Mervi Kaukko

PARTICIPATION IN AND BEYOND LIMINALITIES

ACTION RESEARCH WITH UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING GIRLS

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Academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of the Doctoral Training Committee of Human Sciences of the University of Oulu for public defence in Kaljusensali (KTK112), Linnanmaa, on 27 November 2015, at 12 noon

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Kaukko, Mervi, Participation in and beyond liminalities. Action research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls

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Acta Univ. Oul. E 156, 2015

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis focuses on children's participation in a Finnish reception centre. Using participatory action research (PAR) as the research methodology, the study engaged 12 unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls from Somalia, Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo to consider children's participation during the asylum process, and to explore the ways in which the girls' participation and wellbeing could be promoted.

The research questions, which were formulated during the process in cooperation with the girls, were the following: How do the unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls view participation, its relevance and the possibilities for it during their asylum period? How does the liminality of their life situation promote or hinder their participation? How do the intersecting social categories affect their participation? Methodologically, the study focused on how PAR can be applied to promote children's participation in institutional care in a culturally and gender-sensitive way.

The conceptual framework consists mainly of critical pedagogy and intersectionality. Critical pedagogy made the foundations for the PAR, whereas intersectionality helped to comprehend the liminality of the girls' life worlds. Both theoretical perspectives contributed to understanding and implementing the participatory paradigm.

The findings show that the unaccompanied girls' experiences of participation cannot be explained only through the girls' vulnerability or their resilience, as they clearly belong to both categories and move within them. The participation, which was meaningful for the girls, reflected their fluid positions in relation to their gender, age and status as asylum seekers. Participation meant both the right to voice opinions and the possibility to choose silence, as well as the opportunity to include 'ordinary things' into their lives.

Keywords: children's participation, critical pedagogy, intersectionality, liminality, participatory action research, unaccompanied minors

Tiivistelmä

Tämä väitöstutkimus keskittyy lasten osallisuuteen suomalaisessa vastaanottokeskuksessa. Yhteensä 12 yksin maahan tullutta turvapaikanhakijatyttöä Somaliasta, Angolasta ja Kongon demokraattisesta tasavallasta osallistui toimintatutkimuksen keinoin pohtimaan lasten osallisuutta turvapaikkaprosessin aikana, ja miettimään keinoja miten lasten osallisuutta ja hyvinvointia voisi edistää.

Tutkimuskysymykset, jotka muotoiltiin prosessin edetessä yhdessä osallistujien kanssa olivat seuraavat: Miten yksin maahan tulleet turvapaikanhakijatytöt käsittävät osallisuuden merkityksen ja mahdollisuudet heidän turvapaikkaprosessinsa aikana? Miten elämäntilanteen liminaalisuus heikentää tai edistää heidän osallisuuttaan? Miten ristikkäiset sosiaaliset kategoriat vaikuttavat heidän osallisuuteensa? Tutkimus pureutuu myös siihen, miten osallistavaa toimintatutkimusta voidaan käyttää kodin ulkopuolella asuvien lasten osallisuuden tukemiseen kulttuuri- ja sukupuolisensitiivisellä tavalla.

Tutkimuksen käsitteellinen viitekehys rakentuu pääosin kriittisen pedagogiikan ja intersektionaalisuuden teorioista. Toimintatutkimus pohjautuu kriittiselle pedagogiikalle, kun taas intersektionaalisuus auttaa ymmärtämään tutkimuksen tyttöjen elämäntilanteen liminaalisuuden. Molemmat teoreettiset näkökulmat auttoivat tulkitsemaan ja toteuttamaan osallistavaa paradigmaa.

Tulokset osoittavat, että yksin maahan tulleiden turvapaikanhakijatyttöjen osallisuuden kokemukset ovat moninaisia ja muuttuvia. Turvapaikanhakijastatuksen mukanaan tuoma haavoittuvaisuus ei riitä selittämään tyttöjen kokemuksia, kuten ei myöskään heidän elämänkokemuksensa mukanaan tuoma sinnikkyys ja vahvuus. Tutkimuksen tytöt olivat sekä haavoittuvaisia että vahvoja, ja heidän asemansa näissä kategorioissa oli joustava. Merkitykselliseen osallisuuteen vaikuttivat myös tyttöjen muuttuvat positiot, jotka liittyivät heidän sukupuoleensa, ikäänsä ja turvapaikanhakija-asemaansa. Osallisuus tarkoitti tytöille sekä oikeutta ilmaista mielipiteensä että vaieta, kuten myös arkisten asioiden sisällyttämistä jokapäiväiseen elämään.

Asiasanat: kriittinen pedagogiikka, lasten osallisuus, liminaalisuus, osallistava toimintatutkimus, yksin maahan tulleet lapset

For the girls in my study

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

ACRWC   African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child
CRC   United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
PAR   Participatory action research
UNHCR   United Nations High Commission for Refugees

List of original publications

This doctoral thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I   Kaukko M (2013) "We have to learn for ourselves": Participation of unaccompanied minors in a Finnish reception center. Siirtolaisuus-Migration (Supplement "Unaccompanied Refugee Minors"): 12–21.
II   Kaukko M (2013) Everyday choices, meaningful activities and reliable adults: Diverse paths to empowerment of unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls. In: Törrönen M, Borodkina O, Samoylova V & Heino E (eds) Empowering social work: Research & Practice. University of Helsinki, Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education: 200–221.
III Kaukko M & Parkkila H (2014) Nykyajan totaaliset laitokset tyttöjen suojelijoina. In: Gissler M, Kekkonen M, Känkäinen P, Muranen P & Wrede-Jäntti M (eds) Nuoruus toisin sanoen – Nuorten elinolot 2014 -vuosikirja. Helsinki, Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos: 113–121.
IV   Kaukko M (In press) The CRC of unaccompanied asylum seekers. International Journal of Children's Rights.
V   Kaukko M (2015) P, A and R of participatory action research with unaccompanied minors. Educational Action Research. (Published online: 30 July 2015). URI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1060159: 1–17.

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Contents

1   Introduction

This participatory action research (hereafter PAR) considers children's participation from the point of view of unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls in Finland. When I write this at the beginning of October 2015, 1075[1] unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Finland were waiting for an asylum decision. The amount has increased sharply in the previous four months (from 167 in June 1st 2015) and continues to do so, but it is still low compared to the 23,169 applications which were lodged from unaccompanied or separated children in the EU in 2014 (EUROSTAT 2015), or the estimate that about half of the 33–51 million 'people of concern', meaning all kinds of displaced people, are children[2]. Because of Finland's long history of very few asylum seekers and refugees and current foreign policy[3], Finland has been blamed for being an 'on-looker' in the humanitarian crisis in the EU (Finnish Broadcasting Company News 29.04., 08.05. and 23.09.2015), and is expected to take more responsibility for displaced children in the future. In the light of the current events, this need is more urgent now than ever.

Unaccompanied children face a high risk of a range of child rights violations before and during their flight. They flee because of reasons such as a fear of persecution, armed conflict, exploitation or poverty. They might be exposed to abuse and sexual exploitation, military recruitment, forced labour, trafficking, lack of education and many kinds of discrimination during their flight (Halvorsen 2005). The post-migration conditions bring additional risk-factors for the children's wellbeing (Eastmond & Ascher 2011). Those challenges have been studied from the perspective of education (Rana *et al.* 2011, de Wal Pastoor 2013, 2014), children's rights (Shamseldin 2012, Vitus & Lidén 2010) and psychosocial

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[1] This is the amount of children and youth under the age of 18 who seek for asylum in Finland without their guardians or other customary caregivers on 01.10.2015. The number of unaccompanied children in Finland has been quite steady until this year (150 in 2011, 167 in 2012, 156 in 2013 and 196 in 2014). The previous peak year was 2008, when 706 unaccompanied children arrived to Finland. (The Finnish Immigration Service 2015).

[2] Monthly statistics on accompanied and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are available from Finland but only annual estimations from the EU. Amounts in the EU and Finland are challenging to compare, as the official number in the EU is assumed to be only a fraction of the actual number. This is because many children are unable or afraid to register with the authorities, or they might have been advised by family members, peers or smugglers to keep moving to other destinations. (Jespersen 2014). Yet it is fair to assume the small number is quite realistic in Finland: because of the distant location in the north, Finland is rarely a crossing country and because of the cold climate, children and adults need to register and get a place indoors to survive.

[3] One example of Finnish foreign policy is from September 2015, when unlike most other EU states, Finland voted blank for refugee quotas in EU.

wellbeing (Derluyn & Broekaert 2007, Kohli 2011) as well as from the point of view of good care of the children (Kohli 2007). This study acknowledges those important perspectives, adding emphasis on the views of the children themselves, as well as the multiple overlapping transition stages or liminalities (Turner 1970) in which they negotiate their participation and belonging in the new situation.

It is clear that knowledge about these transition periods could improve the wellbeing of the children (Morrow 2015), but the question is what kind of knowledge can be created from circumstances like these, with a group of children who are in a 'marginal' position in many ways? How could researchers, educators, caretakers or any outsiders be able to understand these children's reality? Furthermore, what kind of knowledge can be created from that reality? All attempts to present unaccompanied children are biased in one way or another; they might unintentionally emphasize the trouble and vulnerability or alternatively, overlook the real challenges in the children's lives. Acknowledging these dangers, this study aims to provide a glimpse into the lives of 12 unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls from Somalia, Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo, who lived about a year of their childhood or youth in two under-age units of a Finnish reception centre. The living units where the girls waited for an asylum-decision were homely, warm and friendly. Nevertheless, they were in an institution with few similarities with the familiar past, or the imaged future of the girls. Besides, they were places where children's participation, by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[4] (hereafter CRC), as well as other regulations and the law[5], should be promoted. Therefore, the more specific aim of this study is to explore how the girls in this situation view the relevance and the possibilities to participate. Before deliberating the research aims and questions further, I briefly explain why researching unaccompanied children's participation is both utterly important and challenging.

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[4] Article 12 of the CRC: '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, and the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' Also, articles 13–17 and 31 focus on participation. (United Nations 1989).

[5] According to the Aliens Act of the Finnish Law (2004/301, section 5) the rights of immigrants should not be limited any more than necessary, and that in all decisions concerning 'alien children', special attention shall be paid to the best interest of the child. The act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers of the Finnish law (2011/746, section 5) has similar content; all actions should consider the best interest of the child, as defined in the Child Welfare Act of the Finnish law (2007/417), and children over 12 years of age should be heard before making decisions concerning them, unless 'such hearing is manifestly unnecessary'.

1.1 Significance and challenges of researching children's participation

Supporting children's participation is especially important for vulnerable children, such as those coming from areas of war and conflict. It can work as a key strategy through which children can learn to transform their relationships with adults, feel belonging with their surroundings, trust their capacities and start reconstructing healthy identities, despite the challenges they have faced. (Feinstein *et al.* 2010, Hart J 2008, Percy-Smith & Thomas 2010). While there clearly is a gap in research focusing on specifically the participation of unaccompanied minors, previous research on children seeking asylum with their families (Lähteenmäki 2012: 177), or unaccompanied (Alanko *et al.* 2011) shows that implementing the CRC, especially the right to participate, is challenging in Finland. The same has been shown in research elsewhere (Bhabha & Schmidt 2006, Halvorsen 2005, Lidén & Rusten 2007, Shamseldin 2012). Some authors, such as Vanessa Pupavac (2001), Jason Hart and Anna Kvittingen (2015) argue that despite the good intentions, the participatory aims of the CRC are far from universal when considering displaced children, whereas Helen Connolly (2015) notes that unaccompanied children's rights are rarely examined from the perspectives of the children themselves and therefore, the mechanics of how the rights become reality might be overridden by rhetorical devices.

Research presents unaccompanied children in a way which rarely emphasizes their participation. The focus is most often on their vulnerability, due to the children's traumatic experiences (Eastmond & Ascher 2011, Seglem *et al.* 2014, Suikkanen *et al.* 2010). This is understandable; fleeing alone or being trafficked from dangerous countries of origin makes unaccompanied children an extremely vulnerable group. Although the language of vulnerability and trouble is meant to prioritize assistance, it might unintentionally reproduce an image of children as helpless, which can be not only harmful but also clearly incorrect in the eyes of the children (Orgocka 2012: 3, Utas 2004: 209). This view is especially problematic in participatory research; it can be asked what the involvement of the children themselves is in research where they are automatically labelled as victims (*cf.* Doná 2007: 211). The discourse of victimhood also ignores the fact that unaccompanied children have managed to arrive to a new host-country on their own, which is a sign of resilience and strength. This appears to be the counter-argument of the victimizing discourse (*e.g.* Chase *et al.* 2008, Rana *et al.* 2011), although undeniably both perspectives acknowledge the complexity of the issue.

Although the focus of this study is on the liminality of the unaccompanied girls' waiting time, I do not consider the extraordinary context or the added risk-factors as *obstacles* for meaningful participation but rather, as factors which have to be taken into consideration when searching for relevant means of participation. As van Beers *et al.* (2006) note, all participation, like any other human action, is meaningful in one way or another. That is why I view participation as the unaccompanied girls' right to be taken seriously and to be considered as experts in their wellbeing, paying attention to the ways the girls' wish to get their voices heard. I also acknowledge that participation is not a panacea but only one element of children's wellbeing, just as promoting participation is only one discourse among many when discussing the best interest of unaccompanied minors. Evidently, promoting participation does not imply that other factors of wellbeing should be ignored; instead, participation can only develop alongside with other wellbeing. Nevertheless, as Samuel Okyere and Afua Twum-Danso Imoh (2014: 210) note, children's voicelessness or the lack of representation potentially undermine all other rights being considered for children: if children do not have the possibilities or the capabilities to participate and express their views and opinions, it is possible that their other rights are not protected either.

This study aims to include the voices of unaccompanied girls to the discussion about children's participation with a PAR. This is justified, because unaccompanied children are undoubtedly the experts with the knowledge of how their wellbeing could be promoted, but a problem-centred approach and the discourse of vulnerability and trauma, although justified in their own fields, might not take that expertise into account. Therefore, in line with authors such as Ravi Kohli (2007), Aoife O'Higgins (2012) and Ulrika Wernesjö (2012, 2014), I combine the understandings of unaccompanied children both as resilient and vulnerable, adding focus on how the ambivalence and uncertainty of their situation, as they see it, affects their participation.

1.2   Aims and research questions

Focusing on the children's experiences, being sensitive to their individual differences and the contexts in which they live, my aim is to explore how the unaccompanied children see the relevance and possibilities of participation in their current reality. Based on two rounds of PAR between May 2011 and December 2012 with 12 unaccompanied girls (8–17 years of age), with the help of 12 practitioners, my research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do the unaccompanied asylum seeking girls view participation, its relevance and possibilities during their asylum period?

    a) How does the *liminality* of the situation promote or hinder the participation of the unaccompanied girls?
    b) How do the *intersecting social categories* affect the girls' participation?

2. How can PAR be used in institutions of residential care, such as the reception centre, to promote children's participation in a culturally and gender-sensitive way?

Question 1a addresses the structural, often unnoticed factors not only hindering but also promoting children's participation, whereas question 1b illuminates the poorly researched area of how the unaccompanied children position themselves within these structures, and how the positioning influences their participation. Question 2 is mainly methodological. The answer to that question can help practitioners in different institutions of residential care to use PAR to include the voices of diverse groups of children to address problems that they find significant in their living environments.

Research question 1 focuses on unaccompanied children's social participation in their everyday lives, whereas Research question 2 focuses more on children's role in participatory research. However, I should note that my aim is not to define participation in a way which would be generalizable for all unaccompanied children, but to show how child-centred, difference-sensitive ways of interaction and dialogue can be used to include children's own, subjective experiences in the discourse of children's participation.

1.3 The role of PAR: Making the road while walking it

The structure of this thesis is loyal to the chronological order of the PAR, describing the theories which guided and were guided by the inquiry, action and analysis in the present time. My self-reflection and insights, and the consequent choice-points we faced in the PAR can be seen in the combination of theoretical perspectives of the study.

The next chapter, *Arranging the backcloth* introduces participatory action research as a method, and the participants (the girls and myself) as guiding the process. My first insight from the interaction with the girls was that their experiences cannot be explained either through their vulnerability or their strength,

as these dichotomized views ignore the possibility that they are both, and move within these categories. Thus, literature on unaccompanied asylum seeker children and youth from multiple perspectives helped me consider what childhood, children's participation and children's rights might mean for unaccompanied children. These insights directed the construction of Chapter 3, *Participation in childhood,* which provides a short history and the most common definitions of children's participation (Hart 1997, Hart J 2008, Percy-Smith & Thomas 2010) and childhood (Freeman 2002, Sporton *et al.* 2006) in current literature. These theoretical fields set the border conditions for this study.

In Chapter 4 *PAR in dialogue with critical pedagogy*, I explain how childhood and children's participation relate to the conceptual framework of PAR, such as the ideas of praxis and empowerment. In the beginning of the process I, like many other action researchers, was inspired by ideas of critical pedagogy (Darder *et al.* 2009, Giroux *et al.* 2001), particularly those by Paulo Freire. The liberatory and emancipatory aims presented by Freire, mainly in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2000), seemed relevant in many respects in the girls' realities and thus, emancipatory knowledge interest seemed justifiable. The girls of my study can be seen as 'marginalized' in many ways because of their age, gender, ethnicity and asylum-seeking status, although as noted, I am aware of the dangers of this kind of positioning.

What I did not realize in the beginning of the process was that these girls' participation in their life situations are far too complicated to explain by using only ideas of critical pedagogy or previously mentioned literature on unaccompanied children or in fact, any single theory. The next insight was, as will be seen in the findings (see Chapter 7), that the girls demonstrated good, creative coping ability, resilience and *hope* (*cf.* Freire 1994), rather than being merely 'marginalized' or 'oppressed'. Furthermore, coping was clearly something the girls actively did, not something imposed only by the surroundings: the girls found flexible ways to negotiate their positions in social categories such as 'vulnerable child' and 'asylum seeker', and to participate meaningfully within the limitations and the possibilities in their realities. This contradictory evidence of the girls' situations directed me towards feminist theory of intersectionality (see Chapter 5), to consider the interconnection between social categories and participation (Kabeer 1999, Maguire 2008, Yuval-Davis 2011), and the way the girls viewed their position in the liminality. Intersectionality helped me to acknowledge the ambiguity of the term participation, as well as the ambiguity of the unaccompanied girls' life worlds and lived experiences. Furthermore, it helped me to interpret the emancipatory

knowledge interest of PAR critically, as also the individual 'empowerment' is influenced by how the girls of this study experience the above-mentioned categories (see Ellsworth 1989).

What keeps the conceptual framework together is the participatory paradigm (Heron & Reason 1997, Lincoln *et al.* 2011). In line with critical theories, the participatory paradigm questions the notion of knowledge and truth existing in some external reality 'out there', but considers the connection between knowledge and the specific historical, racial, gendered and social infrastructures which can produce injustice and marginalization. In this sense, the participatory paradigm is commensurable with constructivism (Lincoln 2001). Applying a participatory perspective to this study leads me to consider knowledge as rooted both in tangible realities and in the socially constructed realities of the participants, with emphasis on experiential knowing, and critical subjectivity. Experiential knowledge is grounded in participant's tacit presence in the world, especially in the actions and encounters with others, considering how they are understood and acted upon (Reason & Torbert 2001: 11). Hence, while the most extreme critical theories claim that there are no grounds for any kind of truth or context beyond text, according to the participatory approach, some facts are true and given regardless of the perspective (Heron & Reason 1997: 275). In my research this meant acknowledging the spatial conditions, such as the regulations guiding the reception and care of the participants, which were tangible and fixed, but also the individual ways the girls experienced these structural conditions, and the relational ways they negotiated their belongings and participation within them. Knowledge created from these spatialities (tangible structural conditions) and relationalities (girls' experiences of their positions and their encounters with others) is historically and socially constructed and interest bound. Therefore, knowledge may be influenced by visible and invisible forces of 'oppression', such as the children's fear of saying something wrong and wanting to be seen in a certain way. However, the knowledge produced in this study is true and relevant in the girls' realities, and according to participatory ideas, it is most powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Fine *et al.* 2003, Lincoln 2001, Pain *et al.* 2010).

The conceptual framework is justified because while simplified understanding of critical pedagogy suggests that some people are 'oppressed' by societal structures, and while intersectionality notes that oppression is more complex, communicating with social categories within those structures, my interpretation of the participatory paradigm is that it acknowledges both, the presence of oppressive systems and individual ways they are experienced and dealt with. Both

intersectionality and critical pedagogy are quite flexible, which is why most authors avoid too much specification (Kincheloe *et al.* 2011: 163). I use the combination of intersectionality and critical pedagogy focusing on underlying commonalities instead of highlighting the differences. Thus, I do not suggest there would be complete harmony between these views, but I choose the most suitable parts of both approaches for this study, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.
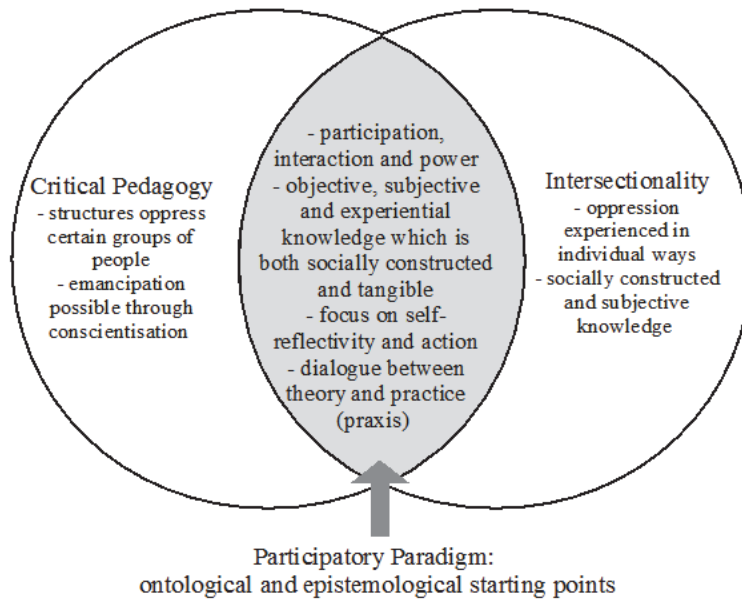
Fig. 1. Participatory paradigm: ontological and epistemological starting points.

1.4   Overview of the articles

This theoretical framework, together with articles I to V, aims to paint a picture of unaccompanied girls' views on their participation. The readers who also read the original articles should acknowledge that just like the PAR-process, the articles reflect my learning process which developed through new insights: articles I and II were written in an early phase of my research (2012) and thus, present ideas which are not as developed as in the latter articles. The original articles included in this dissertation are the following:

Article I (*"We have to learn for ourselves": Participation of unaccompanied minors in a Finnish reception centre*) lays out the foundations for my research by exploring the concept of participation and the problematic assumptions tied to it. The article examines how under-age units of reception centres can work as institutions of non-formal education towards participation, considering what kind of participation unaccompanied minors want and how it can be promoted. The results show that despite challenges, living units for unaccompanied minors can and do promote children's participation. The children valued being able to participate in every-day tasks, as the ability to master skills which will be needed in the future, was empowering. That was seen as contributing to one's own future and independent life in Finnish society.

Article II (*Everyday choices, meaningful activities and reliable adults: Diverse paths to empowerment of unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls*) focuses on the concept of empowerment on a structural level: how the rules, practices, material resources and location impact the way in which the children can be empowered, and then on an individual level: how the special status of the unaccompanied minors influences their agency, empowerment and participation. According to the results, the girls did not see the structures in the reception centre as obstacles for their participation and empowerment but instead, they thought it was important to find ways to benefit from the resources instead of complaining about the problems.

Article III (*Nykyajan totaaliset laitokset tyttöjen suojelijoina* [The total institutions of today protecting girls]) co-authored with Helena Parkkila combines my data with data collected in an institution of foster care. In this article we explore the circulation of power in institutions, using the theories of Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault as a framework. The results show that even though most of the inhumane factors of 'total institutions', as described by Goffman and Foucault, are not present in today's institutions of care, some similarities can be found. The girls of both institutions viewed the living units as places of waiting, as 'liminal stages' before real life can continue. All sides of the 'totality' were not seen as negative; the waiting time was also appreciated as a possibility to learn skills for future life as full members of their new society.

Article IV (*The CRC of unaccompanied asylum seekers in Finland*) shows a shift in a direction in my research from critical pedagogy to a more feminist and engaged approach, and adopts an intersectional perspective on participation. This article considers children's participation from the rights-perspective, focusing on how the CRC is interpreted by the unaccompanied girls, and how the rhetoric of rights-discourse does not fully acknowledge the reality of asylum-seeking children.

The article also considers how the conceptualization of childhood and the implicit assumptions of unaccompanied children affect the way in which the girls of this study were expected to participate, and how they saw their participatory rights themselves. The results show that without underestimating the importance of the right to participate, the girls thought that the right to be protected clearly overweighed it.

Article V (*The P, A and R of participatory action research with unaccompanied children)* discusses the methodological possibilities and challenges of conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The different aspects are considered by answering the following questions: What kind of participation is relevant in such a challenging phase of life, being in a new society without families? What is 'good' action in these circumstances? And finally, what is the involvement of the children in conducting the research when they find the practical end product clearly more interesting? According to this article, genuine dialogue helps the initiating researcher abandon essentialist views of the children's needs and consider the individual needs of the girls in PAR, which is sensitive to differences and flexible to suit the challenging context.

2 Arranging the backcloth: Method and participants

In this chapter I describe action research as my methodological approach, after which I introduce the girls of this study, as well as position myself as an action researcher.

2.1 From action research to participatory action research

The merit for founding action research is usually given to the German-American social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), as he was probably the first to use the concept 'action research'. As other scientists of his era, Lewin conducted research by making experiments to prove his hypothesis on issues being explored, but unlike other researchers of his time, he wanted to conduct the experiments in society, in contact with people in their natural environments, rather than in a laboratory. This was because Lewin thought that social science where the scientist tried to remain detached and objective had not provided incontrovertible solutions to social problems, such as poverty or racism. Significantly, Lewin took a different approach to what in other experiments of social science was called 'biases', referring to the influence of the researcher's position. Lewin introduced 'a cycle of planning, action and fact-finding about the results of the action' (Lewin 1948: 38) as a tool to conduct such research. The cyclic form remains characteristic for action research still today. [6]

Action research has developed into many parallel research traditions after the times of Lewin. In fact, Orlando Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman listed already in 1991 no less than 35 variations of action research, and the list has expanded in the decades after that. The most suitable version for this study is participatory action research (PAR) although the difference between PAR and action research is debatable: at times they are referred to as synonyms (Koshy 2010: 1). According to Fals Borda (2001: 28), the difference is that advocates of PAR decided it was necessary to go beyond the tentative steps of social psychology, which Lewin took

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[6] Some suggest it was John Collier who coined the term 'action research' in his project with Native Americans (*cf.* Räsänen 1995). John Dewey has also been mentioned as one of the founders of action research, because of his interest in how to democratize education, and how reflective thinking follows the phases of suggestion, intellectualization, hypothesizing, reasoning and testing a hypothesis in action. Dewey defined learning as a joint effort to solve meaningful problems in a collaborative manner, including both learners and teachers in all phases of the problem posing, solving and dissemination of findings, which are similar to the process of action research. (Räsänen 1995: 77).

in his experiments, and the classical theories on participation by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robert Owen and John Stuart Mill [7], claiming that action or participation alone is not enough; to be able to contribute to a significant social change; action and participation have to be combined with critical, academic research. PAR developed simultaneously in separate projects especially in the southern parts of the globe in the 70s, where the researchers knew little of what their colleagues were doing, but still managed to create a methodology which was very consistent. Early advocates of PAR at that time included, for example, Finnish researcher Marja Liisa Swantz, and her work in a Bunju village in Tanzania and the followers of Paulo Freire, who formed civil resistance and underground organizations in Brazil (Fals Borda 2001: 27–28, Swantz 2008). The following decade, a seminal book *Becoming Critical: Education, knowledge and action research* (Carr & Kemmis 1986) brought ideas of PAR into educational research by pointing out that PAR could help educational research return to its roots in philosophy and history and to see how theory, research and practice can be combined in a critical and ideological way.

What connects different approaches of PAR is that they are all versions of applied research which are realized in a collaborative context to understand and resolve an issue affecting a group of people (Collie *et al.* 2010: 141). Typically, PAR looks at struggles for social justice, poses critique of power-relations and all kinds of oppression, focusing on self-empowerment and shared capacity of people who are somehow marginalized (Cahill 2007, Fals Borda & Rahman 1991, Kemmis & McTaggart 1988). As the prefix 'participatory' suggests, PAR can take many forms depending on what the participants see as relevant. As PAR started spreading from the southern hemisphere, Stephen Kemmis has called it Southern PAR (Greenwood & Levin 1998: 174–181). PAR with young people can be called YPAR (Youth Led Participatory Action Research), emphasizing the active role of youth in learning research skills and contributing to all phases of research (Cammarota & Fine 2008). Feminist action researchers, such as Patricia Maguire, Wendy Frisby and Colleen Reid add an 'F' in PAR, claiming that the combination of PAR with feminist ideas heightens the focus on interrogation of poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression (Frisby *et al.* 2009).

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[7] In *Social Contract,* Rousseau emphasized each citizen's right to participate in decision making, acknowledging that it was not only necessary for society but it also had a psychological effect on the participants. The utility theory by James Mill suggests that the motivation of people to participate is their own personal happiness and wealth, whereas Robert Owen combined socialism and philanthropy in his theory of citizen participation. (Pateman 1970).

Because of the focus and the participants, my study could be argued as being any one of those. As explained in the introduction, the aim was to make the PAR as child- or youth-led as possible, and all the participants were girls from the southern hemisphere. The reason why I call my project with the girls simply PAR is that in line with Stanley and Wise (1993) I argue that we should look beyond methodological borders; drawing boundaries between different schools of PAR is not always necessary. Furthermore, I consider child-centeredness or feminism not merely as methodological or epistemological perspectives to add on PAR, but necessary elements of participatory ontology as a way of building caring relationships and being in the world regardless of the research design (*cf.* Reason & Torbert 2001, Stanley 1990: 14). Focusing strictly on feminism or emphasizing the youth- or child-led approach could have been limiting, thus taking some of the participatory and experiential elements out of our PAR. Having a special emphasis would also have been unnecessary: it is imprinted in PAR that the individual starting points of the participants are considered, regardless of whether they are girls, refugees or children, and it is the workability of the approach for a certain context that matters.

2.2   Unaccompanied girls at the reception centre

The aim of this PAR was to improve some aspects of the everyday lives of the unaccompanied girls, as the girls themselves wished. Considering the focus on the girls' lived and experiential knowledge, it is necessary to introduce the girls so that we can understand the origins of the knowledge.

The participants of this study were 12 unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls from Somalia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (one 8 year old, the others 14–17 years old[8]). They lived in two under-age units of a reception centre in a middle-sized town in Northern Finland. One unit hosted both boys and girls under the age of 16, whereas the other unit was for older youngsters, with separate floors for boys and girls. The all-girl part of the living unit had only just been opened, as there had been very few girls in the centre, and they were still a minority; there were seven unaccompanied girls and 21 boys in the centre as I started my study in 2011. This is consistent with the gender balance in Finland, as currently 85% of unaccompanied minors are boys (Finnish Immigration Service 2015). Younger girls

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[8] Due to the small number of girls in this centre, I protect their anonymity by omitting pseudonyms, ages or other descriptions which would reveal the girls' identities.

of this study attended comprehensive schools in town and older girls (16 and 17 year olds) who were above comprehensive school age attended adult education offered at the reception centre. [9] The remaining time the girls participated in everyday activities at the living unit: they did homework with the adults, spent free time alone or in groups in their rooms, or with other children in the common areas, where they also watched TV and had a chance to use computers. The older girls who lived at the more independent living unit (16 and 17 year olds) cooked their own meals and had also more responsibilities for cleaning; during designated mealtimes the younger girls ate food prepared by the adults. All girls had a monthly allowance for hobbies, which some of them used for Zumba classes and a few of them for football. In addition, the centre organized trips to youth events and places of attraction for all children and youth. Overall, the time at the centre resembled the everyday-life of a family with children and youngsters, although, as some of the girls noted, with 'more waiting' and 'less love'.

This research did not focus on the girls' past unless they volunteered to talk about it; the focus was on their present reality. Therefore, without making reference to how these particular girls arrived in Finland, I describe the situation in general. The children often start their journey with relatives or family-members, but they also might arrive through smugglers, or be victims of trafficking. Once unaccompanied children arrive and either report themselves or are found by the police or border control, they are placed in special under-age units in State-run reception centres, or in housing institutions run by non-governmental organizations (NGO's). District court assigns each child a guardian *ad litem* who is responsible for acting as the child's custodian in the asylum procedure and is responsible to care for his or her personal situation until the child reaches the age of maturity. The living unit appoints a personal key worker who is responsible for helping the child in everyday tasks. Unaccompanied children are interviewed on behalf of the Finnish Immigrant Service in the presence of their guardians (Euroopan

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[9] According to the UNHCR (1997: 11) and the Council of European Union (2003, Article 10), asylum-seeking children should have the same possibilities to education as the children in the receiving country. This is in line with the Finnish Basic Education Act of the Finnish Law (1998/628, section 25), which states that all children residing permanently in Finland should attend compulsory schooling, with a regulated amount of hours and a core curriculum. However, municipalities in Finland may decide whether asylum seekers are considered as permanent citizens or not, which also gives the municipalities the possibility to not provide proper education for asylum-seeking children. The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (1951) states that after elementary education refugees are to be treated in line with 'aliens generally in the same circumstances'. That is why older girls of this study did not have access to secondary education.

muuttoliikeverkosto 2009, Finnish Immigration Service 2015). At the time of finishing the PAR in December 2012, the participating girls had lived in Finland between two and fifteen months. Some of them had received a permit to stay in Finland, whereas others were still waiting.

2.3 My position as a guest from the outside

One of the features of action research is that I as a researcher inevitably influence the field with my intervention, and by acknowledging my position I can push the action in a desirable direction. This idea was proposed already by Kurt Lewin in the 1930s, who noted that instead of trying to avoid the changes caused by the researcher's interference, the change could be seen as a *result* rather than a limitation of research (Nielsen & Nielsen 2006).

I entered the girls' living unit as a 'guest from the outside' (Watkins & Shulman 2008); I introduced the idea of conducting a PAR as a part of my PhD to the managers and the workers at the underage units. Although the aim was to create a child-centred project from the girls' own starting points, I, just like the participating girls, am positioned in multiple intersecting positions as a researcher, teacher, white middle-class woman and a mother, and all these positions had an impact on the project. As a teacher, I had to deal with the pedagogical paradox, in the sense that the normativity which is inherent in the teaching profession led me to add educative elements and specific learning goals to the project, while I at the same time wanted the girls to guide the process. As a researcher I wanted to produce and publish new knowledge about the reality of these girls, and because of my education and background, I was privileged to be able to do that. My positionality also meant that I brought tools which made the project possible, such as funding, permissions and knowledge of Finnish society. Most importantly, as a mother of four I could not avoid thinking about how losing their parents felt in the hearts of the girls and on the other hand, how it must have felt for the parents to send their children to take a risky journey to an unknown destination.

The multiple positions where both I and the girls moved influenced the development of relationships throughout the process. My positions were accompanied with responsibilities: towards the girls, the reception centre, the academic community and the policy makers. I balanced between the role of an authoritarian adult and a friend for the girls. I wanted to keep the practitioners happy so that I would not lose access to the field and also, because I knew the workers were primarily concerned about the best interest of the girls. Child-

centeredness and the fun nature of the project helped my access to the field; I doubt that the girls or the workers would have welcomed just any kind of research, which would have burdened the children only to serve my academic interests. It was my responsibility to pay explicit attention to how this research might be interpreted or misinterpreted by various audiences: if my research suggests that protection overrules participation, can policy-makers interpret it so that participation does not need to be promoted? Or as my results show that most girls were happy with many aspects of their lives in the reception centre, does this mean that resources are interpreted to be adequate and there is no immediate need for improvement? My responsibility towards the academic community meant that I had to ensure the quality of the project as part of the research and share my findings in the most accurate and efficient way. I picked up the baton of all these responsibilities by presenting the girls in a truest possible light, working as ethically and correctly as possible.

3   Participation in childhood

In PAR, concepts are not used without paying attention to their historical, ideological and political roots and the underlying assumptions. This means that suitable concepts and theories can change, based on the new knowledge and developing relationship with the participants. In this chapter, I look at the roots and implicit assumptions of the concepts of children's participation and childhood, which are by no means universally applicable for all children in all situations. First, I give a short overview of the history of children's participatory rights in the European/North-American debates, and about the response to this in Africa, from where all the girls of my study had recently come. Then, I present some of the most common definitions of children's participation and childhood from the literature.

There are many views on how the discussion about the importance of children's participation started. Martin Woodhead (2010: xix) gives credit to Swedish feminist and social reformer, Ellen Key, who set out her vision for the transformation of childhood in her book *Barnets århundrade* (In English: *The Century of the Child*) in 1900. Inspired by Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), Key's book was perhaps the first text acknowledging the dilemma between protecting children and enabling them to participate, emphasizing the child's capabilities of making rational decisions if the opportunity is given (Lengborn 1996: 826). Another early advocate of children's participation in the European scientific discussion was Eglantyne Jebb, who responded to the suffering of children in the First World War by setting up the Save the Children Fund (Woodhead 2010: xx). The horrors of the wars made also Janusz Korczak realize the pain of the children. He led an orphanage in Warsaw with ideas of participatory pedagogy, promoting democracy and motivation instead of authority and force. In his book *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929/2011: 61) he wrote: 'Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect'. Korczak was also ahead of his time in requesting a binding convention to secure the rights of the child, which eventually appeared in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989.

3.1   The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The CRC, which is perhaps the most significant milestone for acknowledging children's participation as a human right, was the culmination of over 100 years of

international, mostly Western European and North American, discussions on the rights of the child. The version which we know today is the successor of two international, non-binding declarations on the rights of the child from 1924 and 1959. The CRC includes 54 articles, which focus on four general principles: the best interest of the child (Article 3), non-discrimination (Article 2), the right to life and survival and development (Article 6) and the right to be heard (Article 12) (Jespersen 2014: 13). Unlike the previous declarations, the CRC no longer concentrated merely on children's needs for survival, or the responsibility of adults to protect children from any harm. Notably the last principle changed the direction of the discussion of the roles of children and adults by acknowledging children as holders of civil and political rights, rather than merely being objects of adults' charity.

Because of the universality of the CRC, unaccompanied children's position between state systems should not be an obstacle for children's participation. The principle of human rights, including children's rights, 'ascribes a universal status to individuals and their rights, undermining the boundaries of the nation state' (Soysal 1994: 157). Therefore, no states should have excuses to ignore the protection of individual rights (Shamseldin 2012: 92) but instead, human rights should apply to all who can be defined as human, not because they are citizens or members of a state, but because they are 'human beings *simplicite'* (Benhabib 1999: 711). In fact, some of the articles in the CRC aim to specifically address the needs of children who are either unaccompanied or migrated, or both[10]. Significantly, Article 3 of the CRC states that all actions concerning the child must take into account his or her best interest, which should simply lay the foundations for the care of unaccompanied minors, although it is not specified *how* the best interest should be taken into consideration, apart from the mention of using the highest possible professional standards when working with children. It was debated and

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[10] Article 20(1) of the CRC requires States to provide special protection and assistance to children who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their family. Article 22 mentions that interpreters should be used when it is necessary to hear the views of the children in all matters concerning them. The children should be provided with all relevant, age-appropriate information concerning their asylum process, entitlements, the situation in their country of origin and other things which have an impact on the child's life. Article 9(2) of the CRC refers to the child's right to be heard in relation to proceedings involving separation from his or her parent(s), during which 'all interested parties shall be given an opportunity to participate in the proceedings and make their views known'. (UNICEF 2007: 150, 309; see also Mason & Bolzan 2010: 125). The general comment entitled *Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside of the country of their origin* (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2005) notes that asylum-seeking children should be always treated primarily as children, secondarily as asylum seekers, although it is added that this has to be done in a manner consistent with national legislation.

then decided that the wording of the article will be 'a primary consideration' instead of 'the primary consideration' or 'the paramount consideration', meaning that the best interest has to be considered, whereas the paramount principle would mean that the best interest of the child overrules all other principles. Very often the principle must be paramount, but the use of words still leaves room for interpretation by the practitioners. (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2014, Hetemäki 2014). In some countries, such as the UK and Denmark (*cf.* Vitus & Lidén 2010), the CRC contradicts the procedural rules of the national law, but this is not the case in Finland (more in Article IV). Although the rights are in line with national legislation, it does not mean that the CRC would be realized perfectly in Finland. In fact, Finland has received a concluding observation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in each of the four country reports ever made (in 1996, 2000, 2005 and 2011), specifically because children's right to be heard has not been respected (Hetemäki 2014).

The attempt to define universally applicable rights is an easy target for critique: the fact that the CRC was mostly drafted by the governments of Western Europe and North America (Twum-Danso Imoh 2014: 4), and remarkably, by only adults who did not even ask children's opinions (Pupavac 2001) gives justification for criticism: how are the mostly European adults able to draft a convention which is relevant for all children, also those in the non-Western regions of the world? Similarly we could ask how are the practitioners, teachers or researchers ever able to even talk about children's participation in a way which makes sense for unaccompanied children, without implicit assumptions of assimilation or adaptation. Regardless of how the models are planned and drafted, they rarely manage to equally include the voices of all people, children and adults, who are involved.

Having said this, I do not agree with cultural relativism: placing culture or tradition over individual rights has proven to be very problematic (*cf.* Asian Human Rights Declaration, as discussed in Article IV). Nevertheless, the aim to strengthen the individual rights of the child, displacing the child's family as advocates of the child's interests, has caused concerns that children's rights which do not acknowledge the local custom and cultures at all remain merely as words on a paper, instead of being implemented in practice (Bourdillon & Musvosvi 2014, Pupavac 2001). For example, it has been argued that in some cultures in Africa children are the property of their parents instead of beings in their own right (Kaime 2010), which influences how well the universally-intended rights to participate are received and implemented.

Regardless of the dispute between universality and relativity, the CRC has influenced the process of legal reform in all continents by trying to ensure that laws would better protect the rights of the children. The CRC has also worked as an inspiration for local charters, which agree on the idea but want to add sensitivity for the local culture in the document, such as the African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child (hereafter ACRWC), which will be briefly described next. Considering the ACRWC in research which is conducted in Finland is justified because as noted, the first insight of this study was that the idea of children's participation might not make sense everywhere. The ACRWC also illuminates the context where the girls of this study have learned about their rights, or the lack of them. This is significant, as children's participatory rights are given meaning and value by the society within which they are implemented (Okyere & Twum-Danso Imoh 2014, Reddy & Ratna 2004)[11], and the learned values do not automatically change as the child changes context.

3.2   African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child

Although African countries were among the first to ratify the CRC, Ghana being the very first to do so in February 1990 (Twum-Danso Imoh 2014: 4), it was clear that some parts of the CRC did not reflect the priorities and concerns relating to the children on the African continent. In addition to frustration related to being underrepresented in the drafting of the CRC, some African experts thought that the historical and cultural traditions of Africa or the contemporary problems facing children on the continent, such as warfare, poverty, HIV, famine or harmful cultural practices, were not addressed in the CRC. For that reason, the Organization of African Unity (African Union 1999) drafted the ACRWC, the first regional treaty on children's rights (Twum-Danso Imoh 2014).

According to the ACRWC, children do not only have rights but also responsibilities towards their families, societies, states and other legally recognized communities (Article 31). The ACRWC includes the word 'participation' only once, referring to disabled children, but mentions 'protect' 33 times[12]. Overall, the

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[11] The countries of origin of the girls in this study, Somalia, Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo are in the top five in the world with regard to the estimated under-five mortality rate, which is a critical indicator of the wellbeing of children (UNICEF 2014). Also, Somalia is one of the three UN member states which have not ratified the CRC and Angola has been considered as the worst place on earth to be a child (Franklin 2002: 1).

[12] This is in line with the CRC: Article 12 of the CRC does not mention participation either, but refers to children's voice (United Nations 1989).

ACRWC does not refer to participation, power, empowerment or anything like that, but does note that children should respect parents and elders at all times and to assist them in cases of need. (Cheney 2014). Although this might cause some questions concerning children's right to be free from liability, it has potential to facilitate dialogue in communities on children's rights. Responsibilities can also push the children to participate more, and be accepted more fully into the lives of adults in their communities. (Twum-Danso Imoh 2014: 12).

Despite the fact that the ACRWC sought to take into consideration the special needs of the African context, it was not an opposition to the CRC. Instead, it is mentioned in the ACRWC that the CRC was a source of inspiration for it (Lloyd 2002). What is different is that the ACRWC tries to define childhood in terms which take the 'African peculiarity' into account, addressing challenges which are common for the children of the continent. For example, although the definition of childhood is somewhat flexible in the CRC (a child is every human being below the age of 18 *unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier,* Article 1), Article 2 of ACRWC is more rigid by not allowing this flexibility: a child is simply 'every human being below the age of 18 years' (African Union 1999). Although this might contradict cultural traditions of some African countries, it at the same time aims to protect children from, for example, child marriages. (Twum-Danso Imoh 2014).

3.3   Defining children's participation

The CRC brought the discussion on children's participation to policy language, as well as to scientific discussion, notably in the fields of education, childhood studies, sociology and human geography. The CRC also posed a relevant question: what do we mean by children's participation? All the obvious limitations and biases in the CRC have led researchers to try to conceptualize children's participation in a way which is more elaborated than the Article 12 of the CRC, but at the same time, sensitive for differences and usable in real life. (United Nations 1989).

Perhaps the most often cited definition of children's participation is that of Roger Hart, who defines it as a *'process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives'* (Hart 1992: 5). Hart elaborates on the meaning by presenting children's participation in the form of a ladder, which appeared for the first time in *Children's participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship* in 1992 but has been reproduced many times since (*e.g.* Hart 1997, Lansdown 1995). The model is adapted for children and youth from Sherry R. Arnstein's

Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), which was presented in an article on citizen participation in public planning schemes in the United States. Like PAR, the models of Arnstein and Hart were also influenced by the theories on participation by Rousseau, Owen and Mill, but these classical theories were taken further by considering the mechanisms and conditions which were required to enable more citizens, adults or children, to participate.

In both Hart's and Arnstein's ladders the participation of children or citizens on the lowest rungs is merely decoration or tokenism or even worse, action in which participants are manipulated by those with power. On the top rungs of Hart's ladder, decisions which affect children's life and the life of the community are shared with adults. Hart (1997) emphasizes the importance of considering the developmental phase of the child when helping the child to participate; the 'high point' of children's participation does not mean eliminating the adults' presence but a shared decision power between adults and children. Nevertheless, the aim is to help children to acquire influence, knowledge, competences and networks and eventually, shift increasing amounts of the adults' decision power to children.

Roger Hart's ideas have been criticized by authors such as Nandana Reddy and Kavita Ratna (2002), Karen Malone and Catherine Hartung (2010), Jason Hart (2008) and even Roger Hart himself (2008) because a narrow and polarized conception of unequal power relations between children and adults can actually inhibit children's participation and, consequently, hinder the progressive realization of the children's rights. The attempt to challenge the power relations between children and adults has been criticized for emphasizing mutual expectations and trade over generosity and care, most significantly by Yuval-Davis (2011: 196), referring to Emmanuel Levinas and his writings of asymmetrical politics of solidarity. Emphasizing ethical relationships and caring cooperation which can improve 'human flourishing', illuminates that sometimes, as in the case of the girls in my study, the real-life relationships need to be hierarchical (Heron & Reason 1997, Cahill *et al.* 2010). But despite the criticism, Hart's ladder has evidently been very inspirational for later models of children's participation (Lansdwown 2005, 2010, Shier 2001). [13]

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[13] More material from international authors can be found, for example, in a special issue of the International Journal of Children's Rights (2008: Vol. 16, Issue 3) and from database by Andreas Karsten: A potpourri of participation models – Updated (22.11.2012) (URI: http://www.nonformality.org/participation-models). Finnish contributions can be found in Nuorisotutkimus (2012: Vol. 30, Issue 1).

In the Finnish literature Tomi Kiilakoski (2007: 13–14) defines children's participation in two ways: it is firstly the right to one's own identity and respected membership in a unity, such as a family, group, community, society or ecosystem and secondly, participation refers to a commitment to work together to improve some aspect of one's own life, or the life of the community. The definition is updated later (Kiilakoski *et al.* 2012: 15–16) to highlight the mechanisms which enable children to participate in a way which has an impact. Anu Gretschel (2002: 94) emphasizes the *feelings* of empowerment and competence which are created and maintained in participatory work with youth, being along the lines of the participatory paradigm's emphasis on experiential knowledge. Finnish scholars have recently been increasingly interested in the participation of multicultural women and girls. Heli Niemelä (2003: 93) writes that many aspects of Finnish youth culture might appear intimidating for children and youth coming from very different cultural backgrounds and significantly for this study, Veronika Honkasalo (2011) criticizes the victimizing implications in research focusing on immigrant girls and women, pointing out that a broader understanding of agency would acknowledge the meaning which girls give to different kinds of participation in different contexts. In the same way, referring to Somali women in Finland, Marja Tiilikainen (2003) writes that meaningful participation can emphasize the environment of home, due to which the household work can be a component of wellbeing. Like Tiilikainen, Saba Mahmood (2012) criticizes the idea of participation as 'emancipatory resistance', as it strengthens the polarized understanding of subversion and subordination. Mahmood suggests that agency can appear as an attempt to conform at first sight, but instead, it illuminates the multiple and creative ways in which individuals can adapt to the situation.

Although I agree that the understanding of participation, agency and empowerment should be broadened to include not only subversion but all kinds of being, feeling and acting, the emphasis on the private sphere and domestic chores can also be used to direct the discussion of girls' and women's participation in questionable directions. It has led to a conclusion that girls and women from 'traditional cultures' want to contribute to the family and community, and they have no interest in contributing to the society or committing themselves to education or profession, although it is more likely the lack of possibility rather than the lack of interest which can cause this (Stretmo & Melander 2013: 82). Migrant women's knowledge might also be referred to as 'feelings' or 'experience' (Tuori 2009), and although there is nothing wrong with feelings and experience, they might not be regarded as valid knowledge outside the participatory paradigm. Also, it has been

claimed that participatory projects which merely limit their focus on the 'personal and local' as sites of knowledge and empowerment ignore the other places where power and knowledge are located (Cooke & Kothari 2004: 12), thus producing knowledge which would be applicable only at a very local level. The same problem applies to the notion made by Natalie Heinich (2010) that assuming everything to be socially constructed reduces human experience to a single dimension which might not give useful knowledge.

As can be seen from the discussion above, children's participation is used in many ways to address the needs of children in many circumstances, which makes it also a somewhat blurry concept. Because of the blurriness, children's participation is criticized for being too vaguely defined to provide a theoretical basis for forging an agenda for any practical work (Kirby & Woodhead 2003: 243, Thesis 2010: 343). It is true that participation can be used to refer to just about anything, for example, the means by which the participants accomplish the aims of the project in an efficient, effective or cheap way. It can also refer to the outcome, where the community sets up a process to control its own development (Nelson & Wright 2005: 1) although critics (such as Cooke 2004) doubt that participation could be seen simultaneously as both process and an outcome. If participation is represented as a set of techniques rather than a commitment to work together and build respectful relationships, participatory attempts can end up reproducing the unequal power structures they are supposed to challenge (Cahill *et al.* 2010: 408). Acknowledging this danger, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009: 5) has elaborated the definition of children's participation in the CRC as:

> "Ongoing *processes*, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can *learn* how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes."

The importance of this addition is that children's participation should not be seen as an outcome, but a process. The mentions of dialogue and mutual respect mean that participation cannot be an adult-dictated process of informing children of their roles, and the notion of learning means that children need age-appropriate support in acquiring the capacities which are needed for participation. All in all, the limitations of the definition of children's participation do not only concern the essence of participation, but also the child who is referred to. As will be shown below, the definition might not take into consideration children whose experiences do not fit into the mainstream idea of childhood.

3.4 'Child' in the definitions of children's participation

Debbie Watson rightly wonders that if childhood is as complex and contextual as it is considered to be in the light of current literature, how can there be guidelines for the best interest or the wellbeing of children (Kiilakoski & Suurpää 2014: 60, Watson 2014)? Therefore, the final part of this conceptual framework asks who the 'child' is in the definitions of children's participation, and in particular, how suitable the definition is for the participants of this study.

Like many other social identities, a child is seen to be a biologically defined category, marked by chronological age. Children are those who have not yet reached biological or social maturity, and have yet to develop their full capacities and competencies. In general, there seems to be an assumption that if children's participation is conceptualized broadly enough, it is equally available and inviting for all children and youth, because the same 'disadvantage', the low age, applies to all children and youth, although quite clearly for unaccompanied minors, this 'disadvantage' is combined with additional challenges by the societal structures.

The discussion of the participatory rights of children has similar underpinnings as discussions of other groups with less power (women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, *etc.*) in society. The difference is, of course, that childhood is relevant for all members of society in the beginning of their lives and unlike some other social categories of difference, it is a passing phase. This 'becoming' stage means that childhood is a time when children are developed, educated and socialized into their future roles as adults. (Holloway & Valentine 2000: 4) As 'less than' adults, children at least in many areas of the world are supposed to have the right to childhood, which is understood as freedom of liability and responsibilities. The responsible adults have a duty to protect children from the outside world, and in 'normal' circumstances children are not expected to contribute economically to the family or care for others.

But as Watson noted above, childhood, youth and adulthood are seen as culturally and socially constructed phenomena which vary with time and place, articulating with other social differences. Allison James and Alan Prout (1990) pointed this out in their attempt to 'reconstruct childhood', and the idea has since become almost a new orthodoxy of childhood studies (see Alanen 2015). It has also become increasingly common in childhood studies to see children as social actors, capable of decision-making and beings on their own right rather than 'becomings' (Holloway & Valentine 2000, 5). This comes close to the 'child-liberationist' views which were the inspiration behind the rise of critical pedagogy with children

(Strandell 2010) as well as one of the motivations behind Article 12 of the CRC (Freeman 2002: 100). So, while it is argued that, for example, in many African countries children are seen as the property of their families until they acquire the needed skills to become independent rights-holders (*cf.* Abebe & Tefera 2014: 56, who write about Ethiopia), children have socially constructed, innovative ways to respond to these demands. Yet, it is clear that the practice in reality is not as polarized as this, and there are definitely child-liberationists in Africa and paternalist views in the most modernized parts of the world.

However, as Sporton *et al.* (2006: 206) have remarked, unaccompanied minors are still 'lost in an interdisciplinary vacuum'; after the arrival in a host country, their childhood is constructed in Western and adultist terms which do not necessarily match their own understanding of their roles. In addition, if children are included in migration research, the focus is on the lack of their voice and agency, due to their vulnerability. The assumption of vulnerability, based on the unaccompanied children's situation, is understandable. The combination of being a refugee, being in the middle of adolescence and being unaccompanied comprise a significant burden for the development and the wellbeing of unaccompanied children, possibly resulting in depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, grief and other problems (Derlyun & Broekaert 2007: 143). Unaccompanied minors have lost their families either as they have fled, or during the journey, which has been claimed to be the most traumatic experience a child can have (Helander & Mikkonen 2002). Absence of familiar networks, regardless of what they have been like in the past, can make the child or adolescent feel disconnected to her surroundings, and unsure about her own competence. Also, it can force autonomy on the child, demanding the child take responsibilities which are not in line with her capacities and development (Hubertus & van Essen 2004: 524, Lansdown 2005). An often cited expert in refugee studies, David Turton (1996, 2002), actually suggests that because of this, all research focusing on asylum seekers or refugees, not only on children, implicitly or explicitly suggests that the produced knowledge will ultimately help the 'suffering, uprooted or displaced population' and that research with refugees or other groups who have suffered is only justifiable if the suffering is the focus and if the research aim is to find solutions to that suffering. He adds that research which produces only immediate, short-term benefits for the participants inevitably undermines the deeper, structural inequalities (Turton 1996: 96).

But equally understandable is the alternative view, which focuses on the resilience of unaccompanied minors. Resilience refers to a 'dynamic process characterized by positive development in spite of exposure to significant risk'

(Montgomery 2011: 32), or in other words, to the ways in which children cope with, and even respond positively to adversity under stress (Ungar & Liebenberg 2009: 5). As resilience focuses on the strengths of children, it is a more positive, optimistic and pragmatic approach to practice that counteracts the risk- and problem-centred discussion (Gilligan 2009: 9). The escape from their home country has been an act of bravery and agency, and the difficult circumstances have forced unaccompanied minors to take on responsibilities. Although it has been painful, the challenges might have helped unaccompanied minors develop capacities which other children of their age usually do not have.

Seeing unaccompanied children as solely vulnerable or resilient is problematic. Giorgina Doná (2007: 211) asks, without underestimating the real challenges in refugee children's lives, what is the role and involvement of asylum-seeking children themselves in research where they are automatically labelled as victims as, for example, David Turton (1996) suggests? Vanessa Pupavac (2008: 280) adds that 'victimising' asylum seekers means they are released from normal responsibilities and their capacity and subjectivity are called into question, which is not a very fruitful foundation for participatory projects. A one-sided, essentialist view on this matter also inevitably ignores the voices of the children themselves, which might contradict the assumption made by the outsiders.

Although research has acknowledged the contextual and fluid nature of childhood, the practical challenge remains when children negotiate their roles between childhood and adulthood, and between the demands of the child-liberationist and paternalistic views of those roles. The contextual and cultural nature of childhood makes the boundaries between childhood and adulthood difficult to define, which highlights the *liminal space* of unaccompanied children between countries but also between or on the borders of categories of childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, the liminality is different: childhood is formative whereas migration is transformative, which makes unaccompanied childhood challenging to conceptualize. Nevertheless, it has been argued that we are all 'becomings'; the 'unfinishedness' of all people was one of the central ideas of Paulo Freire (Kirylo 2013: 51) and more recently of Emma Uprichard (2008), who talks about 'stickiness of time' meaning that the past, present and future cannot be separated as they all influence all people's experiences, be they children or adults.

In this study, I refer to all the girls in this study as children or minors interchangeably. Although the ages (one 8 year old, others from 14 to 17) would place most of them in to the category of 'youth' and thus, this research into the field of youth research, I do not attempt to categorize the girls into any age category

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more specific than 'under the age of 18'. This is justified by two reasons. First, the distinction between children and adults is problematic, because as noted, childhood, youth and adulthood are to some extent overlapping and dependent on the culture and the context. Chronological age is a delicate topic for asylum-seeking children, as they know that their age can be questioned and tested[14]. Age is also insufficient to define the developmental phase of each participant, as it is influenced not only by years but also by experiences (Clark-Kazak 2009, Crawley 2009). The girls of this study can have experiences, skills and knowledge which are untypical for children of their age and consequently, they might feel the need to hide those capacities so that their childhood or need for protection are not contested (Miranda Fricker, 2007, calls this testimonial injustice). Secondly, referring to all under 18 year olds as children emphasizes the fact that they are subjects of the CRC and even more importantly, should be treated primarily as children and secondarily as asylum seekers. As children and youngsters who are temporarily or permanently deprived of their supportive family environment, they are entitled to special protection and assistance (Jespersen 2014). So, although I do not situate the girls in any category by their age, their own understanding of their age is used as one of the analytical categories when discussing how the girls viewed their participation.

Some authors also criticize the term *unaccompanied*, as it strips the 'child and youth migrants of any agentic capacities to determine the path of their development and individualization' (Orgocka 2012: 3–4), suggesting 'independent child migrant' as an alternative. In this study, I use the term unaccompanied following the language of existing policies (for example, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, hereafter UNHCR). The Finnish term *yksintullut* and the Swedish *ensamkommande* are perhaps more neutral definitions, literally meaning that the child or the youngster has arrived alone. As the participants of my study have not only come alone but also live their current realities without families, I see no reason for avoiding the term unaccompanied.

Regardless of the vagueness or variation in the viewpoints of what the childhood or participation of unaccompanied children should look like, the phenomenon in focus remains the same. Also, the attempts to promote children's participation are usually benevolent, although the conceptions of what this might

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[14] If a child does not have a proof of identification, or if either the police or the immigration officials think the informed age is not credible, the child can be sent to age determination by the Department of Forensic Medicine, Medicum, in Helsinki (Pakolaisneuvonta 2015). The validity and reliability of tests based on bones and teeth, as well as the ethics of this procedure, have long been criticized (*e.g.* by Soomer *et al.* 2003).

mean can differ to some extent. This study does not fix the problem of children's participation as a blurry concept; hence, the aim is not to achieve a theoretical closure or a perfect definition of unaccompanied children's participation. Instead, as shown in the next chapter, the aim in this study is to use and modify a theory which is timely and practical in understanding the girls' participation in our action, while also considering the normative function of action research, thinking about how things could be better.

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4 PAR in dialogue with critical pedagogy

The previous chapter explained the conceptual framework, clarifying what is meant by children's participation and how the understanding of childhood, vulnerability and resilience might influence it. Descriptive theoretical framework alone is insufficient for participatory research. That is why the focus shifts now to the contextual framework, and in particular to the ways the PAR was forming in the encounters with the participants. PAR worked as a tool to shape the context through action in the present and through images of the future, producing 'theory-in-action' as a result. (Heron & Reason 1997, Lincoln *et al.* 2011).

Theories in PAR are used in dialogue with the data. Theory has an analogical (or abductive) role, acknowledging existing theories while allowing the data to determine which are the most suitable and timely frames for action to achieve the desired goals. (Reason & Torbert 2001: 15). This makes sense, as deductive 'testing' of existing theories on children's participation with unaccompanied children could overlook or misunderstand the differences which have an impact on their participation. Yet, the theory also has a normative role, suggesting what could be improved, while questioning dominant assumptions. Inductive attempts to create new theory purely from the data, without any border conditions, would include the danger of producing knowledge which would be limited to only a very local level, without adding understanding about the larger, structural elements within and beyond the immediate environments of the children. (Pain *et al.* 2010, Warren 2000). Thus, rather than seeing action as pure reflection of a theory, or theory having the power to change action, action researchers view theory and practice as having a mediating dialogue, which is called praxis. (Gustavsen 2001: 17). Therefore, I acknowledge previously described theories on children's participation, childhood and vulnerability but instead of looking for essentialist descriptions of the girls' experiences, I view these theories as reflecting and being reflected by the liminality of the girls' life worlds.

As noted earlier, the participatory paradigm relates to critical and feminist theories by sharing a focus on interactions of privilege and oppression based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, gender or sexuality (Lincoln *et al.* 2011: 102). Supporters of critical pedagogy, like action researchers, are interested in the roots of knowledge in a nexus of these interactions: they ask how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how our everyday common-sense understanding gets produced and lived out (Giroux *et al.* 2001). Critical pedagogy embraces a dialectical view of knowledge, supporting the notion that theory and

practice are inextricably linked to our understanding of the world and everyday actions in the world. Therefore, all human activity is understood as emerging from an interaction of reflection, dialogue and action. (Darder *et al.* 2009).

Like action research, the principles of critical pedagogy, praxis and dialogue (as discussed below) were inspired by the ideas of John Dewey, but also by numerous other critical thinkers who were not necessarily in agreement with each other (Kincheloe *et al.* 2011: 163).[15] Perhaps the most influential critical thinker for this study has been Paulo Freire, who, according to Peter McLaren (2000: 1) is 'the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy' and according to Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson (2005: 15), also the founding father of PAR. Using Freire's words, learning about the world can be done by naming and analysing the context together with all the participants through dialogue (*denunciation*) and creating new kinds of being and participating in the shared situation as a result of this (*annunciation*) (Freire 1985: 57). In this PAR it meant exploring the practical and critical experiences of the girls and helping them to improve some aspects of their social situation. The line between theory and practice in both critical pedagogy and PAR is not clear-cut, which makes critical pedagogy and PAR inextricably intertwined too. Yet, they are analytically distinguishable as the former is pedagogy whereas the latter is research.

Although Freire's texts have been criticized (an old example by Elias 1976; a more recent example by Weiler 2002) for being outdated, male-centred and only relevant in the context where they were written, his theories are still useful in understanding participation in a way which addresses multifaceted 'oppression' in societal structures. Furthermore, arguing that solving any social problems or improving any aspect of people's lives is only possible if the ones affected by the attempt are willing and able to contribute to the knowledge production is just as relevant today as it was in the past. If people themselves are unable to act towards a change which they see as relevant for a more just society or bearable current situation, critical pedagogy suggests raising critical consciousness and supporting the participants to find their capabilities to act. Freire (1968/2000) referred to this process as 'conscientization', becoming aware of the society and the injustices in it, or as Cahill and colleagues (2008: 100) phrase it, a process of 'opening eyes and

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[15] As inspirations of critical pedagogy, Kincheloe *et al.* (2011: 163) mention Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Max Weber; the Frankfurt School theories; Continental social theories such as Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and Jaques Derrida; French feminists such as Julia Kristeva and the Russian sociolinguistic, Lev Vygotsky. In addition to these, Tomperi *et al.* (2005, 9) mention Neil Postman and Charles Weingarten (1969, *Teaching as Subversive Activity*) and Ival Illich (1970, *Deschooling society*).

seeing the world with different eyes' as a requirement for fighting 'oppression' and achieving empowerment (Empowerment is discussed more in Article II). This is because without the participation of the affected people, the improvement might end up being arbitrary. This idea is often used in PAR with children, as it has been shown that adult-designed and adult-led attempts to promote children's participation rarely work (*cf.* Malone & Hartung 2010: 34), and it was clearly one of my ideals too, especially in the beginning of the project.

4.1 Including the voices from the 'margins'

As I soon learnt, raising critical awareness is an unrealistic goal for unaccompanied children who are just starting to learn about their situation in Finland. Neither the children nor the practitioners in the centre know whether the children will be granted residence or not, or whether other significant changes, such as a family reunion, will happen. However, I did not want to abandon the aim of conscientization despite the practical challenges: it nevertheless may be the only way to bring the less-often heard voices into knowledge production. Accepting the less often heard voices as valid and true, and the polyvocality and plurality of opinions within them, challenges what Hannah Arendt (2002) calls the 'Coercive truth', *i.e.* knowledge which only exists in expertise and authority. This means that although the discussion of 'raising critical awareness' is unrealistic, unaccompanied children can and should learn enough of their situation to start trusting people and to acquire courage to voice their opinions about issues that they want others to hear. This is because only the children themselves hold valuable knowledge about their lives and experiences, and that knowledge should be the starting point when trying to improve the situation.

Another problematic aspect of applying Freire's theory in this study is that it could imply that the unaccompanied children are responsible for fighting their 'oppression'. Clearly, the most significant 'oppressive' factors in their lives are beyond reach, and furthermore, it should be the adults' responsibility to fight for social justice. Referring to certain groups of people as 'oppressed' may sound cynical and pessimistic, but if 'oppression' is understood as Freire defines it, as 'preventing people from becoming more human' (Freire 1968/2000: 57), restricting their lives into 'existing' rather than 'living' (Freire 1968/2000: 98[16]) the term

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[16]In Freire's early work (1968/2000), the division of people into the groups of the bad oppressors and the poor oppressed is quite polarized, although probably very appropriate at the time and the context which Freire referred to. However, Freire (1994) elaborated the meaning of oppression in *Pedagogy of Hope* to mean social problems of any kind rather than 'bad' people.

becomes more relevant even for unaccompanied children. Although unaccompanied children are most certainly people whom nobody wants to 'oppress' on purpose, in this case oppression could mean that their attempts and chances for contributing to their own wellbeing or increasing their participation would be unintentionally downplayed. Reasons for this could be, for example, a belief that their assumed traumatization requires that protection should be prioritized over participation, or that their assumed lack of suitable capacity would be an obstacle for participation.

My aim is to deconstruct assumptions about unaccompanied girls, considering how the children see their situation themselves. Along with the participatory paradigm, I see knowledge as both subjective and objective and therefore, relative to the knower: knowledge is subjective because it is only known in the mind of the knower, but it is also objective because the mind interprets the given elements in its environment (Heron 1996). The driving force for the desire for change is not necessarily anything that appears as 'oppression' for the outsiders, but in the mind of the knower it might appear as such. As Kabeer (1999: 437) notes, it is impossible to foresee what feels empowering or radically transformative for those who experience the situation; 'second-order' choices might feel empowering for people whose possibilities for 'first-order' choices (*i.e.* life-turning choices) are limited. In our PAR we did our best to learn together about the girls' here-and-now situation in Finland, within the limitations of reality, while finding ways to utilize the girls' previously acquired skills for improvements they found relevant.

4.2   Dialogue

Including all the voices into knowledge production is possible by encouraging participants to engage in an equal subject-subject dialogue. Literally, dialogue means knowledge which is had between knowers, as compared to monologue. Dialogue between children and adults as well as among the children is a requirement for children's participation, if dialogue is seen as Hart (1992: 5) defines it, as the 'process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives'. Hart (1997) even argues that without genuine dialogue, what appears to be children's participation can in a worst case only be a result of manipulation on behalf of the powerful, *i.e.* the adults (see also Vuorikoski & Kiilakoski 2005). Emphasis on dialogue between children and adults is acknowledged especially in a view in which children's participation is seen as a process rather than an end result (Hart 1992, Lansdown 2005, 2010).

Freire (1974: 42) talks about dialogue being 'linked by love, hope and mutual trust', which enables participants to join in a critical search for an improvement of their situation. Martin Buber (1993), whose views on dialogue were close to Freire's (see Steward *et al.* 2004: 33) and whom Freire quotes (1968/2000: 167) differentiates between the alienated 'I–It' relationship and the caring 'I–You' relationship. The 'I–It' relationship emphasizes the difference between self and the 'other', whereas in the latter case, the relationship and the dialogue are between two subjects, who view the shared situation from different perspectives. What is significant in both the Freirean dialogue 'linked with love' and the Buberian 'I–You' dialogue is that both subjects are appreciated as authentic and original, and knowledge is created in interaction between people, not in vertical relationships, which lack the connection, love and empathy (Freire 1974: 84).

Viewing the shared situation from other perspectives and thus, engaging in an empathetic relationship does not mean assuming to know how the other person must feel. In practice, this could result, for example, in assumptions about the permanent vulnerability of unaccompanied children which is, despite its good intentions, projecting one's own feelings onto another. It would imply that all people feel and behave the same way, which is in the end materializing the other. (Buber 1993: 39, see also Järvelä 2005). However, equally objectifying can be a researcher who enters the field with unaccompanied minors with fixed aspirations to 'liberate' the 'oppressed' children, without first hearing what the children want.

Dialogue is only possible in a community where an individual feels belonging and acceptance, and is supported by the belief that one's own actions have a real impact. The feeling of belonging, which Vanessa May (2011) defines as a 'sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings' is one of the three paths to successful resettlement of unaccompanied minors, others being the search for safety and the will to succeed (see Kohli 2011). If the attempt is to promote children's participation in a child-centred way or to address the diverse ways of seeing the shared situation, the only way to do it would be to help all children to voice their opinions. Through this dialogue, it is possible to see connections between the children's experiences and the structural elements which influence their participation.

4.3   Authentic voice and trust

In action research, what participants say in dialogue is often accepted as reflecting individual experience and choice; unmediated and authentic voice of the participant

is presented, if not as a requirement, but at least as a goal for PAR. Nevertheless, the voice may be influenced by socially constructed realities, dominant discourses or even 'hidden acts of normalization' (Kothari 2004: 145), which challenge the notion of 'authenticity'. Freire observed that what seems to be the unmediated voice of the participant might in fact be a sign of adjusting to the system or even echo the 'oppressor's' voice (Freire 1968/2000: 95). In a similar vein, bell hooks (1989/2007), whom Wisneski (2013: 73) calls the 'feminist voice in critical pedagogy' writes about the fear of 'talking back', which means that the voices of the marginalized may merely reproduce the voices of the powerful bodies, especially if the voices arise from situations where people are at risk. Ravi Kohli (2006, 2009) in turn writes about the authenticity of unaccompanied children's voices, noting that their status may possibly cause a fear of saying something wrong and jeopardizing their own situation. Because of this, unaccompanied children might develop guarded ways of speaking about their lives and circumstances when they feel their sense of safety and belonging is threatened. Children might reveal as little as possible to bridge potential credibility gaps and to optimize their claim for protection. These 'thin' stories develop into 'thick' stories along with increasing trust in the surrounding people and a belief in a non-threatening future. (Kohli 2009: 107).

Jo Boyden (2001) agrees with Kohli by noting that children's participation in contexts of forced migration tends to be highly restricted because children might seek privacy and 'invisibility' and even if they would wish to participate, fear and manifestations of power in their contexts make it practically impossible. She also notes that promoting dialogue in transient groups of children who have been brought together by force from areas of conflict may be hindered because of trust. Although trust is central for dialogue, it is not an a priori condition. Instead, trust can result from the encounter when people are co-subjects in exploring and transforming their realities (Freire 1968/2000: 169), and through this reciprocal trust, individual wellbeing, communal participation and empowerment become possible (Törrönen *et al.* 2013). Luckily, as flexible and resourceful people, unaccompanied minors are likely to be able to regain trust despite their difficult experiences (Thomson *et al.* 2003).

Okyere and Twum-Danso Imoh (2014: 211) note that although there is a broad agreement for the conceptualizing of children's participation in terms of dialogue, the emphasis on 'voice' as a part of the dialogue puts children in unjust positions. Many adult-organized attempts to promote children's participation favour older, more articulate and at least fluently speaking children, who really have the language

and the voice which the adults find easy to acknowledge (Matthews & Limb 2003, Turkie 2010). PAR is often inspired by the ideas of communicative action by Habermas (see Alexander *et al.* 1991), but being able to communicate in an equal and democratic manner presupposes not only language but also some knowledge of democracy. Furthermore, even if the focus of PAR is on experiential knowing which precedes language (Reason & Torbert 2001) and knowledge which in PAR can be created in 'myriad of ways' (Hall 2001), the findings have to eventually be translated into words and language.

Bob Franklin (1997) and Greg Mannion (2010) pose a slightly different critique to the dialogical approach to children's participation. Instead of just pointing at the difficulties of children to voice their opinions, they note that the search for more authentic forms of children's voices includes the danger of pushing adults out from the dialogue, to the margins of the process. Also Michael Wyness (2013) and Leena Alanen (2009) attempt to bring the adults back to the discussion by arguing that children and adults have their distinctive roles in the generational relations which implement each other. These relationships are not necessarily equal or based on mutual expectations but instead, emphasize natural dependency and care (Yuval-Davis 2011), as noted in Chapter 3.3.

In summary, although conscientization and dialogue are relevant parts of the analogical theory of unaccompanied children's participation, and central in many previous studies on the topic, these ideals have to be open for criticism. Conscientization, as Freire defined it, is a utopic goal for unaccompanied children given their situation and all uncertainties in it. The attempt to include a purely unmediated, authentic 'voice' of a child in research is difficult with any children, and close to impossible when working for a short time with groups such as unaccompanied minors. However, the normative aspect of this study suggests that they are good goals to strive for, as considering the practical challenges hindering conscientization and dialogue are undoubtedly helpful in learning about what could be improved in the unaccompanied children's realities. In the next chapter I consider the additional theories which helped me to understand the unaccompanied girls' participation especially at the later stage of my research, when I already had experience and data from PAR.

5 Intersectionality and liminality in participation

The above-discussed concepts of praxis, conscientization and dialogue are not static or formulaic; they are not directly transferable to other settings as they all unfold differently for each context and each individual depending on the historical, social and political milieu (Kirylo 2013: 51). The objective reality shapes the subjective knowledge, depending on how the individual experiences her reality (Reason & Torbert 2001). As our PAR proceeded and the knowledge about the societal structures in the girls' life worlds increased, the approach shifted to one that was more feminist and thus, the relevant theories became increasingly intersectional (see Chapter 5.1). Thinking of the girls' status, space and transitions, the concept of liminality (see Chapters 5.2 and 5.3) became central.

5.1 Intersectionality in participation

Intersectionality (term coined by Crenshaw 1989) is a theoretical and methodological approach which focuses on complex and intertwined social categories and the way in which categories are mutually constituted (Dill & Kohlman 2012: 154). Some authors claim intersectionality belongs to post-colonial literature (Lykes & Mallona 2008: 118) whereas others (*e.g.* Lykke 2010) consider it as a trend in feminist research, inspired by other critical theories. Intersectionality echoes the argument which was voiced simultaneously by feminist theorists, anti-racist theorists, post-colonial and post-structural theorists in the 1980s claiming that modern analytical categories ignore the complexity and ambiguity of human experience. A more sophisticated way of analysing the social categories would be to see them as 'crossroads' (Crenshaw 1989) when the 'streets' of, for example, gender, race and class cross in individuals' lives, or as 'axes' of difference and the way in which power differentials interact and produce different kinds of societal inequalities (Yuval-Davis 2006: 195). Focusing on one analytical category or assuming some participants to be, for example, 'marginalized' because of some observable elements in their lives overlook the cumulative effect of differences in individuals' lives, and even more significantly for this study, the individual responses to those categories (McCall 2005: 1776).

Interconnection of the many faces of oppression is not unfamiliar for critical pedagogy either (Kincheloe 2011: 164), and both intersectionality and critical pedagogy fit perfectly well within the participatory paradigm (see Figure 1).

However, as Ellsworth (1989) points out, critical pedagogy can become impositional and function even as indoctrination if it is not used with care, meaning if the individual perspectives are not taken as foundations for action. More specifically, intersectionality aims to deconstruct normative assumptions of social categories and by doing that contribute to a social change (anticategorical level), focus on how different existing categories intersect (intercategorical level), or look at how individuals in the categories interact (intracategorical level). In all cases, the interest is focused on the material and social inequalities, as well as symbolic violence, which are rooted in relationships and defined by, for example, ethnicity, gender or age. According to McCall (2005), these categories are contextual and artificial, and people's positions in them fluid.[17]

Although intersectionality was not the original frame of this study, the girls kept referring to social categories which were significant in their realities: childhood, asylum-seeking status, ethnicity and gender, and it was obvious that these categories had an influence on their participation. The categories have a separate ontological basis, which means they are not irreducible or directly comparable. For example, asylum-seeking status is grounded in relation to the international humanitarian crisis and is therefore very concrete, whereas childhood represents the dimension of time and the appropriate roles for certain ages. Gender relates to accepted ways in certain contexts of being a boy and a girl, and ethnic divisions relate to discourses of boundaries which divide people into 'us' and 'them'. (Dhamoon 2011, Lykke 2010, Yuval-Davis 2006). Therefore, unlike McCall (2005) and some other critical theorists, I do not consider all these categories solely artificial: for instance, asylum-seeking status is legally imposed and very concrete for the girls in this study, whereas others, such as understanding gender might be more self-constituted and flexible depending on the context. Although the categories are not comparable, they can be used as analytical tools to explore the girls' experiences within these categories. The analysis is both anticategorical, directing the attention to the need to revisit the existing categories to address the girls' experiential knowledge, and intercategorical, looking at the cumulative effect of overlapping social categories.

In my study intersectionality means that the girls' participation is not explained referring only to the obstacles caused by their liminal situation or by their age, ethnicity, gender or asylum-seeking status, but instead the focus is on the ways the

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[17] More references in Intersectionality: a special issue in European Journal of Women's Studies (2006: Vol. 13, Issue 3).

girls themselves experience their position in the categories, and consequently, how their experiences influence their participation. This is not a new approach; for example, Rowena Fong mentioned intersectionality already in 2004 in her book about culturally competent practices with refugees[18]. Intersectionality extends from commensurable existing theories, critical pedagogy for instance, by adding the context-specific, difference-centred lens to address the ambiguity of the participants' realities (Maguire 2008). The context-specificity in this study considers the liminality and the girls' individual responses to it (discussed theoretically in Chapters 5.2 and 5.3, empirically in Chapter 7.2), whereas the difference-centeredness adds focus on how social categories, such as the previously explained categories of childhood, vulnerability or resilience, influence the girls' participation. In fact, it is the ambiguity and liminality of the girls' realities which justifies the use of intersectionality, as will be demonstrated below.

5.2 Liminality in structures

My interpretation of participatory perspective is that objective and subjective realities are intertwined and impossible to separate, which means that liminality can be found in the structures, and in people's minds. In this thesis I shall first focus on what has been written about the structures which are relevant for the girls in this study, and then move on to consider how individuals can respond to these structures.

The term liminality was probably first used by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his work *Les Rites de passage* published in 1909, but it was another anthropologist Victor Turner (1970, 1974) who made the concept known not only in anthropology but also in sociology. Turner (1974: 57) described liminality as a phase when:

> [S]ubjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.

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[18] Fong (2004: 310–311) suggests intersectionality as the future direction when working with immigrant and refugee populations. Her definition highlights the multiple liminalities and the need to examine each social environments with different, interacting variables. Fong suggests that practitioners should have detailed knowledge about the 'clients'' backgrounds. The aim is practically and ideologically problematic, as it carries a note of cultural essentialism. Yet, awareness of the fact that differences exist is required cultural sensitivity (*cf.* Räsänen 2007).

Turner later elaborated that liminality is 'a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating post-liminal experience' (Turner 1986: 42). In migration research, liminality has been explored in terms of diaspora, referring to migrant communities away from their country of origin (Van Hear 2014: 176). Liisa Malkki (1995a, 1995b), like Turner (1964), talks about the situation of being 'betwixt and between', when people are detached from an old status but are not yet incorporated into a new one. This results in a space of 'alterity' as Nicola Rollock (2012) defines it, a position at the edges of society from which an individual's identity and experiences are constructed. Referring to his own stay in exile, Freire (1994: 31) wrote:

> No one goes anywhere alone, least of all into exile, not even those who arrive physically alone, unaccompanied by family, spouse, children, parents or siblings. No one leaves his or her world without having been transfixed by its roots, or with a vacuum for a soul.

Freire described people in exile being in a limbo stage: they are neither there (in their country of origin) nor here; they might spend years in liminality while waiting for news to be able to remain or return, and during this ambiguous period in their lives, they should be creative in finding hope in the situation (Freire 1994: 32–33). Many authors, such as Ala Sirriyeh (2010) and Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo (2004) have noted that migrant children and youth experience multiple liminalities: between origin and host societies and between childhood and adulthood. Some liminalities are a part of all young people's lives, and optimally provide exciting opportunities to open new doors to the 'post-liminal', but when many liminalities overlap, the effect might be no longer exciting but stressful and even intimidating. This is especially true for asylum-seeking children, whose liminality is also influenced by uncertainty of where those doors will open. The multiple liminal spaces due to the age and status of the girls in this study demonstrated very few of the attributes of their past, and the current situation in the reception centre definitely seemed quite different from the post-liminal 'real life', as the girls imagined the outside-world being (*cf.* Turner 1974, 57).

Liminal places have been analysed from the point of view of governability (famously by Foucault 1980) and totality (Goffman 1961/1969), where the actions of individuals are highly controlled. Goffman (1961/1969, 9) writes about institutions controlling the inhabitants with visible and invisible 'barriers' between the residents and the wider society. The barriers, such as distant location or limited

access to resources, are justified to ensure the safety of the residents or the society, but for the individual point of view, they can appear highly disempowering. Foucault writes similarly about institutions, but the difference from Goffman's views is that Foucault does not see people as targets of power but as its instruments; power exists in the network of relations among people (Foucault 1980). The institutions described by Foucault and Goffman do not isolate people because of their displacement but because of other individual features which at the time of writing were used to justify the need to exclude people from society: mental illness, criminality or sexual orientation. So, institutions either excluded individuals, or socialized them to act according to some pre-set goals which were considered as justifiable from the societal perspective. However, the socializing practices might appear as unfair and disempowering from the perspective of the individuals who experience them (Gallagher 2006: 161). Clearly, places like these hardly have a good opportunity structure for participation.

Some descriptions of liminality are quite dramatic: refugee camps have been presented as human storage, where instead of having a right to live, individuals have a right not to die (Hyndman & Giles 2011), and Goffman's old writings about psychiatric hospitals portray them as places where people are no less than stripped of their identities. Freire (1968/2000: 169) remarked that although people in liminality would be capable of participating in the pursuit of liberation, the ambiguity of their own situation combined with the fear of freedom might lead people to be hesitant to 'revolt' or try to improve their situation. This is because their realities are conditioned by contradictions, and these contradictions in turn shape individuals. If the individual is uncertain of her capabilities to manage, the fear of freedom causes anxiety of replacing internalized guidelines of the situation with autonomy and responsibilities. (Freire 1968/2000, 45–46). In this way, the people in waiting are often labelled by 'abjection' (Kristeva 1982), meaning that the migrants' individual autonomy is questioned and the person has to linger somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity.

Ong (2003) notes that the 'advanced liberal societies' control asylum seekers not with discipline (*cf.* Foucault 1995) but regulation. Also Lidén and Rusten (2007) note in their research with accompanied minors in Norway that the problem of the implementation of the CRC, especially connected to the principles of participation and the best interest of the child, is that regulations and demands of the asylum system might overrule the CRC. Thus, structures of inequality can be created and maintained in more subtle ways through seemingly human practices, which means that when individuals think they have the freedom to act and participate as they

will, their activities can be controlled in ways they do not even recognize. This might mean, for instance, that unaccompanied children are given the freedom to participate, as long as they do it the way that is consistent with the values of the receiving society, and does not cause any extra load for society. This is supported by unaccompanied minors' fears of being a burden to society, and what Les Back (2007) calls a 'grid of immigration' in which an unequal relationship of debt and thankfulness between the immigrant and the host country forces the former to express gratitude towards the latter. In the case of unaccompanied minors, this 'grid' is strengthened by the inevitably unequal power relations between children and the adults who are responsible for taking care of them.

Carolyne Willow (1996) asks two fundamental questions which are relevant for children's participation in liminal situations: First, do young people have the *ability or competence* to make decisions and participate? Second, what are the *benefits* of promoting participation in places such as residential homes? This leads to consideration of whether the capabilities of the child are adaptable to the new life circumstances, and even if the ability and competence would be there, what are the actual benefits for the child in using them? According to Monica Barry's (2002: 251–252) research with children in care, the mismatch between protection and participation damages the long-term development of children in two ways: too high expectations and too much independence at an early age might decrease the child's willingness to take responsibility for his or her own life later. On the other hand, a more frequent problem with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is that their acquired capabilities have no value or use in the care-system. This connects to the problem that although the aim in institutions of child welfare is to make the children and youth suitable for society and participate in a certain way, in the view of the children themselves, the impact might appear to be opposite (Kekoni 2008). That is because the children understand their position in the current situation as well as their future prospects in ways which make sense in their realities; they might feel that the resources and their own resourcefulness do not match in a way which would contribute to their wellbeing in the present and future (Evans 2007).

The concrete ways in which liminality influences unaccompanied minors' participation is that their actions are more limited than those of the 'mainstream' children, because the reception and care must be regulated to minimize the costs (Conlon & Gill 2013: 241). Although by law, unaccompanied children should be considered primarily as children and secondarily as asylum-seekers, the opportunities for participation are implicitly and explicitly influenced by their status as asylum seekers. Besides, as unaccompanied minors' membership in their

families, societies or home countries no longer provides protection for them, the role of the adults around them becomes very significant also in providing emotional support.

5.3   Individual responses to liminality

The influence of liminality on individuals has been the focus of a lot of research, but there are contradictory views about what the effect on individuals might be. In migration research the sedentarist view (*e.g.* Kibread 1999) argues that people's identities are fixed to a geographical location, and outside that place of origin, people are 'uprooted', suffering and perhaps even permanently damaged. It has been claimed that people in this kind of state struggle with ambivalent feelings, experiencing simultaneously both attraction and repulsion, love and hate towards the situation (Smelser 1998: 5). Furthermore, because of the displacement, people develop some kind of 'shared refugee identity' (Kibread 1999) or form *communitas* (Turner 2007/1969: 106) reforming affectual relationships which tie individuals together across fixed social categories.

What is less apparent in most theories on liminality is that the people who experience it might find surprising ways to adjust and cope within the limitations of the reality. The anti-sedentarist counterargument, posed by Liisa Malkki (1995a), for example, notes that assuming some kind of 'international order of things' where people have places where they belong produces refugees as universal and dehistoricized category of humanity, emphasizing their victimhood and ignoring that migrants, too, are individuals with personalities. Malkki (1995a) suggests that people have a mass of multiple, shifting identities which instead of being permanently tied to some social categories, geographical locations or cultural traditions, are constantly renegotiated in interaction with other people to fill the needs of a current situation (see also Sporton *et al.* 2006). The individual is not a victim of the way she is positioned, but has agency: she can think, imagine, act and resist in order to change her situation (Braidotti 2002). Edith Montgomery (2011: 32) argues that many children who have experienced severe advertises in their past were able to 'bounce back' from their problems during their time in exile, and there is no simple, causal relationship between traumatic experiences and consequent psychological problems. Montgomery highlights the importance of establishing a stable social ecology (she is referring to Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model

of development[19]) in the exile country as a key component of supporting the child's social participation. (Montgomery 2011). Joanna De Berry (2004) writes about girls in refugee camps in Uganda and Roy Huijsmans (2012) about young migrants in Lao People's Democratic Republic, both arguing that vulnerability is not an inherent quality, but a consequence of the way of life that exists in the contexts of forced migration. Thus vulnerability is not all-encompassing and permanent but people become vulnerable if, among other factors, their agency is constrained (de Berry 2004: 59, Huijsmans 2012: 42).

Resilience points individuals in the direction of an 'imagined elsewhere' (Haraway 1992: 295) where things would be better and by doing so, the process influences the ways in which people think about their here-and-now situation (Lykke 2010: 39), and imagining future circumstances and adjusting one's own roles to them requires creativity (Valsiner 2006). It might also require losing parts of one's own identity and recreating them in a new context, but as Malkki (1995b) argues, this is not necessarily painful but can in fact be liberating.

Although Michel Foucault and other post-structural theorists have been critical of PAR (see Kesby *et al.* 2010, Kothari 2004), their thoughts about the political, economic and social structures that constrain and exploit humankind and even more importantly, their sophisticated analysis of human experience in those structures, are relevant considerations in participatory research. For instance, Foucault's idea of power as a circulating force at the micro-level of society[20] helps in understanding even the unaccompanied girls' individual responses to liminality. Although the intent of the institution is to reform the inhabitant to be suitable to society, in reality institutions might work the opposite way: they can become generative, creating productive sites of activism, resistance and transformation, even though it had not been the original aim of those exercising the power (Foucault 1995, Gallagher 2008: 397). Instead of seeing power as something to hand down (*e.g.* from the adults to the children), Foucault argues that the change must begin from where the power already exists: outside, below and alongside the macro-level, so that the change is both effective and empowering for the participants (Foucault 1980: 60).

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[19] Urie Bronfenbrenner explored the influence of the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems in the child's development, and Montgomery (2011: 17, 31) pointed out that these all are very special in the situation of refugee children, and that each should be looked at separately.

[20] According to Foucault (1980: 98) 'Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization'.

Instead of seeing the liminality and waiting as only structural, inevitable facts and people who wait as passive objects, feminist perspectives on waiting also point out that liminalities can be 'socially produced, imbued with geopolitics, and actively encountered, incorporated and resisted amidst everyday spaces that migrants experience' (Conlon 2011: 353), which means that instead of only 'oppressing' objects to fit the system, liminality can help individuals find ways to resist, manage or even benefit from it (see Davies 1989). In this view children even in liminal situations are not powerless, but the power manifests itself in networks among the children, and between children and adults, taking different forms than the power which is exercised by adults only. This challenges the idea of a power-shift from the 'powerful' to the 'marginalized' as a requirement for participation, and disrupts the dichotomies between macro/micro, central/local, or powerful/powerless (Kothari 2004: 141).

However if power is seen on the micro level, circulating in people's relations and at some level available for all, it is very difficult to locate real domination or discrimination in the structures (Ramazanoglu 1993). This concerns not only gendered domination, but also domination due to other differences, such as age, ethnicity or asylum-seeking status. It is important to note that although power is, at some level everywhere in the network of people, exercising power is still intentional, since it is always calculated to fill somebody's aims or needs. This is why the individual experiences have to be considered also from the perspective of social categories, which reminds us that some forms of discrimination are tangible and influence some groups of people more than others.

6   Action of our PAR

Theory, data and findings go hand in hand in PAR, which means that the first parts of this thesis have already illuminated some of the findings. The focus of the remaining chapters of the thesis shift to the action, and how the data and theory together started answering research questions presented in the beginning. I describe the practical realization below, after which I present findings in chapter 7.

The process started in May 2011, when I stated my observation period. After signing the vow of silence, getting approval from the workers, the children and their guardians, I was invited to get to know the daily life of the units. In order to build cooperative relationships, I participated in activities with the children, such as watching TV or cooking, while having informal conversations with them. We discussed possible problems in the children's daily life, which they would like to solve. Evidently, one of the problems was the children wanted to get their minds off the troubling aspects of their situation. The other problem was the lack of accessible and fun activities especially for the girls. There were more boys than girls at the centre, which is perhaps why the boys had found peers and support among themselves, and also found their ways to many hobbies. Furthermore, the girls were not interested in joining activities together with boys at this stage of their lives. These observations defined the practical knowledge interest for this PAR: to develop meaningful activities from the girls' points of view, instead of focusing on their suffering, regardless of some experts' claims that refugee research should do just that (see Turton 1996). We started weekly workshops in September 2011 to plan activities with the seven girls who took part in the first round of PAR [21]. In the meetings, we discussed all the girls' wishes, trying to find ways to combine them all in a plan that would suit everybody. The meetings went mostly smoothly, although a few contradictory wishes of the planned action created minor conflicts. Those were solved by reminding ourselves about the need to respect all members of the group, and by negotiating alternative plans in which all the girls could commit themselves to.

Many alternatives for the end-projects for our PAR were proposed, such as filming a movie, making a play, or conducting a survey of activities for children and youth, offered by the city. The selected end products after both rounds of PAR

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[21] The first group consisted of seven girls between the ages of 14 and 17. The second group was also seven girls between the ages of 8 to 17; two of the girls participated in both groups, which makes the total number of girls 12. After each round of PAR, the seven participating girls went to a camp. The countries of origin were Somalia, Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo.

were two three-day camps outside the centre, which were designed by, for and with the girls. The camp was a possibility to bring different kinds of activities together, as no single activity was supported by all the girls. The practical work, such as searching the net and the library when planning the possible activities, dividing the work load, calculating the budget and contacting possible partners, was done by the girls according to their abilities and wishes. This was consistent with the central idea of PAR to value and utilize the acquired knowledge and skills of the girls, thus bridging their capabilities with the aims of the project. Yet, in all honesty it must be admitted that due to the girls' limited prior knowledge on how to search for information and how to organize activities in Finland, many of the practicalities before the camps were taken care of by the adults. On the other hand, many practical tasks at the camps were done by the girls. The girls cooked meals for the whole group, as well as contributed to other domestic chores without adults instructing them to do so. In addition, some girls initiated spontaneous activities at camps, such as a play which was simultaneously composed and performed, and an Idols-style singing contest.

The process of the PAR can be seen in Figure 2. The constructed data and analysis is presented later, in Table 1. The activities spread over a long period of time, which was necessary to allow me to get to know the children and the children to start trusting me. This was also a practical necessity as I was a part-time PhD student during the whole time of the data gathering, until the end of my parental leave in December 2013.

Documents about the aims of the reception and care of unaccompanied minors (Alanko et al 2011; Ombudsman for Children 2010; Parsons 2010)

Theories of children's participation, critical pedagogy and PAR

Additional theories of intersectionality and liminality

Observing (1)
May 2011-July 2011
I observed the daily life of the reception centre, getting to know the children and the workers.

Planning (2)
September 2011-January 2012
We met approximately once a week (16 meetings) with 7 unaccompanied girls, interpreters and practitioners to plan the project. Some meetings were at the centre, some in town (in the library).

Acting (3)
January 2012-February 2012
3-day camp in a camping site outside town, with activities such as handicrafts, makeup workshops and baking workshop

Reflecting (4)
February 2012
An interpreted focus group interview in which we reflected on the project, the girls' roles in it and wrote a short report about the PAR

Planning (5)
May 2012-September 2012
Meetings with new girls (7, two of whom also participated in the previous round) to develop an improved PAR from the new participants' starting points. 12 meetings.

Acting (6)
September 2012
3-day camp in a camping site outside town (different from phase 3), with activities such as horseback riding, dance lessons and singing.

Reflecting (7)
September 2012
An interpreted focus group interview in which we reflected on the project, the girls' roles in it and wrote a short report about the PAR.

Insight 1:
Childhood, children's participation and voice have different meanings in different contexts. The girls were both vulnerable and resilient, and the relevance of children's participation differed according to their changing needs.

Insight 2:
Emphasis on "conscientisation" and authentic voice is challenging in the liminal situation of the girls.

Insight 3:
Liminality is not only negative but also functioned as a resource to get ready for the future.

Insight 4:
The girls' positions and actions were not determined by any single category but by varied fluid and flexible factors due to their background and current situation..
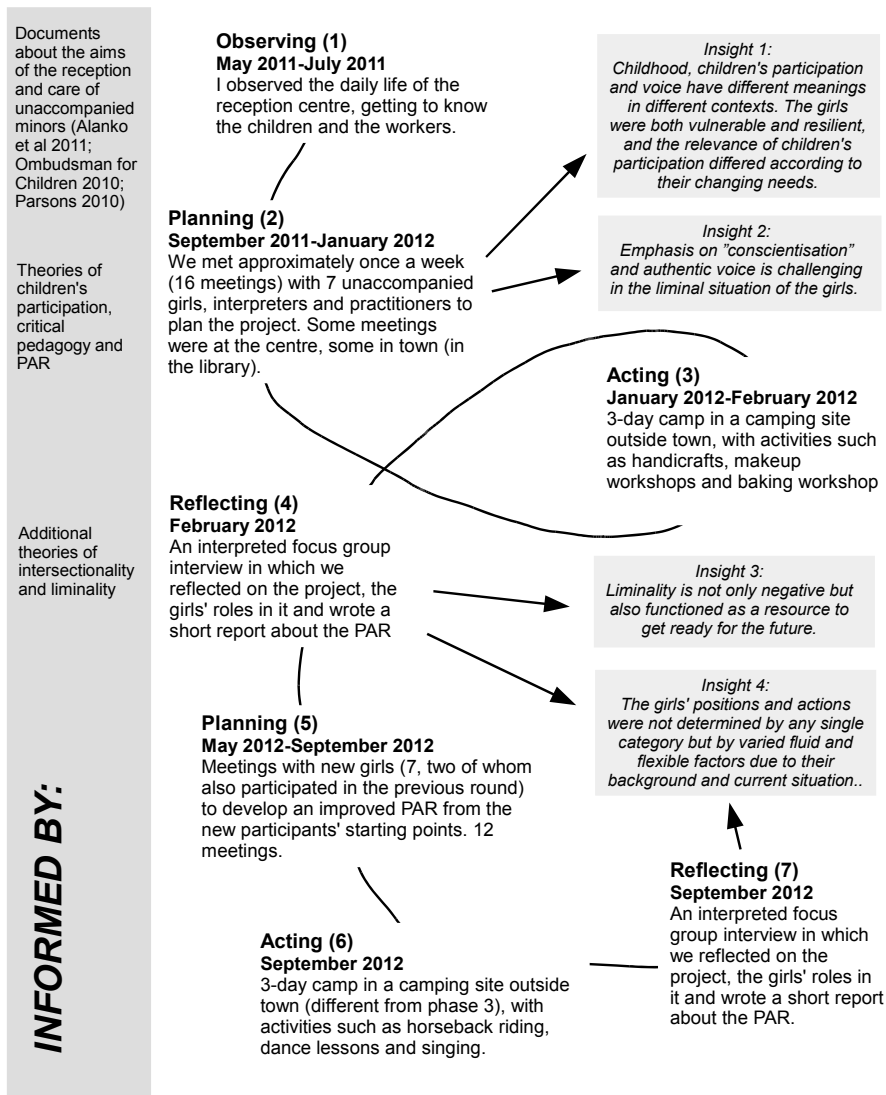
Fig. 2. Phases of PAR.

6.1   Constructing data

I used multiple sets of data and varying methods of analysis to compensate for the limitations of certain approaches. During my observation period in summer 2011, two kinds of information were generated. First, I studied the stated aims of the

reception and care of unaccompanied minors (Alanko *et al.* 2011, Ombudsman for Children 2010, Parsons 2010), which gave me information about the practicalities of the girls' situation. I also read the education plans *(kasvatussuunnitelma)* for each of the girls, which state the individual plans for their education and care. Existing literature and policy papers were important in finding the gap in research, as well as limiting the possible intervention and inquiry; to understand the border conditions within which our PAR had to fit. This information was combined with the knowledge derived from lived experiences of the participants, as I started to learn to know them. Being involved in everyday activities, forming relationships with the children and hearing their thoughts contributed to experiential knowledge about the context from the children's perspective, which I turned into research data through writing and analysing it. (*e.g.* Herr & Anderson 2005: 79). I also included the tacit knowledge of the practitioners, as they were the closest adults to the children in the centre[22].

A central source of knowledge in this study were the individual interviews of the girls, which were only possible with the help of interpreters. Following the instructions by Laws *et al.* (2003: 258), I tried to minimize the challenge posed by language by presenting an outline of the interviews to the workers and the interpreters beforehand to see if the terms and themes discussed were suitable and clear in other languages, and by using visual material, such as a simplified version of the 'ladder of children's participation' (see Appendix 2) as a tool for our discussions. Although all the interpreters were highly professional and trained to work with children, the interpretation still caused additional challenges to our process. Some interpreters got lost on the way to the centre and did not show up. Sometimes the girls spoke such a special dialect that they could not communicate with an interpreter. Some concepts did not translate to other languages. For example the Somali interpreter used the English term *private life* because the Finnish concept *yksityisyys* does not exist in the Somali language. Sometimes the interpreter with the right language abilities was only available via telephone. Some girls seemed to have a crush on an interpreter, which unquestionably had an influence on what the girls said. The more outgoing, talkative and fluent girls dominated the dialogue in the planning sessions, and are also overrepresented in the interview data. To compensate for this, instead of drawing results only from interviews, I also

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[22] Tacit knowledge from the workers is used as background information in this thesis, to understand the context. In addition to informal discussions, I interviewed nine practitioners (counselors and supervisors) individually. That data will be used in later research.

considered how the less verbal girls gave me insights into their experiences in discussions outside the interviews. Overall, I think that our communication worked as well as possible in this situation.

PAR acknowledges knowledge which is created not only through formal research methods and language but also by other socially constructive and creative ways. Using non-linguistic research tools in PAR with multicultural children seemed justified, which is why we included arts into our workshops, which was also a wish of the participants. The girls drew mind maps of happy things and sad things, as well as pictures of their dream places. Some of the girls also initiated acting, singing and dancing performances. In the end of the project I had a massive data source of crumply drawings, filmed performances and field notes of the discussions around these activities. The activities were central in creating dialogue and pleasant activities for the group, but the end-products were not as fruitful for the focus of this thesis as were the interviews. For instance, the girls seemed to copy my drawings as carefully as possible, which is understandable because of my role as a teacher and because the girls were not accustomed to this kind of creative tasks. The produced art (some examples of our activities in Appendix 3) was beautiful but should be analysed with different tools.

In total, the data used for this study consists of 48 pages of field notes from the observation period, meetings with the girls (16 meetings with the first group and 12 meetings with the second group) and from the camps. In addition, I conducted individual interviews [23] with 11 girls (one of the girls moved out before the scheduled interview), and group interviews after each PAR project.

6.2 Analysing the process and the data

Tuck *et al.* (2008: 55) suggests that action researchers should not 'mix too many colours of the water colour palette to break the paper or make a mess' but choose the smallest possible number of suitable methods to explain the chosen phenomenon. However, this contradicts with Lincoln *et al.* (2011), who note that action research requires an extended epistemology, converging of multiple points of view and many ways of knowing to verify the meaning. Lincoln *et al.* (2011) continue that action research should use all the methods which are necessary to

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[23] The interviews lasted from one to two hours, depending on the girl's mood and the schedule; the average length was about 90 minutes. The interviews were thematic, although the theme structure was very flexible, allowing the respondent to lead the way (See Appendix 1).

create new knowledge, as long as the methods are ontologically and epistemologically commensurable. Regardless of the risk of 'breaking the paper', this PAR required three kinds of tools to analyse the action and the data: first, a participatory analysis with the girls, second, my own content analysis of the data and last, my further intersectional analysis of the data.

Participatory analysis was continuous throughout and after the project, focusing on the girls' roles in action (see Table 1, *Reflecting*), on what was successful, what could be improved for the next round and what the girls learned. This kind of reflection, as well as all other aspects of research, were understandably new for the girls, and not high on the list of priorities to learn in the new situation. It soon became evident that analysing the action and the data was not the most interesting part for the girls; for them the fun parts of the actual action were more interesting. Luckily, PAR allows participants to opt in as much or as little as they like, so it is acceptable that most of the analysis was done by me.

In addition to participatory analysis with the girls, I analysed the textual data (interviews and field notes) using content analysis, which is broad and flexible enough to combine with different methodological and theoretical frameworks. With a help of the NVivo 10 program, I analysed the group and individual interviews by coding them first vertically, concentrating on one interview at a time, then horizontally, looking at the data as a whole. As common for content analysis, I did this phase of analysis by looking at the *content*, what was said, with less consideration on the *context* (Krippendorff 2004). Unlike in common guidelines of theory based content analysis (such as Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002: 94), I did not start by deciding what was important and leaving everything else out. Instead, the initial analysis was data-based, focusing on what was said, highlighting the themes which the girls thought were important. This round of analysis created categories beyond the framework of children's participation, but all the same important considering other aspects of the girls' views on their situation (see Appendix 4). After the initial analysis, I continued focusing more on themes relating to children's participation, such as empowerment, children's voice and children's rights.

Focusing only on the content of the interview data, without acknowledging the intersecting social categories as influenced by the context, my understanding of the girls' participation would have remained very incomplete. Intersectionality [24] helped me to understand the complexity of participation as a concept and also, the

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[24] In Article IV I refer to this phase as 'feminist voice-centred analysis', according to Watkins and Shulman (2008: 288), but the principles are along intersectional analysis.

complexity of the girls' experiences. In this phase of analysis, the different ways of discussing the same topic, both between individuals and among single interviews, become evident. Intersectional analysis was conducted by looking at the complexities of liminality and difference (as shown in Chapter 7.2) and how the girls navigate this complexity (see Chapter 7.2.4). One of the starting points of intersectional analysis is to decide which social categories to focus on, and determine which interactions are analysed, as there is an unlimited amount of categories in any individual's life. In this phase, the 'extra' categories which were produced during the first phase become useful. Some of the categories I would not have considered as significant in regard to children's participation, but the girls did. The polyvocality in the girls' stories was expected because of the diverse backgrounds of the girls, whereas the contradictions within single interviews were understandable because of the complicated situation in their lives. In fact, it is the 'messiness' and the contradictions which justify the use of intersectional analysis; even a seemingly disappointing interview allows insights into intersectionality through the multiple voices that can be seen in any one narrative (Buitelaar 2006: 263). Anticategorical intersectional analysis helped me to reconsider categories such as childhood or gender, by concentrating on how the girls viewed them, and how the categories influenced their views on children's participation. The intercategorical approach illuminated the cumulative effect of the categories, if there was one to be seen, for example, if displacement and age together were a significant combination. As my results show, the social categories into which the girls positioned themselves are not logical or consistent; they change and shift in time, *i.e.* depending on how long the girls had stayed at the reception centre, and place, *i.e.* depending on whether we were at the girl's own living unit, common areas, classroom or camp.

Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvontrup Jensen (2012: 111–112) discuss methodological challenges which have to be addressed in intersectional analysis. The authors ask how to avoid assuming different forms of social differentiation functioning according to identical logics but at the same time find something to thematise. Similarly, Lykke (2010: 87) notes that seeing the categories as historically, socially, culturally and linguistically constructed might possibly not help to challenge oppression but instead, results in further stereotypes and essentialist ideas. Assuming that categories are specific forms of concrete oppression which function in additive ways, might direct attention from the individual experiences to reproducing a hegemonic discourse of the 'right way' to be a member of certain groups, and the expected way that a group faces

discrimination. There is also a risk of overanalysing the participants' narratives, which can result in interpretations which are not fully grounded. Or on the other hand, as PAR emphasizes collaboration and consensus as a basis for action, it may lead to 'tidying up' people's messy lives and excluding anything that does not fit into the shared story (Kothari 2004). I am aware that my analysis of the girls' voices is partial, fragmented, biased and ambivalent. I do not assume that I would have the ability to capture the whole essence of an interview, action or an individual girl, as that would be patronizing and against the ideas of PAR. Following the ideas of anticategorical intersectional analysis, I aim not to strengthen but deconstruct the categories in which the children position themselves. Also, as I think deconstructing alone is not enough, I try to *re*construct a vision of children's participation, considering the girls' own views on social categories.

Table 1. Summary of the data collection (primary and secondary) and analysis.

Data	Phase of PAR (see Figure 2)	Analysis	Purpose
Textual accounts of everyday life and informal discussions with the participants in my **field notes** (written on site or soon after).	Throughout the process, especially during **observation**, **planning** and **action.**	**Content analysis** by the researcher, focusing on themes related to participation.	Field notes were used as **primary data** for this research.
Semi-structured, thematic group- and individual **interviews** which were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.	**Reflecting.**	**Content** and **intersectional analysis** of the transcripts by the researcher later.	Interview data was used as **primary data** for this research.
Mind maps (instructed by the researcher, drawn by the girls). **Artwork** (by the girls).	**Planning.**	Artworks and mind maps were **discussed to verify** the meaning.	Art functioned as part of the activities, and steered the discussion in our PAR-sessions. The products were used as **secondary data** for this thesis.

Data	Phase of PAR (see Figure 2)	Analysis	Purpose
Plans for the action (by the girls and the researcher).	**Planning.**	**Participatory analysis** of the project throughout the process, focusing on the girls' role in action: what they wanted to do, what was possible?	Hands-on work to plan and implement the action. The written plans were used as **secondary data** for this thesis.
Audiotapes, photos, and video clips by the researcher and the girls.	**Action.**	**Participatory analysis** of the process as discussions between activities, and in the final group interview.	The gathered data promoted dialogue in the group interview. The documents were used as **secondary data** for this study.

7 Findings from the PAR

In this chapter, I summarize the findings of this study. I shall first show how the girls saw participation during their asylum period, focusing especially on the effect of liminality and intersecting social categories. After that, I revisit our PAR, considering how it managed to promote the girls' participation. As is typical for PAR, the exact research questions evolved throughout the process and similarly, the analysis of the process was continuous. The initial answers for the research questions have been published in articles I–V while the process was still ongoing. The answers presented here are the result of a further, intersectional analysis of the whole data set referred to in the articles.

7.1 Unaccompanied girls' views of children's participation

Meaningful participation for the girls of this study meant the right to not only voice opinions but also the possibility to choose to be silent as well as to include 'ordinary things' into their lives, both of the latter being aspects which are rarely discussed in literature about children's participation. The emphasis varied along the process, depending on how the girls discussed their positions in different social categories, but the process was by no means linear or systematic. The ambiguity of the stories represented the incompleteness and the ambivalence which was present in the girls' lives due to their situation. Next, I present the most important aspects of children's participation, based on how the girls of this study saw them as relevant.

7.1.1 Children's voice and participation

In our group meetings, we discussed children's participation using Article 12 of the CRC as a starting point. We started talking about participation with references to *voice*, as I thought it would be a simple way to show that all children and youth in Finland, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, have the right to express their opinions and have those opinions taken seriously in all matters concerning them. Already in the first discussions, I realized the girls and I were referring to different things by 'children's voice' and that my understanding, based on the CRC and literature, was not very compatible with the girls' past experiences and current realities. Some of the girls connected children's voice with noisiness and bad behaviour. As one of the girls told me, her grandmother had poured a pot of food on her head for being too 'noisy' at the dinner table, and for this reason the

girl did not view the child's 'voice' as a good thing. Even after this misunderstanding was cleared, children's voice was seen as problematic:

> *"I don't think children should be allowed to decide on things – school, for example. If someone doesn't want to go to school, she shouldn't decide. The adults have to help in that situation. You have to consider so many things (in decisions like that), like the age of the child."* (Girl 1[25])

This quote is consistent with the idea that the right to express opinions becomes available with skills and responsibilities. Also, without claiming that there would be an unanimously agreed understanding of childhood anywhere, these mentioned views are consistent with the allegedly common understanding in many African countries that childhood is a period of obedience, during which children expressing their own views can be a sign of disrespect. The quote above shows mature thinking about inevitable dependency in the roles of children and adults. This viewpoint also clearly relates to the debate between protecting children and enabling them to grow independent and participate.

The girls' situations as asylum-seekers can explain the fact that they sometimes felt unable or uneasy to freely talk about themselves, and that they wanted to reveal as little as possible about their backgrounds. This could be because the girls told me that hearings by the immigration officials were sometimes intimidating, although at the same time, the girls also told me how the officials and *even the police* (emphasis shows that some girls found this especially surprising) were actually quite nice. However, the girls were unsure what can be told to whom, and what kind of effect their words might have on their credibility and wellbeing in the current situation and on the other hand, on their future. Their confidence and willingness to speak increased along with strengthening trust in the people around them, at the same time with the increasing awareness of their situation and the asylum procedure.

The carefulness, which also appeared as reluctance to say anything negative, could be explained by the girls' views of good manners, or the assumed need to express gratitude:

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[25] The girls are randomly numbered from 1 to 11. The names, ethnic origins and age are removed so that no girl could be singled out from the data.

"Sometimes when you ask them (other unaccompanied minors) how their life is, they are afraid to answer. They don't want to say anything bad about your country." (Girl 3)

Because of the girls' background, they all had experienced situations in which their opinions had no value or even worse, when it had been dangerous to speak at all. One of the girls noted that her mother had to send her away and even though the girl had been devastated to leave her family, she could not resist as the life of the whole family was in danger. This caused pain both for the girl and the mother:

"It feels bad to be without mother, and she thinks about me all the time." (Girl 3)

She continued by explaining that she felt that her mother knew she did not want to go, but saying it out loud would have been bad behaviour and making things worse, as the escape was inevitable.

Although most of the girls thought that it can be rude if children express their opinions too loudly, it is not to imply that none of them wanted to have their voices heard. All the girls wanted to express their opinions in 'everyday things', while some also referred to the importance of involving children in decision-making even on a larger scale:

"Children should at least be asked what they want, whether they would like to do something or not. If they are forced, if the decision is made elsewhere and you have to do it even if it is annoying, that is not right." (Girl 7)

The girls wanted to have possibilities to influence things such as choosing their roommate, deciding the menu or suggesting changes for the cleaning schedule. Even if the decisions they wanted to influence could appear as insignificant to the outsiders, these 'second order' choices can feel empowering for the girls as real life-turning choices were out of their reach. Familiar elements, such as traditional food from the country of origin can offer a 'first sanctuary' for unaccompanied children, evoking being at 'home' in a new situation (Kohli *et al.* 2010). Furthermore, deciding upon these everyday matters undoubtedly has a great influence on the girls' wellbeing in the present, day-to-day life.

The girls who expressed a desire to have their opinions considered, also noted that the power of their voice is practically very limited in the current situation: even if somebody would have the courage to voice their opinions, especially language abilities puts them in a very tangible liminality.

"The most difficult situation is for those who come from their country alone. They don't have friends, they can't speak, they are alone. If I have a problem, I tell it to person x, she tells it to person y, and together we think about how we can tell the practitioners. If someone lonely needs something, she always needs an interpreter." (Girl x[26])

So, while the girls' 'voicelessness' was learned as appropriate behaviour in the country of origin, it was also caused by the liminality of the present situation, in which the meaning and power of child's voice was very different than in the past, or in the imagined future of the girls. The silence was also to some extent forced, as the girls did not fully understand their situation or know whom to trust. Here lies the problem of treating the CRC as globally relevant in ensuring the participatory rights of the child: even if all adults around the unaccompanied children would be committed to implementing the CRC, the learned or forced voicelessness might prevent the rights from becoming reality. This challenge has been addressed with additions to the CRC to ensure the rights of the child with special needs (interpreters, child-appropriate information, *etc.*). Despite these additions, it remains difficult for an unaccompanied child in a strange society speaking a foreign language to have an unmediated, authentic 'voice' with real impact. However, based on the discussions with the girls, they did not necessarily see the limited communication as a barrier to wellbeing, nor did they see their silence as a problem. Rather, they viewed relevant participation in a way which clearly contradicts the common understanding of children's participation relying on their voice: it can also mean the right to decide when to be silent.

7.1.2 Participation as the right to silence

If participation is seen as having one's views considered, it also means the right not to express opinions, if that is what the child chooses to do. Although as noted, silence can be learned, involuntary, caused by the circumstances or all of these, it can also be tactical manoeuvring when the unaccompanied child calculates the possible risks and tries to ensure her survival and wellbeing. This kind of behaviour is most often connected to asylum-seeking adults. Live Stretmo (2014: 130–140) talks about the image of unaccompanied children referring to a continuum from *vulnerable child* to *ambivalent teen* and *strategic adult*), but the silence of the girls of my study was not

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[26] To protect the anonymity of this girl, I cannot mark the numerical identification after this quote.

only due to their childhood or vulnerability, it was also their way of using agency and being strategic.

Silence was necessary for coping, as it protected the girls from uncomfortable discussions on painful topics. The journey had often been so horrible that some of the girls did not want to talk about it. For others, worries were not considered to be so significant that they would require being discussed. The girls who mentioned this were also annoyed that they were collectively assumed to be devastated or traumatized because of their backgrounds; they told me they were in fact often quite happy. Having said this, it is also possible that the girls wanted to be seen as happy and grateful for being in Finland, and sufficiently resourceful to manage independently to emphasize the fact that they would not become a burden to Finnish society. Regardless of why the girls felt they had to or wanted to be silent, they most definitely did not want to be pushed to talk.

Not sharing one's own problems was also seen as keeping the home a 'care-free zone' as long as possible. While the girls wanted to have the right to be silent about their possible troubles, they nevertheless wanted to be assured that they could talk to an adult if they wished to do so, and that the adults would understand and be sensitive to their needs. This strategy of 'telling without talking' (Stremto 2014: 227) means that unaccompanied children can give hints about their difficult experiences, but rather than talking about them, they let the adults 'fill in the blanks' and assume the parts which are left unsaid. The girls who decided to be silent about difficult issues probably considered this as a good tactic for having interaction and relations which are both pleasant and beneficial for them at the moment. This is understandable for a child or a youngster who has been confronted by all kinds of people during the flight and in Finland, sometimes even people hostilely asking who she is and demanding justification for her claim for asylum.

Voluntary silence, for example, showing no interest in dialogue which the girls did not see as helpful, was their way of using their agency as they wanted. The private thoughts the girls decided to share with me, with other adults or each other were no longer owned by them. The girls used their agency also by refusing to participate in action, for example, by withdrawing from social activities which were not seen as relevant. The way I saw it, having the power not to participate and to be silent was empowering for the girls, as it would be for any child or youth who finds ways to act their way and oppose adults' (at times incorrect) views of what is good for them. Withdrawal can also be seen as a strategy for an easier life; being constantly alert, responsive and social at the same time when interpreting messages from the surrounding community can be straining. By leaving things unsaid the

girls showed cautiousness and flexibility which they considered as necessary in their situation. Pushing them to open up for the sake of research, or because the guidelines say that children's active participation and voice should be strongly promoted, would be putting them in a very uncomfortable and unfair situation. Cultural sensitivity requires adults to acknowledge, among other things, that non-participation and chosen silence signify different things for children in different circumstances and in different cultures; it can even signify expected behaviour. Above all, acknowledging the special needs of an asylum-seeking child, or in fact any child, means that participation or voicing opinions is a right, not a responsibility of children.

7.1.3 Participation as a means of coping with the present and preparing for the future

Although the focus of this project was on the girls' participation in the current moment, Uprichard's (2008) notion of the 'stickiness' of time was evident; the past, present and the future cannot be separated. What was seen as relevant participation in the present was influenced by the memories from the past, both positive memories which the girls wanted to hold on to, and negative memories of issues which the girls would want to avoid in the future. Most importantly, relevant participation in the current situation was influenced by the image of the future, the 'real life' after moving out from the reception centre, and the skills which would be needed then. Thus, activities brought meaning to the 'fructile chaos' so that it became 'a storehouse of possibilities' (*cf.* Turner 1986: 42) to prepare the girls for the post-liminal stage in their lives. The future was imagined as the time when the rights of 'full personhood' become available. At the same time girls were aware that some children's rights, such as full-time guidance from adults, would no longer be available. This is why many of the girls emphasized the importance of the practitioners in providing gradually decreasing amounts of help, enabling the girls to take more responsibility of their own lives in the future:

> *"When we take care of ourselves and our business, we grow. We learn things that we wouldn't learn otherwise. If somebody always takes care of our own things, it doesn't help us."* (Girl 6)

> *"The counsellors do a good job, they help everybody in the beginning, and then they leave you alone. It's good for the future. … Children get a good life when they learn to do things by themselves."* (Girl 3)

These girls' views are along the understanding which was common among the workers at the centre; that the adults' job is to gradually make themselves 'useless' (field notes 27.05.2015).

The girls appreciated the opportunity to do 'ordinary work' and take part in practical work, which had a two-fold relevance. First, many of the tasks which the girls mentioned carried cultural significance; they were mostly pleasant tasks which had been among the girls' past responsibilities. Therefore, participation as a right to do familiar tasks provided tools to bring some glimpses of fun and normality to the girls' present reality, which was occasionally chaotic. It also meant that the girls would not use their knowledge about, for example, domestic chores only for survival purposes, as many of them had done in the past, but also for personal pleasure and social transformation, as the tasks produced feelings of being useful and having a role in the community. In this way, the girls could use their capabilities for something they found meaningful in the current situation.

The right to go to school was not the original focus of our research, but it appeared to be a top priority for the girls and is therefore worth considering. The possibility to go to school ensures not only structure and meaningfulness for the daily life, but it also provides means to gain the required capacities for future participation. The girls saw education as a promise for a better life in the future. It was also something concrete they could do to contribute toward a better life for themselves in the 'post-liminality', after having left the reception centre. Education ensured the feeling of human worth and belonging also in the current moment; to mention one example, having similar books as other children in the class was seen as highly significant.

Education was a children's right which the girls' knew about, and a right which some of them thought was not always achieved:

"We have been told that children have to study, that it is their responsibility to study. And that in Finland children have the right to study. But we here, we don't have real studying. Previously children have gone to school right after they have arrived here, somewhere in town, some language course. But I arrived as a 16-year-old and I was told that when you get residency, then you have the right to go to school." (Girl 5)

This girl elaborated the 'real studying' as lessons in school where all the pupils are school-aged, or at least 'not adults', where subjects such as language and science are taught and most importantly, where days are long. Interestingly, this girl had very little educational background from the country of her origin, which means that

the described 'real school' was a dream for the future rather than a memory from the past. Another girl described the school at the reception centre:

> *"All people come, they don't study anything there, no language, no mathematics, no other subjects either. ...You don't have time to ask, you don't have time to study, the time is up. You just have to wake up, nothing else."* (Girl 1)

The way the girls talked about the importance of education, knowing I am a teacher, can also be interpreted that the girls said what they thought I expected. This could be seen as a methodological problem, but PAR acknowledges the inference of the researcher's position as an accepted result of the cooperation. Therefore, the way the girls spoke about education could be a result of the girls' growing understanding of Finnish society, which my interference, sparked by my profession, influenced. However, I do not doubt these girls' genuine wish to become educated. The girls also referred to education as a tool to ensure at least something permanent and certain in their lives; places and people changed, our PAR had an end but acquired education was something which could not be taken away from them. The importance the girls placed on education contradicts the sometimes common misinterpretation that girls from more traditional cultures would not commit to school but prepare themselves for their lives as mothers and as wives (as discussed in Chapter 3.3). This might be an issue which is affected by cultural factors; adjusting to the values of the surrounding society is also a sign of flexibility in identity construction. Definitely the girls of this study appreciated the possibility to participate in domestic work but at the same time, they wanted to benefit from education.

7.1.4 Transformative participation in a liminal space

As can be seen in the previously described views on children's voice and education, it is clear that the girls thought that even when they would have the will and the capacity to make choices and participate in a meaningful way, the liminality might inhibit them from using their agency effectively. Participation requires an enabling environment, including the material, human and social resources, all of which might be scarce in institutions. Although the best interest of the child is the guiding principle of all actions in the underage units of reception centres, the living units could still be seen as having some of the disempowering elements of 'total institutions', as discussed by Goffman (1961/1969). Some of the 'barriers' between

the girls and the society were quite concrete, such as the distant location of the living unit in a forest and the limited resources to have hobbies which cost even a little bit of money, or move about in town. Other barriers were less visible, such as the fact that access to information was limited because the children's language and technical skills were inadequate and because they were unaware of where to get information. Social and human assets were constrained by the fact that the girls had not yet learned the code of conduct of the new society and furthermore, they were just starting to learn which of their human assets have value in the new society. Therefore, even though the girls knew that the aim of the underage units was to help them participate and pre-integrate into Finnish society, they felt that some of these barriers took them in the opposite direction.

Having said that, the girls did not seem to think that the living unit *should* pre-integrate them; the time in the centre was seen as the intermediate stopping point on the way to independency and 'real life'. The meaning of their own participation in the current phase, as well as the continuity of the effects of their own actions understandably seem unclear and uncertain in such a situation; as one of the girls asked: *Why change something so temporary*? It is easy to understand that the girls were sceptical about attempting anything transformative because of the temporariness of their situation, but even more so, it was clear that coming from areas of war and conflict, many of the girls did not see their present situation as *needing* radical transformation. Both the present situation and the imagined future were seen as improvements compared with the past, where many of rights were non-existent. In this way empowerment and wellbeing are to some extent relative: environments can create advantages for some groups, while appearing as a context of disadvantage and inequity for others, depending on how individuals experience their contexts. At times, frustration due to waiting and the lack of opportunities was seen as negative, yet the time in the liminality was also viewed as productive. It provided resources to stop, reflect on one's own position and learn skills beyond the liminality, for the future life as full members of Finnish society.

Resilience in liminality can be seen as the girls' ability to benefit from the limited resources, finding flexible ways to participate within them, despite the circumstances which are impossible to change. The girls' ways to participate were innovative; they showed great joy in deciding and implementing practical tasks in our PAR. Innovative ways of participation can also be seen in previously mentioned modest acts of revolting, which illustrate the way the girls balanced their thinking, acting and resisting to respond to the assumed needs of the new situation (*cf.* Braidotti 2002: 3); for instance by utilizing the possibility to opt out of our PAR

meetings (field notes 27.06.2012). In cases like this the power is operated in networks between people, instead of being only in the hands of the adults. The girls' resistance was accepted to varying degrees because of the participatory and voluntary nature of our project, although it was clear that in normal circumstances the girls would have hardly questioned the practitioners' authority.

If transformative participation is seen as developing the strength to make relevant life choices, connected with a sense of knowing that one's actions and views are taken into consideration and may be acted upon, it is rather a distant goal for unaccompanied minors. It requires learning about the society with all its injustices, as well as acquiring skills for 'speaking back' which are unrealistic goals for girls who are inevitably unaware of their situation and of the factors which might influence it. The unawareness in the girls' lives had been prominent already during their escape. One girl told me about her journey to Finland through Sweden:

> *"I didn't believe I would get to Europe, but I had to leave, or else the men would have caught me, killed my family or something. My mother said I go to a place where I don't have to marry anyone. The man (who took her) did not speak to me, he gave food, then I slept, waked and slept. He told me this is Sweden, you are in Europe. I didn't believe it."* (Girl 3)

In the current situation, the rules of the living unit were unclear for many of the girls and understandably, the functions of Finnish society were unclear for all of the girls.

> *"At the moment, I don't know Finland well. Not yet. … I wait for a police officer to tell me what I should do, what I cannot do. What is my right, what is my responsibility. Now, all is difficult because I don't know."* (Girl 5)

Moreover, there is very little room for the child's voice in the asylum-process; the most important changes concerning an asylum decision or family reunion, for instance, are beyond the reach of the children. The liminality of the girls' situation highlighted the fact that protecting the girls' rights was not in their hands, but in the hands of the practitioners and the other authorities. Thus, the girls viewed themselves as 'becomings' instead of current rights-holders.

It is also possible that because of their status as asylum seekers, the girls saw a certain kind of participation as a requirement. In such cases, regardless of good intentions, participatory work can function as normalization, indoctrination or even 'oppression': the girls were introduced to different roles in action which they were not familiar with in their past, and they acted as they thought they were supposed

to. The girls noted they knew how things worked in the living units: the adults made decisions and the children obeyed, without too much questioning. The currently used attempts to get the voices of the children heard in the living units, such as the monthly unit meetings, were not successful. The meetings, which simulated a democratic decision making process, presupposed that all participants have some basic understanding about democracy so that the meetings would work as 'communicative spaces' like they were meant to. This would be challenging with any children, but especially so with children who have grown up in non-democratic countries which are experiencing civil war. Therefore, the girls did not see the meetings as platforms of children's participation but instead, as events for adults to tell the children about practicalities and new rules.

Although the girls did not want to 'challenge' their situation by suggesting changes to improve the conditions in the present, they wanted to be sure that all relevant information was told to them, and that the adults in the centre worked to ensure their best interest. Despite the fact that it was difficult for the girls to understand that the closest adults had nothing to do with the asylum procedure, and that the adults were truly as unaware of the schedule or the details of the process as the girls themselves, they generally accepted the way things were organized. At times, for instance when conducting our PAR-project, the girls even insisted that adults should have more decision power.

To conclude, the time at the centre was seen as a waiting room for the girls' way to the post-liminal stage of residency, independence and adulthood. Therefore, aiming for any kind of transformative participation was seen as not only practically challenging but even as somewhat useless. Although the liminality of the situation can lead to unwillingness to actively participate or pursue change, this can hardly be explained by the girls' responding to the strategies of normalization, 'echoing the oppressor's voice' (Freire 1968/2000: 95) or merely their 'fear of talking back' (hooks 1989/2007). Instead, it was the girls' perfectly natural adjustment to the new situation, including creative adaptation, which requires imagining of what is required from them in the present and in the future. It is clear that as children they are happy to have their most basic rights of protection and care covered by the adults, and also, all sides of 'totality' (*cf.* Goffman 1961/1969) of the living units were not and cannot be seen as negative. Although the girls in the living units had little autonomy and responsibility, the units were primarily 'asylums' and only

secondarily, if even that, 'total institutions[27]' for the girls. Assuming 'trans-formative' desires when there are none, or giving false hopes in a situation where the children really have no possibilities to change the structures might turn out to be disempowering. This is also why the dichotomous understanding of children's participation and 'non-participation' ought to be questioned: meaningful activity can be participating within limitations rather than protesting. The 'transformation' which the girls waited for was moving out of the centre, and all the changes which would follow, opening doors to their future lives.

7.2   Fluidity in social categories

As noted, categories in intersectional analysis are not essentialist, irreducible or comparable, because they might be anything from self-constructed to socially constructed, biological or legal. They are also more or less temporal, and the knowledge from these categories is both subjective, based on the way the way the categories are experienced, and objective, as some of the aspects of these categories are given and hence less dependent on point of view. Next, based on my analysis of the interaction and interviews, I present the how the girls saw their participation being influenced by social categories (see research question 1b). I have included categories which have arisen from the data as frequently mentioned: those determined by the age, gender and asylum-seeking status (including *e.g.* culture of origin, language, vulnerability/resilience) of the girls.

Apparently, the girls' lives were influenced by several overlapping liminalities, some of which were linked to their age and others which were defined by their situation. The girls were between childhood and adulthood due to their age, between being girls or young women in the country of origin and in Finland, between being cared for and managing on their own. The girls talked about social categories in which they saw themselves being positioned by outsiders, correctly or incorrectly, and the way in which the incorrect categories can become labels. According to the findings, categories were fluid and flexible. Flexible was also the way in which the categories were discussed; sometimes references to categories in a single interview were contradictory. Considering the multiple liminal stages and the effects of the girls' age, gender, culture, vulnerability and asylum-seeking status,

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[27] The seminal work by Goffman (1961/1969) is *Asylum – Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* in English, whereas the Finnish translation of the title "Minuuden riistäjät: tutkielma totaalisista laitoksista" means literally *Exploiting identity. Study of total institutions.*

the polyphony, ambiguity and the varying nature of the narratives was to be expected.

Although the practical conditions of unaccompanied minors' participation are limited because of the inevitable conditions of their situation, it was clear that the girls were still actively involved in shaping their own lives regardless of that, and the meanings they gave to their experiences cannot be explained by referring only to challenges, or by trying to reduce the girls to any single social category. Finding ways to participate was clearly something the girls actively did, not something which was imposed on them by the surroundings. As I see it, the movement within and between different categories was the girls' way of responding to the requirements of their living conditions. This highlights the importance of sensitive listening instead of essentialist labelling; if adults see the vulnerability and marginalization but fail to see the intersecting resilience and potential in a child, they might also assume that it is enough if a child receives help and good will from society. This limits the agency and autonomy of the child and thus, strengthens the risk of marginalization even further.

7.2.1 Moving between childhood and adulthood

The girls understood the roles of adults and children as being different in Finland compared to the countries of their origin. They had learned to see childhood and adulthood as categories of difference which have distinct, unquestionable roles and which complement each other, but they also implied that the roles in which they were positioned might contradict their own understanding of what is suitable.

Some girls mentioned that the period of youth was absent in their cultures, but they wanted to experience it in Finland. That became obvious in their interest in the youth culture, such as popular artists, and how they adopted features from the way other youngsters in Finland dressed. Not all showed signs of this; some talked about Finnish youth with surprise and disrespect:

"I think that, for example, a 15-year-old could already be an adult, because she knows what is wrong and how she should behave. And there, in our country, if you are a 15-year-old girl, you already have your own life, own room and own things. You are on your own. You are already an adult." (Girl 4)

"Yes, we start from early on to help mother with domestic work, sometimes boys help fathers too. Then you become responsible. But here, it feels that 15-

year-olds still behave like children because they are always called children."
(Girl 5)

The interviews included parallel narratives of satisfaction and criticism towards the girls' positions in the categories of childhood, youth and adulthood. On the one hand, the girls noted that as children and as foreigners, they need adults to survive and to learn how to live their lives in the new society. On the other hand, they felt that their agency had been stronger in the past: they used to have duties usually entrusted to adults, such as taking care of not only themselves but also of their siblings, but now they had 'reversed' back to childhood when in Finland. So sometimes, while the girls thought that *children* should not have decision power, they felt that *they* should, since they are no longer children. This complicated space between childhood and adulthood can influence the girls' views on their participation in two ways: it might make them feel that they could handle more responsibilities than they are given, but at the same time, it also might make them want to take advantage of the new situation of being cared for by adults. All in all, the girls seemed to be balancing in double liminality: as asylum seekers and as teenagers.

According to some girls, the journey from the countries of origin had been a time when too heavy responsibilities and forced autonomy had been imposed on them. Their transition between childhood and adulthood had been quick and sometimes forced, and to my eyes it had also been very early. This made the attempts for greater participation through our PAR seem a little absurd: the girls were aware that the current situation was their chance to enjoy freedom from responsibilities and get support and even recreation, which children and youth of their age should have, but which they had not necessarily had before. Not surprisingly, the girls were mostly happy to take advantage of having fewer responsibilities, although sometimes, they discussed their 'reversing' back to childhood with frustration.

While the responsibilities in the past and the escape from the country of origin have great personal significance for the girls, I think it is not justified to emphasize their independence. As the girls told me, the decision to flee from the country of origin is most often not initiated by the unaccompanied minors themselves. Although surviving the long journey proves that they have incredible courage and strength, the liminal situation of the waiting time makes it challenging to transform all their resources into meaningful participation, as during the asylum process in any country their possibilities to choose from different options are very limited. In

this way, it is fair to say that the girls were 'victims' of their position, as many of them would not have wanted to leave their countries and families. However this does not mean that they could not change the situation to their benefit, just like I think many of the girls were determined to do.

In many definitions of children's participation it is overlooked that hierarchical relationships between children and adults can also be productive. Besides, not all individuals at all times want to have maximum decision power or be independent of each other. The views of the girls clarified the obvious fact that children need adults to survive, and the adults around them need sensitive 'antenna' to understand the right level of participation and the changing needs of each child. Although groups such as unaccompanied minors might be more resourceful in some areas of their lives, they might need more assistance than some other children simply because of all the liminalities which were described above, and as they are in a new society without their parents. The relationships between children and adults in this situation are inevitably asymmetrical, where the 'I' should not expect anything from the 'You', using Buber's (1993) words, but instead, the relationship is based on dependency.

The girls came from cultures in which the idea of children's participatory rights is quite different from the idea in the Nordic countries. While many children in Africa are expected to participate and be a part of the 'adult world', they also have the responsibility to contribute as much as they can, or even more than they can. In circumstances like that, the discussion about children's participation is less rights-based and more a necessity. What the girls assumed as appropriate influenced the way in which they formed their relationships with the adults at the centre, and how they saw their own roles and rights in Finnish society. So instead of aiming for a power-shift from adults to children, it is more useful to promote cooperation and dialogue among children and adults. Hence, rather than assuming the adults' dominance 'oppressing' the girls, adults can be seen as resources who enable the children to participate in more meaningful and more efficient ways. According to what the girls said, the lack of resources and meaningful activities was more 'oppressive', than current adult-designed activities, which were sometimes more and sometimes less successful but always voluntary.

7.2.2 Simultaneously as vulnerable and resilient

Linked to the previously presented categories of childhood and adulthood, the girls' stories included simultaneous narratives of vulnerability and resilience. Even

though the girls emphasized how ready they are for independent life, they also wanted the adults to tell them what is good for them and what to do; it was seen as 'a nice change' (Girl 11) compared to times when they did not always have sufficient protection from adults around them.

Some of the resources which the girls had were in fact the result of their vulnerability, due to the fact that they had been forced to develop capabilities because of the challenges they had faced. Naturally, they also wanted to be able to use and develop those capacities in the current phase of their lives, which is how resilience becomes significant. Resilience in this situation was manifested in the process in which the girls showed positive development in spite of the challenging situation, in other words, how they used their own resourcefulness within very limited resources. For instance, the smallest girl made toys out of wood, cones and empty cans at the camp. That was not because of the lack of toys, as she had plenty of toys. Being creative with things she could find was her way of being innovative, using skills she had learned in the past.

Even the most resilient-appearing girls in my study showed signs of vulnerability, whereas even the most vulnerable showed signs of strength. Some girls who highlighted their adulthood and independence could still curl up under an adult's arm while watching TV at night. Similarly, a girl who I know had traumatic experiences in the past could appear as happy as any girl of her age. Signs of both extremes, the vulnerability and the resilience, could be seen within single interviews; for example, one girl explained that she would like the adults to spend more time with the children, asking how they are doing and being emotionally available. But at the same time, she argued there are things she would like to do and would be able to do for herself, but the workers had told her that she was too young. Thus, she positioned herself as more of an adult than what she thought the practitioners did when it came to practical tasks, but she also noted that because of her vulnerability, she needed adult support more than she was given. Even more variation can be seen when looking at the data from our PAR as a whole, horizontally.

The change in the girls' narratives can be seen in their stories developing from 'thin to thick' (*cf.* Kohli 2009), echoing the increasing awareness of the surrounding society and the growing trust in the surrounding adults. The girls noted that they wanted to trust the adults around them to protect their rights but also, they wanted to be trusted themselves. The inconsistencies in their stories did not indicate the girls' dishonesty; the narratives changed in reference to the girls' feelings, not so much when they talked about facts. The changing narratives and the fluidity of

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social categories showed that the girls needed to be flexible to comprehend, adjust and manage their lives. Furthermore, it showed that none of the categories which the girls thought they were positioned in were simple, nor purely negative or positive. To acknowledge the individual needs of the children means that the surrounding adults, including the researcher, should avoid labelling and allow children to move within social categories like all children and youth do. Also, it is important to remember that although protecting children and enabling them to participate are often presented as opposites, they are not mutually exclusive but depend on each other.

7.2.3 **Adjusting the gender roles**

Gender was mentioned as the girls discussed the 'appropriate' ways of being and participating as girls in the new situation. When doing this, the girls moved between the roles they had grown into and the assumed 'right' ways of being girls and young women in their home countries and now, in the living unit and more widely, in Finnish society. Although I am sceptical towards a dichotomous portrayal of gender roles in different cultures, it was obvious that all the girls came from rural areas where interaction between different social groups is more limited according to gender, generation and social class than in Finland. For instance, many girls told me their choices had been more limited in the past because of their gender:

> *"If you are a boy, you can go to work and make yourself a good future. If you are a girl, you have nothing."* (Girl 3)

As mentioned in Chapter 1.3, the girls connected participation with practical work and most often, with tasks which are traditionally seen as 'women's' work. Also, the activities the girls chose for the camps can be seen as rather 'girly': makeup workshops, needlework and cake-baking, to mention a few examples. Instead of reminding the girls that they do not *need* to do more domestic chores in the living unit than boys, or suggesting that they should be open in trying some less traditional hobbies, it was reasonable to let the girls choose activities which they found meaningful and comforting, without questioning the gendered stereotypes dictating these activities. This meant that I, as a researcher and an educator inspired by both critical pedagogy and feminism, had to constantly balance my own values and sensitivity for the girls' own views, and the differences among them.

It was clear that the girls viewed Finland as a more equal society compared to their home countries. The girls were curious about the roles of women and men in

Finland (*Can women be police? Is it normal for men to wash windows?* Field notes 18.06.2012 and 12.08.2012), and they seemed determined to benefit from the choices they would have in the future, such as the possibility to be educated. While I thought it was appropriate to have a dialogue and tell the girls, for example, that it is required by the law that their opinions are considered, and that all had an equal right to speak, I did not want to challenge their rather 'traditional' views on gender roles, as I think it would have been one more confusing element in their realities. The views became obvious when they envisioned their lives after ten years; many of the imagined futures portrayed the girls as mothers of traditional nuclear families. However, I think many Finnish teenagers would dream similarly.

The other way in which gender influenced the girls' participation was that some of them did not want to have anything to do with boys or men. This was evident during the planning (field notes 28.11.2011), as well as confirmed by the workers who told me that the girls rarely participated in activities at the same time with the boys. This might have been influenced by at least two factors: first of all, many of the girls had experienced abuse and violence from men, and therefore had trouble trusting even the men who worked at the reception centre. Secondly, some of the girls were practicing Muslims, and those girls told me that their religion limited cooperation with boys and men, and even their behaviour when they were on their own. For instance, the girls told me that they were unaware of who watched the recordings of the surveillance video cameras in the common areas of the centre and therefore, they felt obliged to wear their veils even when they were alone in the girls' corridor. This is not to imply that the effect of religion would have been negative. On the contrary, religious practices carried high cultural significance for the girls, bringing comfort when being separated from the family and community. Religion brought also comfort to the previously mentioned silence, regardless of whether the silence was forced or voluntary:

> *"Privacy… Privacy is a sacred thing for me. When I have worries, I rather trust God than other people."* (Girl 2)

The complicated relationship with males did not mean that none of the girls would have had normal crushes on boys. The targets of many of the girls' interests were safe and distant, and shared with many Finns of the same age. For example, the girls wanted me to use my 'adult authority' to invite a Finnish teen idol Antti Tuisku to the centre to perform. Unfortunately, Antti Tuisku did not accept this wonderful charity opportunity.

Communal participation and domestic chores were often mentioned by the girls, and as the original communities of the girls were absent, the community of the living unit functioned as a partial replacement. But as noted, these ideas were not presented as contradicting the idea of an educated woman. Promoting participation in the girls' terms meant that instead of imposing ideas of gender equality or the 'right' way of being a girl, there should be an open, yet sensitive discussion of even contradicting values.

7.2.4 Negotiating belonging

The focus of this sub chapter is on how the above-described social categories influenced the way the girls negotiated their roles and belongings in the living unit and in the PAR. Thus, the findings discussed below combine the spatial knowledge about the effect of the liminality with the relational knowledge which formed in our interaction with the girls who experienced that situation (Pain *et al.* 2010).

Observing the girls' cooperation and analysing their discussions illuminated the negotiation process in which they adjusted their courage and capabilities to voice their own views in the new situation, as well as the way they navigated their roles in relation to other children in the same situation. Navigating requires adjusting the role of a girl which they had learned in their countries of origin with the (assumed) requirements and the cultural codes of the group of children in the centre, as well as with the norms and possibilities of Finnish society as they started to understand them. In situations like this people have to navigate through processes of identification and de-identification, finding ways to manage tensions between conformity and individuality. This negotiation process was not simple; understanding that the core values of one's distant family, culture or religion are not universally applicable, while trying to make sense of the new society and ensure one's own survival in it was challenging. It is additionally challenging for children who have grown up in an atmosphere where children are supposed to be quiet, and are currently in a situation without the required linguistic capacities and courage to express themselves. While the girls understood the inevitable liminality and temporariness of their situation, they still wanted to experience stability, allowing them to build belonging:

"We shouldn't be moved. If somebody decides, then you go there. You don't know what kind of place it is, you don't know anybody, you don't know anything about it. ...I wasn't asked, I was just given a time. This day you will go, nothing

else. ... Nobody told me why or asked me if I wanted to go. I was surprised; I had been told that after the immigration interview I will be moved somewhere, but before the interview I was told I have to go." (Girl 8)

The girls' meaningful participation was a multidimensional process of change rather than some final destination or grand transformation: while negotiating the action, the girls learned how to build relationships with each other, as well as learned about their own capabilities and self-worth.

In addition to individuals being aware of the reality, some understanding of the reality should also be shared by the girls in order improve the situation by participatory action. The girls came from many cultural and religious backgrounds, and they did not share a language or other cultural markers which would help them interpret the reality together. Regardless of that, some noted that because they are in the same situation, waiting for an asylum decision, they have a strong sense of belonging together, similarly to what Kibread (1999) called a shared 'refugee experience' or what Turner (2007/1969) called *communitas*. The challenges they faced were similar, and the most important decision they were waiting for was the asylum-decision:

> *"This is a place to wait, and that's what we all do. ... There are no groups, we all are one. We are close with everybody, if we understand each other. If we can understand each other ... and if we can tell jokes, then we can be friends."*
> (Girl 3)

Nevertheless, the similar situation does not necessarily build belonging or contribute to social participation. People who *have* to behave a certain way because of the situation, such as when people open an umbrella in rain, do not necessarily engage in social interaction or participation. However mentioning about telling jokes and trying to understand each other refers to acting towards a meaningful change in the shared situation (*cf.* Heikkinen *et al.* 2005: 17). Furthermore, being in a similar situation does not define the girls personally: they were all individuals, and some of them even criticized the fact that they were at times treated as one group regardless of their differences:

> *"Sometimes I feel like they (the practitioners) treat us all like we are the same. But we don't even come from the same country."* (Girl 2)

After possible abuse or other traumatizing experiences, the girls might have trouble trusting adults, people from other ethnic groups or, as many of them came from

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areas of civil war, they could have difficulties in trusting even people from their own ethnic group. Although some girls noted that the common experience of being unaccompanied minors and waiting for the asylum decision bind them together, they also had attitudes and prejudices towards each other. In addition, some girls had prejudices towards Finns, as well as assumptions of other people's attitudes towards them. Imagined or real experiences of hostility hindered participation, because the girls had to consider their appropriate roles while being aware of many kinds of myths. For example, one girl assumed that all Finnish people want to kill foreigners, who come to their land. Understandably, she thought it would not be a good idea to challenge the situation by trying to justify her own being and participation in Finnish society. This girl considered being as 'invisible' and silent as possible and not causing any harm as the safest option.

Many girls mentioned the myth of 'bogus' asylum-seekers, which means they would have no claim for legitimacy and should be treated as untrustworthy and even as 'threats' to society. Perhaps because of this, the girls emphasized their sincerity by repeatedly reminding me that they have come to Finland to save their lives, not to have a 'good life', and that they did not choose to come, or request to belong because they wanted to, but because they had to. The girls kept assuring themselves, the other children and the adults that they were honest and willing to contribute to society:

> *"If you have the possibility to study, then you have to study hard. And later, you have to get a job. You have to work."* (Girl 1)

I think the idea that children, or any people in need, would have to contribute to society to claim their rights is somewhat paradoxical. Unaccompanied children's right to stay, participate and belong in Finland would in my opinion be more easily justified by ethics of care and the simple fact that these children need support and acceptance to survive, rather than trying to justify their presence with ideas of mutual contribution.

Some girls had experienced racism, whereas some had not, and it seems that girls who had been in Finland longer did not see the situation as being as bad as the recently arrived girls. Overall, the girls seemed hopeful about their possibilities to participate and feel belonging in Finland, despite the inevitable challenges:

> *"There are racists everywhere if there are different people. But when you get to know the person and get close, and if she sees that you are not like she thought you were, then she can like you. Finnish people, young people, they*

are not racists. They see different people in school, in town, on TV, everywhere. For young people the world is big, the world is changing." (Girl 3)

7.3   PAR with unaccompanied children as a mutual learning process

In this last subchapter of the findings I focus on the features of PAR which should be reconsidered when conducting research with groups such as unaccompanied children. The aim is not to strengthen a polarized understanding of conducting PAR with unaccompanied children versus PAR with children in general, or to suggest that any simplistic model of PAR would be applicable for all unaccompanied minors. Rather, the aim is to describe how this PAR worked as a mutual learning process, with developing sensitivity to differences, as was also asked by one of the research questions. As meaningful children's participation has already been discussed above in Chapters 7.1–7.2, these results focus mostly on children's participation in participatory research.

The participants' role in PAR (in each *participation*, *action* and *research*) are summarized in the table 2 below, and elaborated after that. The features in the left column are selected from literature (Kindon *et al.* 2010, Koshy 2010, Reason & Bradbury 2001), but the selection is not all-encompassing. The right column presents aspects which the girls in this study viewed as relevant but also, the examples are not comprehensive. They are intentionally chosen to highlight the differences.

Table 2. Role of the participants in PAR.

	PAR in general	PAR with unaccompanied minors
P	Challenging social or structural inequities. Having a voice and participating in decision making. Power shift from the powerful to the less powerful. Creating feeling of belonging. Raising 'conscientization' and aiming for social change.	Having the wish for protection and guidance from adults but also, for more responsibilities and independence. Being allowed to choose to be silent. Trusting that adults work for the best interest of the child. Creating feeling of belonging, but acknowledging the challenges. Acknowledging that predicting the future or aiming for big social change during the waiting time is unrealistic.
A	Often initiated by participants. Connected to transforming reality. (tackling 'suffering' or 'oppression'). Filling the practical needs of the participants. Negotiating the action as a shared learning experience.	Initiated by using existing resources, including adults. Coping with the situation. Bringing glimpses of ordinary life into the waiting time. Filling the practical needs of the participants. Negotiating the action as a shared learning experience.
R	Learning research skills. Conducting practical research (most often through language). Producing reliable results. Reflection of one's own situation as a way of reducing contingency.	Learning non-research related skills. Participating in the activities was the most important thing (also through non-verbal participation). Producing results that can be influenced by many factors (fear of saying something wrong, living up to expectations, *etc*.).

Initiating participatory research in a community, of which the initiator is not a member, is possible by working alongside the members of the community as an invited guest (Watkins & Shulman 2008: 269). In addition to invitation, it requires that the researcher is willing to understand the reality of the participants and the ways they see their situation. The initial meeting in which I, a young white woman with a pen and paper, introduced by the manager of the living unit, invited the girls to participate in a project with me was hardly participative or a culturally sensitive way of becoming an 'invited guest' for many reasons, perhaps most importantly because I invited myself to join the community of the girls. It is possible that some girls thought the project was something they had to do, as part of the programme in the centre. Furthermore, it created confusion when I told them I would rather not

give them ideas about what we should do, but I wanted to hear what they wanted to do instead. After clearing some misunderstandings and finding the right terms, all girls were willing to invite me to their daily lives and participate in the PAR, although I cannot be certain of the reasons of their willingness. Power and authority are involved in all phases of participatory research projects, including the construction of the interest in itself; all decisions, actions and reflections reflect how the participants see their positions in the community. Regardless of how well I tried to explain the nature and the voluntariness of the project, it remained unclear if the initial decision to participate alludes that the girls understood that participation was expected from them, or was even their only option.

Discussions of children's participatory rights sometimes created new hierarchies in the PAR, 'empowering' the girls to use their power in a negative way; the girls who were more vocal tried to use their power over others. The plans of the project changed, the more vocal girls attempted to dominate the PAR process, and even religious dilemmas arose. Perhaps the most significant need to negotiate was when we had agreed on the date for the second round of action to take place in August 2012. The accommodation was booked and summery activities were planned when we realized that the time overlapped with Ramadan. After negotiating with the girls, with the help of an interpreter who understood the concern but tried to remain diplomatic, we agreed on changing the date for later and re-planning the activities to be suitable for colder weather. I could have used my authority to persuade the girls that we stick to the original plan as agreed, but in that situation it would not have been participatory or even ethical.

The PAR succeeded in working as a mutual learning experience, during which we negotiated roles and set shared goals. The most vocal girls did not automatically get to rule or 'silence' the others, but we learned to include all the voices in a dialogue. Sometimes this meant that I had to take an adult authority role, making sure the girls listened to each other, respecting each other's views. When the girls became more comfortable to speak, my role as a facilitator diminished. In this sense, the idea of power as a circulating force became relevant: by developing confidence and abilities to influence relationships and to collectively work towards a shared goal produced empowerment. Continuous negotiation worked as a mutual learning experience; the girls who had the strongest will had to learn to consider the voices of the others.

"I felt bad because the movie we planned first didn't work out, because it was such a good idea. It was a shame because everybody wanted to do it first but then they changed their minds." (Girl 4)

She reflects on the process later:

"For example, when we went to the camp, then we planned and talked a lot, decided together what to do. Those kinds of things work. That is how things should be done." (Girl 4)

While I taught the girls about their possibilities in Finland, they taught me about their reasons for wanting to take a more or less active role in the PAR, and in their everyday lives in general. This process reminded me to challenge my views of 'good action'; instead, we defined it by exploring the multi-levelled aims of the project (Bradbury-Huang 2010). The practical aim of our PAR, developing meaningful activities with the girls, was ensured as all the girls and the staff members remained motivated throughout the process; if the aim had not been met, they would not have wasted their time in taking part in the process. Another aim was to develop activities that took the girls' minds off the troubling things and made their situation less frustrating. When it comes to the emancipatory aims, it was necessary to know the individual needs and the capacities of the girls, as well as the limitations of the reality, to adjust them to the scope of the PAR and avoid giving false hopes for children. As noted, the girls did not wish to do anything very 'transformative' and furthermore, their 'liberation' quite obviously meant the time when they moved out of the centre. Emancipatory aims require the initiating researcher to engage with communities in challenging social and structural inequalities as the participants see them relevant, regardless of how minor or insignificant they might seem in the eyes of the outsiders. In this research the challenges included the lack of ordinary, 'girly' elements in the participants' lives; 'human flourishing' (Heron & Reason 1997: 288) in that moment consisted of practical knowledge of how to bring those elements of normality into the liminality, how to build belonging and relationships with each other and finally, how the girls could contribute to a better future for themselves for the post-liminal time. Luckily, these kinds of changes were within the scope of our PAR.

Overall, the PAR reminded me that children's participation is not a panacea, but a complicated process which appears as different depending on the point of view. Participating in research can be relevant for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children if it is a right but not a duty for them, if the children can rely on having

adequate support from surrounding adults who are also willing to learn from the children and furthermore, if the aims of PAR are considered critically. The girls noted that they are not a homogenous group and should not be treated as such. Therefore, it should not be assumed that another group of unaccompanied girls would have similar interests, or that another PAR could replicate this project. By taking the girls' definition of participation as a starting point and accepting that the participatory project they wished for aimed at more immediate benefits, such as a more pleasant daily life, produced knowledge which was true and relevant in this context. The meaning, motivation and purpose which the participants bring to the activity make the process empowering.

8 Discussion

This study was guided by four major insights: the first was that unaccompanied girls' experiences cannot be explained either through the girls being vulnerable or resilient, as they are clearly both. The second insight was that voice, 'conscientization' and social change, central for critical pedagogy and PAR, are valuable goals but are very challenging to reach in the liminal situation of unaccompanied children. The third insight was that perhaps radical change is not even very relevant, because the girls of this study hardly saw themselves as merely 'marginalized', let alone 'oppressed' in spite of their status but instead, demonstrated creative coping methods and admirable adjustment strategies. Although the liminality in the current situation was tangible, its effect was not only negative. The liminality also provided the girls with opportunities to stop and reflect upon their situation and get ready for the future. Finally, a central insight was that the girls' positions and actions were not determined by any single category; the girls' positions were influenced by not their vulnerability or strength but by varied fluid and flexible factors due to their background and current situation. In this discussion, I consider those insights and their relation first to theory, then to practice. After that, I reflect on the quality, ethics and limitations of my research, with a wish that future research would address them.

8.1 Insights and theory

Based on my findings, I argue that to make participation equally inviting and achievable for all children and youth, the understanding of childhood as the time of joy and innocence should be deepened, as it excludes children whose experiences do not fit in the idealized picture of childhood. Similarly, the universalist notions of children's participatory rights should be questioned, as they overlook the specific socio-historical realities in which these rights exist. The experiences of unaccompanied children should not and cannot be explained only through their vulnerability or their strength, as these dichotomized views overlook the ambiguity and the liminal nature of their life. They also ignore the possibility that children at times belong to many categories, and move within and between these according to their needs in the current moment (Wernesjö 2012, 2014). Children who have experiences which usually belong to adulthood still need care and support from adults, but at the same time, they want to use their acquired assets in productive

ways. This is how children might rightly see the challenging past as a resource rather than as something which has 'damaged' them permanently.

The girls made it clear that they would not like to be seen only as asylum seekers and victims, which meant that their participation could not be explained solely through the theories of existing refugee research. Additional theories were needed to consider their age and gender, as well as the liminal situation of their lives. Furthermore, the knowledge which was seen as worthwhile in the eyes of the girls was not as 'emancipatory' or 'transformative' as I assumed based on my prior knowledge of the girls' situation and on my keen interest in the participatory paradigm. Relevant knowledge was primarily practical: how to develop an inspiring project for the girls' waiting time. Being open to discomforting evidence was necessary to protect me from becoming blind to evidence which challenged my choices, and helped me to use the full potential of critical praxis. These kinds of turns allow action research to be better anchored in reality, in the actual situation of the unaccompanied minors, rather than in an idealized illusion of children's participation as a panacea.

Reconsidering the definition of childhood would help to value children's participation even when it seems to differ from our understanding of what is good for children, for example, when a child's withdrawal seems problematic but can in fact offer her comforting silence. Participatory methods, if not used with care, can strengthen polarized understandings of participation and non-participation, because they can juxtapose micro and macro, powerless and powerful or children and adults and in doing so, reproduce simplistic notions about participation and social categories. In addition, these polarized views do not acknowledge the liminality or the fluidity inside and especially on the borders of categories.

The situation of the girls' life-worlds was in many ways labelled by liminality as described by Turner (1970), Alitolppa-Niitamo (2004) and Sirriyeh (2010): it had very few familiar elements from the past or the imagined future of the girls. While the liminality reduced the girls' willingness to do anything 'transformative', it also provided a place to stop and reflect on one's own situation and get ready for the 'post-liminal' life in the real world. Thus, the relevance of participation was connected to both coping at the present and getting ready for the future. As simplified, the challenging (darker grey) and the promoting (lighter grey) aspects which the pre-migration and current experiences had on the girls' participation are summarized in the Figure 3 below:
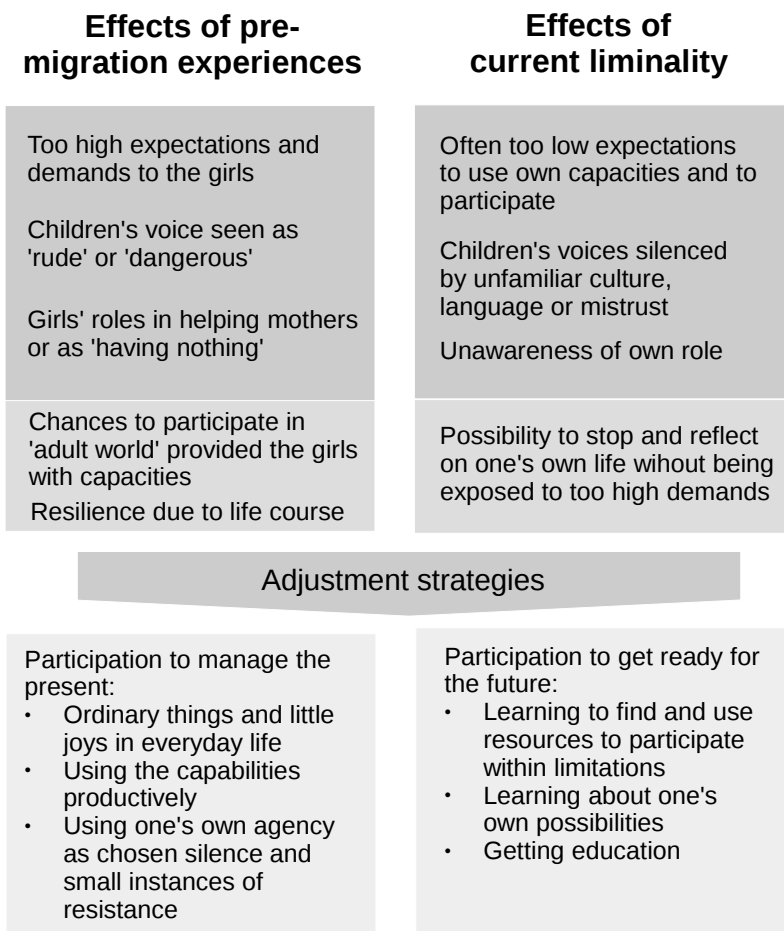
Effects of pre-migration experiences

Too high expectations and demands to the girls
Children's voice seen as 'rude' or 'dangerous'
Girls' roles in helping mothers or as 'having nothing'

Chances to participate in 'adult world' provided the girls with capacities
Resilience due to life course

Effects of current liminality

Often too low expectations to use own capacities and to participate
Children's voices silenced by unfamiliar culture, language or mistrust
Unawareness of own role

Possibility to stop and reflect on one's own life wihout being exposed to too high demands

Adjustment strategies

Participation to manage the present:
- Ordinary things and little joys in everyday life
- Using the capabilities productively
- Using one's own agency as chosen silence and small instances of resistance

Participation to get ready for the future:
- Learning to find and use resources to participate within limitations
- Learning about one's own possibilities
- Getting education

Fig. 3. Effects of the pre-migration and current experiences on the girls' participation in and beyond liminality.

When theories attempt to name, explain or make sense of some community's problems, there is always a risk of misunderstanding some members' experiences by overlooking the participants' diverse views (Frisby *et al.* 2009: 16). The aim of this research was to explore the ways unaccompanied asylum-seeking children see relevant participation *themselves*, but it is not to say that all existing theories should be abandoned; Bjorn Gustavsen (2001: 24–25) rightly warns action researchers to not fall into complete relativism and rejecting the assumption that there could be a usable theory. Regardless of the twists and turns in this study, theories of critical

pedagogy, children's participation and PAR seemed relevant as indications about the possible good ways to go about trying to find ways to improve the girls' participation, and theories about intersectionality and liminality helped me to structure, analyse and interpret the data. The theories in this study were flexible; they informed and were informed by our interaction and experiences of the situation, which were not static.

Considering the aim to produce knowledge which would be relevant for the participants and truthful to the unexpected insights from the action, adopting an eclectic theoretical framework was essential. A narrow conceptual framework alone can turn out to be 'oppressive', explanatory and normative (Reason & Torbert 2001, Warren 1994); for example, using definitions of children's participation to emphasize the obstacles caused by the asylum system or the vulnerability of the participants might not produce emancipatory knowledge but instead, it might function as justifying the status quo. That is because, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie notes in her Ted Talk (2009): "*The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.*"

8.2   Practical implications

The danger of a single story also highlights a central practical implication of this study: fixed ideas of unaccompanied children should be questioned, and assumptions of their needs should be reconsidered accordingly. The 12 participating girls of this study were 12 individuals from three different countries, with varying personalities and needs. The 1075 unaccompanied minors in Finland today come from 33 countries (Finnish Immigration Service 2015). The diversity and the transient nature of this group of children brings a very practical challenge to participatory work: a shared understanding of the reality, or even a mutual understanding of the research goals was not simple to achieve in this study (*cf.* Boyden 2001). Participatory methods and feminist research have both been criticized for aiming to create some kind of unitary, mutually accepted view of interests, thus underpaying individual differences (*e.g.* Kothari 2004: 146, Lykke 2010). Yet, working together does not require consensus; it requires respect towards each other, and willingness for mutual learning.

My findings indicated that relevant action occurred both on individual and collective levels. The girls who experienced the situation could contribute in improving their own daily life as they wanted, and leave the responsibility for

fighting inequalities to the adults. Instead of aiming for transformation or maximal involvement of children in implementing the action, it was helpful to see the presence of adults as a resource. The girls found the co-planned action motivating and meaningful enough to remain committed the whole time. However, the findings of this study do not offer a model of participation which would be applicable for all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children but instead, shows some examples of how the concept might be understood and applied when developing child-centred care of unaccompanied minors. The changing nature of individual needs confirms Live Stretmo's (2014: 261) claim that the practitioners need to learn how to deal with the ambivalence of unaccompanied minors. There will always be new surprises which will not be solved, such as the possibility that the amount of asylum seekers suddenly drops or increases during the project, asking for modified plans. Both happened to me: the third cycle of action was postponed because there were not enough girls in the centre. During the pre-examination of the thesis the amount of unaccompanied children in Finland increased from 167 to 1075 (Finnish Immigration Service 2015). Not only does this make writing a doctoral thesis with updated knowledge extremely difficult, but it also highlights the importance of developing feasible long-term plans to address the needs of these children, pave their way for integration and make sure our society is as competent as possible to adapt to this changing situation. The best we as researchers and practitioners can do is to try to understand and deal with the uncertainty. Situations change and children are individuals, hence the 'right' way to promote their participation cannot be explained by any one model.

The discussions about and around the theme of children's participation illuminated a whole spectrum of aspects in the girls' lives which they viewed as significant, and which should be addressed when developing the care of asylum-seeking children. The importance of being able to choose a roommate was connected to the girls' longing for friendships and belonging and also, for doing something ordinary. As Live Stretmo and Charlotte Melander (2013: 94) write, in normal circumstances children and youth do not live with strangers they have not chosen themselves. A mismatch in personal chemistries might make unaccompanied children isolate themselves from others, which can be interpreted as a personal problem rather than an issue which could be fixed by acknowledging the group dynamics and individual wishes.

Moreover, the possibility to go to a 'real' school was crucial, as has been repeatedly shown in previous research with unaccompanied minors (Björklund 2014, de Wal Pastoor 2014). Even the possibility to choose what to cook and eat

was significant, not only because it provided nutrition but also it produced a feeling of familiarity and autonomy about some aspects of children's own lives, as also Ravi Kohli and his colleagues (2010) have shown. Although the priority concerns of the girls in this study might appear ordinary and even trivial, it does not mean that these aspects of the girls' lives would be insignificant, or that the girls would be uninterested in larger, societal issues affecting their situation. On the contrary, these are important elements in the girls' lives, as they are in a process of learning to articulate their concerns and to interpret their possibilities in Finland.

Regardless of how much or little the girls wanted to contribute to the research, the findings must be accessible and useful to the participants. Habermas (1973) is doubtful that action research could be practically beneficial either in the short or long run, as society is so ridden by extreme power and oppression that a project such as PAR cannot influence it. Interestingly, one of the girls quite sensibly remarked that it is understandable that the possible long-term benefits of the project would be realized after they have moved out from the centre, but perhaps the results would help the practitioners develop activities together with the children coming after them. Another girl added that it is important to talk about these things, as if nobody ever says anything, nothing changes. For the participating girls, the most tangible benefit was the possibility to have something to cheer up their life and manage to include their own ideas into a common project. However, I am hopeful that the increased self-trust and the capabilities which were developed would be transferrable to new situations in the girls' lives, beyond our PAR. Perhaps the only general, practical guideline which my study offers, in line with findings by, for example, Stremo (2014), Wernesjö (2014), Watters (2008) and Kohli (2006), is that all attempts for genuine dialogue in which children are encountered as individuals would be a step in the right direction, with respect to the children's wellbeing and participation.

8.3   Ethics of PAR with unaccompanied children

Respect, beneficence and justice are the three ethical principles for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, according to The Belmont Report (1979). Respect means that people should be treated as autonomous agents who are capable of making decisions. Those with 'diminished autonomy', such as children or asylum seekers, should be entitled to protection. Beneficence means that research should minimize the harm and maximize the benefit to the participants, society and humanity. Justice refers to the principle of

treating human beings as equals and distributing good equally among them. (Manzo & Brightbill 2010, 34). Hence, the ethical principles of this research were guided by the ideas of respect, beneficence and justice. Nevertheless, research with unaccompanied minors, and in fact any children, requires a more elaborated stance on ethics. In the following text I specify the ethical choices I made based on rights-based principles of ethical research with children, *i.e.* the right of children to be 'properly researched' (Abebe & Bessell 2014: 127, Beazley *et al.* 2009). The right draws attention to a combination of provisions from four articles of the CRC: the right to express opinions (Article 12), the right to freedom of seeking, receiving and imparting information using appropriate means (Article 13), the right to protection from all kinds of exploitation (Article 36) and the right to high professional standards being used with children (Article 3.3.) (United Nations 1989). In brief, the right to be properly researched means that 'all children involved in research are entitled to have their human rights respected' (Abebe & Bessell 2014: 128).

The girls' *right to have their views heard* (Article 12) was protected not only through the participatory research design, but also by allowing the girls to decide the suitable level of their participation. The girls could decide the focus and the steps of our PAR, but also how much or little they wanted to be involved. Hearing the girls' views does not mean that there would have been one uniform view about anything. Thus, I aimed at including the polyvocality of the girls' views both to the action and to this thesis. The girls could also decide which of the findings would be made public, how much information was to be revealed about them and what kind of photos could be used in this thesis. I promoted the *freedom of expressing and receiving information* (Article 13) by helping the girls to learn simple ways to get information, and by using child-appropriate language in all communication. The interview themes were pre-approved by the practitioners to avoid possibly troubling themes. The girls could withdraw or change the topic whenever they wanted, for any reason, without negative consequences. Some of the girls used that right very effectively, and as a result, I have very little data from some of the individual interviews. Pushing the girls to answer with more words would have been unethical use of researchers' authority; it was necessary to be happy with answers which the girls themselves were comfortable with. *The highest possible professional standards* (Article 3.3.) relate to procedural ethics: this research met the criteria by the Ethics Committee of Human Sciences in the University of Oulu Graduate School (UniOGS), and was supervised appropriately. Supervision was complemented by a follow-up group at the University of Oulu, as well as by a

membership in the Nordic Network for Research Cooperation on Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (NordURM), where PhD students had a chance to present their studies for experts in this field. Lastly, the danger of '*all forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare*' was avoided (Article 36) by being mindful about the effect this research had on the lives of the girls in the current moment, and the legacy the research would leave for the future. We discussed the research findings and implications with the girls, making sure that the girls are presented in both a true and respectful way. As especially the girls in the first group were worried about leaving permanent traces about themselves, I refrained from filming our meetings.

The changing and participatory nature of PAR causes problems in following some of the traditional ethical guidelines literally. Procedural ethics require that methods have to be determined and the whole research pre-planned before participants have been requited or the process negotiated with them, although the participatory principles of PAR require the opposite. The autonomy of the participants might be difficult to ensure as the projects are often visible; all the residents and practitioners in the girls' living units knew what our meetings were about, and they had the possibility to hear and read about it. Nevertheless, this thesis includes no identifiable images of the girls, and not even pseudonyms or anonymous descriptions of each girl, as this was the girls' wish, and my ethical principle too. Lynne C. Manzo and Nathan Brightbill (2010) argue that despite the problems of incorporating some traditional ethical guidelines with PAR, participatory approach can in fact extend the core principles that govern ethical research. They claim, for example, that the requirement of beneficence, if understood as an imperative to 'do no harm' is insufficient in PAR, where the researcher seeks to have an impact, to instigate change and to create benefits for participants. The respect for persons and beneficence come from the participatory nature of research, as well as the ontology based upon human rights and social justice.

The right to be 'properly researched' in PAR also calls attention to ethical relationships between research participants. My relationship with the girls started as a professional relationship. In the beginning, the most important ethical consideration was to use all available help to learn to know the girls and to ensure the sensitivity of the process: that the children felt comfortable with each other, with me and with the project, making sure everybody's wishes are respected but at the same time, keeping the hopes realistic. As the project proceeded, our relationship became more close and complex, calling for consideration of the

broader social relationships, personal connections and responsibilities towards other people. When the girls started to trust me, they revealed more about themselves, also about the worrying aspects of their situation which again helped me as an outsider to see what could be improved in their life situation. The relationship was reciprocal; I learned from the girls and enjoyed our cooperation, whereas the girls were happy they could plan and implement their own ideas in our project. I promoted continuity by helping the girls make connections with local NGO's and schools, and developing continuous cooperation between the students of our university and the under-age units of the reception centre.

Ethical relationships, *i.e.*, working together towards what is considered to be right in a specific time and place, are central for the quality of PAR. Yet, the scientific audience requests other kinds of measures, which will be discussed below.

8.4   Quality of PAR

In the very first international conference where I presented my initial findings, I was criticized for being too passionate. After that comment, I have become increasingly aware of the criticism of the scientific value of action research, exactly because of the 'passionate' or at least subjective position of the researcher. For example, Habermas (1973: 18) claims that participation in action simply prevents the researcher from contributing to theoretical discourse. However, framing the action within several theoretical discourses and remaining self-reflective about my own conduct throughout the research process has improved the quality of my study. Thus, I acknowledge that my standpoint influenced the way I analysed the girls' action, interaction and discussion, as well as what I decided to use from the literature about other groups of people who are in a similar situation. I used the existing theories and my prior knowledge, combining them with the relational and experiential knowledge we produced in action, while considering how the situation in this time and space could be improved. This analogical theorizing in PAR occurs both in practice and for practice; it helped us to modify our practice but it can also help future practitioners in similar situations (Torbert 1999).

Peter Reason (personal discussion, 17.04.2015) pointed out that quality in action research can be ensured when the project did as much as it could, considering the circumstances and the context. No criteria are applicable across different contexts and participants, and the same goals are not relevant for two projects. Although experiential knowledge sees unique encounters as a source of knowledge and direct, symbolic representations of encounters even impossible (Heron &

Reason 1997: 276, Reason & Torbert 2001: 11), in reality any research aims, methods, results and analyses are very difficult to communicate, use and analyse through anything else but some form of language. Considering all the challenges in creating trust, being able to build a dialogue or even achieving a shared understanding of the reality for the basis of the dialogue might encourage sceptics to ask what kind of knowledge can be created from this kind of interaction. How to capture the important changes in children's trajectories, and what can even be known about these phases by anyone else than the children themselves? These are relevant concerns, but an even more relevant question is: What is the quality of knowing within this kind of interaction for the girls in this situation? This means that instead of trying to get everything right, it is more important to try to make both practices and outcomes meaningful for the participants in the specific context. This study will not provide a 'right' answer of what good participation is or how to separate the authentic voice of the child from the echoes of dominant discourses or possible agendas which the child might have to ensure her survival. However, the action was suitable and knowledge was authentic, true and relevant in the time and context which was most significant for the girls of this study: in their day-to-day life. The girls could to a great extent decide what we aimed for, what was true and what constituted the main findings in this study. They could participate in the analysis in the group discussions, and when I thought I understood what they meant by something, I verified the meaning from the girls whenever possible.

Although some action researchers resist the term validity altogether, it is applicable to this study if it is defined as Lincoln and her colleagues (2011: 116) do, meaning that findings are sufficiently authentic so that I may trust myself in acting on their implication, and that the findings are not produced with faulty (*e.g.* discriminatory, oppressive) or malformed methods, for example, from false data. Furthermore, I as a researcher must trust my findings enough so that I would be happy if they were used to construct social policy or legislation (Lincoln *et al.* 2011: 120). The validity was also strengthened by prolonged involvement in the study (from May 2011 to December 2012, still ongoing but less regularly). The prolonged involvement included dialogue, aiming to build authentic relationships between myself and the participants, as well as among the girls themselves. I also used triangulation, as the study included observations, group- and individual interviews, and analysing the action together. (Heron & Reason 1997, Robson 2002). Although 11 interviews is not very much, Sarah Baker and Rosalind Edwards (2012) suggest that the sufficient amount really depends, and even one interview could be enough if saturation is reached. Even though saturation is not a very suitable criterion for

this study, considering the changing nature of PAR and the attempt to capture the polyphony, not the uniformity of the views, I think saturation was reached as the big picture was illuminated through the girls' diverse views of participation. The responsibility of transferability (or transcontextual credibility, *cf.* Greenwood & Levin 1998) is on the future researchers or practitioners who might want to use this study as an inspiration; making the project meaningful is only possible by listening to the participants, becoming engaged and putting essentialist assumptions aside.

Despite the need to constantly emphasize the rigor or justify the passion of PAR, I did not become less passionate along the process. Luckily, I have found an audience with relevant expertise to evaluate my study. I have felt at home with other action researchers who, like Lewin (1948), do not see the passion or engagement of the researcher as a problem. As Petri Salo (2015) phrased it, action research can and should act as an 'aunt in a flower hat' (*kukkahattutäti* in Finnish), being both critical and idealistic. In line with Zembylas (2008) I think that emotions, attached with a certain amount of pathos, are justifiable in social science; perhaps it is even inevitable when both the researcher and participants are thinking and feeling human beings.

8.5　Future research and final words

Between the time of submitting this thesis to pre-examination (June 2015) and writing these final words (October 2015), we have witnessed the most dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers in Finnish history: the applications of all asylum seekers in process in Finland have jumped from 1876 to 17851 in four months (Finnish Immigration Service 2015). Understandably during the past months, all the time, effort and innovation has been used for getting over the worst: finding food and shelter for thousands of new asylum seekers. The change can also been seen in the public discourse, which is perhaps more polarized than ever between the threat- and victim-discoursers. The changed situation does not decrease the importance of promoting the participation of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; instead, participatory work is one of the central goals of the long-term plans of how to develop lasting cooperation between the reception centre and other stakeholders. Furthermore, the children I have recently met in the crowded rooms and full corridors of the reception centre are not to blame for the challenges society faces in dealing with the new situation: they continue to appear as children with high hopes for their future and with resources that are not to be wasted.

PAR might be more fruitful with participants who have some basic understanding of how to conduct research, or in a time frame which would allow a thorough learning process through several cycles. Therefore, I recommend further research with young migrants who have lived in the host country already for some time, because research like that could be more conducive and educative to the participants. It could also provide deeper understanding of the new situation, as the participants would have probably moved from the shock of the new to adaptation (Kohli 2011). It would be interesting to see what the capability-approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen has to offer to understand the situation of unaccompanied children. Exploring the capabilities which the children or youth need to be able to cope in the host society, and how those capabilities can be facilitated in this situation of more migrants would be worth further research, and possible with children who have lived in the host country longer.

This doctoral thesis presents the results of this PAR to one audience, *i.e.* the academic community. I have addressed other audiences by publishing in professional literature (Kaukko 2014), and presenting my findings for practitioners working with unaccompanied minors internationally (for example in the *Uncertain Journeys: Exploring the Challenges facing Separated Children Seeking Asylum* seminar 11.03.2014 in London) and nationally (for example *Halaten* seminar by Institute of Migration, 23.04.2014 in Turku) as well as in several events of professional development at the centre where this study was conducted. Regardless of the fact that there is no 'model' to implement PAR with unaccompanied minors, I intend to write a common-sense guide of how PAR could be used to promote the participation of unaccompanied minors in a child-sensitive way.

According to Hannu Heikkinen *et al.* (2006: 29) cycles in action research do not have an end, but the improved practice or more functional context is always only temporary, waiting for a new cycle of action to improve it even more. However this action research project had an end due to the fact that the girls moved away and I have to finish this thesis. The practical knowledge will hopefully benefit the practitioners in the centre to host and care for new children. The theoretical knowledge can be used, challenged and criticized also by future researchers in the fields of childhood and youth studies, refugee studies, children's participation and intersectionality, whereas the methodological knowledge can be used to further participatory research with children.

Although this research was not longitudinal, I had the privilege to see that some of the dreams of the 'real life' of the girls became reality. Two of the girls told me they would live in the city perhaps for a year and then find out about official routes

of participating, such as youth parliaments. About a year later, I met one of the girls in a seminar on youth participation. Also, two of the girls appeared in a documentary by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, telling about their rather positive experiences of being the very first immigrants in a little rural town in Finland. Some of the boys who lived at the centre during my field work now work as volunteer interpreters to help with the recently arrived asylum seekers before they get registered. These youngsters' happiness and success, due to their courage and resilience, made me confident that promoting unaccompanied children's participation continues to be of vital importance, especially due to the changed situation, and it calls for more action and research.

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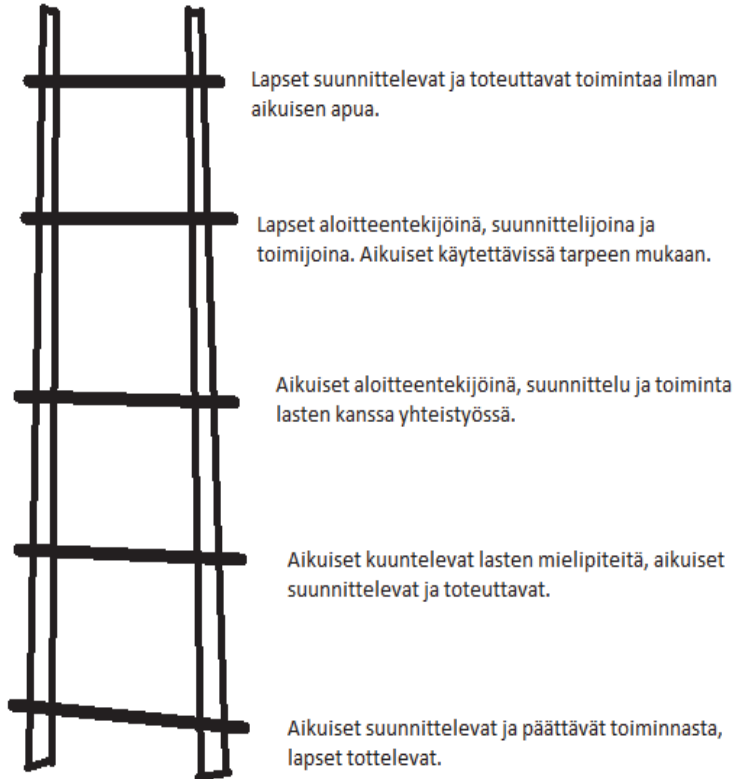
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Appendix 1: Themes of the individual interviews:

1. Background: the length of time in Finland, current living circumstances
2. Educational background in the country of origin
3. Education in Finland
4. Everyday lives at the centre (chores, responsibilities, fun things, ideas for improvements)
5. Roles of children and adults in the centre
6. Friendships and belonging
7. Practical and emotional support
8. General wellbeing and safety
9. Children's rights, what is important and what is challenging?
10. The relevance and the possibility of children's participation (picture of a ladder)
11. Own capabilities
12. Examples of children's initiatives in the centre
13. Dreams for the future

Appendix 2: Simplified version of the Ladder of Children's Participation

Lapset suunnittelevat ja toteuttavat toimintaa ilman aikuisen apua.

Lapset aloitteentekijöinä, suunnittelijoina ja toimijoina. Aikuiset käytettävissä tarpeen mukaan.

Aikuiset aloitteentekijöinä, suunnittelu ja toiminta lasten kanssa yhteistyössä.

Aikuiset kuuntelevat lasten mielipiteitä, aikuiset suunnittelevat ja toteuttavat.

Aikuiset suunnittelevat ja päättävät toiminnasta, lapset tottelevat.

Appendix 3: Samples of art activities

Appendix 4: Sample of categories from data-based analysis

Original publications

This doctoral thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I   Kaukko M (2013) "We have to learn for ourselves": Participation of unaccompanied minors in a Finnish reception center. Siirtolaisuus-Migration (Supplement "Unaccompanied Refugee Minors"): 12–21.

II Kaukko M (2013) Everyday choices, meaningful activities and reliable adults: Diverse paths to empowerment of unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls. In: Törrönen M, Borodkina O, Samoylova V & Heino E (eds) Empowering social work: Research & Practice. University of Helsinki, Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education: 200–221.

III Kaukko M & Parkkila H (2014) Nykyajan totaaliset laitokset tyttöjen suojelijoina. In: Gissler M, Kekkonen M, Känkäinen P, Muranen P & Wrede-Jäntti M (eds) Nuoruus toisin sanoen – Nuorten elinolot 2014-vuosikirja. Helsinki, Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos: 113–121.

IV Kaukko M (In press) The CRC of unaccompanied asylum seekers. International Journal of Children's Rights.

V   Kaukko M (2015) P, A and R of participatory action research with unaccompanied minors. Educational Action Research. (Published online: 30 July 2015). URI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1060159: 1–17.

The original articles are reprinted with the kind permission from the publishers Institute of Migration (I), Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education (II), Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos (III), Brill (IV) and Taylor & Francis (V). Original publications are not included in the electronic version of the dissertation.

140. Alanko, Anu (2013) Osallisuusryhmä demokratiakasvatuksen tilana : tapaustutkimus lasten ja nuorten osallisuusryhmien toiminnasta Oulussa

141. Puroila, Anna-Maija & Kaunisto, Saara-Leena & Syrjälä, Leena(Toim.) (2013) Naisen äänellä : professori Eila Estolan juhlakirja

142. Malmberg, Jonna (2014) Tracing the process of self-regulated learning – students' strategic activity in g/nStudy learning environment

143. Virkkula, Esa (2014) "Soittaminen ammattilaisen kanssa on paras tapa oppia" : työpajaperustainen työssäoppiminen muusikoiden ammatillisessa koulutuksessa

144. Lutovac, Sonja (2014) From memories of the past to anticipations of the future : pre-service elementary teachers' mathematical identity work

145. Villanen, Heli (2014) Our place, my future and their project : reflecting children's lifeworld in education for sustainable development

146. Kaunisto, Saara-Leena (2014) "Täällä sai puhua sen, mitä kenties muualla ei" : opettajien vertaisryhmä kerronnallisena ympäristönä

147. Suorsa, Teemu (2014) Todellisinta on mahdollinen : systeeminen ja subjektitieteellinen näkökulma kasvatuspsykologiseen kokemuksen tutkimukseen

148. Salo, Raimo (2014) Opettajien osaamisen ja opetuksen kehittäminen perusopetukseen valmistavassa opetuksessa

149. Hanhela, Teemu (2014) Educational perspectives on recognition theory

150. Rantanen, Antti (2014) Development of methodology for assessing counseling interactions : developing the Counselor Response Observation System and assessing applicability of heart rate variability to the measurement of client emotions during verbal reporting

151. Näykki, Piia (2014) Affective and effective collaborative learning : process-oriented design studies in a teacher education context

152. Mäki, Päivi (2015) Opettajana ja kehittäjänä : vertaismentorointiryhmässä kehittäjäopettajan ammatillista identiteettiä kertomassa

153. Räisänen, Sari (2015) Changing literacy practices : a becoming of a new teacher agency

154. Pudas, Anna-Kaisa (2015) A moral responsibility or an extra burden? : a study on global education as part of Finnish basic education

155. Määttä, Elina (2015) Setting young children up for success : approaching motivation through children's perceptions of their ability

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