Child participation in a context of poverty in a wealthy Western nation

Understanding and enhancing children’s lives and well-being

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Introduction
Chapter 1

1.1 General introduction and problem statement

Close to half of the world’s population lives in urban areas (Bartlett et al., 2016) and the urban population worldwide is growing at a much faster rate than the population as a whole. The global urban population is expected to double to more than four billion people by 2025, with some 80% of them in developing countries (Bishop et al., 2000). By 2030 each of the major regions of the developing world will be home to more urban than rural dwellers; by 2050 two-thirds of their inhabitants are likely to live in urban areas (Montgomery, 2008). In all countries, one of the characteristics of many urban settings is the concentration of problems related to quality of life and the availability of resources. Cities worldwide confront a range of complex realities as concentrations of people and economic activity make enormous demands on the environment and on local inhabitants (Bartlett et al., 2016). Relatively unfavourable living conditions are observed among residents of large cities compared to those living in smaller cities and towns (Brockerhoff & Brennan, 1998; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2017). One major consequence of the density of urban population is poverty, which results from an inevitable scarcity of economic resources and equal employment opportunities (Massey, 1996; Gilderbloom, 2008).

Of the urban population living in impoverished and suboptimal conditions, children are at a particularly high risk, as disadvantaged living conditions have a deep impact on children’s well-being and the effects of their childhood experiences run well into their adult life, determining almost every aspect of their development: physical, emotional, psycho-social, behavioural and cognitive. Given the severity of child poverty in the so called developing countries it should be no surprise that much of the literature on child poverty deals with this part of the world (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992; Barrientos & DeJong, 2006), where hundreds of millions live in dismal conditions, have too little to eat and little chance of effective treatment when they are ill or injured. These children might also lack access to clean water and sanitation. In crowded areas where infectious disease can spread rapidly, the threats to health are acute. Opportunities for play are often inadequate and indoor space insufficient. If these children attend school, they often find it overcrowded, understaffed and poorly equipped (Bartlett et al., 2016).

In recent years, there has been increasing attention paid to child poverty in wealthy countries. Extensive research has been conducted on how living in a poor household or poor neighbourhood influences the way the child develops physically, cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally (among others:
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Porterfield & McBride, 2007; Emerson, 2007; Schreier & Chen, 2013). These studies have yielded robust evidence of the long-term damage of early poverty on children's opportunities, development and lifelong chances. As Schreier and Chen (2013) indicate in their review, there is overwhelming evidence that low Socio Economic Status (SES) negatively influences physical health. Furthermore, Porterfield and McBride (2007) found that low-income families have less access to health services, largely due to their lack of access to information. According to Emerson (2007), epidemiological studies have consistently reported a significant association between poverty and the prevalence of intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, overweight and obesity are an increasing problem worldwide, especially among urban populations. While in developing countries adults and children of high SES groups are at risk (Chhatwal et al., 2014; Prentice, 2005; Gupta et al., 2012), in wealthy countries a gradient can be observed whereby both adults and children of socioeconomically disadvantaged households are more likely to be overweight or obese (Sallis & Glanz, 2009; Rossen, 2014; Jansen et al., 2013).

Given the scale of urban dwellers worldwide and the gravity and complexity of challenges facing urban populations, in particular children, it is critical to come up with new and refreshing ideas on how to improve the quality of life and well-being of those affected, not only in developing countries but also in affluent Western countries. The nature of children’s lives, the opportunities available to them and the stresses to which they are subject can vary significantly between countries and even within cities. The understanding of children’s best interests and the resources available for responding to them also differ from place to place. We know that there are children who live in suboptimal conditions; we know that their development and prospects are at stake. Both public and private initiatives have been developed, with varying results, aimed at improving lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, for example focusing on healthy diets for children and prevention of overweight/obesity. As we know that child participation can lead to better services, it is important to consider its potential for improving interventions aimed at enhancing lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty. According to academic studies, and as is experienced in practice, participation leads to better decisions and tailoring of services, since children can contribute unique and essential knowledge during research and decision-making that researchers or practitioners may lack (Hart, 2008; Vis et al., 2011; Dedding et al., 2013). In recent years, experiences of the benefits of child participation in research are gained with regard to addressing issues as quality of youth care (Rutjes & Sarti, 2012; Jurrius &
Sarti, 2013), education and school life (Smith, 2007; Åkerström, 2014), and quality of health care (Dedding, 2009; Schalkers, 2016) and medical-scientific research (Grootens, 2016). In this thesis I examine the realities facing children growing up in poverty in Amsterdam from their own perspective. I introduce and develop a participatory approach whereby initiatives to address the issue of poverty can be informed by the perspectives of those who experience its realities. In taking such an approach I hope to make explicit children’s narratives about their lives and to inform policymakers and practitioners of these perspectives.

Before taking a close look at the lives of these children, I focus on the main allied problems of poverty that children confront. This chapter begins with a section in which I describe the problem of poverty in wealthy nations and its consequences on the children’s development, followed by an introduction to Amsterdam’s school gardening programme which was one of the focal areas through which we gained insight on the needs of children from their own perspective. The chapter ends with an outline of the main research question.

1.2 Background to child poverty

1.2.1 Child poverty in wealthy nations

Although there is much debate about the definition of poverty (Laderchi et al., 2003), there is a degree of consensus that poverty in Western European countries, unlike in many developing countries, is not so much a matter of physical survival, but rather is related to the general level of prosperity of the society to which people belong. Townsend (1979) introduced a ground-breaking conception of poverty, defining it in terms of relative deprivation, according to which needs arise by virtue of the kind of society in which people live. According to this conception, it is possible to judge whether or not someone lives in relative poverty only in relation to other people living in the same society at the same time. Segments of the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to realize the living conditions, types of diet and supplies, and are unable to participate in the activities which are customary in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those available to the average individual or family that they are to a large extent excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities (Townsend, 1979, pp. 31). Thus, rather than looking only at a person’s material resources, attention should be paid to actual outcomes in terms of living standards and activities (Lister,
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Financial constraints coupled with less favourable living conditions can lead to poverty and social exclusion. Social exclusion means that people become isolated and alienated from society because their participation in it is limited (Coumans, 2012). This is also the conceptualisation of poverty adopted by the European Commission on 19 December 1984, which states: ‘The poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the member state in which they live’ (Gordon, 2006).

Consequences of poverty for children’s development

Studies on the effects of poverty on children indicate that they are significantly affected by poverty, physically, cognitively and emotionally (Porterfield & McBride, 2007; Emerson, 2007; Schreier & Chen, 2013). As Schreier and Chen (2013) pointed out in their review, there is overwhelming evidence that low SES negatively influences physical health. For example, the relationship between low SES and obesity has been shown to be strong, as in several studies a gradient is observed whereby socioeconomically disadvantaged people were more likely to be overweight or obese (Fraser & Edwards, 2010; Sallis & Glanz, 2009; Rossen, 2014; Jansen et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to Emerson (2007), epidemiological studies have consistently reported a significant association between poverty and the prevalence of intellectual disabilities. Emotional problems as a consequence of growing up in poverty are of both internalizing and externalizing nature (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Poverty affects a child’s development most when it occurs when the child is young and when the state of poverty is persistent (McLoyd, 1998; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Much of the observed relationship between income and various adverse child outcomes appears to be related to a number of factors that are negative for a child’s development and often accompany low income, such as parental education, family structure and neighbourhood characteristics (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Evans, 2004).

1.2.2 Childhood overweight/obesity and malnutrition

Overweight/obesity is becoming a focal challenge to child health and well-being and disproportionately affects people of socioeconomically disadvantaged households, which calls for sound interventions. Obesity and overweight are often defined in terms of weight in relation to height. Body mass index (BMI) is a measure used to determine overweight and obesity and is calculated by dividing a person’s weight in kilograms by the square of height in meters. For children, BMI is age- and sex-specific and is often
referred to as BMI-for-age. Therefore, BMI levels among children need to be expressed relative to other children of the same age and sex (CDC, 2016). Many overweight and obese children suffer from a range of physical diseases such as type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cardiovascular disease (Myers & Vargas, 2000; Reilly et al, 2005; De Onis et al., 2010) and also mental maladies and social challenges such as low self-esteem, social isolation and discrimination, lower educational attainment and depression (Edmunds et al., 2001; Mustillo et al., 2009).

Childhood obesity is a complex condition with many behavioural, genetic, environmental, and psychosocial factors contributing to it (Ludwig & Gortmaker, 2004; Poortinga, 2006; Harrington & Elliott, 2009). At the physiological level, overweight and obesity are caused by an energy imbalance whereby caloric intake (diet) exceeds expenditure (physical activity) (Harrington & Elliott, 2009; Black & Macinko, 2008). The expression of genes favouring the storage of excess calories as fat becomes maladaptive in a rapidly changing environment that minimizes the opportunities to expend energy and maximizes the opportunities for caloric intake (Chung & Leibel, 2008; Biro & Wien, 2010).

Over the past three decades, childhood overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions in most industrialized countries (Seidell, 2005; WHO, 2013). In several studies a gradient is observed whereby both adults and children of socioeconomically disadvantaged households were more likely to be overweight or obese (Seidell, 2005; Harrington & Elliott, 2009; Fraser & Edwards, 2010). In addition to individual-level SES being a strong predictor of obesity, there is a growing consensus that neighbourhood disadvantage may also play an important role in understanding the epidemiology of obesity, independent of individual-level SES (Janssen et al., 2006). In recent years, much attention has been paid to how changes to the built environment may influence their physical activity and eating habits (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006; Frank et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2010; Knai et al., 2012). Differences in neighbourhood facilities (availability and price of healthy food and absence of sport facilities and parks) may be related to neighbourhood inequalities in dietary intake and physical activity (Lenthe & Mackenbach, 2002; Swinburn et al., 2004; Papas et al., 2007).

Low SES groups face difficulties in their living environments, such as scarcity of resources, recreation facilities and deficiencies in the overall public spaces. As we have seen in this section, the scarcity also concerns the food environment, leading – in combination with other factors – to high levels of
overweight and obesity in low SES segments of urban populations. In the next section, I discuss child poverty in urban Amsterdam.

1.3 Child poverty in urban Amsterdam

Our study mainly took place in Amsterdam, the biggest and, with over 800,000 residents, most populous city in the Netherlands. In this section I will explore child poverty in the context of Amsterdam.

In the Netherlands, average wealth is such that in principle all citizens have a roof over their head, do not have to suffer hunger, can dress properly and have access to medical care. Yet there are differences in living standards and not everybody living in the Netherlands has enough money to participate adequately in society. The income criteria used in the Netherlands are intended to indicate what is needed to fulfil a minimum package of necessities. The policy income threshold (beleidsmatige inkomensgrens), the most widely used criterion for income deprivation, is based on the statutory prescribed minimum sustenance standard. The policy income threshold is equal to the social minimum, but for several years, the implementation of this policy has been based on 110 per cent of the social minimum, which means that welfare recipients with little additional income also fall below the threshold. The low-income threshold (lage inkomensgrens) of the CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) reflects a fixed purchasing power. It is deliberately placed above the social minimum, in order to include households that are solely or primarily dependent on welfare. Finally, the budget threshold (budgetgrens) of the SCP (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau) measures poverty using standard costs based on sustenance budgets of the Nibud for a given year of reference. The SCP distinguishes between a ‘basic needs criterion’ and a ‘not-much-but-sufficient criterion’. The former involves the minimum expenditure on food, clothing and housing, and other hard-to avoid-costs (such as insurance). The not-much-but-sufficient criterion also includes costs for social participation. For the measurement of the risk of poverty in all three cases the disposable household income is the starting point. This includes income from work, capital, benefits and alimony (Hermans, 2015).

Although poverty in the Netherlands rose in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, and estimates were that the number of low-income households would continue to increase (SCP/CBS, 2013), new figures show that rates have fallen and will continue to do so (Hermans, 2015). Nevertheless,
there is a significant increase of households with long-term low income. While the number of low-income households in 2014 had hardly increased, the number of long-term low-income households compared to 2013 had increased by 24,000 (Hermans, 2015). Among households of residents with non-Western backgrounds, the share of long-term low incomes is almost six times as high as among households of native Dutch citizens. Between 2013 and 2014 this share increased more sharply (from 11.5 to 13.3 per cent) than among households of native Dutch citizens (from 2.0 to 2.2 per cent) (Hermans, 2015).

In 2013, almost one in five households in Amsterdam had an income below the low-income threshold, making it one of the municipalities with the highest risk of poverty (Hermans, 2015). The risk of long-term poverty is also greatest in Amsterdam. In this city, 6.8 per cent of households had to get by with a low income for four years or longer in 2013, well above the national average of 3 per cent (Hermans, 2015).

Children are affected by poverty more than other segments of the population because of the high risk of poverty among single-parent families, especially women-managed households, and because of the high risk of (long-term) poverty in families with more than one child (SCP/CBS, 2013). Single-parent families with only young children have a relatively high risk of long-term poverty: 10.6 per cent were affected in 2014, an increase of 2 per cent compared to 2013 (Hermans, 2015). The number of very young children living in a family with a long-term low income increased in 2014 with 16,000, leading to a total of 131,000 children living in poverty. That equates to 4.5 per cent of all children. Almost half of these children grew up in households reliant on welfare, while in more than one third of the families, paid work was the most important source of income (Hermans, 2015).

Research initiatives (among others: Attree, 2006; Sutton, 2008; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Ridge, 2011; Roets et al. (2013)) have identified the range of problems that children living in poverty need to grapple with on a daily basis. Among these are lack of or unsafe playing spaces; inadequate housing; and parental unemployment. Multiple studies (among others: Porterfield & McBride, 2007; Emerson, 2007; Schreier & Chen, 2013) have pointed out domains in which action is needed by providing evidence of the harmful effects of growing up in poverty on children's well-being, health and opportunities. Given the consequences of poverty on children, it is of great importance to consider what their lives look like in order to understand how they can be better supported. This means taking a close look at specific
domains and practices in which children are involved, such as playing sites, school and home. One of practices in which children in Amsterdam are involved is the Amsterdam school gardening programme. By examining this programme and its benefits for child well-being and health, I aim to identify what, from the child's perspective, room there is to improve this programme, but also to contribute to a deeper understanding of children's lives, interests and motivations. Furthermore, in this thesis I want to make a contribution to this and other interventions aimed at enhancing children's lives by understanding and respecting their own perspectives.

1.4 The Amsterdam school gardening programme

One of the areas of our research was a focus on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. This intervention is aimed at providing children with experiences of nature and gardening. Furthermore, it aims to encourage children to eat vegetables as a means to combat issues like overweight, obesity and malnutrition among children growing up in urban Amsterdam. This section introduces the programme and its significance to this study.

1.4.1 The importance of vegetable intake in children

Children’s low vegetable intake remains a challenging public health concern and disproportionately affects children from families with low SES (Fernandez-Alvira et al., 2014; Zarnowiecki et al., 2014). Although there is substantial proof of the benefits of a diet rich in vegetables in tackling and preventing adiposity, many children do not meet the recommended daily intake of at least 400 grams or five servings of vegetables (Yngve et al., 2005; Dovey et al., 2008). Among the many factors contributing to this insufficient vegetable intake is children's own food preferences and choices (Birch, 1999; Birch & Fisher, 1998). Consistent cross-culturally is children's dislike of vegetables (Skinner et al., 2002; Cooke & Wardle, 2005). Genetic predispositions include the preference of foods that are sweet and salty and the rejection of those that are sour and bitter, as well as rejection of unknown foods (neophobia). However, they also include the predisposition to learn preferences by associating foods with the contexts and consequences of eating them. Food preferences are learned via experience with food and eating: genetic predispositions to accept or reject foods work in concert with the food environment to shape learned food preferences (Birch & Fisher, 1998; Birch, 1999).
The availability and accessibility of vegetables is found to be positively related to vegetable preference and their consumption by children (Cooke & Wardle, 2005). The extent to which vegetables are made available and accessible to children at home shapes their liking for and consumption of those vegetables (Keim et al., 2001; Libman, 2007; Krolner et al., 2011). However, besides availability and accessibility, the psychological consequences of eating as well as the social context play a role in acceptance. Children's dislike of some vegetables was found to be based more on prejudice than on taste (Krolner et al., 2011). Furthermore, food preferences can develop if a specific food is presented in positive social situations or as a reward, whereas foods that are presented in negative social situations, such as parental coercion of eating, may be rejected (Scaglioni et al., 2008; Wardle & Cooke, 2008; Powell et al., 2011).

1.4.2 The Amsterdam school gardening programme
Like in other areas, Amsterdam children's vegetable intake is suboptimal, especially among children from low SES families. Among the interventions to enhance vegetable intake and prevent overweight/obesity in Amsterdam is school gardening. In Amsterdam, school gardening has existed for more than a century, with its goals evolving over time from being a solution for major food shortages during and after World War I to gardening as an educational tool for health and food (ANMEC, 2015; NME-gids Amsterdam, 2015). The Amsterdam school gardening programme is independent but is currently under the umbrella of nutrition-related programmes, named Voedselwijs (Foodwise). Other programmes that are part of Voedselwijs are farm education, in which children get a sense of where their food comes from; a visit to a botanical garden; and a 'no waste lunch' preparation lesson. There are 13 school gardening complexes in Amsterdam where annually approximately 6800 children participate for almost an entire calendar year (ANMEC, 2015). In the course of 25 lessons of 90 minutes, children grow and process vegetables, herbs and flowers, and learn how nature and nutrition are related. The first three sessions in March take place indoors, during which children are introduced to their school garden, study soil types and learn how seeds grow into plants. In April, weekly gardening activities start. Each child receives a small plot of land on which to grow plants and vegetables. After the summer holiday, from the end of August onward, children mainly harvest vegetables and herbs to take home (NME-Gids Amsterdam, 2015).

Gardening programmes represent a promising intervention to improve children's consumption of vegetables (Morgan et al., 2010; Gatto et al., 2012;
Jaenke et al., 2012). Children's own perspectives, however, are in large measure missing from the discussion of school gardening and how gardening might be related to vegetable consumption. What this research undertakes to do with its emphasis on participation and children's perspectives is to identify the strengths and possible opportunities to improve this programme from the point of view of the children who engage with it.

1.5 Research objective and main research question

In order to counteract the dramatic differences between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged counterparts in terms of well-being and health outcomes, it is of utmost importance to give priority to low-income segments of the population in public initiatives. This also means that attention should be paid to the experiences and views of the children involved, in order to come up with practices that match their needs and lives. Although there has been increasing enthusiasm for child participation over the past decades, there is still reluctance on the part of some researchers to take children's accounts of aspects of their own lives seriously and to see them as a legitimate source of data let alone as partners in research (Pole et al., 1999). In particular, as expressed in critical reflections in previous years, research is more likely to dismiss or overlook accounts of children from low SES families in favour of articulate middle-class children (Kellett, 2011). In addition, although prevention programmes, targeting lifestyle and dietary factors, are more likely to be effective in addressing the obesity epidemic, in particular among low-SES segments of society, only a few prevention programmes have been developed or implemented, and the success rates reported to date have been poor (Visscher & Seidell, 2001). New insights are needed on children's perspectives on what does or does not work in order to come up with interventions that fit their preferences and are successful in addressing overweight and related health problems.

This study aims to contribute to understanding the perspectives and experiences of children with regard to growing up in contexts of poverty, and to examine their perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme as an intervention to enhance vegetable consumption and prevent overweight/obesity and/or malnutrition. The main research question is framed as follows:

How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?
Chapter 2
Theoretical concepts

This chapter presents the core theoretical concepts used in the thesis. The chapter begins with the concepts related to the challenge of studying lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty. This is followed by an elaboration of the results of studying children’s lives in an adequate manner, both in terms of understanding and enhancing their lives and well-being.
2.1 Studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty

2.1.1 Child participation
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by nations worldwide in 1989 and provided a radical new vision of children (Unicef, 1989). While acknowledging that the child is vulnerable and in need of protection and assistance from the family, the society and the state, the child is also regarded as a subject of rights (Pais, 2000; Sinclair, 2004). Furthermore, the UNCRC establishes that children have the right to form and express opinions, participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions that may be relevant for their lives (Pais, 2000). In particular, article 12 is often identified as portraying the right of the child to participate, stating that ‘States Parties shall assure the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (OHCHR, 1989). It is considered as one of the fundamental principles of the convention, which needs to guide the way each individual right is ensured and respected (Pais, 2000; Hart, 2008).

Since the declaration and ratification of the convention, we have seen a significant increase of interest in child rights and child participation (Hill et al., 2004; Hill, 2006). Besides the children’s rights agenda, a significant factor in the surge of participation over the past decades has been new paradigms in the social sciences that have increased the understanding of children as agents who actively participate in their social world (Sinclair, 2004; Hill, 2006; Franks, 2011; Kim, 2016). This means that increasing attention is being paid to the active role that children (can) play in shaping their environment as well as their competence to be both commentators on their own lives and to be involved in decision-making (James et al., 1998; Sinclair, 2004; Jurrius, 2013). In this view, the age of a child and its assumed accompanying experience operates as a form of capital that brings value to research and consultation processes (Pole et al., 1999). Children can contribute unique and essential knowledge during research and decision-making that researchers or practitioners may lack, creating a situation in which children and professionals pool and share their knowledge in order to achieve a meaningful outcome (Franklin & Sloper, 2005; Franks, 2011; Jurrius, 2013).
Theoretical concepts

Besides the legal and practical arguments for child participation, there are also socio-psychological and health-related arguments. A wide area of ‘individual’ problems should be considered as the result of cultural practices in which children are not taken seriously as actors (De Winter et al., 1997; Dedding et al., 2013). Child participation appears to have protective and preventive effects for health-related problems (De Winter et al., 1997; Vis et al., 2011), as participation leads to better decisions, and tailoring of services and the participation procedure itself is therapeutic (Hart, 2008; Vis et al., 2011). Taking part in participatory activities can offer children the possibility of acquisition of skills, empowerment and a sense of being part of something and leaving a mark on their environment. The idea of the immediate usefulness to participants, according to Franks (2011), blurs the notion of research with intervention. Research on prevention programmes for health problems in young people highlight the importance of children’s participation. Not treating children as dependent objects of adult intervention, but involving them as active and competent subjects in (the planning of) interventions, as well as in the arrangement and management of the living situation, can give children the feeling that they can master their lives and their health (De Winter et al., 1997; Dedding et al., 2013).

Participation can mean consultation aimed at finding out views in order to inform decisions regarding policy or practice in a direct fashion (hereinafter referred to as ‘consultation’). Participatory approaches in research (participatory research) are becoming more commonly favoured over more traditional approaches where children were seen predominantly as the objects of research (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). According to Kim (2016), there are normative as well as methodological rationales for involving children in research (see figure 2.1). Whereas methodological assumptions concern the quality of the research carried out and the insights gained, normative assumptions supporting participatory research concern the benefit that conducting research has for children.
Furthermore, there is an increasing overlap between the sphere of consultation and participatory research (Hill, 2006). Through conducting research, children are seen to be able to actively participate in the process of producing knowledge and, based on their research findings, better participate in various decision-making processes (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Hill, 2016; Kim, 2016).

Another differentiation can be made between participation in which children take part in activities, or participation in which actual transfer of power occurs so that participants’ views influence decisions (Franklin & Sloper, 2005). In research with children, either adult researchers act as primary investigators and involve children at selected stages of the process or adults and children conduct the project together as co-researchers. In research ‘by’ children, children are facilitated to be ‘primary investigators’ throughout the process from the initial identification of the research topic to the dissemination of the final results (Kim, 2016). In practice the term participation is often used to mean being ‘listened to’, depicted by Sinclair (2004) as passive participation, whereas active participation entails some presumption of empowerment of those involved, which is that children believe and have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference (Sinclair, 2004). In recent years, multiple ladders depicting different levels of participation, and in particular degree of power held by children, have been developed: the ladder of Arnstein (1969), the ladder of Hart (1992) and the ladder of Shier (2001). Although these ladders as a rule aim

<table>
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<th>Normative assumptions</th>
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<td>Children are competent to conduct research</td>
<td>Conducting research fulfils children’s rights to participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children are epistemically better positioned to do research about children</td>
<td>Conducting research empowers children</td>
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Figure 2.1 Methodological and normative assumptions supporting research by children (Kim, 2016)
for a high level of initiative and power assumed by children, corrections have since been made. For instance, Hart (2008; 2013) states that children do not always need to participate at the highest levels, but it should be up to each child to choose the highest level of participation that fits his or her ability. In response to the ladders, Alderson and Montgomery (1996) propose an alternative by defining four levels at which children can participate: being informed; expressing a view; influencing a decision; being the main decision-maker. According to this framework, all levels are important methods of participation and the first three must precede the fourth if the child is to make an informed choice (Utting, 1997; Waterhouse, 2000). Kirby et al. (2003) have developed a non-hierarchical model of participation, where no one level is assumed to be superior to another. They identify the following types of participation: children’s views are taken into account by adults; children are involved in decision-making (together with adults); children share power and responsibility for decision-making with adults; children make autonomous decisions (see figure 2.2). Within this framework, you may use a variety of participation levels at different times and in different contexts. None is inherently better or worse than another. The context, tasks, decisions and participants determine the appropriate level. Individual children may participate in different ways depending on their abilities, interests and availability.

![Figure 2.2 A model of the level of participation (Kirby, 2003)](image-url)

In this thesis, I subscribe to the notion of active participation in which children’s involvement actually makes a difference, affecting policy and
practice. Our study and this thesis endorses Alderson and Montgomery's and Kirby's non-hierarchical models of participation, in which the type of participation activity is to be determined according to the circumstances and the participating children.

2.1.2 The child’s perspective
According to the UNCRC, solutions to problems concerning children need to be built with children, considering their perspectives on realities that need to be addressed and ensuring that they are empowered to make informed choices and enrich results (Pais, 2000). The concept ‘child’s perspective’ is usually understood to mean a child-friendly perspective that is informed by new approaches to the study and analysis of children and childhood (James & Prout 1990; Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006). A central element is that children are seen as individuals, with opinions, interests, and viewpoints that they should be able to express (Lee, 2001; Johansson, 2004; Sommer et al., 2010). By being located in a particular social position, children have a distinct experientially informed vantage point from which they are better able to understand issues about contemporary childhoods than adults (Kim, 2016). Through actual child participation children have the opportunity to express themselves and get their perceptions known and included (Pais, 2000).

The adoption of the UNCRC meant an increased interest in involving young people through a range of participatory initiatives and consultations. However, there can be conflicting interests between the provisions in the UNCRC. There is a tension between the child’s need for protection and the child’s rights of participation (Söderbäck et al., 2011). Söderbäck et al. (2011) distinguish between a child’s perspective and the child’s perspective. A child’s perspective is aimed at respecting the child’s best interest by having the child’s rights in mind, making it possible for well-intentioned adults to act and take decisions in a situation without finding out the child’s perspective and the child’s capabilities. Therefore, adults must capture and learn the way a child experiences and understands the situation from his or her perspective. Traditionally, adults’ view of children’s perspectives has been sought, with parents generally acting as proxies for children. However, adult proxies’ views of children’s experiences may differ quite markedly from children’s own views and in some cases may be flawed or inaccurate. Hence researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of directly recording children’s own perspectives (Coad & Shaw, 2008; Söderbäck et al., 2011), which is contributing to a better understanding of children’s experiences and needs. In a similar vein
Theoretical concepts

Sommer et al. (2010) argue that a child perspective is characterized by the adult’s outsider perspective on children’s conditions, experiences, perceptions and actions, with the individual child and his or her best interests in mind, while the child’s perspective is characterized by the child’s insider perspective, based on what he or she considers to be important. Research from children’s perspectives is captured when exploring their expressions, experiences, perceptions and understanding (Sommer et al., 2010).

Skivenes and Stradbu (2006) propose a concept of the child’s perspective that contains three aspects on two different levels. At the structural level, children's rights and position in society, as well as their legal protections, should be guaranteed. States must recognize children as legal subjects, and implement systems that are appropriate to their needs and competencies and facilitate participation through co-decision and empowerment. On an individual level, children must receive recognition from adults (e.g. professionals) as stakeholders in their own right. This means regarding them as individuals, each with their own particular needs and interests and adopting a position where children can be considered in the present – as human beings – rather than only in a future perspective as a human ‘becomings’. The third aspect, also on an individual level, concerns the context of children’s lived realities. Respect for the child’s view of the world is central when taking children’s interests into consideration. The starting point is that children have needs and viewpoints that are qualitatively different from those of adults. This threefold notion of a child perspective must be fulfilled if children are to be taken seriously and participate on their own terms in society and practices (Skivenes & Stradbu, 2006). This research relies heavily – both in its methodology and in the outcomes to which it aspires – on such a conceptualization of the child’s perspective. By engaging children in participatory action research (PAR) with photovoice as the main method (a detailed explanation follows in chapter 3), we aimed not only to empower children’s agency as decisive members of their society, but also enable an individual expression of their needs, desires and interests.

2.1.3 Child agency
The UNCRC challenges traditional conceptions of childhood, as it considers children to be subjects of rights, implying they are, like adults, holders of agency (Stoecklin, 2013). Agency comprises the social capacity of human beings to act and create, and to change practices in order to achieve personal purposes (Bollig & Kelle, 2016). To recognise children’s agency means acknowledging that children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes, but active in the construction and determination
of their lives and environments (Prout & James, 1990). Since the rise of the ‘new paradigm’ in childhood studies, the social construction of childhood and the need to observe children’s agency have been underlined (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Corsaro, 1997; Stoecklin, 2013).

Although it is important in itself to conceptualise childhood in this manner, agency is not acquired by the simple fact that the child is given the status of subject of rights by the UNCRC. Children’s rights become real only through the exercise of participation, which may eventually contribute to gradual capacities gained by children as social actors having voice (Lansdown, 2010; Stoecklin, 2013). According to Stoecklin (2013) the child, although a subject of rights, remains an actor with rather limited agency. He argues that the child is simultaneously a subject of rights from birth and a social actor with evolving capacities to make decisions, act and interact with other people in a socially competent way. There is the risk that an overarching emphasis on children’s agency becomes a sociology of choice, which fails to recognize the structural freedoms and constraints which the agency of children expresses. Age operates as a structural factor to limit agency and there may be many other such factors which operate in the same way, acting to deny or at least curtail individual agency (Pole et al., 1999). Therefore, whilst recognizing individual agency, it is equally important to recognize the constraints under which it is exercised (Archer, 1988; Qvortrup, 1997; Pole et al., 1999). In this way we are able to observe actions and expressions of children’s agency that would have otherwise remained unnoticed and identify and analyse the freedoms as well as the constraints under which individual agents are able to construct their world.

Taking a relational social theories view as well as a network-analysis understanding of agency, means recognizing that agency is located in social relations and interdependence and takes place in interaction with material worlds (Knorr-Cetina, 2001; Esser et al., 2016; Esser, 2016). Interdependence with social surroundings means that the child has evolving capacities to learn how to behave socially and consequently increases his or her agency, and that the child’s social acting is embedded in complex social processes (Weber, 1978; Stoecklin, 2013). The extent to which individuals develop their agency depends on the interaction between their evolving capacities and the dynamic contexts in which they live, and this is a non-linear lifelong process. The interaction between contexts and children should be more accurately addressed (Stoecklin, 2013) and children’s agency should be understood through empirical observation of their evolving capacities in specific contexts (Lansdown, 2010). This thesis examines the school gardening
programme as an important practice in which children take part, observing both the procedures of the programme and children's agency.

2.1.4 Lifeworld orientation and everyday life
This thesis deals with the question of how children perceive child poverty and how the child's perspective on growing up in poverty can be grasped. This requires a connection with the daily experiences of children, which Grunwald and Thiersch referred to as a 'lifeworld orientation' (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). The interpretive paradigm of lifeworld orientation is rooted in theories of social pedagogy, and forms a methodological approach that takes into account the contexts in which children's voices are produced and the circumstances of poverty that shape them (Otto & Thiersch, 2001; Hämaläinen, 2003; Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). As everyday life is dependent on social and systemic forces, the reconstruction of the lifeworld implies that research focuses on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society and captures the child's voice in its interactional context (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Roets et al., 2013).

From a lifeworld orientation perspective, interpreting the relationship between individual aspirations and social forces is inherently related to a social justice project. The lifeworld and the everyday manifest themselves as primary and fundamental dimensions of human life situations, some of them problematic in nature, that can be dealt with or improved (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Taking a contextual orientation as a starting point furthermore means that we accept that there is a plurality of interests and entitlements in contemporary society and that this plurality refers to a diversity of contexts in which children grow up. This contains a context-specific interpretation of children’s rights and interests, thus leaving room for different meanings, depending on these contexts (Mouffe, 2005; Reynaert et al., 2010).

Employing a lifeworld orientation also enables us to engender a picture of children as ‘beings’ actively relating to and shaping their daily lives. Understanding how child poverty affects daily life as well as how children shape it, requires that we listen to children and pay attention to their current experiences and perspectives. Despite a long tradition of scientific study of children and their development, children’s personal experience of events, relationships and everyday life receive little attention and little is known about the fabric of their lives, and interactions that form everyday experiences (Green & Hogan, 2005). Setting out to research children’s experiences implies a respect for each child as a unique and valued experiencer.
of his or her world. It also demands the use of methods that can capture the nature of children's lives as lived rather than those that rely on taking children out of their everyday lives (Green & Hogan, 2005).

2.2 Enhancing children’s lives and well-being

2.2.1 Policy dialogue

Policy dialogue, sometimes referred to as deliberative dialogue, is the process of adopting structured discussions into decision-making processes to help contribute to the development of evidence-informed policies. A common definition concerns the notion of dialogue for policy and decision-making, which requires involving those with the prerogative to make decisions at any level. The key characteristics of this type of policy dialogue are: 1. An iterative process; 2. Considering both the technical and political aspects of the problem in question; 3. Very variable and broad in nature; 4. Involving evidence-based and politically sensitive discussions; 5. Including a broad range of key stakeholders, and 6. Having a concrete purpose or outcome in mind, such as a decision or a plan (Rajan et al., 2015).

Policy dialogue is part and parcel of the policy it ultimately aims to inform and the decision-making processes, where the dialogue is intended to contribute to developing or implementing a policy change following a round of evidence-based discussions and consultations on a particular subject. The process can include structured formal events, but puts a distinct emphasis on the junctures and debates which take place during the policy and planning cycle. This can lead to a key policy decision and subsequent implementation that is owned by a wide range of stakeholders. Stakeholder ownership is invaluable and is, among other things, a consequence of having a voice in the policy process. Dialogue, whether formal or informal, can boost trust between stakeholders and allow for constructive commitments on how implementation will take place (Rajan et al., 2015).

One of the questions that this research poses is to what extent involving children in policy dialogue on decisions concerning their own lives can be beneficial. Local governments increasingly acknowledge the importance of taking children’s views into account to develop policies that fit their needs and daily reality, regarding them as stakeholders in their own right. Child participation, in this light, is best understood as an on-going process in which the child can expect to have a say in some, if not all, relevant issues being addressed (Littlechild, 2000; Vis et al., 2011). It is necessary to
design forms of dialogue and engagement that start from the position of the child, whatever their age or ability (Sinclair, 2004). A process of dialogue and exchange needs to be encouraged to prepare the child to assume increasing responsibilities and to become active – combining adults’ direction and guidance to the child with the consideration of the child’s views in a manner that is consistent with the child’s age and maturity (Pais, 2000; Bucknal, 2009). Children usually get support from and work together with adult(s) throughout the process, because, despite demonstrating agency in many stages, children often are not able to carry out all activities without support and, for example, lack research skills (Kellett et al., 2004; Bucknal, 2009; Kim, 2016). Therefore, the child’s evolving capacity represents just one side of the equation: the other has to do with adults’ evolving capacity and willingness to cooperate with, listen to, understand, and weigh the views addressed by the child. The implementation of the right of children to express their views and have these heard, therefore calls for the training and mobilization of those who work with children, preparing them to give children the chance of increasingly participating in society and in the actual policies that might have significant effects on the quality of their lives (Pais, 2000).

One key challenge of the current research was how to involve children effectively so that their stories are actually listened to and acted upon by policymakers. We explored the potential of photovoice as a method to make explicit children’s narratives about their lives and to bring them into contact with policymakers.

2.2.2 Self-esteem
The pursuit of self-esteem has become a central preoccupation in Western culture and pedagogical philosophies (Sheldon et al., 2001; Crocker & Park, 2002; Baumeister et al., 2003). The desire to believe that one is worthy or valuable drives behaviour and shapes how people think about themselves, other people, and events in their lives (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Crocker, 2000; Ross & Wilson, 2002). For example, the best predictor of satisfaction with positive events is their impact on self-esteem (Sheldon et al., 2001). The pursuit of self-esteem is so pervasive that psychologists have assumed it is a universal and fundamental human need (Maslow, 1968; Rosenberg, 1979).

The vast majority of the published articles on self-esteem has focused exclusively on the level of trait self-esteem – whether people typically or characteristically have high or low self-regard. Crocker and Park (2002), however, suggest that the importance of self-esteem does not only lie in whether trait
self-esteem is high or low but also in the pursuit thereof: what people do to boost their self-esteem and avoid losses of self-esteem in their daily lives. They argue that people are motivated to boost their self-esteem above their trait level and to avoid drops in state self-esteem below it. Moreover, people are not merely passive victims, their self-esteem tossed around by events over which they have no control. Rather, they actively pursue self-esteem by attempting to validate or prove their abilities or qualities in the domains in which self-worth is invested. People work to achieve success and avoid failure in these domains, to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are worthy. In other words, people are motivated by self-validation goals in the areas in which they have invested their self-worth (Crocker, 2000).

In relation to this and in relation to studying children growing up in contexts of poverty, it may be relevant to consider Tajfel’s (1974) social identity theory, as it considers how identity formation is an active process aimed at enhancing self-esteem. Social identity theory considers that people organise their social environment using social categories. The notion of social categorisation is used to describe a mental process of grouping people together who resemble each other in behaviour, ethnicity, life experience or appearance. A person’s social identity is derived from his or her perception of belonging to a social group, together with the emotional significance attached to that membership. Thus, an individual actively creates a social identity in different contexts to define his or her own place in society in a way that enhances self-esteem (Tajfel, 1974; Castano et al., 2002).

In this study, we considered how child participation can contribute to children’s well-being. Since child poverty is a sensitive topic and there are indications that direct discussions on living in poverty can be challenging, we particularly explored how addressing child poverty and deprivation can be done in a positive manner that enhances rather than diminishes self-esteem.

In sum, the above has shown that both the process and the results of studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty are important and need to be examined thoroughly. By studying children’s lives, and incorporating participatory approaches, we gained insights on the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty and what is needed to enhance their well-being. Before presenting the results of our study, I will explain in chapter 3 the research design.
Theoretical concepts
The first two chapters introduced the topic and the conceptual framework for the research. This chapter presents the research design beginning with the main research question and its sub-questions, followed by a description of the research approach and research methods.
3.1 Main research question and sub-questions

The objective of this study is to contribute to understanding the child’s perspective on what it means to grow up in contexts of poverty in order to give suggestions for enhancement of their lives and well-being. The central research question is as follows:

How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?

This main research question can be broken down into four sub-questions, which can be divided in two parts. Part one of this thesis is concerned with understanding the lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty from the child’s perspective. This study aimed to take a first step towards understanding children’s lives by studying the perspectives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, on which it provided us with insider views. This led to the following sub-question:

*Sub-question 1: What is the child’s perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?*

In order to access this perspective, we first aimed to identify which approaches and methodologies would be adequate for the study of the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty. This led to the following sub-questions:

*Sub-question 2: How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?*

*Sub-question 2a: How can child poverty be discussed with children who grow up in contexts of poverty?*

*Sub-question 2b: How can photovoice provide us with insights into daily activities of children growing up in contexts of poverty?*

The second part of this thesis analyses how to enhance children’s lives and well-being. First, I aimed to draw lessons from the process of bringing children’s perspectives to the policy-making table. Therefore, the following sub-question was derived:
Sub-question 3: Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?

I looked specifically at the school gardening programme as a practice in which children participate and as an intervention aimed at enhancing their lives and well-being. This led to the following sub-question:

Sub-question 4: What is children’s perspective on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?

Table 3.1 gives an overview of the research parts and sub-questions and shows in which chapter they are addressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Research sub-questions</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding children’s lives</td>
<td>What is the child’s perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing children’s lives and well-being</td>
<td>Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are children’s perspectives on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 3.1 An overview of the research and corresponding study questions used in the thesis
3.2 Research approach

In order to study the perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty and to understand what is needed to enhance the quality of their lives and their well-being, we combined participatory action research (PAR) and ethnography. In PAR, understanding is developed in collaboration with the target group itself, and dialogical methods are employed to generate research that is shared with the target group (Cornwall & Jewkins, 1995; McIntyre, 2008). The PAR approach entails data collection, reflection, and involving the people in taking action to bring about public improvements (Baum et al., 2006; Dedding et al. 2013). Ethnography aims to describe and understand social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within a group of people or culture (Reeves et al., 2008). It aims to unravel the layered meanings that a phenomenon holds for the people involved. This involves the search for patterns and for ideas that help explain the existence of these patterns (Goulding, 2005). Ethnographic research has a characteristic ‘funnel’ structure, becoming progressively more focused over time. Over the years, it has been recognized as a fundamental research method to explore and make sense of the social worlds of children (James et al., 1998). Since ethnography focuses on the perspective of those being studied, e.g. intervention users, it has been recognized as an important part of implementation research in nutrition, helping to understand how delivery and utilisation processes affect programme impacts or outcomes and thus how to optimally tailor intervention design and implementation to different sociocultural and environmental contexts (Tumilowicz et al., 2015)

3.2.1 Research methods, sampling criteria and strategies of analysis

Two studies involving children in low SES areas were undertaken to answer the main question and sub-questions. In study 1 the focus was on children’s lives and needs. In study 2, we focused on a specific programme targeting children, namely the Amsterdam school gardening programme.

Study 1: Studying perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty

An extensive study was conducted on disadvantaged children's lives and needs, resulting in three chapters of this thesis. In this study, we combined PAR and ethnography, the former aimed at gaining knowledge about the children's needs in order to give direction for policies and interventions that fit these needs. As part of the ethnographic approach, we conducted participant observation while working and travelling with the children.
The study was carried out in two deprived neighbourhoods in the provincial town of Hoorn and the city of Amsterdam. We were, in particular, sensitive regarding how to introduce this project to children. Children were not selected and invited on personal grounds. Instead, we aimed explicitly for a social mix of children by inviting all children from well-known deprived areas to participate in ‘a photo project on their lives and neighbourhood.’ Children were asked to take part in the project by local youth workers in Hoorn and by three primary schools in Amsterdam.

Photovoice was employed as a central method. A total of 29 children aged 8-14 years took photographs of things and places in the local environment which were important to them. In weekly meetings, focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews were conducted in which the children were invited to reflect on their photographs. Recruitment from an area of deprivation meant that most children were likely to be poor, although this was not assessed on an individual basis. When the issue of poverty explicitly came up in children’s accounts, the opportunity existed for further discussions on the topic. At the same time, we were equally interested in the absence of reference to poverty. In order to contextualise the stories of children, the researchers also undertook informal conversations with parents, and conducted interviews with a primary school teacher, two youth workers and a policymaker.

The researchers developed relationships of trust with the children by walking them from school to the project location and home afterwards, by organising recreational outings and by having casual conversations with them. This helped to establish high levels of rapport with the children and contributed to the researchers’ in-depth insights into the children’s lives. Children appreciated adult attention and thrived on having someone to talk to and listen to their stories, and were interested in the work and lives of the researchers as well. As part of the ethnographic approach, we conducted participant observation while working and travelling with the children.

The project was extended in Amsterdam with a dialogue between children and policymakers and a photo-exhibition. After the photo-exhibition, in the form of a photo stories table, stayed in the council office for a week for everyone to see and reflect on the photographs and the children’s stories, the table was also exhibited at two schools and at a local library. At these locations, the children had the opportunity to discuss their photographs
with their peers, communicate the results to their own communities and to influence local professionals.

An ethnographic content analysis was conducted. Ethnographic analysis uses an iterative process in which information that arises during active involvement in the field is transformed or represented in a written document. It involves processing pieces of data to detect and interpret thematic categorisations, search for inconsistencies and contradictions, and generate conclusions about what is happening and why (Thorne, 2000). As part of the participatory approach, we involved children in conducting analysis to help us better understand their needs. The Candy Sorting Game, in which children were asked to sort different types of sweets into piles according to colour, shape and type and to name them (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), combined with the ranking of problems in order of significance, were used to explain the method of inductive categorisation to the children. Categories and themes were discussed and reflected upon in the research team and carefully and frequently checked with the children.

**Study 2: Studying children’s perspectives on the school gardening programme**

Two of the chapters in this thesis are dedicated to our study on children in low SES areas’ perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. In an ethnographic study approach, participant observation was employed to gain thorough insights into children’s thoughts on the programme and in particular how it affected vegetable intake, and their ideas for programme improvement. A naturalistic approach was assumed to enable the researchers to study children’s experiences with gardening and harvesting in a natural setting and interpret these in terms of the meanings they have for the children involved (Jones, 1995). In participant observation, the researcher collects data by taking part in research targets’ natural environments, and alternately adopting the role of active participant and observer (Johnson et al., 2006; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010).

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select schools that had been participating in the Amsterdam school gardening programme for many years and that were located in city districts inhabited by the population of interest, i.e. children living in low-SES and high overweight and obesity contexts. In this manner, we aimed to include schools that were familiar with the Amsterdam school gardening programme and were available and willing to participate in our qualitative study. Since the selected schools were
both already part of a larger mixed-methods study they also represented a convenience sample.

Between March and November 2015 two participant observers were present at all school gardening lessons to observe what events took place, what the children did and how they reacted to what they saw and heard. While participating in the gardening lessons of both schools, the participant observers assisted children in gardening activities, conversed with them informally and closely observed their actions and behaviour. Furthermore, to deepen our insights into children’s perspectives on school gardening and the vegetables they cultivated, formal interviews were held with children from both schools. A FGD was held with the children from one of the groups to get a better understanding of the range of and variety in perceptions on school gardening and vegetable consumption. Finally, interviews were conducted with parents on what vegetables are eaten at home.

An ethnographic content analysis was conducted which involved the inductive emergence of categories and themes that relate to children’s perspectives on school gardening programmes and their attitudes towards and consumption of their own vegetables, as well as agency with regard to the vegetable they cultivated. Categories and themes were established after careful examination of data and multiple deliberations between the researchers and project team.

3.3 Validity

In order to enhance the quality of our research, provisions were made to ensure credibility. Among others, the following measures were taken:

1. In both studies different methods were used in conjunction to compensate for their individual limitations and exploit their respective benefits, i.e. establishing triangulation (Shenton, 2004; Denzin, 2009). In the photo project on children’s lives, photovoice was combined with individual and group discussions, and observational methods. In our school gardening research, participant observation was complemented with interviews and a focus group discussion.

2. In both studies we worked with a team of researchers all of whom had many years of experience in the field of child participation and qualitative research. Frequent debriefing sessions were organized with the researchers
and project leaders to discuss and reflect on results and interpretations, reducing researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, project teams were formed bringing science, policy and practice together. In both projects, regular meetings were organized to discuss practical attainability of procedures developed as well as practical implications of research results.

3. Taking a participatory approach to our poverty research, meant that researchers carefully and frequently checked with the children for accuracy of data and interpretations of data, thus applying member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

4. In both studies data were carefully documented to enhance validity. Interviews and FGDs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, detailed field notes and observation reports were written by taking extensive field notes and drawing elaborate reports from these notes immediately afterwards.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Given the nexus between research and recreational involvement of children in our photo project, making careful ethical deliberations was highly important. Combining PAR and ethnography, this project enabled us to meet the children regularly over an extended period of time. We developed relationships of trust with the children by collecting them from school and taking them home after the sessions, having casual conversations with them, and organising recreational outings. Informal interactions during outings such as a guided tour of the Dutch central bank and the Amsterdam Museum for Photography, contributed to our in-depth insights into the children’s lives. They also benefited children, who had the opportunity to engage in fun activities and develop relationships with each other and the researchers. At the same time, the blurring of research and fun activity carried the risk of the children forgetting the research purpose and revealing more than they would want to. For this reason, we approached informed consent as a process rather than assuming it throughout on the basis of initial consent (Heath et al., 2007). This meant that consent was negotiated as an on-going concern. We kept the parents and young people informed at all stages of the research. Throughout the study, it was made clear to all the children that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any moment without having to give any reasons and with no consequences.
Research design

The school gardening study was presented to and approved by the Medical Ethics committee (METc) of the VU University Medical Centre. After the schools consented to take part in the participant observation, all of the children in the target classes received information letters and consent forms to take home. A passive informed consent strategy was adopted since the study did not involve sensitive topics and children were not exposed to any significant risks.

All interviews and FGDs were only audio-recorded after the participants were told about anonymity and confidentiality and their permission had been explicitly requested and granted. During the participant observation at the school gardens we made sure not to take notes regarding three children’s expressions and actions whose parents had opted them out of the study. After one of these three parents belatedly gave permission for her child’s participation, two children were left out of the research. Finally, to ensure anonymity, we have used pseudonyms in all formal publications, including this thesis.

3.5 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is structured into nine chapters. The first three chapters describe the rationale and aim of the thesis (chapter 1), the theoretical concepts underling the thesis (chapter 2) and the design of the research (chapter 3).

Chapters 4-8 present the findings of the thesis. Individual chapters have been published (chapters 4, 6, 7 and 8) or are accepted for publication with revisions (chapter 5). Chapters 4-6 present the results of our research on children who grow up in contexts of poverty. Chapter 4 discusses children’s needs in growing up in poverty and their perception of poverty, while chapter 5 has a special focus on (social) resources available to children and where they draw from to enhance the quality of their lives. Chapter 6 discusses the central participatory method used in this research, the photo-voice method, and its lessons for connecting children with policymakers and influencing policy-making processes. Chapters 7 and 8 attend to the results of the research on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. Chapter 7 deals with children’s overall perceptions of this programme, their motivation to participate in it and their suggestions for improvement, while chapter 8 has a special focus on children’s perceptions on its gains for
vegetable-consumption purposes, connecting it with agency brought about by programme procedures.

Chapter 9 reflects on the main research question of this thesis, bringing together and discussing the findings by sub-research question and as presented in the chapters 4-8. This chapter also contains a reflection on the validity of the research findings and suggestions for further research.
Research design
Chapter 4

‘I am not poor. Poor children live in Africa’: Social identity and children’s perspectives on growing up in contexts of poverty and deprivation in the Netherlands
Abstract

This study focuses on problems children living in contexts of poverty face in daily life and how they perceive poverty. Findings are based on research with children (8-14 years) from impoverished areas in the Netherlands. Besides the problems as identified by the children, such as the poor quality of playgrounds and the lack of money for activities, we identified a striking paradox, namely the taboo on or denial of poverty versus the pervasiveness of poverty. In order to understand and handle this contradiction, we reflect on representation of children growing up in contexts of poverty through a social identity framework.
4.1 Introduction

There is a substantial body of knowledge on child poverty. Much deals with child poverty in the so-called developing countries (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992; Barrientos & DeJong, 2006) but there is also increasing attention to child poverty in wealthy countries. Extensive research has been conducted on the way living in a poor household or poor neighbourhood influences the way the child develops physically, cognitively, emotionally and in terms of behaviour (among others: Porterfield & McBride, 2007; Emerson, 2007; Schreier & Chen, 2013). These studies have yielded robust evidence of the long-term damage of early poverty on children’s opportunities, development and lifelong chances. As Schreier and Chen (2013) pointed out in their review, there is overwhelming evidence that low SES negatively influences physical health. For example, the relationship between low SES and obesity has been demonstrated to be strong. Furthermore, Porterfield and McBride (2007) found that low-income families have less access to health services, due to their lack of access to information. According to Emerson (2007), epidemiological studies have consistently reported a significant association between poverty and the prevalence of intellectual disabilities.

These studies are significant because they demonstrate the detrimental impact of growing up in poverty and point out domains in which action is needed in developing countries, but also in wealthy countries where the prevalence of poverty is now rising due to the economic crisis.* Poverty in the Netherlands, for example, rose from 7.4% of the population in 2010 to 9.4% in 2012, and estimates indicate that the number of low-income households will continue to increase (SCP/CBS, 2013). Children are affected by poverty more than other segments of the population because of the high risk of poverty for single-parent families, especially when the head of the household is a woman, and because of the high risk of poverty in families with more than one child (SCP/CBS, 2013).

The aforementioned studies fail to provide sufficient insights into the perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty. Christensen and Prout (2002) distinguish four ways of seeing children and childhood in research: 1) the child as object, namely a person acted upon by others; 2) the child as a subject, recognizing the child’s subjectivity and taking this as a starting point; 3) the child as social actor which extends the ‘child as subject’ perspective and considers children as social actors with their own

* At the time of writing the article on which Chapter 4 is based the economic crisis was still going on. At the time of writing this thesis, in 2017, the crisis has terminated.
experiences and understanding; and 4) the child as participant and co-researcher. The latter approach represents a more recent development of the perspective of children as social actors, seeing children as active participants in societal life and in the research process. This perspective is established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), especially those sections that promote the idea that children be involved, informed, consulted and heard on matters and decisions that affect them directly. This approach is also reflected in new social science methodologies that increasingly acknowledge that children are able to contribute to our understanding of their living environment and that they should be involved in the formulation of policies and interventions that fit their needs and their daily realities (Kellett, 2004; Vis et al., 2011; Dedding et al., 2013).

The field of research that addresses children who grow up in contexts of poverty as social actors is fraught with methodological difficulties, given the ambiguities of using labels such as ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ in wealthy countries. Sime (2008) suggests one possible way of coping with these difficulties is to focus on the specific context in which the research takes place while acknowledging that not all individual participants consider themselves to be living in poverty. By engaging with children in their own living environment and consulting them about their lifeworld in its entirety, researchers can ensure that child participants agree, at least partially, with the ways in which they are being represented.

Sime’s suggestion to avoid the use of words like ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ and not to ask children explicitly about the meaning of ‘being poor’, still presents researchers with a ‘crisis of representation’, particularly if they claim to access the authentic voice of ‘the poor child’ to represent the essence of living in a context of poverty. Roets et al. (2013) agree with Sime that researchers should take a lifeworld orientation when addressing children in contexts of poverty and stress that this should mean that researchers focus on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society, and attempt to capture the child’s voice in its interactional context. They argue that reflexivity is crucial when attempting to provide a representation of children’s voices. Contradictions in the ways in which children’s perspectives can be interpreted should be embraced as an unresolved puzzle in human interaction rather than minimized (Roets et al., 2013). We tried to be sensitive to this puzzle in our project, and in this paper we provide detailed descriptions of the perspectives of two groups of participating Dutch children. In the discussion, we employ a social identity framework to reflect
on the representation in research of children who grow up in contexts of poverty.

4.2 Methodology and theoretical framework

This article represents the findings of the first phase of a two and a half year qualitative study, in which we combined participatory action research and ethnography. In participatory action research, understanding is developed in collaboration with the target group itself, and dialogical methods are employed to generate research that is shared with the target group (Cornwall & Jewkins, 1995; McIntyre, 2008). In this case, participatory action research was aimed at gaining knowledge about the children’s needs and coming to interventions that fit these needs. Ethnography aims to unravel the layered meanings that a phenomenon holds for the people involved. With regard to ethnographic analysis, this involves the search for patterns and for ideas that help explain the existence of these patterns (Goulding, 2005). Ethnographic research has a characteristic ‘funnel’ structure, becoming progressively more focused over time. As part of the ethnographic approach, we conducted participant observation while working and travelling with the children. We became interested in the identified taboo/denial versus omnipresence of poverty and looked into theories that could help us understand and explain this better.

We were, in particular, sensitive regarding how to introduce this project to children. Children were not selected and invited on personal grounds. Instead, we aimed explicitly for a social mix of children by inviting all children from well-known deprived areas to participate in ‘a photo project on their lives and neighbourhood.’ Children were asked to take part in the project by local youth workers in Hoorn and by three primary schools in Amsterdam. Meeting on a regular basis for an extended period (six months in Hoorn and one year in Amsterdam) in a more or less fixed group allowed the children to get used to each other and to the researchers. This helped enhance mutual trust and openness during the sessions. At the same time, it was also important for the meetings to keep an open character so that new children could join in. This resulted in the emergence of a core group of children who attended regularly with a second circle who came to a few meetings. Recruitment from an area of deprivation meant that most children were likely to be poor, although this was not assessed on an individual basis. When the issue of poverty explicitly came up in children’s accounts, the opportunity existed for further discussions on the topic. At the same time, we were equally interested in the absence of reference to poverty.
The photovoice method was employed as a first step in understanding the children's perspectives (Harper, 2002). The children, guided by a professional news photographer who encouraged the children to explore their own capacities and ideas, took photographs of things and places in the local environment which were important to them. In weekly meetings, focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted in which the children were invited to reflect on their photographs. Semi-structured topic guides were used to direct the group discussions and interviews.

We approached informed consent as a process rather than as a single moment in time. This meant that consent was negotiated as an ongoing concern within the research process rather than something that was assumed on the basis of initial consent (cf Heath et al., 2007). We kept the parents and young people informed at all stages, and gave them the opportunity to withdraw from the project whenever they wished. To try to ensure that we only involved children who were genuinely interested in taking part, we emphasised the voluntary nature of the participation.

A total of 29 children living in impoverished areas of the Dutch provincial town of Hoorn and the capital city of Amsterdam, participated in the project. The Hoorn core group consisted of five boys and ten girls, aged 8-12 years; the Amsterdam group of nine boys and five girls, aged 10-14 years. Although the children of the Hoorn and Amsterdam groups were all born and raised in the Netherlands, they have diverse ethnic backgrounds: Dutch (n= 15), Moroccan (n= 7), Chinese (n= 2), Turkish (n=1), Iranian (n= 1), Surinamese (n=1), Iraqi (n=1) and Afghan (n= 1).

The researchers developed relationships of trust with the children by walking them from school to the project location and home afterwards, by organising recreational outings and by having casual conversations with them. This helped to establish high levels of rapport with the children and contributed to the researchers’ in-depth insights into the children’s lives. Surprisingly enough, the children did not seem to have problems with adjusting to occasional changes in the line-up of the researchers. Children appreciated adult attention and thrived on having someone to talk to and listen to their stories, evidenced, for example, by them showing us their school reports or texting us during their holidays. The children were interested in the work and lives of the researchers. They were also intrigued by the fact that one of the researchers had the same ethnic background as
some of them, something that contributed to an atmosphere of trust and open-heartedness.

Detailed interview and focus group discussion transcripts, field notes and observation reports were written and analysed. Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously to allow new information to be investigated in subsequent conversations. To understand the needs of children, we involved them in conducting a conventional content analysis (cf Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) which involves the inductive emergence of the categories and themes of analysis from the data rather than their imposition prior to data collection and analysis (Thomas, 2006). The Candy Sorting Game, in which children were asked to sort different types of candy into piles according to color, shape and type and to name them (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010), combined with the ranking of problems in order of significance, were used to explain the method of inductive categorisation to the children. Categories and themes were discussed and reflected upon in the research team.

The problematisation of the themes and contextualisation of the accounts of the children was undertaken by the researchers and carefully and frequently checked with the children. For this analysis, we used a social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1974). From this perspective, we were particularly interested in the way children spoke about their own and others’ identities in terms of being poor, in combination with other possible identity considerations. Research on social identity has been criticized for examining a single social identity at a time and not taking sufficiently account of the fact that individuals possess multiple social identities within their overall self-concepts, leaving unanswered many questions about how multiple identities are organized within an individual’s overall self-concept (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Freeman, 2003). Tajfel’s definition of the social identity theory, however, implicitly takes people’s multiple social identities into account (Freeman, 2003) and therefore might be useful in gaining a better understanding of how children themselves describe their lifeworlds and identities.

4.3 Findings

In this section, we first describe the four issues that the children themselves identified as main problems: 1. the poor quality of public playgrounds; 2. the unsafe neighbourhood; 3. bullying; and 4. lack of opportunities to join
clubs and activities. In the second part of this section, we unravel a striking paradox we found, namely a taboo on speaking about poverty or the denial of poverty versus the obvious prevalence of poverty in the children's daily lives and stories.

### 4.3.1 Children's problems in daily life

**Poor quality of public playgrounds**
The first problem mentioned by children concerned the poor quality of the public playgrounds. Cramped living arrangements, and in some cases large families, often mean that children have little space at home to play on their own or with friends. Additionally, due to thin walls, neighbours easily get upset if children are too noisy. Another obstacle is that the children's houses generally do not have gardens to play in. For these reasons, children often rely on public spaces in their free time, which is illustrated by Ebru's account of the importance of playing outside:

> I play outside every day. I play more outside than inside. Outside you can play with your friends. Inside you can't do that. There's not much room inside: we've only got the rooms. We don't have a garden. We would play at home more often if we had a garden.

Although the children say there are enough playgrounds, they refer to them as boring and mainly designed for young children, not for them. The outdoor playgrounds offer few challenges and, as they explain, always stay the same, day in – day out:

> I think the playground is not really fine because most children just hang around and they should have more things [for us to play on]. Just ordinary things that everyone likes to play on like a higher slide, more swings but no seesaw. (Sahar)

The children prefer small playgrounds with good quality equipment and enough variety to larger playgrounds with many open spaces.

**Unsafe neighbourhood**
The children experience their neighbourhood as unsafe, emphasising that it has a bad reputation because of this. Although the children do not consider their neighbourhood to be impoverished, they do consider it to be in a poor state and neglected. While a great deal of effort is placed in improving the aesthetic aspects of the neighbourhood, the children think that the
safety aspect is neglected by the local government. Ayman, for example, is concerned about the unsafety of the neighbourhood as he believes that this reflects on its image:

If you want to attract people, the most important thing is safety. Then there has to be more safety because that’s not possible, see, living in a neighbourhood where it is less safe. You shouldn’t really even go there so you don’t want to live there, do you?

The main reason for feeling unsafe is the presence of groups of people, especially large groups of teenage boys who gather in the streets or in public places like playgrounds and squares. [In Dutch, these are called *hangjongeren*]. Tarik describes, in a vivid manner, how he copes with threatening older boys in the area:

If there are big boys of about 20, then I run away. Imagine, they might have a gun... You can’t say ‘Why do you steal? Why do you steal?’ As a child, you wouldn’t dare!

The unsafe feeling caused by these groups is partly based on children’s own experiences, and partly on stories and rumours about children who have been attacked, chased or robbed. The children are outside a lot during the day but often also till late in the evening. Due to feelings of unsafety, they frequently choose to forsake their favourite playing areas and look for alternative places to play. The children experience this as a restriction on the freedom they hold dear:

It feels like a limited time. Children are only allowed to play till 6 o’clock. But no, it’s a free country, you can play as long as you like. But there are dangerous people, or that’s how it feels, who come there at about 8 o’clock, like grownups who just sit there, and you never know what might happen. (Ayman)

The children say there should be more surveillance by security cameras, police and *street coaches* (voluntary surveillance officials from the local community) in the areas where they play. This would contribute to a safer feeling and would give them more freedom to play outside, before and after ‘6 o’clock’.

**Bullying**

Bullying is another major problem. Children are bullied on the basis of their looks, ethnic origin, character and behaviour, and because of the people with whom they are affiliated. Moreover, children explained how bullying
is often linked to possessions. This account illustrates how children are targeted for not having the right stuff:

If you’re sitting with the other boys, and then along comes the boy with new shoes and he says ‘You, these shoes are fucking expensive, they are really good, you should get some too.’ And then he starts to boast. And then he says ‘You can’t buy these shoes but I can’ and this and that, and then everyone starts to go on about it.

(Tarik)

According to the children, children from more fortunate families are more likely to bully children from families who have less to spend. Bullying is sometimes very explicit and open, and sometimes takes on more subtle forms. Different forms mentioned by children are bragging about personal possessions in front of a child that is known to be poor, subjecting a poor child to ridicule because of his or her clothes or food, and excluding poor children:

A boy in my class said something last year. I had Euroshopper [a cheap brand] drink with me and he said ‘Don’t you have any money? Don’t you have any money?’ Sometimes I buy shoes from the market and he says ‘Your clothes are fakes.’

(Brittany)

Additionally, fighting is common, especially among boys, although girls get into fights too. One of the boys explained that children bully and fight because ‘they want to be tough’. It is important, says another boy, that you show that you are strong and not afraid. Some children are bullied severely and continuously which leads to feelings of loneliness and sadness.

**Lack of opportunities to join clubs and activities**

A fourth problem is the lack of money to join activities and clubs. At the beginning of the project, most children spoke of having lots to do, such as attending clubs, singing lessons and sport activities. However, later on, it turned out that they had been speaking about activities they had joined in the past or would like to join if their families had more resources:

Before, I used to take swimming lessons but at a certain time I wanted to get my A diploma [the first swimming diploma in the Netherlands normally for children of 6 years of age] but it became much more expensive and my mum didn’t want to pay so much. She said ‘In group 7 [primary school class for children aged 10-11], you can do swimming at school and then you can get your A diploma [for free].’

(Dessy)
Many children participate in the free activities of the local youth centres, such as the homework club and singing lessons, or activities provided by their school, like football or handball. However, due to government cuts, fees are increasingly being asked for these activities as well. Children regularly speak about dropping out of activities and looking out for alternatives. Nabil, for example, explained:

Last year, I also went to homework club but then I stopped because if you go to homework club you have to pay, 50 euro a month, quite a lot. So I didn’t go anymore. And where I go now it’s free.

Lack of money for organised activities and clubs is especially problematic for these children because they are often on their own during their free time. Many parents work long hours. In most of the children's families, the father is the main breadwinner but the mother often works too. Some of the children are from single parent families where the single parent (usually the mother) works. As a result, parents are not available to spend time with their children or to take them to activities:

My dad works a lot, even in the weekend. In the weekend he works from 12 o'clock to 9 o'clock [pm]. But in the morning, when I go to Chinese school, then he is asleep. I think it’s a shame [that I see him so little]. (Koen)

The absence of parents also means that children have additional responsibilities at home, for example babysitting siblings or cooking for themselves and their families. For many children, this is a natural part of their lives, although some experience it as a restriction of their freedom:

I always have to look after my little sister. My dad always chooses me to do this instead of my [other] sister. I always get angry when she says no. But my dad always chooses me. Because Elbahia doesn’t look after my little sister very well. She sits in front of the TV and things like that when she looks after my little sister. (Sahar)

Clearly the problems as described above have an impact on children’s well-being and future development. It is not difficult to see a link with poverty. Nevertheless, this link with poverty was hardly ever openly identified by the children. Did the children not see the connection with poverty themselves? Or did they not want to confront and discuss it? These questions will be discussed in the next section.
4.3.2 Taboo on or denial of poverty versus the obvious presence of poverty

When asked about child poverty, the children initially said that children in the Netherlands are *not* poor and that poverty mainly exists in other countries, mainly in Africa but also in European countries in crisis. The children associate poverty with begging, homelessness or ‘living in a tent’, things which children in the Netherlands rarely experience. They commented:

> Money does have a role in your life... But not always. Only if you’re in a crisis. If you’re in a crisis or if you have debts. Like in Greece, Italy and Spain. There are also people in the Netherlands who are in the crisis but I don’t know them. (Tarik)

> There are some homeless people in the Netherlands. But they all live somewhere else, near the bridge I think. But I hardly ever see them. (Omar)

In the Dutch context, the children make a distinction between ‘normal’ children who are most children, including them, and rich children who reside in a few neighbourhoods with detached houses. Later on, the children said that in each district there are one or two children who are poor, but they maintained that most districts in the Netherlands are more or less the same as theirs and that most children have about the same level of prosperity as them. Nevertheless, they all know one or two children who cannot afford new clothes or food and who live in an impoverished house. Two illustrative accounts:

> I don’t know because the children of rich people wear different clothes every day and this boy only changes his clothes every three weeks. (Nabil)

> A cousin of mine sometimes goes to the food bank [a place where poor people can get food for free]. Because both his parents do not work. (Sahar)

Although the children talk about the poor state and neglect of their neighbourhood, their family going to the food bank and their inability to take part in activities requiring fees, they do not seem to question whether these issues have anything to do with them being poor. Moreover, they consider it normal that some people, including themselves, receive things free of charge from the local council on occasion. In particular, Dessy’s account on getting a free of charge computer is telling:

> Soon we’re going to get a new computer from the local council. Because I am...because I’ll be 12. And then almost all children in my class, when it’s their 12th birthday, they get one, almost everyone gets a computer. Because, because, umm, some children have a computer that works OK and they don’t get a computer, because
'I am not poor. Poor children live in Africa'

their computer is working. When you’re 12, you get a new computer because you are going to Group 8 [last year of primary school] or the first class [of secondary school] and then you need a computer.

Gradually, one girl named Brittany increasingly, but still carefully, discussed the fact that she considers herself to be poor. She told the researchers that it is not pleasant when people talk about poverty or when ‘such a thing’ is said about you because it is ‘a little bit like gossiping’. She explained:

Sometimes mum wants to cook a particular dish and we’re really looking forward to it but we can’t buy the ingredients. [……..] It is really terrible if it’s said about you [that you are poor]. [In response to a question as to why she is now talking about it] But this is about me, this is not gossip. This is not terrible because it’s only you [the researcher] and my girlfriends that are hearing it. That is safe but if you say it in public, then people will know and they will talk about you.

None of the other children openly referred to themselves as poor but, as the project went on, they did talk more and more about others close to them being poor. As Ebru commented at the end of the project: ‘[I have learned] how to make beautiful pictures and about different issues, about safety and money problems and stuff, how it feels... to be bullied and how other people [emphasis by the authors] are poor.’

4.4 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was twofold: first, to gain insights into the problems children living with poverty face in their daily lives, and second to understand how children themselves perceive poverty. Like other research on children in contexts of poverty and deprivation, this research shows that they encounter the same challenges as children in general, such as finding pleasant and safe places to play, finding varied activities in which to participate and coping with bullying. However, these challenges are often more acute because of the lack of financial resources and the poor condition of the neighbourhoods in which they live. These children depend more heavily on public places than other children because of cramped housing, lack of money for organised activities and clubs, and lack of money to travel at weekends and holidays. Moreover, these children’s parents often cannot afford after school care when they are absent. The public areas that are available to children are perceived to be unsafe and in poor condition and, as the children say, stay the same, day in day out, which makes them boring. It is striking how our findings are consistent with other Western qualitative...
studies on child poverty (for example: Ridge, 2011; Attree, 2006; Roets et al., 2013; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Sutton, 2008) and thus once again point to the need to take action to improve children's living and playing conditions.

A second striking outcome is the taboo on poverty. It was hard to talk to children about poverty while, as we have shown in the description of the problems they face, poverty appears to be omnipresent. Our analysis showed that talking about poverty went through a number of stages. Initially, children defined poverty as something that is distant from them, even in a physical sense: poverty is something that concerns ‘children in Africa’. After further discussion, children recognised poverty as something slightly closer to them physically but not socially: the children indicated that there are poor children in the Netherlands but they claim that they themselves do not know any. However, when further exploring the issue, children indicated that there are one or two poor children in each district in the Netherlands and that this applies to their own neighbourhood as well.

This changing perspective of the children may be a result of the project in which they reflected on their lives and neighbourhoods in dialogue with each other and the researchers. It could be the case that, by discussing their living environment and the subject of poverty, the children gradually adjust and broaden their view of what being poor and living in deprivation means and the many variations that it takes. Nevertheless, despite evidence of changing perspectives, most children still did not consider themselves to be poor or living in contexts of poverty. We propose two possible explanations for these observations: a limited frame of reference and the rejection of the label ‘poor’ in order to enhance a positive social identity. First, denial of poverty might be the result of children’s limited frame of reference. The children in our study live with other children in similar circumstances and, in their local context, it is ‘normal’ for a child to receive something extra from the local council, to go to the food bank or to participate in subsidised activities.

A second explanation might be that children reject the label ‘poor’. In this context, Tajfel’s social identity theory may have relevance (Tajfel, 1974; Castano et al., 2002). Social identity theory considers that people organise their social environment using social categories. The notion of social categorisation is used to describe a mental process of grouping people together who resemble each other in behaviour, ethnicity, life experience or appearance. A person's social identity is derived from his/her perception
of belonging to a social group, together with the emotional significance attached to that membership. Thus, an individual actively creates a social identity in different contexts to define his or her own place in society in a way that enhances self-esteem. If an individual perceives him- or herself to belong to a group that does not enhance personal self-esteem, the individual will tend to leave the group. In the case where this is impossible for objective or moral reasons, the individual reinterprets the unwelcome features of the group so that these are made acceptable (Tajfel, 1974). Seen from this perspective, children may not want to be seen as poor because this is not beneficial to their acquisition of a positive social identity. This might explain why children tend to start the discussion about poverty by comparing themselves to an obviously distinct group: ‘children in Africa’. After this, they compare themselves with children in their neighbourhood in similar circumstances which again does not challenge their positive social identity.

Social identity theory, as well as the experiences that we gathered from this project, demonstrates the importance of talking to children about poverty in such a way that it does not interfere with their personal frame of reference and their development of a positive social identity. We have used social identity theory to reflect on the identities of children and the way they view poverty. However, we realize that children have multiple identities which might have an impact on their views on poverty. These identities relate, for example, to being a child, being a member of an ethnic minority, having a certain level of wealth, and to gender and education. More research is needed to understand how children differ in attributing meaning to and enacting poverty. Reflexivity and ethically and methodologically sound qualitative techniques are needed to enable children to tell their own stories about their lives and identities. In order to create a safe environment and build rapport with individual children, it is important to take enough time. Furthermore, time is needed to create appropriate shared vocabularies with which sensitive subjects can be discussed.
Chapter 5
Beyond a deficiencies approach: Towards a more integral representation of the everyday life of children growing up in contexts of poverty
Abstract

The research on child poverty typically takes a deficiencies approach that focuses on material deficiencies, which are considered to have a profoundly negative impact on children's well-being. Countering this approach, our research is based on a lifeworld orientation and explores children's everyday life from their own perspective. Using a range of qualitative methods such as photovoice, focus group discussions, interviews, and participant observation, we gather detailed information on the lives and well-being of children growing up in contexts of poverty. Our research provides insights into the complex and multi-layered issues of childhood poverty and suggests that support must take into account not only the negative aspects of poverty, but also those aspects that children consider positively. This begins with taking note of children's best use of public and private resources that are already available to them.
5.1 Introduction

Besides examining the impacts of child poverty in developing countries, there has been increasing interest in how growing up in a poor neighbourhood in a wealthy country influences a child’s development (e.g. Schreier & Chen, 2013; Porterfield & McBride, 2007; Emerson, 2007). A considerable body of research has yielded robust evidence on the long-term impact of early poverty on children’s opportunities, well-being and health. As Schreier and Chen (2013) point out in their review, there is overwhelming evidence that low socio-economic status (SES) has a negative influence on physical health. For example, the relationship between low SES and obesity has been demonstrated to be strong (Jansen et al., 2013; Rossen, 2014; Sallis & Glanz, 2009). Furthermore, children exposed to poverty were found to have poorer cognitive outcomes and school performance and are at greater risk of suffering intellectual disabilities (Emerson, 2007; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

These studies on child poverty and its consequences for child development are important, but they represent an etic perspective on poverty and focus mainly on future outcomes. Influenced by the traditional construction of the ‘becoming’ child discourse, which is explicitly future-oriented, greater importance is often placed on what the child will be rather than what the child is, and children’s everyday realities are neglected or dismissed (Uprichard et al., 2008). It is essential to consider the everyday life of children growing up in contexts of poverty, as we know from existing Western qualitative studies that poverty can deeply affect children’s well-being (Ridge, 2011; Attree, 2006; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Sutton, 2008).

Understanding how child poverty affects daily life requires that we listen to children and pay attention to their current experiences and perspectives. As we have discussed elsewhere (Sarti et al., 2015), studying youth poverty is challenging and requires a lifeworld orientation, which means that researchers focus on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society and capture the child’s voice in its interactional context (Roets et al., 2013). Employing a lifeworld orientation also enables us to engender a more complete picture of children as ‘beings’ actively relating to and shaping their daily lives, and contributes to countering the prevailing image of children living in poverty as merely destitute and in need of help.

Research on child poverty typically takes a deficiencies approach that focuses on material deficiencies, which are considered to have a profoundly
negative impact on children’s well-being. From an emic perspective however, there are indications that growing up in a context of poverty is not experienced only as negative, but rather forms a backdrop to children’s experiences – both positive and negative (Sime, 2008; Roets et al., 2013; Sarti et al., 2015). Furthermore, it is not only the material aspects of being poor that are relevant, as we know from prior research that well-being is primarily seen in relational terms (Thomas et al., 2016; Fattore et al., 2009; Jalongo, 2007).

Given the importance of relationships for children’s well-being, it is vital to examine their perspectives on social resources, i.e. the social support they have and use. Social support can be described as an individual’s perceptions of general support or specific supportive behaviours (available or enacted) from people in their social network, which enhance their functioning and/or safeguard them from adverse outcomes (Malecki & Demaray, 2002; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984; Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1987; Barrera et al., 2004; Weiss, 1974). Cobb’s classic definition comprises three components of social support: feeling cared for, feeling valued or esteemed, and belonging to a social network (Cobb, 1976; Malecki & Demaray, 2002).

This study aims to contribute to understanding perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty on their lives and well-being, by engaging children in participatory action research (PAR) with photovoice as the main method. The article elaborates on and extends an earlier paper (Sarti et al., 2015) in which we explored how children made sense of their lives in the context of poverty. This article focuses on tracing the resources, in particular of social support, available to and accessed by children.

5.2 Methodology

This article presents the findings of the first phase of a two-and-a-half-year study in which we combined participatory action research (PAR) with ethnography. We used different qualitative methods – photovoice, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews, and participant observation – to gather detailed information on children’s lives from their own perspective. In the second phase of the project, we facilitated a dialogue between children and policymakers (see Sarti et al., 2017).
Beyond a deficiencies approach

Twenty-nine children living in impoverished areas of the provincial town of Hoorn and the major city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands participated in the project. The Hoorn group consisted of five boys and ten girls, aged 8–12 years, and the Amsterdam group consisted of nine boys and five girls, aged 10–14 years. Although all of the children were born and raised in the Netherlands, they have diverse ethnic backgrounds: Dutch (n= 15), Moroccan (n=7), Chinese (n=2), Turkish (n=1), Iranian (n= 1), Surinamese (n=1), Iraqi (n=1) and Afghan (n=1). The children were recruited with the help of local youth workers in Hoorn and three primary schools in Amsterdam. Informed consent was obtained from the children and their parents, following letters and an informal meeting providing information about what we called ‘a photo project about their lives and neighbourhood’. Careful ethical deliberations are important in every research with children, given the differences in power between them and researchers, but in particular in a PAR project like ours, given the nexus between research and recreational involvement of children. This photo project enabled the researchers to meet the children regularly over an extended period of time. The researchers developed relationships of trust with the children by collecting them from school and taking them home after the sessions, having casual conversations with them, and organising recreational outings. Informal interactions during outings such as a guided tour of the Dutch central bank and the Amsterdam Museum for Photography, contributed to the researchers’ in-depth insights into the children’s lives. They also benefited children, who had the opportunity to engage in fun activities and develop relationships with each other and the researchers. At the same time, the blurring of research and fun activity carried the risk of the children forgetting the research purpose and revealing more than they would want to. For this reason, we approached informed consent as a process rather than assuming it throughout on the basis of initial consent (Heath et al., 2007). This meant that consent was negotiated as an on-going concern. We kept the parents and young people informed at all stages of the research and gave them the opportunity to withdraw from the project whenever they wished. Moreover, since children were partners in the project, they partly decided what to include in presentations and what not. Nevertheless, as was pointed out by Goodwin et al. (2003), unexpected ethical dilemmas can arise and should be attended to. In this research we encountered that even though we did not communicate with the children via Whatsapp nor encouraged children to do so, they took initiative to contact us, appealing to us as benevolent adults rather than researchers. We carefully deliberated whether and how to respond and what to include in public publications, such as this
article. Given the importance of gaining insights on children's strategies of mobilising social support and the precautionary principles of anonymity being upheld, we decided to disseminate such conversations.

The photovoice method was used as a first step in understanding the children's perspectives (Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). The children, guided by a professional news photographer who encouraged them to explore their own capacities and ideas, took photographs of things and places in their local environment that were important to them. In weekly meetings, FGDs and individual interviews were conducted to invite children to reflect on their photographs. Semi-structured topic guides were used to direct the group discussions and interviews, all of which were audio-recorded and transcribed. In order to contextualise their stories, the researchers also held informal conversations with parents, and conducted interviews with a primary school teacher, two youth workers and a policymaker.

Detailed interview and FGD transcripts, field notes and observation reports were written and analysed. Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously to allow new information to be explored in subsequent conversations. A content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) involved the inductive emergence of categories and themes related to children's lives, particularly (social) resources available to and accessed by them. Categories and themes were established after careful examination of data and repeated discussions between the researchers and project team.

5.3 Findings

Although children at first mainly presented positive aspects of their lives, gradually they discussed negative aspects as well. In their accounts, positive and negative aspects were very much intertwined. For clarity purposes, in this section we first describe the difficulties of family life as discussed by children. Children explained how inadequate housing, parental unemployment, low-paid jobs and financial strains are affecting their lives and well-being. Second, we describe what children related about resources available to and accessed by them that enhance the quality of their lives and well-being. This part of the findings comprises three aspects: making use of public spaces, a free and busy life and generating social support.
5.3.1 Life at home: fraught with difficulties

Although children were reluctant to take photos inside their homes, the overwhelming majority of children’s accounts concerned life at home. Home life obviously is very important to children and represents their first point of reference. Their accounts illustrate the difficulties of growing up in a poor household. Children expressed their concerns about inadequate housing, parental unemployment and low-paid jobs, and financial problems.

Inadequate housing. Children elaborately discussed their housing conditions. It is remarkable that, especially at the beginning of the project but also later on, children mainly commented on aspects of their homes they like, such as big rooms or a luxurious kitchen, nice decorations or a closet that has ‘beautiful things’ in it. Children made a point of showing their and their family’s possessions and sometimes boasted about the price. One boy explicitly stated that he thinks it important to ‘show things about my life, show that I have a beautiful and good life’. Jamey, talking about his house, stressed its size:

[Our house is] a very big house… a lot of rooms there. There is a lot of room for… you can even… if you are playing hide and seek, search for a long time… hide everywhere.

Over time, however, children also identified aspects of their homes and private lives that they considered insufficient. Most children live in small houses, often flats, leading to problems such as cramped conditions and noise pollution. Many children also said their houses are old and damaged. Children explained that the small, old flats in which they live don’t satisfy their need for space to play unhindered. In particular, children described their bedrooms as inadequate. Children who have their own bedroom said it is too small and doesn’t offer enough space to sleep comfortably and to store their belongings.

[My room is] not really that big. It’s pretty small. There is only my bed, desk and a nightstand and that’s it, and no closet or anything. The closet is outside. [That’s] not nice because sometimes I’m uncomfortable… and then I’m always stuffed and the other room is always full as well. (Vaspar)

Some children don’t have their own bedroom and they complained about sharing a room and sometimes even a bed with parents or siblings. For instance, one of the children insisted on the audio-recorder being switched
off when she spoke about sharing a bed with her sisters, and is obviously frustrated and ashamed about the situation.

**Parental unemployment and low-paid jobs.** Another aspect of family life children mentioned concerns their parents’ occupational status. Both unemployment and low-paid work put a burden on family life and affect children’s well-being. A few of the children said that their parents don’t work. Some did not know why, while others related their parents’ unemployment to bad physical health. Children expressed compassion and concern for their unemployed parents, especially when accompanied by health problems:

> I think that’s too bad because, you know, my parents are both not working. The fact that my father does not work because of his backache, I understand... it hurts too much. A worn back causes a great deal of pain. (Ayman)

A considerable number of children said that their parents do work, as a rule in unskilled and low-paid employment. Fathers’ jobs include carpentry, cleaning, packaging and transport, taxi driving and working at the steel factory; mothers’ jobs include working at a restaurant and ‘washing old people’. As a consequence of their low wages, driving them to work overtime and sometimes maintain a day and an evening job and/or work at weekends, parents – in particular fathers – are often absent.

> He works in a chocolate factory and he has another job as well, his own shop in the black-market, and he places satellite dishes... Usually he doesn’t come home until 11 or 12 (pm), because he works there [at the chocolate factory] from Monday to Friday and, when he finishes around half-past four, he goes all the way to Lelystad, Amstelveen or, once, he went all the way to The Hague. (Vaspar)

As a consequence of their parents’ working overtime and being absent, children are often on their own, taking care of themselves and their siblings and doing chores around the house, like cleaning and cooking. Children made statements that indicate that it provides them with appreciation and satisfaction to offer a contribution, but also pointed out that it can be a burden to take on domestic responsibilities, especially since they are not always able to spend their free time as they want to. Sahar, for example, said she was not always able to come to all of the meetings of the photo project because she had to take care of her sisters.

**Parents’ financial strains.** Due to unemployment and low-paid work, the children’s families experience financial strains. A few children spoke about
a structural lack of money, saying that their parents do not earn a lot or have little to spend on daily necessities, such as groceries. More often, however, children hinted at financial strains when they discussed the difficulties of making particular purchases, such as equipment, a vehicle or shoes. Other accounts related to paying for activities, such as sports and school outings, and also paid homework guidance. Children discussed how parents postpone or look out for cheap alternatives.

I always go to school by foot. And if I... er... get my bike then I go to school by bike. [I'll get a bike] next month I think... then I'm having my birthday. (Sandy)

Last year I went to homework guidance, but then they said if you continue coming then you have to pay, so I stopped going. You had to start paying for it. They [parents] thought it was expensive. It was 50 euros a month... that's quite a lot. Because where I go now it's for free. (Omar)

Some of the children said that they hold back from making requests because of their parents' financial problems. They described not wanting to burden their parents financially. For example, Stephanie said that she had bought her new shoes with her own money so that her mother could save more for groceries.

5.3.2 How children seize resources available to them to enhance life quality and well-being
Adopting a lifeworld orientation by using the photovoice method meant that space was given to children to discuss their lives as they saw fit. It is striking that the children's accounts do not focus only on deficiencies in their lives, but also on positive aspects. Here we describe which resources are available to and accessed by children to enhance the quality of their lives. In particular, the focus is on how they use their social resources.

Making use of the public spaces. The children took many photographs of and discussed the outside environment. These photographs and narrations often involved playing, indicating that playing outside is important to the children. As already explained, due to cramped living arrangements children have little space to play at home. They often rely on public spaces in their free time, as Ebru explained:

I play outside every day. I play more outside than inside. [...] There is not much space inside: we've only got the rooms. We don't have a garden. We would play at home more often if we had a garden.
Children regularly meet up and enjoy each other’s company. The girls like to sit on the swings, do photo shoots together or hang about and chat, the boys too like to hang around the neighbourhood or play ball. Being outside is an important way to meet other children, since they don’t go to play in each other’s homes because of the lack of room and privacy. As Sahar, for example, said: ‘Inside you’re not at ease chatting with your friends. Your brother might hear you’.

Although the children are critical of the playgrounds in their neighbourhood, referring to them as mainly designed for younger children and offering few challenges, they also photographed and discussed the playgrounds and spaces that they frequent and enjoy. According to the children, adequate playgrounds are aesthetically suitable, sizable, and have the right equipment. Children notably often photograph playgrounds in the vicinity of their homes, as these are easily accessible and are a fall-back location when they cannot play at home. As the children commented:

It’s pretty nice here, sometimes... playing ball with friends. Behind my house we have one of those football cages and then we always play ball. (Vaspar)

This is at ours... say... here’s where I live and this is the square. I often play there with Davey and with other children. (Tarik)

Furthermore, it is striking that children are creative in using public spaces to play, not restricting themselves to playgrounds and squares. For example Sahar related playing on a near-by cycle path. Koen, when asked what he thought would improve the neighbourhood, commented: ‘I don’t know. I will always play ball outside anyway, it doesn’t matter where: in front of our home, on the street, anywhere’.

**A free and busy life.** It is striking that many of the children spoke with pride about having a busy life, in which they both explore the neighbourhood and engage in various formal activities. Many of the children spend a considerable amount of time outside. Some of them even said that they do not go home immediately after school but rather seek out friends and hang around with them in the neighbourhood until the evening. These children seem to have a lot of freedom to decide where to go, what to do and when to go home.

Yes I almost always have something to do. Look...my mother says: ‘When you get out of school you can play outside, you don’t have to come home
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first, you just can go outside immediately...'. I just have to say whether I am outside or I have something [an activity] so she won't get worried. (Tarik)

Children develop interests and use opportunities to enjoy themselves and further develop their capacities. In particular, the youth centre is important in offering children activities, such as singing lessons, free courses over the weekend or homework guidance.

[Ayman during an interview in one of the rooms in the youth centre]: This is a sound-proof area. I sometimes record music here. There [points] you can sing and nobody can hear you. These [points] computers improve the sound of the music. I know much about music devices.

[At the youth centre] I really enjoy singing lessons. Instead of sitting at home and being bored it’s better to have some fun. So it’s about having fun. (Elbahia)

Children have a remarkable desire to engage in many activities and, as became apparent in further discussions, in addition to having fun, they also aim to have as many (learning) experiences as possible and increase their future chances. As Ayman explained:

My mother says it's good because then I can learn how it is for big people...grown-ups. Sometimes it’s quite tough, so many things and being busy all the time, but you get used to it. [...] I think it’s good this way. Sometimes it’s a bit much, but I enjoy myself most of the time.

Some of the children related going to places that are not specifically designated for or even forbidden to children to enjoy what is on offer, such as a movie:

Er, I was with Davey and we went to the Eye [cinema in Amsterdam]. Er... in the rooms they play movies. But er, you actually have to be over 14, but we, we just go inside. You have an entry here and you have one here [points out on photograph]. Here is the restaurant. Here’s a guard, but sometimes he's not there. Sometimes he stands here or here. If he is here, we will go in here and if he is here we will go through there. (Tarik)

Then we went to er... the NDSM dock. That used to be a company where er... ships were made. But now not any more, now there is the Nickelodeon studio. But we were not allowed to go in there... and then we sneaked in when someone came out. (Koen)
For many children the photo project itself was a free activity in which they 
took part enthusiastically. Participating in it provided children with a few 
benefits, such as meeting new (adult) people, getting the opportunity to tell 
their stories and having people listening, and engaging in nice trips and 
activities, particularly photography.

**Generating social support.** Besides material resources and activities in the 
neighbourhood, children spoke about social resources to which they have 
access and that compensate for the difficult circumstances at home. The 
following three groups of people and their significance in terms of offering 
social support were derived from children’s accounts: extended family, peer 
group and teachers. Furthermore, we take a close look at a special group 
of enthusiastic and benevolent outsiders, namely the researchers. Through 
the photo project their aim was to connect with and get to know the chil-
dren and their lives. In this section we examine what we can learn from the 
conversations between the children and researchers about what children 
do to generate social support.

**Extended family.** The extended family is a major source of social support 
for children. Although most children, being of foreign descent, have family 
abroad, many of them also have family nearby. Only two children said they 
have no (contact with) family nearby. Only two children said they 
have no (contact with) family nearby. Children discussed the assistance 
they and their families receive from extended family members, in particu-
lar financial help.

> My mother doesn’t have much money. We sometimes don’t have any money. Money 
is important. Sometimes. But you can also manage without it. You always have 
someone who can help you, like family. (Brittany)

> Now I’ll start swimming lessons again, I have already signed up. And my uncle will 
help so I can save money. (Sandy)

Furthermore, children rely on extended family members to care for them 
in the absence of their parents, in particular due to work. Occasionally the 
care provided by the extended family goes beyond shelter when parents 
are at work, as they sometimes contribute to resolving complicated fa-
mily circumstances. For example, Stephanie lives with her mother and at 
the beginning of the project said she didn’t see her father often as he lives in 
another district of Amsterdam and has regular nightshifts. As the project 
continued, she said she was staying with her father regularly as they had 
found a solution for his absence during parts of the evening: when father
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has his shift, she stays with grandmother who lives nearby. She said that she enjoys visiting her grandmother and playing games together. She also has her own room there where she can spend the night. Another girl, Dessy, mentioned moving out of the house for a while and being taken in by her aunt, because of the many conflicts at home.

**The peer group.** As we have already shown, peers are important to children to play and explore the neighbourhood with, and they are also important in providing protection. Growing up and being outside a lot in a deprived neighbourhood means that children have to hold their own in an unsafe environment. Children said they feel safer outside in the presence of other children or going around in groups, as they feel protected by their peers.

[Tarik, when discussing an incident he was involved in with a group of older boys]:
Yes, those boys saw that I was alone and then they were waiting for me, because if those other boys were there those big boys would not do that.

If someone plays outside, unknown people can come out, like people who smoke, and I don’t want that… I’m only going outside if there are still other children playing outside. (Sahar)

Also, the presence of a friend can be a source of protection and offer a counterbalance to widespread bullying. For instance, Brittany, when speaking about the heavy bullying at school, also described how her friend Ebru helps her and how she depends on her protection for feeling safe.

**School teachers.** Children find it important to have teachers in whom they can confide and who are helpful. They consider whether teachers are understanding or help them when they have problems in their private lives or when strained family finances affect school life. During the project they spoke highly of teachers who stand out in that regard.

My mother really has money problems every year... three kids for school outings... that’s a lot and my mum can’t pay it, and she [a teacher] said: no, she really has to pay otherwise she will not be allowed to go. And then [name of principal] came and said: Now I’m the principal, you [the teacher that forbade the outing] still work at school, but I’m the principal so I choose, and she can go. So I went. (Brittany)

Children also spoke about the role of teachers in intervening against the widespread bullying at school. Koen, for instance, said:
Then they hit me and er ... say something nasty about my culture. That’s not nice. Then I go away or I tell the teacher. That helps a bit.

The children praised teachers who intervene adequately, as this contributes to their feeling safe at school.

_CONNECTING WITH THE RESEARCHERS DURING THE PHOTO PROJECT_. Besides children’s accounts of significant people in their lives, much can be learned about how children mobilize social support from looking at the way they connected with the researchers during the photo project. Two aspects stand out: the enthusiasm with which the researchers were met by the children and the atmosphere of openness and confidentiality the children created in interactions with the researcher. The children enjoyed receiving attention from the researchers and actively engaged with them, both during and after the formal ending of the photo project. Some of the children kept in touch with the researchers via Whatsapp. For example Sahar contacted one of the researchers a few weeks after the end of the project, asking whether there would be a meeting again:


On broaching subjects concerning more private aspects of their lives, children clearly demonstrated a high degree of ambivalence and hesitation, as on the one hand they wanted to discuss everything and on the other they wanted to close off aspects they consider negative and/or private. Children were reluctant to take pictures of things in their houses they didn’t like, yet were more willing to verbally comment on these aspects. Similarly, having verbal accounts being audio-recorded sometimes crossed the line. For example, when one of the girls wanted to speak about the sleeping arrangements, she insisted on the recorder being switched off. Yet apparently speaking about it with the researchers was not a problem, which speaks of the special bond that they had developed over time.
5.4 Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to understanding perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty. Thorough insights were gained that extend beyond the deficiencies approach to the lives of children in poverty. In recent years, academics and practitioners have criticised the deficit theory, which asserts that the disadvantages affecting people living in poverty derive from their own shortcomings, resulting in ‘a culture of poverty’ (Collins, 1988; Gorski, 2006; Gorski, 2008). Adopting a lifeworld orientation enables children growing up in contexts of poverty to represent themselves and makes it possible to understand their daily lives from their own perspectives, diminishing outsiders’ labels and preconceived assessments (Sime, 2008; Roets et al., 2013).

In our research, children drew attention to deficiencies that are consistent with other Western qualitative studies on child poverty (Ridge, 2011; Attree, 2006; Roets et al., 2013; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Sutton, 2008). In particular, the home context, as their primary living space and a source of identification, is important to children even when it is deeply flawed. In line with earlier research (Bartlett, 1998; Coley et al., 2013) children discussed the effects of inadequate housing on their well-being, as small and crowded living spaces limit indoor options. Due to absence of hardworking parents, children are regularly left to their own devices and expected to fend for themselves and their families. This can put a burden on children and encroach on their autonomy and freedom to decide how to spend their free time.

However, in contrast with the unidirectional negative impacts of child poverty on children’s well-being presented in literature, children in our study interestingly were found to be quite optimistic and positive about their lives as, in their experience, deficiencies and resources go hand in hand. Although other studies (Attree, 2006; Ridge, 2009; Ridge, 2004; Elliott & Leonard, 2004) did draw attention to the importance of social resources as potentially supportive, they did not succeed in moving beyond the negative, ultimately arriving at how potential social resources are compromised by deficiencies. In this research (social) resources were identified that could compensate for deficiencies. From the accounts of the children as well as from the researchers’ encounters with them during the photo project, it becomes apparent that they actively use resources in the outside domain to shape their daily life and development in such a manner that financial strains, although present, are not decisive. Children demonstrate a zest
for life as they explore their neighbourhood, develop interests, and use opportunities to gain experiences they consider necessary to improve their lives now and in the future. Moreover, in line with earlier research (Printz et al., 1999; Larson & Richards, 1991; Garnefski, 2000), the results of our study illustrate the importance of social support for children's well-being. Just as material resources in the outside sphere compensate for material deficiencies at home, social resources available to children also complement parental care and attention. First, the absence of parents (due to work) does not necessarily create a vacuum if there are extended family members who are accessible and available to provide care. Furthermore, as a consequence of a lack of space to play at home, children seek each other out in the public domain and form a community of peers, playing together and protecting each other. Finally, children attach value to having supportive teachers who are understanding and helpful in the face of hardship at home and bullying at school.

In sum, children's accounts demonstrate the importance of the home sphere as a primary source of identification. The findings also show that due to deficiencies at home, children rely greatly on resources – both material and social – in other domains, especially the public sphere. Interactions between the private and the public spheres shape children's lives and deficiencies at home are, where possible, actively compensated for elsewhere.

**Conclusion and implications**

This study demonstrates that looking at the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty broadly and moving beyond a deficiencies approach provides in-depth insights into the lives of children and how different aspects, from their perspective, relate to each other. By asking children what they find important to discuss in their lives, we get the opportunity to hear and understand how they present themselves and their life circumstances. This might be indicative of how they want to be addressed and therefore be useful for researchers, policymakers and practitioners who work with these children. Although children do not describe themselves as ‘poor’, they do speak of deficiencies in their lives, often coupled with compensating resources. Learning about resources can give direction to interventions because it invites policymakers and practitioners to invest in what children value. All of this requires listening to children and giving their accounts due weight. In particular, the importance children attach to outdoor spaces to play points to the need for playgrounds and other venues that are adequate, accessible and where children can play safely, both alone and with peers. Children’s accounts also indicate the importance of youth centres as places
where children can play and develop their talents. Taking note of the importance of social support invites us to take children’s social relationships seriously. It is imperative to analyse and understand the family system in its completeness, to understand the nexus between the nuclear and extended family, in order to effectively strengthen the process of caring for children. Paying attention to extended family as well as other social resources in various domains enables us to facilitate support structures and contribute to children’s well-being.

**Directions for future research**
To gain better insights into the lives and social resources of children living in poverty, longitudinal research is needed to know whether sources of social support as identified in this research are robust and long-lasting and what their impact on children’s lives and well-being is in the long run. Furthermore, we need to engage in an on-going exploration of domains in which children spend their time, such as sports clubs and community centres. Paying attention to the various contexts in which children live is important as it enables us to better understand their lives and where they take place, and also because, as Graue and Walsh (1995) pointed out, children’s actions change so much from one location to another. Furthermore, addressing the interaction between contexts and children helps us to understand children’s agency through empirical observation of children’s actions within these contexts (Stoecklin, 2013; Lansdown, 2010; Dedding et al., 2015). Although there is growing research that acknowledges children’s agency, there is little that addresses the agency of children living in poverty, i.e. children’s strategies to mitigate their circumstances. Moreover, research on the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty can be extended to other age groups, offering insights into the challenges facing younger children as well as teenagers and also into (social) resources across different domains.
Chapter 6

Around the table with policymakers: Giving voice to children in contexts of poverty and deprivation
Abstract

Increasingly children are seen as social actors who are knowledgeable about issues that concern their lives, both in research and policy-making. However, this approach is not without challenges, particularly in relation to sensitive topics like poverty. One key challenge relates to how to involve children effectively so that their stories are actually listened to and acted upon by policymakers. This article reflects on the potential of photovoice as a method to make explicit children's narratives about their lives and to inform policymakers of children's perspectives. We involved two groups of children living in contexts of poverty and deprivation in urban areas of the Netherlands, supporting them to refine their narrative and presentation through photography. The children were brought into contact with policymakers after they had gained experience as photographers and experiential experts. The policymakers found their narratives compelling and there is evidence that the children's perspectives were taken on board in local government. Exhibition of the photographs using a specially designed table was also found to be an effective addition to the photovoice method. We conclude that photovoice can be successfully used to facilitate dialogue between children and policymakers but that its use requires time, creativity and reflexivity.
6.1 Introduction

Taking children seriously as partners in research has gained ground in recent years. In childhood studies children are increasingly seen as social actors, that is as active participants in societal life, and are addressed accordingly as participants and co-researchers, revealing issues and concerns that they themselves identify as important (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Efforts are being made to develop research methods that support children’s contribution to our understanding of their living environment. These efforts range from consulting children to actively involving them in designing and carrying out research projects themselves (Kellett, 2004; Vis et al., 2011; Dedding et al., 2013).

Not only social scientists, but also local governments increasingly acknowledge the importance of taking children’s views into account to develop policies that fit their needs and daily reality, with regard to such diverse issues as tackling domestic violence (Jurrius et al., 2006), debt problems among youth (Noorda & Pehlivan, 2009), and quality of health care (Rutjes & Sarti, 2012). As in other European countries, local councils in the Netherlands have become increasingly responsible for youth policy (Timmerman, 2009). The law requires that local councils not only strengthen the development of children through families, neighbourhoods, schools and youth work, but also invest in strengthening the ‘pedagogical civil society’ and in giving children and youngsters a voice (VVD-PvdA, 2012). The local councils have considerable freedom in the way they interpret and carry out this obligation, leaving many of them struggling with the question of how to do this properly. Initiatives like youth councils are seldom potent, often failing to represent certain groups of children or to bring their issues to the policy-making table effectively, especially since they are often initiated and led by adults and depend on formal adult-oriented systems and communication styles (Wyness, 2009). For example, Matthews (2001) found that youth involved in UK based youth councils named ‘it does not represent the views of people like me’ as a major weakness.

One promising method to achieve youth participation in research and policy-making is photovoice. Photovoice is a participatory action research method that can be used to give voice to vulnerable groups, by engaging them through photography to act as researchers and potential catalysts for change in their own communities (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice can serve three goals: 1. help people to record and reflect on their community’s strengths and concerns; 2. promote critical dialogue and knowledge about
important community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs; and 3. reach out to policymakers (Wang, 2006; Wang, 2000; Wang & Burris, 1997). Although photovoice can serve these goals, action is not guaranteed. If not executed well, photovoice can raise false hopes, failing to inform policy or rally public concern, and leaving participants feeling less empowered than before (Strack et al., 2004). Especially children’s stories are often not translated into change because, even more than adults, they depend on researchers and policymakers to take the needed measures (Strack et al., 2004; Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

In this article, we consider how photovoice can be used to bring about an effective dialogue between children and policymakers, focusing on how children growing up in contexts of poverty can express themselves on issues which are relevant to them. In addition to the intrinsic advantages of photovoice described above, we opted for photovoice to cope with the methodological difficulties of discussing the subject of poverty with children. Poverty can set children apart, particularly if it is not addressed sensitively (Holloway et al., 2014). Poverty and being poor is surrounded by taboos because it can generate shame in both children and adults in a wealthy country like the Netherlands. Children who face deprivation tend to avoid using labels as ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ and sometimes get angry or upset when others, like researchers, use these terms (Sime, 2008; Sarti et al., 2015). Moreover, due to the image of children as vulnerable and to the notion of childhood as an ideally carefree and joyful period in life (Sandbaek, 1999; Sorin, 2005), researchers feel constrained when discussing what is seen as a painful and confrontational topic, while gatekeepers may express objections to such discussion as well (Sandbaek, 1999; Cree et al., 2002).

Giving children the opportunity to photograph their lives and neighbourhoods allows them to address topics in a comfortable way because they can tell their story in their own words and at their own pace, without much intervention from adults. In our study, we aimed to bring children who grow up in contexts of poverty and deprivation and policymakers together, to stimulate genuine interest and understanding of children’s daily lives among the policymakers and to invoke a sense of urgency to act upon needs articulated by children. Furthermore, we considered whether photovoice, as is originally designed by Wang (2002, 2006), is suitable for reaching these aims or whether special adjustments and refinements are needed.
6.2 Methodology

Our study was designed as a participatory action research (PAR) project. The PAR-approach entails data collection, reflection, and involving the people in taking action to bring about public improvements (Baum et al., 2006). Photovoice was used as the central method, which meant that children were involved in recording and reflecting on their lives and neighbourhoods through photos. Although researchers initially directed the project, children gradually became more involved as partners, deciding on topics for photography and themes to discuss. In individual and group photo elicitation interviews (Epstein et al., 2008; Harper, 2002), understanding of children’s experiences and needs was gained. Furthermore, we conducted participant observation and informal interviews while working and traveling with the children during work sessions and outings.

In order to enhance the quality of our research, provisions were made to ensure credibility. Among others, the following measures were taken: 1. Different methods, such as photovoice, individual and group discussions, and observation, were used in concert, compensating for their individual limitations and exploiting their respective benefits (triangulation) (Denzin, 2009; Shenton, 2004); 2. The adoption and adaptation of such a well-established method as photovoice allowed for us to obtain a more complete picture of children’s lives (Shenton, 2004); 3. All the researchers had many years of experience in the field of child participation and qualitative research; 4. Frequent debriefing sessions, including regular meetings, were organized with the project leader, researchers and project partners to discuss and reflect on results and interpretations, reducing researcher bias (Shenton, 2004).

The project was presented to children as ‘a photo project on children’s lives and neighbourhoods.’ A total of 29 children, living in impoverished areas of the Dutch provincial town of Hoorn and the capital city of Amsterdam, participated in the project. The Hoorn group was recruited by local youth workers. This group consisted of five boys and ten girls, aged 8-12 years. The Amsterdam group was recruited via three local schools and consisted of nine boys and five girls, aged 10-14 years. The children of the Hoorn and Amsterdam groups were all born and raised in the Netherlands, but have diverse ethnic backgrounds: Dutch (n= 15), Moroccan (n= 7), Chinese (n= 2), Turkish (n=1), Iranian (n= 1), Surinamese (n=1), Iraqi (n=1) and Afghan (n= 1). We met the Amsterdam children once a week for two hours, over a period of one year. We organised weekly meetings with the children from...
Hoorn as well. The Amsterdam group was involved in a dialogue with policymakers and the local community. Due to organisational challenges in the welfare organisation in Hoorn, they could not provide sufficient support to extend the project with a dialogue. For reasons of coherence, the findings of this article predominantly relate to our work with the Amsterdam children, validated by encounters with the Hoorn children.

The researchers developed relationships of trust with the children by walking them from school to the project location and to their homes afterwards, by organising recreational outings and by having casual conversations with them. This helped to establish high levels of rapport with the children and contributed to the researchers’ in-depth insights into the children’s lives. The children were intrigued by the fact that one of the researchers has the same ethnic and religious background as some of them, contributing to an atmosphere of trust and open-heartedness. The second researcher has a native, secular background and contributed a candid and inquisitive attitude, preventing researcher bias. However, in spite of the differences in researchers’ backgrounds, there were also many common characteristics that distinguished them from the children: both researchers are older than the children and highly educated. Both are interested in and have much experience in working with the theme of child poverty in the Netherlands but are not poor themselves. This did not seem to pose an obstacle in connecting with the children, especially since poverty and being poor was not at the centre of discussions with children. Instead, the focus was on their neighbourhood with which the researchers were not familiar. The children appreciated adult attention and thrived on having someone to talk to and someone to listen to their stories, illustrated, for example, by them showing us their report cards or texting us during their holidays.

Given the sensitivity of the issue of child poverty, we chose to involve children as co-researchers and facilitate them in giving direction to the course of the project. We approached informed consent as a process rather than assuming it throughout on the basis of initial consent (Heath et al., 2007). This meant that consent was negotiated as an on-going concern. We kept the parents and young people informed at all stages of the research. To ensure that we only involved children who were genuinely interested in taking part, we emphasised the voluntary nature of their participation and the opportunity to withdraw from the project whenever they wished, and without any consequences. In order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, aliases were chosen for use in publications, like the article in hand.
Throughout the project expert research knowledge and local knowledge were combined. Children were involved in the interpretation of the material in order to increase validity of the results (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). After initial basic training on how to use a camera provided by a well-known news photographer, the children took a first set of pictures. They discussed these among themselves and with the researchers. After these first photographs were categorised and initial themes were established, the researchers together with the children studied the results and determined which topics were missing. Increasingly, the children had more say in operational procedures and, on the basis of identified lacunae, new ideas for photography were discussed with the children in order to further deepen the understanding of their lives and needs. Children were not just involved in analysis once, after finishing data collection, but were involved throughout in a responsive dialogue. The researchers facilitated the process by doing small exercises, such as a candy sorting game (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010) and ranking exercises, to make the children familiar with the process of qualitative analysis. Parallel to the analysis with the children, detailed interview and focus group discussion transcripts, field notes and observation reports were written and analysed by the researchers. Inductive content analysis of the raw data was undertaken to identify recurring concepts and themes that were discussed and reflected upon in the research team. This fed the analysis with the children but also our own understanding of children’s lives and needs, and assured that analyses were performed at an academic level, leading to articles for publication in peer reviewed journals.

6.3 Findings: connecting children with policymakers through photovoice

In the first part of the findings, we focus on how photovoice contributed to dealing with the difficulty of discussing the sensitive topic of poverty with children in a non-offensive manner. In the second part, we describe how we engaged policymakers in a dialogue with children about their concerns and needs.

6.3.1 Addressing child poverty with the help of photovoice
We developed a varied programme to guide the maturation of the children’s story and that children would find enjoyable to spend their time on. The programme was not fixed, we were always open to adjust and adapt to the unexpected, for example when children needed more time to get acquainted
with each other and the researcher, when they had better ideas on activities or when they appeared to be bored.

The first meeting was dedicated to explaining the goals and procedures of the photo project. We explained to the children that we were interested in their stories and lives, and that they have a right to have their voices heard in matters that concern their lives. We asked them to take photographs and tell us about their ideas about what is positive in their lives and neighbourhood and how their lives could be improved. We further explained we wanted to generate attention to their lives and needs via these photographs. We explained that we wanted to set up a photography exhibition and that they could invite whomever they wanted, but that we thought it was beneficial to invite policymakers because they have the power to bring about change. In order to manage participant expectations, we informed the children that policymakers were not involved initially and that their involvement later on was not yet decided. We explained that we would fully commit ourselves to getting policymakers to listen to children’s stories. The children reacted enthusiastically but were also sceptical about the idea that they would discuss their lives and needs with policymakers, not expecting them to be interested. The researchers explained that they would help the children where needed, for example in getting in touch with policymakers and focusing attention on their story.

During the photographer’s first encounter with the children, he explained basic mechanical aspects of camera use, like operating the camera when taking pictures, and close-ups and angles. Matters of ethical conduct, such as asking permission from subjects, were also discussed. Subsequently, the children were accompanied by the photographer on guided tours through their neighbourhood, appealing to children’s experiential knowledge. The children made photographs of places and things they liked or did not like. For example, Jamey made a picture of litter in his neighbourhood. For him, this is a significant problem because litter hinders him and his friends when playing outside (see figure 6.1).
In addition to group trips through the neighbourhood, the children took the cameras home to capture different aspects of their day-to-day lives. The children expressed that they were excited about bringing the new camera to their homes because many of them had never owned a camera. We invited them to take 10 to 15 photographs of anything that says something about their lives, whether positive or negative. These photographs were used as a starting point for an individual interview, offering children the opportunity to bond with the researcher and to share things they might be less willing to talk about in a group setting. Some children preferred to do this interview together with their friend(s). The children determined which photos to discuss and in which order. The researcher asked short, open-ended questions, such as: What is this? What is happening here? Why did you take this photo? This provided insights into how children perceived their lives and neighbourhood, and which themes were important to them.

As the project progressed, we carefully encouraged children to take photos of domains in their lives that were still underrepresented in their photo series. For example, we noticed that children mainly took photos of the outside environment, such as streets and playgrounds, their friends and school...
life, but very few of their home environment. Hence, we invited them to take some photos inside, for example to take a picture of their favourite spot in the house. Moreover, in order to shape their own stories and for us to gain a better understanding of their personal lives, we invited them to make their own photograph series about a topic of their interest. Three children took advantage of this opportunity. Interestingly, these individual series yielded photographs of children's home environment. This provided an opening to discuss why they initially were not very willing to take such photos. Children told us that this had to do with privacy aspects as their parents do not want them to take pictures of the interior, and only family and really good friends are allowed to see their house. Furthermore, this individual approach strengthened our relationship of trust with the children. New and sensitive topics that previously had not been explicitly addressed came to the fore, also during group discussions. For example, Ebru's series concerning 'things I hold dear and would not want to miss for the world' included a picture of her mother's wallet because, as she shortly explained, 'money is important.' This was an opening for Brittany to share that her mother has financial problems: 'Sometimes we have no money. Mum sometimes wants to cook a particular dish and we're really looking forward to it but we can't buy the ingredients.' The girls mentioned that they also know other people in the neighbourhood with little money, and they indicated that this is a topic that is not openly talked about. The conversation continued about why, according to children, being labelled as poor is such a bad thing. They associated being poor with scarcity and limitations in taking part in activities such as sports, things they don't want to be identified with. As children explained, referring to someone as poor is 'a bit like gossiping' and only happens when people want to speak ill of a person. Therefore, when it affects you, you only want your nearest friends and people you trust to know about it. Brittany explained in response to a question as to why she is now talking about being poor:

It is really terrible if it's said about you [that you are poor]. But this is about me, this is not gossip. This is not terrible because it's only you [the researcher] and my girlfriends that are hearing it. That is safe but if you say it in public, then people will know and they will talk about you.

**Successful elements of the photo project.** Three main elements were identified that contributed to enabling a discussion about poverty with children and gaining in-depth insights into their personal lives and needs. First, children were in charge of presenting their own story. Second, they were
encouraged to show rather than tell their stories and, third, the method appealed to children’s sense of pride.

Children in charge of their own story: Giving children a camera put them in charge and let them influence themes of subsequent conversations and what they would disclose and when. The children gradually grew in their role as photographers and ‘experts on their neighbourhood’, growing increasingly comfortable in discussing their lives and neighbourhood. Working in a group for a prolonged period of time contributed to children’s skills in expressing their own opinions and listening to others. In addition, children increasingly felt comfortable enough to speak up in order to make their voices heard. Tarik explained: ‘For example, you don’t want to talk, you’re afraid or something, maybe you’re shy. But then you are not shy anymore because the others talk and then you join them in conversation. That’s good.’

Show rather than tell: Photovoice offered the children an opportunity to show rather than ‘tell’ aspects of their lives and identities that might have otherwise remained unknown, as the method does not depend solely on their oral competencies. Besides, children believed that only talking is ‘boring’. At the same time, the verbal accounts elicited, supported and contextualised the visual images. For example, children took photos of playgrounds, explaining that playgrounds mainly address the needs of small children and that they never change, which makes them boring (see figure 6.2). As Omar said: ‘Nobody goes to the playgrounds. There is no adventure at all!’
By discussing the photos of inadequate playgrounds, we realized how these are especially problematic for children living in impoverished areas. Cramped living arrangements often mean that children have little space at home to play, and joining clubs and formal activities is impeded as well due to scarce financial resources. Ebru commented:

I play outside every day. I play more outside than inside. Outside you can play with your friends. Inside you can’t do that. There’s not much space inside: we’ve only got the rooms. We don’t have a garden. We would play at home more often if we had a garden.

Appeal to pride: Photography was found to have a positive impact on children’s sense of pride and feelings of self-worth. For children living in poverty, taking photos is not a common past-time and they enjoyed having a camera in their possession. In addition to using photographs as a way of expressing their needs, we invited children to take photographs of positive issues as well. On a regular basis, they received prints of their photographs which were proudly put in a special place in their homes:
Around the table with policymakers

I just can’t believe that I am in the photo project and that I make all these beautiful photos [...] I have placed the card with my photograph on it on my cupboard. I look at it every day. (Sahar)

The fact that children increasingly had the opportunity to articulate and execute their own projects added to their sense of accomplishment.

6.3.2 Preparing for a dialogue with policymakers

Initially, children and policymakers were not enthusiastic about having a dialogue. Children stated that they were worried about whether policymakers would be genuinely interested in their photo exhibition and related stories. Policymakers saw practical barriers. For example, they commented that exhibition spaces had already been booked for the coming year. Nevertheless, seven months after the start of the project, we visited the council office with seven children for a meeting with the local councilor, a policy advisor and a communication officer (see figure 6.3). The children were quickly at ease, talking about the photo collages they had brought to the meeting, reflecting on different themes that needed attention in their opinion, such as the importance of adequate playgrounds, the handling of litter and feelings of unsafety in their neighbourhood.

Figure 6.3: Preparing collages for the meeting with the local councillor
The local councillor promised the children that their photos could be displayed at the council office notwithstanding earlier expressed practical objections, but nothing concrete was agreed upon concerning time and occasion.

In the meanwhile, we went to a photography museum with the children because we learned that none of the children had ever been to a formal exhibition. They enjoyed the outing but came to the conclusion that a conventional photo exhibition, as the researchers had planned, was boring. Based on the criticism of the children on the idea of having a ‘boring’ exhibition and a lack of space on the wall at the council office, the project leader came up with an innovative way to present the data, namely a photo stories table, and the researchers proposed the idea of using the table to the children. Using the photo stories table bypassed the argument of not having space on the walls for an exhibition, and offered more opportunities for creativity and for doing things differently. Together with an empathic co-designer, the children arrived at a table with seven different styles of legs, chosen and decorated by the children and representing their individual identities. It involved a glass top layer under which a selection of photographs could be displayed. Furthermore, some of the photo material was highly sensitive, calling for careful deliberation on what to exhibit. For example, children did not want to expose photos of their bedrooms. Children gave permission for the exhibition of other intimate photographs, such as photos of their homes and relatives, with the restriction that these photos would be less visible. This led to the idea of drawers for more intimate material, some of which could be opened and others not.

The advantage of the table is that it naturally facilitates a dialogue, since people literally gather around it. Due to its form, it has the ability to assert its presence and claim people’s attention. Two months after the meeting at the council office the table was presented by the children to local policymakers and the general public at the annual open evening for citizens (see figure 6.4). Parents stated that they were surprised and impressed that their children were having a public conversation with the local councillor and the general public. Adults seemed moved emotionally by the stories of the children and they were also impressed by the children’s skills as storytellers of their lives and as knowledgeable conversation partners. People spontaneously started to talk to the children and each other. The local press was present to generate a number of items in local newspapers and a magazine. This contributed to the children’s sense of accomplishment and empowerment:
Around the table with policymakers

Researcher: What did you find most special about the photo project
Omar: Well when we were at the council office, right guys?! [directed at the other children] Researcher: The other evening?
Jasim: Yes, then we were famous!

The photo stories table stayed in the council offices for a week for everyone to see and reflect on the photographs and the children's stories. During this time, people could share their thoughts on a blackboard on the side of the table (see figure 6.5).
Subsequently the table was also exhibited at two schools and at a local library. At these locations, the children had the opportunity to discuss their photographs with their peers. Furthermore, it provided them with the opportunity to communicate the results to their own communities and to influence local professionals. For instance, a head teacher said that he intended to involve children in the design of the school playground in the future.

The project stimulated local policymakers to further discuss the issue of youth poverty, taking children’s perspectives into account. For many policymakers, it was the first time they had actively communicated with children in their work and it gave them new insights. They became very enthusiastic about the potential of the method to address and prioritise the issues and needs identified by children. They stated that they wanted to continue with such a consultation process because it is consistent with current developments in the direction of citizen consultation (*burgerraadpleging*). Furthermore, the enthusiasm of the officials of the local council spread to the city of Amsterdam at large. A strategy meeting was organised
in which the future policy for children living in poverty was discussed. The children’s table held centre stage at this meeting and was used to reflect on existing and future policies for children living in poverty (see figure 6.6).

Figure 6.6: Outlining policy for children living in poverty with the help of the photo stories table

6.4 Discussion and conclusion

This study demonstrates how photovoice can be used to empower children who grow up in contexts of poverty and can be instrumental in bringing about an effective dialogue between children and policymakers. Photovoice facilitates this process by its focus on images that tell the children’s own stories and generate more empathy than words alone. Photovoice makes it possible for children to take charge of conversations, putting the image in the forefront and offering children the opportunity to clarify their stories verbally. Furthermore, a few additional aspects contributed to the success of the project. First, using photovoice, we were able to maintain contact with the children over a long period. This meant that there was enough time for the children’s stories about their lives and poverty to mature in a
positive way giving, as is suggested by Wang and Burris (1997), children the opportunity to depict their own and their neighbourhood’s needs as well as assets. Furthermore, by giving children time and opportunity to practice discussion and presentation, children’s confidence was strengthened. Second, rather than starting out by connecting with and mobilising policymakers as is suggested by Wang (2006), we deliberately chose to start by forming a bond with children, empowering them to build their own narrative about their lives and neighbourhood. This turned out to be an effective way of getting heard by policymakers who initially did not have a clear vision on child participation and how to execute it in their municipality. We argue that confronting policymakers with an ongoing process and the first results was more powerful than asking them to join an indeterminate participatory action research process with unclear added value. Third, the photo stories table as a means for communicating children’s stories turned out to be an extremely powerful tool in facilitating dialogue. The children had the opportunity to literally gather round the table with policymakers, show them their photographs and tell their stories. This caused a change in the mind-set of individual policymakers who were drawn into children’s stories and felt the urgency for action. This led them to evaluate their own policies critically and define a new strategy for the future better fitting the daily realities of children.

Nevertheless, as is the case for other photovoice projects, our project was subject to pitfalls and limitations, and new questions arose. First, involving the most vulnerable children is a challenge. In our project, the choice to use photovoice was rooted in the ambition to give children the opportunity to develop the story of their lives and neighbourhood at their own pace, giving their own interpretation of the role poverty does or does not play. For this reason, rather than making a strict selection based on adult definitions of who is poor and not, participation was open to all children in neighbourhoods that are known to be deprived. We wanted to engage children of all segments in the neighbourhoods, including children with less aptitude for concentration, by incorporating many informal events and outings. Children who found it difficult to engage in photography were still welcome to the meetings, and able to make a contribution to the conversations. However, we may have missed some of the most marginalized children that we ideally would have wanted to include, because they did not feel welcome or comfortable or were not allowed by their parents to come. This corresponds with Wang’s suggestion that ‘it may be that the people who have the most difficult lives find the method impractical, unappealing or inaccessible’ (2000, p. 191).
Secondly, using photovoice can intrude into children’s private space (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001; Prins, 2010), a challenge that becomes the more pressing with a sensitive topic like poverty. Given the intensive nature of the cooperation between the researchers and the children and because we continuously worked on developing a relationship of trust, we saw that the children increasingly felt at ease with sharing their experiences with us. Painful and difficult issues such as poverty were discussed openly. Children played a crucial role in co-selecting and co-interpreting material (Newkirk, 1996). Although careful attention was paid to gaining and on regular basis renewing informed consent, we realize that children might not at all times have been sufficiently aware of the full meaning of their research involvement, as is reflected in Brittany’s statement that it is not bad to disclose being poor since it is only shared with the researcher and her friends. We carefully deliberated on what to include in public publications, such as this article. Given the importance of sharing children’s intimate experiences and the precautionary principles of anonymity being upheld, we decided to disseminate such processes and experiences. A related question that arises when working with photovoice is how the photographic material should be used. In our study, the sensitivity of some of the photo material meant that careful deliberation on whether to exhibit it was needed, and opportunities to exhibit some aesthetically beautiful photo material was lost.

Thirdly, taking a participatory approach, children’s interests directed the photography and determined the course of the discussions. We employed creative methods and games to empower children and give them space to explore and develop their ideas. Though initially hesitant, looking to the researchers for guidance, gradually children felt more in charge and took more initiative. Researchers’ ideas were always explained to the children so that children were able to object or bring forward other ideas. This also meant that we were confronted with children’s limits and taboos. In particular, photographing and discussing the private home environment turned out to be problematic. This means that this area is relatively underexposed. More time would be needed to involve parents, creating the opportunity to learn more about children’s private lives inside the home and about interactions between children and parents.

Finally, we would like to make some suggestions for how to use photovoice to its best advantage. As we have experienced in our project, it is essential to take enough time for the children to gradually get used to each other, the researchers and the photographer, and their roles as experiential experts. Employing photovoice once and briefly could lead to insufficient
depth and false insights and interpretations. Although the literature considers the need for enough photos to reach saturation (Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Strack et al., 2010), less consideration is given to the importance of taking enough time for a cyclic process in which new ideas for photography arise and are executed. In our project, children first took ‘safe’ photographs, showing things they were proud of and could show and discuss easily. It took time and encouragement to get the children to shift their focus to include more problematic parts of their life worlds as well. Moreover, it is important to come full circle by preparing a dialogue with relevant stakeholders in order to have children’s stories heard in such a way that it leads to change. This starts with giving children the opportunity to speak up in a way that fits their competences and interests, involving a mode of presenting with which they are comfortable and which moves policymakers to action.
Around the table with policymakers
Chapter 7

Sowing seeds for healthier diets: Children’s perspectives on school gardening
Abstract

School gardening programmes are among the most promising interventions to improve children's vegetable intake. Yet, low vegetable intake among children remains a persistent public health challenge. This study aimed to explore children's perspectives, experiences and motivations concerning school gardening in order to better understand and increase its potential for health promotion. Using participant observation and semi-structured interviews, we provided 45 primary schoolchildren (9-10 years) from Amsterdam who participated in a comprehensive year-round school gardening programme, the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas on school gardening. Children particularly expressed enjoyment of the outdoor gardening portion of the programme as it enabled them to be physically active and independently nurture their gardens. Harvesting was children's favourite activity, followed by planting and sowing. In contrast, insufficient gardening time and long explanations or instructions were especially disliked. Experiencing fun and enjoyment appeared to play a vital role in children's motivation to actively participate. Children's suggestions for programme improvements included more autonomy and opportunities for experimentation, and competition elements to increase fun and variety. Our results indicate that gaining insight into children's perspectives allows matching school gardening programmes more to children's wishes and expectations, thereby potentially enhancing their intrinsic motivation for gardening and vegetable consumption.
7.1 Introduction

Low vegetable intake among children remains a challenging public health concern in both high-income and low-income countries (WHO, 2003). Children from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) are at a higher risk of unhealthy dietary habits and insufficient vegetable intake (Fernandez-Alvira et al., 2014; Zarnowiecki et al., 2014). School gardening programmes are considered to be a promising intervention to improve children's vegetable intake as multiple studies have shown that school gardening improves children's vegetable knowledge and preferences, increases their willingness to taste vegetables, and positively changes their attitudes towards vegetable consumption (Langellotto & Gupta, 2002; Somerset & Markwell, 2009; McAleese & Rankin, 2007; Robinson-O’Brien et al., 2009; Ratcliffe et al., 2011). These studies further suggest that school gardening may therefore also increase children's vegetable intake. For example, a study by Evans and colleagues (2016) has found that children with previous school gardening experience did not only have greater vegetable exposure and more diverse vegetable preferences but also consumed more vegetables than children with less gardening experience. Other studies have also suggested positive effects on children’s vegetable knowledge, attitude and willingness to try vegetables, but found no clear evidence of an increase in children's vegetable intake or vegetable preferences after participation in gardening or nutrition education programmes with a gardening component (Poston et al., 2005; O’Brien & Shoemaker, 2006; Koch et al., 2006; Morris et al., 2001; Savoie-Roskos et al., 2017).

Although existing findings on school gardening and its effects on children's vegetable consumption are encouraging, previous studies did not investigate conditions for success from the perspective of children themselves. Designing, implementing and evaluating effective interventions requires obtaining contextual information about an intervention and its users as well as information from the perspective of the users (Tumilowicz et al., 2015). Gaining insight into the user’s perspective allows for a comprehensive understanding of an intervention, identifying strengths as well as possible opportunities for improvement. Furthermore, it helps us understand what motivates children to participate in school gardening in the first place. Investigating children’s ideas on the purpose of school gardening and comparing them with formal programme objectives may additionally aid in bringing the two more in line with each other, thereby enhancing programme effectiveness.
In Amsterdam, school gardening has existed for more than a century, with its goals evolving over time from school gardening as a solution for major food shortages during and after World War I to gardening as an educational tool for health and food (Deken, 2011). There are 13 school gardening complexes in Amsterdam where approximately 6800 children participate in a year-round school gardening programme each year (ANMEC, 2015). When the first school garden complex was constructed in Amsterdam in 1920, the main goal was to provide city children with an opportunity to interact with nature. Other goals included teaching children how to grow vegetables and getting them interested in nature and agriculture. Later on, more emphasis was put on nature and food education, and gardening during school hours became integrated in most primary schools in Amsterdam (Deken, 2011). The current Amsterdam school gardening programme does not only aim to teach children about the environment and nature, but also introduces children to food production and educates them on where their food comes from.

The aim of our study was to explore children's experiences, perspectives and motivation concerning school gardening and vegetable consumption to better understand and improve its potential for health promotion. In order to achieve this objective we interacted with the children during the entirety of the Amsterdam school gardening programme, observed their attitudes and behaviours towards gardening and vegetables and conducted formal interviews as well as informal conversations.

7.2 Materials and Methods

Study design
We chose an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, formal interviews and informal conversations. In order to gain a more complete and in-depth understanding of children’s perspectives and experiences, participant observation was chosen as the main ethnographic data collection method. It allowed us to get alongside children in their ‘natural’ environment to explore how they made sense of the world and how they shaped their realities. Ethnography aims to describe and understand social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within a group of people or culture (NME-Gids Amsterdam, 2015). Over the years it has been recognized as a fundamental research method to explore and make sense of the social worlds of children (Mack et al., 2015). Since ethnography focuses on the perspective of those being studied, e.g. intervention users,
Sowing seeds for healthier diets

it has been recognized as an important part of implementation research in nutrition, helping to understand how delivery and utilisation processes affect programme impacts or outcomes and thus how to optimally tailor intervention design and implementation to different sociocultural and environmental contexts (Tumilowicz et al., 2015).

This study was part of a larger mixed-methods study which further consisted of a quantitative survey, aimed at examining vegetable preferences, knowledge and intake of disadvantaged primary school children in Amsterdam. The current study investigates the year-round Amsterdam school gardening programme which is part of a comprehensive nutrition education programme called Voedselwijs (Foodwise). Other elements of Voedselwijs include farming education, cooking workshops and a ‘no-waste’ lunch. The Amsterdam school gardening programme consists of 25 structured lessons of 90 minutes, in which children grow and process vegetables, herbs and flowers. The first three sessions comprise indoor lessons in which children are introduced to their school garden, study soil types and learn how seeds grow into plants. In April, weekly gardening activities start during which each child receives a small patch of land to grow plants and vegetables with the help and instructions from a garden educator. After the summer holiday, children harvest vegetables to take home and learn how to make vegetable soup and pizzas using their own vegetables. Furthermore, children pick their self-grown flowers and learn how to arrange them. Finally, the programme ends with an indoor lesson on winter plants and animals, and a food quiz in December (NME-Gids Amsterdam, 2015). Our study took place from January to December 2015.

**Ethics**

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved on January 28, 2015 by the Medical Ethics Committee (METc) of the VU University Medical Centre (protocol 15/026). A passive parental informed consent strategy was chosen as the study did not involve sensitive topics and it was expected that children would not be exposed to any significant risks. Furthermore, throughout the study, it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that children were free to withdraw from the study at any moment without having to provide any reasons and without facing any consequences.

**Participants**

The recruitment process started by inviting primary schools, located in three socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of Amsterdam which are
characterized by a high prevalence of overweight and obesity, to participate in the quantitative study. Schools were invited with the help of the Amsterdam Nature and Environmental Education Centre (ANMEC) which held the contact information of all schools that participate in the school gardening programme of Amsterdam. Schools received an email from ANMEC with information about the study and were asked to participate. Subsequently, schools were given a week to respond, after which those that did not respond were invited again by telephone. A total of 12 schools decided to participate in the quantitative study. Out of these schools, two schools were then selected to participate in the current qualitative study using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select schools that had been participating in the Amsterdam school gardening programme for many years and that were located in city districts inhabited by the population of interest, i.e. children living in low-SES and high overweight and obesity contexts. In this manner, we aimed to include schools that were familiar with the Amsterdam school gardening programme and which were available and willing to participate in our qualitative study.

**Data collection procedures**

Participant observation was used to determine how the school gardening programme was introduced to and received by the children. Participant observation was chosen because it helps the researcher gain insights into the perspectives and actions of the individuals being studied, i.e. in what persons say and do in their ‘natural’ environment (Mack et al., 2005; Bernard, 2011; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Between March and November 2015, all indoor and outdoor lessons of the children in the two target classes were observed. Two researchers followed children participating in gardening activities, held conversations with them and closely observed their actions and behaviour. Additionally, at the school garden complex of one of the participating schools, one of the participant observers also received a garden patch in between those of the children. This further facilitated observations as it provided a good opportunity to occasionally retreat from being a mere observer and to participate hands-on in the gardening activities, gaining a richer understanding of children’s gardening experiences. Participating in children’s gardening activities also enabled the researchers to gain children’s trust and build rapport. All observations were recorded in the Dutch language using field notes which were expanded into thick descriptions of what was observed, directly after each observation. Thick descriptions do not merely present the actions of
participants but more detailed information about context, emotion and the different relationships between participants (Denzin, 2001, p. 83).

Observations further provided valuable input for interviews and informal conversations with the children. Informal conversations occurred spontaneously during gardening activities and were open-ended, enabling the researchers to establish rapport with the participants and to get to know their thoughts on gardening. In addition, a total of 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted, 18 with the children, two with the school teachers and two with the garden educators. All interviewees granted permission to audio-record interviews, after which the interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized using pseudonyms. Both interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Dutch. Semi-structured interviews with the children took place at school and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Children were interviewed in locations outside the classroom which the children had chosen themselves and where they felt comfortable. School teachers and garden educators were interviewed for contextual information about how children reacted to programme elements and what elements were, from their experience, liked or disliked by children.

**Data analysis**
Data analysis was an iterative process and started directly from the first meeting at the school gardens, i.e. when raw field notes were expanded into narratives, elaborating on initial observations, and when interviews were transcribed. Transcribed interviews and expanded field notes were analysed using qualitative content analysis in an inductive manner, i.e. themes ‘emerge’ from the data through a process of open coding and theme refinement, without restricting the analysis by predefined codes and themes (Gale & Heath, 2013). This process took place in three steps: open coding, categorization and abstraction (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The content analysis started by coding eight interviews and three field reports by hand using open coding, prior to coding all collected data in the MAXQDA 10.4 data analysis software programme. Open coding involved reading and reviewing the transcripts multiple times, while writing notes and headings, i.e. codes, in the manuscript to describe all content. Recurring or striking patterns and apparent inconsistencies between children’s beliefs and their actions were identified and coded. After repeated reviewing, all codes were transcribed onto a coding sheet, forming categories. Relationships between different data segments were explored and both recurring categories and categories describing similar thoughts or events were grouped into broader higher order categories to reduce the number of required
categories. Negative cases, i.e. views and events that contradicted or did not support major patterns and explanations that were emerging from data analysis (Mays & Pope, 2000), were identified to obtain a more complete and in-depth understanding of children’s experiences and perspectives. Finally, categorization allowed initiating the process of abstraction of the data, i.e. developing general descriptions of the research subject by moving from the specific and anecdotal to the general. In this manner higher order categories were grouped into subcategories (or subthemes), which in turn were grouped into main categories (or main themes). Both coding sheet and interim results of the data analysis were discussed in regular group meetings with the research team.

Since all data was collected in the Dutch language, the data analysis was performed in Dutch. During data analysis and write up of the manuscript, the original Dutch quotes were used for as long as possible to prevent losing meaning as a result of translation. The quotes in the final manuscript were translated by the authors and checked by a native English speaker who also speaks Dutch.

7.3 Results

A total of 45 children participated in the study, 18 boys and 27 girls, while three children were opted out by their parents. Children were 9 or 10 years old at the start of our study, reflecting the target population of the school gardening programme. Participants were all born and raised in the Netherlands, but have diverse ethnic backgrounds: Dutch (n=27), Moroccan (n=5), Surinamese (n=2) and Afghan (n=1). In addition, some children were of mixed Dutch-immigrant descent (n=6), mixed non-Dutch descent (n=1), and of unknown descent (n=3). Table 7.1 presents the participant demographics.
First we describe children’s general impression of the programme, followed by what they consider to be the purpose of school gardening. We conclude with children’s own ideas for improvements of the current programme.

7.3.1 Children’s general impressions of school gardening

Children enjoyed the school gardening programme. As one boy put it: “Well, I just think it’s really fun, school gardens and even garden work” (Stan). Children stated that the programme was fun for a number of reasons, such as being active outside and doing something fun during school time, but in particular because it enabled them to learn a variety of new things in an independent, playful and fun way. As Kees told us: “There are lots of things to do and we also learn a lot.” Theo expressed: “I really like it because you have your own garden. So, people will not meddle with you. For example, if you’re doing something wrong, you can learn from it.” Being away from school during school time was by and large appreciated by the children, as illustrated by Rob: “I don’t like being in school in the afternoon. So I think it’s nice that there are things to do in the school garden.” Witnessing the growth of your own crops and harvesting them was another often heard reason for liking the programme. Although the majority of participants was very positive about school gardening, one girl said that while she did believe that the programme was nice, gardening just was not for her: “It’s nice, but sometimes I find it somewhat less fun because gardening is not really my thing. Ehm, I like doing sports things, and not really things with plants.
and vegetables. And making holes in the soil and so on...with worms and stuff” (Vanessa).

Whilst a minority mentioned that the indoor classroom lessons were also fun and informative, all agreed that the outdoor gardening lessons were far more enjoyable. During the indoor lessons, it was observed that children were frequently bored, did not know what to do when they had finished their workbook assignments or just lost interest, as illustrated by Sander: “[…] we had to glue seeds in the workbook, glue stuff in it and colour it in and write. Well, I did not feel like doing all that. I was thinking ‘just let me go and dig in the mud outside.’” In contrast to this, outdoor gardening lessons often started with children cheerfully entering the school garden complex and curiously and enthusiastically running to their gardens. Furthermore, when garden educators announced outdoor lesson cancellations due to holidays, most children were visibly disappointed. Some children even asked whether it was possible to reschedule cancelled lessons. Children stated that they preferred the outdoor gardening lessons because they could do more themselves and because it allowed them to actively and independently perform hands-on activities outside: “You do more than during the indoor lessons. Because then you just sit and learn everything and you have to answer questions. But if you do it outside, you really have to do it yourself. So I think it’s more fun” (Theo). Moreover, whereas children initially were having difficulties with gardening and required much help from gardening educators, after several gardening lessons they were capable to confidently take care of their gardens on their own, visibly enjoying gardening activities.

A majority of the children described harvesting as the most enjoyable school gardening activity, closely followed by planting and sowing. Participants stated that they liked harvesting because they could take their self-grown vegetables home and eat them. For example, Tim said: “And I like harvesting the most, of course. So that you have tasty food. […] that you can just enjoy eating your own food.” Likewise, Vanessa commented: “Harvesting because then you can have yummy fresh food once a week.” Elaborating on this point, many children said that it is also “more fun to eat your own food.” Children’s eagerness for harvesting was evident starting from the first outdoor gardening lesson, when it was observed that children would regularly and impatiently ask the garden educator when harvesting would start. When the children finally harvested for the first time, they were overjoyed. It started at the sitting corner, when a girl fanatically started yelling “Harvesting people! It says harvesting” when she noticed a word web about harvesting. The news then spread like a wildfire as more and more children
started cheering and drumming on their watering buckets. Similar to harvesting, planting and sowing was also liked and linked to food by most children: “Well, I do actually like planting and sowing because you can do things. Then it will grow and then you can sooner make something tasty at home” (Rob). Others stated that they favoured planting and sowing as it was something they rarely did and because they enjoyed these activities: “I just think it [planting] is fun to do because it’s just something else. Because I almost never do it.” (Melisa) However, a minority experienced planting and sowing as less enjoyable because they had difficulties determining where to plant or sow: “Sometimes I think it’s hard. [...] Then I don’t know where to plant, but I do pay attention. But I don’t know where...” (Vanessa)

Although children were generally enthusiastic about the school garden lessons, some aspects were disliked. It was well observed that long explanations and instructions at the sitting corner or the demonstration garden often caused impatience and frustration among the children. As Sam commented: “The instructions... I think they are always taking too long.” This made it difficult for the school garden educators to finish giving their instructions as children started talking to each other, playing with their buckets or even wandering to their garden patch while instructions were being given. Children’s discontent with long instructions was exacerbated by the number of explanations and instructions given at a time, making it difficult for children to remember everything. Lana stated: “That you have to remember what to do, otherwise you have to ask all the time. Because sometimes we have to do a lot of things and then it’s hard to remember everything.”

Additionally, field observations revealed that children did not like it when there was not enough time to complete assignments. Despite children supporting and helping each other with gardening assignments throughout the programme and gardening lessons, there were always some children who were not able to finish all their gardening assignments before the end of each lesson, leaving them worried and dissatisfied when departing from the school garden. As one of the children put it: “[...] it’s just that sometimes we have too little time to do things and I think that’s annoying. I’m just only halfway through and then we have to stop again” (Miranda).

Weeding was experienced as one of the most unpleasant and frustrating activities as children were frequently confused because they found it difficult to distinguish weeds from crops. This sometimes resulted in children accidentally raking or pulling out crop plants, leaving them visibly upset.
Similarly, watering plants was also one of the most challenging and disliked tasks, often causing a muddy mess in both the garden and on children’s outfits. For example, Tom said: “Yes, watering actually. Because it then floods a little. [...] Yes, it then flooded and then you had to put sand on it. But then your boots became dirty.” Although children were appropriately dressed for gardening, not all of them liked to become dirty.

7.3.2 Children’s perspectives on the purpose of the school gardening programme

Although children had different ideas about the purpose of school gardening, a clear majority believed that the purpose was just to have fun. As Rob expressed: “I think the goal is...um...just having fun!” Learning how to independently garden, especially how to plant, sow and harvest was believed to be another important purpose of school gardening. Children believed this to be important because it would enable them to start their own gardens in the future, as illustrated by Rob: “[...] because then I can start my own garden later. [...] I think it’s important for later because it’s handy to know how to plant. Then you can also explain it to your children.” Elaborating on this, many children said that they were eager to learn how to garden in order to be able to garden at home and help out parents or relatives with garden work. Similarly, participants who habitually gardened (e.g. at home or with relatives) noted that school gardening could help them improve their gardening skills. As Camilla explained: “And now I can improve myself and then I can help my grandpa even more [with gardening]!” Max added: “I’ve already learned how to handle stuff. For example, how to handle the shovel and rake.”

A small number of participants felt that the purpose of school gardening was to take home vegetables and encourage children to eat more vegetables. As one of them, Tim, put it: “I feel that the purpose of the school gardens is that you eat more vegetables...when you never eat vegetables at home. Then you have grown your own vegetables, and then you just want to eat them yourself. [...] So the goal is that you eat more vegetables.” Most participants believed that participation in school gardening could, indeed, have a positive effect on children’s vegetable intake as they felt that children would be eager to eat the vegetables they had put so much effort into. For example, Michelle said: “I would be very proud of a big harvest, with onions and potatoes. I mean, you’ve planted them yourself and then you do want to eat them.” Others believed that participation would make children curious about the taste of their own vegetables, as illustrated by Camilla: “Yes, if they participate they’ll learn that vegetables can also be tasty because they
get to know the vegetables. [...] I first didn’t like lettuce but because of school gardening I do like it now. Because I thought: ‘ok, I’m going to taste it.’ ” In contrast, three participants felt that school gardening would not necessarily lead to an increase in the vegetable consumption of children, explaining that they did not believe it would take away children’s dislike for vegetables: “If you don’t like vegetables, I don’t think you’re going to eat more vegetables [because of school gardening]” (Sam).

Finally, a minority of the participants thought that the programme aimed to teach children more about nature and plants, and how to deal with them respectfully, as Rashid told us: “I think the purpose of the school gardening programme is to learn about nature. About plants, mountains, sand...things like that.” Several children elaborated on this point, stating that it would help them distinguish edible plants from non-edible or harmful plants. As Miranda put it: “Then you’ll at least know what a plant is called and what it is. [...] Because if you don’t know, you might think: ‘I’ll just put that [plant] in my mouth.’ And then you don’t know, maybe it has prickers or it’s poisonous.” Similarly, some children pointed out that it is important to know what you eat and whether it is treated with pesticides or not. Camilla commented: “I think it’s important because we can’t live without vegetables. This is our food, our vitamins.”

7.3.3 Children on opportunities for improvements

Although children were enthusiastic about the programme in general, they did have suggestions for improvements. Almost all children believed that the programme could be improved by taking better measures to facilitate gardening assignments. For example, children suggested to provide more time to finish gardening assignments. As Vanessa commented: “A tip...yes, just a bit shorter explanations so that we have more time to plant and harvest.” Furthermore, many children suggested that garden educators could take better measures to facilitate gardening assignments by, for example, using plant tags more often to reduce confusion on what to plant where; providing children with description cards for the gardening assignments; ensuring that sufficient gardening tools and growing plans are available; and building an additional demonstration garden for children who have their gardens on the opposite side of the complex to reduce confusion on where to plant.

A majority of the children also wanted additional activities at the school gardens to increase fun and variety. During informal conversations in the school garden, many children mentioned that it would be more fun to have contests on who has the tallest plants and most beautiful vegetables:
“Actually, I think it would also be very fun to decide, for example, who has the most beautiful vegetables and to also discuss that in class” (Vanessa). Furthermore, a number of children suggested a scavenger hunt and a plant quiz, involving awarding prizes: “[...] for example, do something like a scavenger hunt. That you then have to search for as many worms as possible in your garden within five minutes. And the one who has the most wins something” (Latifa).

Finally, a number of children would like to see bigger gardens so that more crops could be planted. As Frank put it: “I would make bigger gardens. [...] No, I don’t think they’re too small, but you can plant more stuff if you have bigger gardens.” Larger gardens would also better meet children’s demand to let them decide for themselves what to grow, for example strawberries, blackberries, cucumbers and cauliflowers: “That you can just choose what you want to plant [...] it would be more fun to just take anything you want and plant as many of it as you want” (Melisa). Similarly, some children stated that it would be fun to have the space to experiment with growing plants by planting or sowing them differently: “Maybe have some kind of experimental garden where you also can plant stuff. Only then do it really differently and see how that works. For example, not putting the seeds in a hole but just putting them on the soil and then scatter soil over them. And then see how that works out” (Sam). It was believed that this would provide children with the opportunity to learn from both successes and failures in a processes of trial-and-error: “[...] that you can try. That you have a couple of chances to do it. So if you then do it the wrong way it doesn’t matter much. Because then you can see for yourself what happens” (Lana).

### 7.4 Discussion

This study aimed to fill knowledge gaps concerning children’s experiences with and perceptions of school gardening. The small amount of qualitative research on school gardening that does exist has focused on children’s general gardening experiences, mainly reporting positive gardening experiences (Geisman et al., 2005; Bowker & Tearle, 2007; Block et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2015), but none have shed light on children’s ideas of its purposes, their motivations for gardening, and their ideas and suggestions for improvements. By providing children, the primary intervention users, with an opportunity to voice their views on what they believe works and what does not, unique input for programme changes and improvements is gained.
Consistent with previous qualitative studies on children’s gardening experiences (Geisman et al., 2005; Bowker & Tearle, 2007; Block et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2015), our study shows that participants were enthusiastic about school gardening and generally enjoyed it. Similar to findings by Passy et al. (2010), children clearly favoured outdoor hands-on gardening activities. Indeed, earlier research has shown that young students prefer a hands-on, inquiry-based learning approach over traditional text-book based methods, and developed more positive attitudes towards schooling and science as a result (Selim & Shrigley, 1997; Lawton, 1997). Harvesting was mentioned as the most enjoyable activity, closely followed by planting and sowing. Children were curious and gained a sense of accomplishment and pride from seeing their own vegetables, growing, harvesting and taking them home for consumption. These findings are consistent with other studies demonstrating that children experience feelings of achievement, satisfaction and pride from taking care of their crops and harvesting them (Selim & Shrigley, 1983; Lawton, 1997; Passy et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2015; Ohly et al., 2016). On the other hand, children specifically disliked having to listen to long gardening instructions and having little time for assignments which, to the best of our knowledge, is not documented in previous studies. Assessing the likes and dislikes of children is relevant because it provides useful insights into what influences children’s motivation to garden.

Our results showed that children’s primary motivation for engaging in the school gardening programme is ‘having fun’, which is consistent with data obtained by Bowker and Tearle (2007). Experiencing enjoyment or fun is a vital component for intrinsic motivation. Whereas extrinsic motivation entails performing activities because of an external demand or reward, intrinsic motivation involves doing something volitionally, mainly because it is enjoyable or fun. Research has shown that individuals with intrinsic motivation toward a certain behaviour, show greater effort, commitment and perseverance in displaying that behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Self Determination Theory (SDT) of Ryan and Deci (2000) argues that nurturing intrinsic motivation requires satisfying three innate psychological needs: autonomy (i.e. the need to feel free to act of your own volition, without others deciding for you), competence (i.e. the need to feel capable and proficient to accomplish desired goals), and relatedness (i.e. the need to feel connected and belonging to your social environment). School gardening appears to provide children with opportunities to experience these three psychological needs. To a certain degree, it offers environments that support children’s autonomy, enabling them to have their individual garden which
they can take care of independently without others meddling. Moreover, despite the highly structured programme setup, children did experience some autonomy in gardening, for example, gardening with or without gardening tools. Children's experiences of autonomy were stimulated most when harvesting as they could not only decide what and how many crops they wanted to take home but were also free to decide what to do with them at home.

In addition, school gardens proved to be excellent ventures to experience feelings of competence as children gained a sense of achievement and pride, resulting from a rigorous but rewarding gardening journey. Putting effort into planting, sowing and nurturing crops, witnessing them grow and, finally, harvesting and enjoying the result of their hard work enabled children to feel competent and confident. After several gardening lessons, children were capable of gardening properly without the help of gardening instructors, using gardening tools in a correct and safe manner.

Lastly, school gardening also contributed to feelings of relatedness as children felt connected throughout the programme, consistently helping and supporting each other with gardening activities. These feelings of relatedness probably extended beyond the school gardens as children believed that the programme helped them to support others in their close social environment (e.g. parents, friends and grandparents) with gardening. In this manner, school gardening has connected them with other gardeners, both young and old.

When comparing the programme's formal goals with children's goals and their ideas on the purpose of school gardening, they seem to match well. Similar to the programme goals, participants believed that the main purposes of school gardening were to teach children how to garden properly, teach them more about nature, plants and vegetables, and enable them to harvest, take home and consume fresh vegetables. Almost all participants believed that participation in school gardening would positively influence children's vegetable intake. Learning more about vegetables, performing gardening activities in a vegetable promoting environment, harvesting and taking home self-grown vegetables was believed to motivate children to try new vegetables or consume more vegetables.

Finally, although children had many specific requests and suggestions for improvements, perhaps the most striking one was their request for more opportunity for exploration and experimentation. Children, paradoxically,
valued the school gardening programme structure but, at the same time, they desired more autonomy to decide for themselves what to grow and to experiment in their gardens. The importance of experimentation has been described by Jarret (1997, pp. 2), a scholar in the field of inquiry strategies for science and mathematics learning, who considers that children “construct their own knowledge by actively taking charge of their learning” and that just providing good teaching and quality textbooks is not sufficient. This is in line with recommendations to arrange education in such a manner that facilitates children to take charge of their learning actively by posing questions, conducting their own experiments, experiencing and learning from both successes and failures, and communicating their findings with others (Lawton, 1997; Jarret, 1997). Hart (1997), professor and director of the Center for Human Environments and the Children’s Environments Research Group, describes this as ‘participatory learning’ and stresses the importance of providing children, the learners, with a key role in their own learning process. He argues that children should be taken seriously, have choices and should be actively involved and consulted in their learning process. When these conditions are met, participatory learning can take place in which children investigate, interact and learn from each other and adults acquire a valuable opportunity to see and understand how children make sense of their lives and their surroundings. It should however be noted that merely providing more opportunity for experimentation or additional activities may not be adequate as sufficient time is also required for children to be able to explore and experiment or perform additional activities in the school gardens.

Limitations of this study lie in the limited numbers of participating schools and children. In addition, although formal interviews were conducted to gain insights into individual children’s ideas, due to already constrained school timetables it was not possible to interview all children. It could be further argued that the positive results were due to the fact that the participating schools and schoolteachers were the most enthusiastic and willing to participate in our study. This may have influenced children’s attitudes and perceptions in favour of nature, gardening and vegetables. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in children as positive reported outcomes may not have been solely due to participation in the Amsterdam school gardening programme. Finally, there was a lack of information on if and how long vegetable promoting effects persisted outside the school gardens and after completion of the programme. Similarly, it was not determined to what extent formal programme goals, namely educating children on the environment, nature and origins of food, were achieved.
The key strength of this study is the use of participant observation, which proved to be a powerful method to gain insights into children’s actions and perspectives in a natural setting. Using this method we were able to avoid disrupting children’s natural behaviour and could truly focus on their experiences and views. Informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with children complemented observations and provided additional insights into children’s perspectives and behaviours, both inside the school gardens and at school. This resulted in rich data and improved the validity of the results.

7.5 Conclusions

The findings of this study add to the existing evidence that school gardening programmes are a promising and fun way for children to experience nature and promote vegetable intake. Understanding children’s perspectives facilitates tailoring existing or new programmes to the wishes and expectations of children, thereby increasing the extent to which the programme is enjoyed by children. This, in turn, may enhance children’s intrinsic motivation for gardening and vegetable consumption. To achieve greater vegetable consumption by children, efforts should not merely concentrate on how to motivate children to consume more vegetables but on how to create supportive environments that enhance children’s intrinsic motivation to try new vegetables by satisfying their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Efforts could be made to create a better balance between structure and autonomy to choose, experiment and explore as health promotion programmes for children are often designed and implemented in a structured top-down manner. Furthermore, the feasibility and number of gardening assignments should be evaluated to ensure that they can be completed within the time available. This includes assessing whether and how children’s gardening time can be increased and the amount and duration of instructions decreased, and whether it is beneficial to provide children with additional instruction cards that facilitate remembering gardening assignments and enable them to work at their own pace. All of this requires the involvement of children in the development and evaluation of programmes. As the primary intervention users, children understand and experience what works and what does not, are able to identify shortcomings and provide valuable input for improvements. Additionally, children’s feelings of relatedness may be enhanced by involving parents in the programme, creating a link between school gardens and children’s homes. Finally, further
research should evaluate whether improvements in gardening programmes are leading to higher, sustainable levels of vegetable intake.
Abstract

Inadequate vegetable consumption is a global public health concern related to numerous health risks. A promising intervention to increase children's vegetable consumption is school gardening, although earlier studies have shown mixed results. This study explores how gardening might contribute to changed attitudes towards eating vegetables from a child’s perspective. Findings are based on qualitative research with children in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We reflect on how children enact agency regarding their vegetables. Results show that children report that changes occur in their attitudes towards vegetables as they not only eat more vegetables but also advocate the consumption of vegetables at home.
8.1 Introduction

Inadequate vegetable consumption is a global public health concern and related to numerous health risks. Although there is substantial evidence of the benefits of a vegetable-rich diet in preventing and tackling diseases such as overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers and type 2 diabetes (Li et al., 2014; Boeing et al., 2012; Key et al., 2011), many children around the globe, including Dutch children, do not meet the recommended daily intake (Van Rossum et al., 2011; Kromhout et al., 2016). Environmental as well as individual factors play a role in children's low vegetable intake. For instance, one of the factors that contribute to this low vegetable intake is children's own preferences and food choices (Birch, 1999; Birch & Fisher, 1998). Across various cultures, children consistently dislike eating vegetables (Cooke & Wardle, 2005; Skinner et al., 2002).

Gardening programmes represent a promising intervention to improve children's consumption of vegetables, although earlier studies yielded mixed results. Some previous research has indicated that experiences of school, after-school or community gardening have positive effects on the preferences and behaviour of children regarding vegetables (Gatto et al., 2012; Somerset & Markwell, 2009; Parmer et al., 2009; Jaenke et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2010; McAleese & Rankin, 2007). Findings suggest that adding a gardening component to nutrition education programs strengthens the likelihood that children will eat more vegetables, including vegetables they had not cultivated themselves (Parmer et al., 2009; Morris & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2002; McAleese & Rankin, 2007). Some studies have taken a special interest in the effects of participation in gardening on household vegetable variables. Heim et al. (2009), for example, found that garden-based educational activities led to an increase in children's vegetable asking behaviour at home, noting the importance of children's asking behaviour in influencing decisions about the family diet. In addition to these quantitative studies, the few qualitative studies also present evidence of a connection between gardening and the amount of vegetables children eat, attributed to social influences (Lautenschlager & Smith, 2007) and greater awareness through social interactions (Libman, 2007).

Other studies, however, have nuanced or even negated positive effects of gardening on vegetable consumption. Poston et al. (2005) and O'Brien and Shoemaker (2006) demonstrated that gardening and nutrition education programmes do not improve the preference for vegetables or their consumption. Christian et al. (2014) found little evidence to support the claims
that school gardening alone can improve children’s daily vegetable intake, noting the need for a holistic approach and for incorporating additional related activities with parental involvement. Koch et al. (2006) and Morris et al. (2001) found that although children who grew vegetables knew more about the benefits of eating vegetables or were more willing to try certain vegetables, there was no change in their food preferences. Ratcliffe et al. (2011) and Lineberger et al. (2000) found that while children involved in school gardening had developed positive attitudes towards and preferences for eating vegetables, their consumption of vegetables did not appear to change.

Children’s own perspectives are in large measure missing from the discussion of school gardening and how gardening might be related to vegetable consumption. Describing their perspectives and experiences could be significant since we know that interventions are more likely to succeed if they match the expectations and needs of the target group (Skinner et al., 2002; Tumilowicz et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is a need to pay more attention to what children actually do rather than only what they are exposed to. Although briefly touched upon by Libman (2007), who described how young people reported helping to prepare food at home using the harvest from the school garden and thus contributing to improving their families’ diets, there is a need for deeper insights into children’s agency.

Agency comprises the social capacity of human beings to act and create, and to change practices in order to achieve personal purposes (Bollig & Kelle, 2016). Recognising children’s agency means acknowledging that they are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes but, instead, active in the construction and determination of their lives and environments (Prout & James, 1990). We adopt a relational social theories view and a network-analysis understanding of agency, locating agency in social relations, interdependence and interaction with the material world (Knorr-Cetina, 2001; Stoecklin, 2013; Dedding, 2014; Esser et al., 2016; Esser, 2016). From this perspective, we were interested in the material and non-material forces to which children were exposed in being involved in school gardening and how these forces encouraged children to exercise agency, especially in relation to vegetable cultivation and consumption.

This study investigated the Amsterdam school gardening programme which started in 1929 and is one of the longest-running of such programmes in the Netherlands. It is an independent programme but is currently part of an umbrella of nutrition-related programmes, named Voedselwijs (Foodwise).
Other programmes that are part of Voedselwijs are farm education in which children get a sense of where their food comes from, a visit to a botanical garden and a ‘no waste lunch’ preparation lesson. There are 13 school gardening complexes in Amsterdam where annually approximately 6800 children participate for almost an entire calendar year (ANMEC, 2015). In the course of 25 lessons of 90 minutes, children grow and process vegetables, herbs and flowers, and learn how nature and nutrition are related. The first three sessions in March take place indoors, during which children are introduced to their school garden, study soil types and learn how seeds grow into plants. In April, weekly gardening activities start. Each child receives a small plot of land on which to grow plants and vegetables. After the summer holiday, from the end of August onward, children mainly harvest vegetables and herbs to take home. They learn how to make vegetable soup, pizza and spiced vinegar, using their own vegetables and herbs. The children also pick flowers and learn how to arrange them. The programme ends with an indoor lesson on winter plants and animals, and a food quiz in December (NME-Gids Amsterdam, 2015).

The aim of our research project was to contribute to the body of knowledge on children’s perspectives on school gardening and eating vegetables, by engaging with children and observing their attitudes and behaviour during the school gardening programme. The central research questions were: 1) What are children’s experiences with and perspectives on school gardening? 2) What are children’s perspectives on how school gardening contributes to enhancing the consumption of vegetables? In this article, we report findings concerning the second question; the first question is discussed in a forthcoming article. A special focus in the present article is how children involved in school gardening exert agency with regard to the vegetables they grow, both in the school garden and at home. The results are structured according to the chronological order in which events took place, from gardening to harvesting and taking home vegetables.

8.2 Methodology

Research design
This article is based on qualitative data gathered through participant observation complemented with interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD). In participant observation, the researcher collects data by taking part in the research subjects’ natural environment, alternately adopting the role of active participant and observer (Johnson et al., 2006; DeWalt
& DeWalt, 2010). A naturalistic approach was assumed to enable the researchers to study children’s experiences of gardening and harvesting in a natural setting and to interpret these in terms of their meanings for the children involved (Jones, 1995).

**Sampling strategy and data collection**

This research was part of a larger mixed-methods study that was carried out in three socioeconomically deprived areas of Amsterdam. A total of 12 primary schools participated in the study which permitted pre- and post-test questionnaires on vegetable preferences, knowledge and intake to be conducted among children participating in the school gardening programme. Of these 12 schools, two were selected for participant observation, based on a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Both schools were located in areas characterised by a high prevalence of overweight and low socio-economic status (SES) households, and contributed to ensuring the ethnic diversity of the children. The analysis resulting in this article only refers to the two school sites selected from the twelve.

Between March and November 2015, two researchers attended all school garden lessons to observe what took place, what the children did and how they reacted to what they saw and heard. While participating in these lessons, the researchers assisted children in gardening activities, held informal conversations with them and closely observed their actions and behaviour. The participant observations also involved interactions with parents who sometimes visited the school gardening complexes. To deepen our insights into children’s perspectives, especially regarding the vegetables they cultivated, we conducted 18 formal interviews in May, at the beginning of the harvesting period, and eight in November, after the harvesting period. A FGD was held in May with the children from school A in order to get a better understanding of the range and variety of perceptions regarding school gardening and vegetable consumption at home. Finally, four interviews with parents were conducted in June/July focused on vegetable consumption. Semi-structured interview and FGD guides ensured that questions were consistent, while allowing the opportunity for participants to bring up new topics.

**Research ethics**

After the schools consented to take part in the qualitative research, all of the children in the target classes received information letters to take home. A passive informed consent strategy was adopted since the study did not involve sensitive topics and children were not exposed to any significant
‘I eat the vegetables because I have grown them with my own hands’

risks. Parents of two children opted out. During the participant observation, we did not take notes on these children’s expressions and actions. Throughout the study, the children were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any moment without having to give any reasons and with no consequences. The Medical Ethics committee (METc) of the VU University Medical Centre approved the study. All interviews and the FGD were only audio-recorded after the participants received explanation on anonymity and confidentiality, and their permission had been explicitly requested and granted. In addition, to ensure anonymity, we have used pseudonyms in all publications.

**Analysis**
Extensive field notes written during the participant observation formed the basis for writing detailed reports immediately afterwards. Interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The reports and transcripts provided the means for a content analysis, involving the inductive emergence of categories and themes related to children’s attitudes towards and consumption of their own vegetables. Categories and themes were established after careful examination of data and repeated discussions between the researchers and project team. Moreover, using an agency perspective meant that we attentively examined the data for children’s decisions and actions with regard to cultivating, harvesting and eating vegetables.

**8.3 Findings**

In this section, we first describe the participants and their attitudes towards the school gardening programme. We then describe children’s attitudes towards consumption of the vegetables they harvested. Finally, we examine children’s growing involvement in household vegetable choices. A total of 45 children participated in the study: 25 from school A and 20 from school B. The total group comprised 18 boys and 27 girls. The children were, at the beginning of our research, nine or ten years of age. Although they were all born and raised in the Netherlands, they have diverse ethnic backgrounds: Dutch \((n=27)\), Moroccan \((n=5)\), Surinamese \((n=2)\), Afghan \((n=1)\). Furthermore, a number of children are of mixed Dutch-allochthonous descent \((n=6)\), one child is of mixed non-Dutch descent and three children of unknown descent.
8.3.1 Growing ownership in the school garden
At first, the school garden educators provided much structure during the lessons. Each outdoor lesson started with children gathering around the demonstration garden, where they received elaborate instructions. In addition, the school garden educators provided illustrated growing plans which showed children exactly where to plant or sow. In addition to instructions on what to plant and how, children were taught how to look after their plants. The school garden educators explained about weeding, drawing attention to the difficulty of distinguishing between vegetables and weeds, and the care needed not to lose the crop. There were also explanations on how and how much to water, taking into account factors such as the humidity of the soil. Finally, as the harvesting season began, children were instructed in techniques for harvesting the different vegetables.

As the lessons progressed, children increasingly became more free to decide for themselves what to do and in which order, especially regarding whether, what and when to harvest. The school garden educators gave the children information that would help them to make a more or less considered decision and increasingly used less directive language such as ‘you have to’ in favour of phrases such as ‘you can’ or ‘if you want’:

The school garden educator this time beats the children to it, he says: ‘I know you will ask how many pieces you may harvest. “Can I harvest it all?” It’s all yours, do what you want. You see, I don’t have to do much anymore, you know how to garden yourselves.’

‘If the corncob is not very ripe, it means it is not very sweet. If you leave it for a week, it will either be more ripe or eaten by birds. So see for yourself, I love children that can think for themselves.’

Gradually the large quantities, as well as the sizes of the vegetables, posed challenges to the children, leading to remarks such as: ‘It’s so big, it doesn’t fit in my bag’ and ‘I don’t even know what to do with it.’ Children were not always able to take home all of the vegetables, yet they were reluctant to leave them to go to waste. Children came up with solutions, such as giving vegetables away to other children who had not grown as many. Moreover, children were challenged to consider whether and how many vegetables to take home, taking into account factors such as the size of their family, groceries already purchased or planned, and parents’ plans for evening meals.
‘I eat the vegetables because I have grown them with my own hands’

A girl has harvested nothing at all. Another girl asks her why she has harvested nothing when they are allowed to harvest their vegetables. ‘Yes, I know, but my mother might already have bought a lettuce.’ ‘Take one,’ says the other girl. ‘No,’ she repeats. ‘But you are supposed to,’ the other girl says. ‘No, you only harvest if you want to.’ ‘Oh, if I had known that I wouldn’t have picked one either,’ the second girl says.

Nora tells me that she wants to harvest some extra beans because the ones she took home last week have all been eaten. They have eaten them with potatoes. They have mixed them with supermarket ones but hers were tastier.

8.3.2 Enthusiasm for their own vegetables

Children’s attitudes towards the vegetables they cultivated were characterised by enthusiasm. They consider that harvesting is the most exciting part of gardening. As soon as the children went to the school garden, they attentively examined the state of their vegetables. During harvesting, there were lively conversations between them in which they showed each other their vegetables, comparing their quantity, form and size:

Vanessa: ‘Wooooooow! Look, so much spinach!’
Other children: ‘Sooooooooo! Woooooow!’
Jolanda: ‘Wow! Check my potato!’
Michelle: ‘Look at mine!’
Luuk: ‘That has grown really big’
Denise: ‘Look Belinda, mine is bigger! I am so happy!’

Children also proudly approached the researchers to show the vegetables they had harvested:

‘Miss, look, I have a carrot the shape of a machine gun!’

‘What a big onion, it looks like a tennis ball!’

Children’s enthusiasm for their vegetables soon translated into the wish to eat them. Many children indicated that they had even tried vegetables that they thought they did not like, explaining that their freshly harvested vegetables might be tasty after all.

I just wanted to try some of it and then it turned out that I quite liked it. I think I was a bit more open-minded towards vegetables. (Lilly)
Chapter 8

Because you do really want to eat your own food. You want to know how it tastes. Even if you don't like it, you still want to try it. For example, I really don't like carrots but when mine are ready [to harvest], I'm just going to eat them. (Tim)

A small number of children mentioned not trying out a specific vegetable because they were convinced they would not like the taste. As Sander said: ‘No, I really don't like onions!’ Some children mentioned wanting to taste a vegetable but realising they might not like it. They described sampling small pieces of it first in order to find out:

I'll first try it, but not the whole piece, just a little bit. And if I like it, then I'm going to eat all of it. (Miranda)

I'm going to taste it: I'm going to cut off a piece and then I'll taste it to see if I like it. (Rachid)

Children wanted to try to eat their vegetables because they had put so much effort into cultivating them, and not eating them would have meant their efforts had been in vain:

Because if I don’t eat it, then it will rot and then it’s not... yeah that's a waste ... of the garden, all the planting and stuff. (Melisa)

I do it [eating the vegetables] because I have grown them with my own hands and effort. (Omar)

Since the children had worked hard to grow their own vegetables and had ‘made’ them themselves, they were curious about how they tasted and expected them to be better than shop-bought vegetables. Also because the vegetables were so fresh, the children expected them to taste better than vegetables bought at a supermarket.

Because you actually will grow vegetables yourself. And then you actually like it that you eat them. And you then want to find out how it tastes when you have the ones from the supermarket or when you have those you made yourself. (Lana)

Well, I don’t know. It is, you really know it’s fresh. And yes, it is a bit better if it just comes straight out of the ground...That's just tastier. (Latifa)

8.3.3 Involvement in choosing and preparing vegetables

Children looked forward to taking their vegetables home, anticipating positive reactions from their families. Parents were generally surprised and
‘I eat the vegetables because I have grown them with my own hands’

delighted with the harvest, adding even more to the children’s sense of pride and enthusiasm.

Yes, they think it’s great fun. And then my mother doesn’t have to buy groceries and she thinks it’s great fun. (Tom)

Children placed great value on their vegetables being used at home. They negotiated with their parents about using all of the vegetables, even when there were many vegetables or when they were full of insects:

My mother said: ‘Omar, there are far too many insects on them; we’d better throw them away.’ And then I said: ‘No, just clean them properly! That’s a waste. I have done my best to grow them.’ (Omar)

Increasingly, parents began to take children’s harvest into account when thinking about what meals to prepare. While she was visiting the school garden and observing her child harvesting lettuce, a mother said to one of the researchers: ‘I have already bought a lettuce, but I guess I won’t use that one’. In addition, many children became involved in deciding on and preparing meals:

Then I say: ‘Mummy, if you take care of the groceries, I will see what I can take home from the garden and then we can decide together what to eat.’ (Kaya)

But now she often brings home vegetables and wants to help, like when she has lettuce, to wash it, even if it is three times, because obviously there is quite some sand on it. And then she says: ‘The lettuce from the garden doesn’t need dressing on it because it is really fresh so it’s good the way it is.’ (Sophie’s mother)

Children regularly brought home different types of vegetable during the harvesting period and they often tried to eat them. Some children found out they liked a vegetable they used to dislike or that they gradually developed a taste for it.

Well, I think I used to dislike cucumber before but now I don’t. I didn’t like it but my brother and sister did. But then I got to like it more and more. (Tom)

I think tomatoes are nice but sometimes...inside there is something and that is soft and I don’t like that. But now I do. Because I ate it so many times and then I liked it. (Nora)
In some cases, however, trying a vegetable did not lead to children developing a taste for it, but rather confirmed their dislike.

Lettuce I didn't like so much, because it's so bitter, and I still feel that way. (Theo)

I didn't eat the spinach and radishes because I don't like them. I gave them to my mother because she is fond of them. I did taste them but I didn't think they're nice. (Samantha)

The introduction of vegetables into the children's homes was not always limited to eating their own harvest. Some children also asked their parents to buy the vegetables they had tried and liked from the school gardening programme, an indication that the vegetable promoting effect extends beyond the programme itself.

I asked my mother: 'Do you want to buy radishes some time because I think they were very tasty.' (Kaya)

[After having eaten all the courgettes from the garden] Last week, we bought courgettes. Because we often don't really know what to eat for dinner and my mother often thinks of something. But sometimes we can ask for something and I thought: oh, we can buy courgettes. (Eva)

8.4 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was twofold: first, to gain insights into children's experiences and perceptions of gardening and its contribution to changing attitudes towards and consumption of vegetables, and second to understand how children enact agency towards vegetables. Our study is consistent with other qualitative studies (Lautenschlager & Smith, 2007; Libman, 2007) in pointing out that children themselves link gardening to eating more vegetables. Children are excited about gardening. They tend their vegetables carefully, making sure to 'separate the weed from the crop' and eliminate garden pests. They impatiently anticipate harvesting and are enthusiastic about their own vegetables once they have picked them, especially when there are large quantities, big sizes or peculiar forms. Children show their vegetables to and compare them with those produced by other children and are proud when they regard their harvest to be superior and disappointed when they regard it to be inferior. Moreover, children want to eat their vegetables, both familiar or new types and some they previously disliked, not
wanting the vegetables they had worked so hard on to go to waste, and expecting their own and freshly harvested vegetables to be tastier than supermarket ones. This is consistent with Gatto et al’s (2012) finding that children involved in a garden-based nutrition intervention tended to believe that vegetables from the garden taste better than vegetables from the shop.

The analysis of children’s behaviour from an agency perspective showed that they increasingly became more autonomous in gardening and were encouraged to reflect on and make considered choices about what to do with their – sometimes abundant – harvest. Children attached great importance to not leaving the vegetables to go to waste, and sought solutions such as giving vegetables away to other children. Moreover, children considered which vegetables and how many their own families would need. Consistent with findings of Thorp and Townsend (2001), we found that children were very eager to take their vegetables home. Once they had done so, children placed great value on them being eaten. They negotiated with their parents about using all of the vegetables and increasingly became partners in deciding on and preparing meals. Due to the children’s incessant enthusiasm and involvement, children reported that they and their families ate more vegetables which, in some cases, contributed to acquiring a taste for some vegetables. This is consistent with studies that point out that mere exposure and regular samplings can lead children to appreciate foods (Birch, 1999; Birch & Fisher, 1998; Nicklaus, 2009).

The changes in children’s attitudes towards their own vegetables is activated by programme routines that increasingly grant them more autonomy and decision-making, in accordance with the idea that agency comes about as practices are performed and that these practices also provide the subjects with positions that guide their actions (Bollig & Kelle, 2016). Furthermore, the school garden educators and the other children, as well as parents, encouraged the children to become more active regarding their vegetables. Whereas the school garden educators actively encouraged the children to ‘think for themselves’, the presence of other children added a sense of competitiveness, making the children want to have as many and as big vegetables as possible. Parents’ enthusiasm regarding their harvest added to their children’s own enthusiasm and pride, but also instilled a sense of confidence in contributing to family decisions about meals and eating vegetables. This is in line with the thought that agency is embedded in children’s social relations and interdependency and that at the same time their actions affect their relationships (Esser et al., 2016; Bollig & Kelle, 2016).
The school gardening programme is promising in the promotion of vegetables and might contribute to intrinsic motivation of children to eat vegetables. According to the self-determination theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation is an autonomous form of motivation that involves doing something merely because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. Therefore, intrinsic motivation leads to greater commitment in individuals displaying that behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Our study showed that children are enthusiastic about gardening and that school gardening has potential to improve the attitudes of children from low SES-groups towards eating vegetables. This is of special importance, because children from low SES-groups are at higher risk of unhealthy eating, particularly inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption (Fernandez-Alvira et al., 2014; Zarnowiecki, Dollman, & Parletta, 2014). During the school gardening seasons, intrinsic motivation seems to have been brought about but more research is needed on whether this translates into long lasting behavioural changes.

The main strength of this study is the use of multiple qualitative methods. In particular, participant observation proved to be a powerful method to gain insights into children’s actions and perspectives. Intensive observations were conducted for a prolonged duration, allowing us to gain thorough understanding of the year-round programme and children’s perceptions of it. Limitations of the study are the limited numbers of participating schools and children, as well as a lack of information on long-term changes in children’s vegetable consumption at home. Similarly, it could not be objectively determined whether or not children consumed their vegetables at home because vegetable consumption was self-reported.

In conclusion, these findings invite us, as Prout and James (1990, p.8) explained decades ago, to regard children as subjects who are ‘active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live’ when developing programmes concerned with children, nutrition and health. Designing school gardening programmes in such a way that children become increasingly autonomous in gardening and harvesting means that they can develop ownership of their vegetables, allowing the children to decide, act and become agents of change. To gain better insights into the short- and long-term effects of school gardening we need more research on family dynamics during and after school gardening and harvesting, and on long-term impacts on children’s consumption of vegetables.
'I eat the vegetables because I have grown them with my own hands'
Chapter 9

Conclusions and discussion
This chapter presents the conclusions of my research on child participation involving children growing up in contexts of poverty. Chapters 4 to 8 addressed the main research question:

*How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?*

To answer this question, this thesis first focused on understanding the lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty from their perspective. To direct this part of the study, two sub-questions were formulated, namely:

1. **What is the child's perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?**
2. **How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?**

The second part was concerned with how to enhance children's lives and well-being and was also directed by two sub-questions:

3. **Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?**
4. **What are children's perspectives on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child's perspective, can it be improved?**

The sub-questions are answered and discussed in the first part of this chapter. This is followed by a reflection on the main research question and the validity of the research findings. The chapter closes with suggestions for future research.

### 9.1 Conclusions on the sub-questions

1. **What is the child's perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?**

Chapters 4 and 5 provided insights into how children relate to what we consider to be growing up in a context of poverty. In our research we followed the suggestion of Sime (2008) and Roets et al. (2013) to focus on the specific context in which the research took place while acknowledging that not all individual participants consider themselves to be living in poverty. Gradually, information about children's perspectives on inadequacy and poverty, and about children's self-representation, came to the surface. A striking outcome from our study was the denial of or taboo on poverty, even while poverty seemed to be omnipresent.

In chapter 4 we considered whether the labels 'poor' and 'poverty' are rejected consciously or sub-consciously. Although it is possible that children
genuinely don’t consider themselves to be poor, it could also be that they actively reject the label ‘poor’ and don’t want to be associated with poverty. In our analysis we considered that denial of poverty might be the result of children’s limited frame of reference, as they live with other children in similar circumstances and, in their local context, their standard of living is ‘normal’. Children demonstrated a limited view of what it means to grow up in the Netherlands, basing it on their own experiences which are generalized to the Dutch society as a whole. When children pointed to the presence of a few ‘poor children’ in their midst they maintained that this doesn’t place the neighbourhood as a whole apart from other Dutch districts. Children in our research identified others as being poor only in relation to other children in the neighbourhood. It might be helpful here, to revisit the concept of relative poverty elaborated by Townsend (1979) and validated by others like Lister (2004) and Coumans (2012), as expounded in chapter 1. As we have seen, according to this conception it is possible to judge whether or not someone lives in relative poverty only in relation to other people living in the same society and to classify people as poor when they lack the resources to achieve the living conditions or participate in the activities which are customary in the societies to which they belong. Townsend did not develop this concept to address the psychological processes leading people to classify themselves and others, nor did he consider children in presenting his conception of relative poverty. In this thesis, by extension, I am interested in children’s emic perspectives. The findings of the research give us reason to extend the idea of relative poverty to children’s self-conception. Furthermore, the theory of social identity (Tajfel, 1974; Castano et al., 2002) has been helpful in understanding why children might not want to be considered as poor. Tajfel’s theory draws attention to social categorization as a purposeful process aimed at enhancing individuals’ self-esteem. Seen from this perspective, children may not want to be associated with poverty because this is not beneficial to their acquisition of a positive social identity, contributing to a sense of self-esteem.

The fact that children don’t (say they) consider themselves to be growing up in poverty, however, doesn’t mean that they don’t speak about (material) deficiencies that affect them personally or their neighbourhood as a whole. Indeed, many children’s accounts of their lives and neighbourhood would lead outsiders to conclude that they live in poverty or in a disadvantaged neighbourhood or even to label them as ‘poor children’. Qualitative research with children who are experiencing poverty is still a relatively new and developing field. Research endeavours are exploring the impact of poverty on children living in complex economic and social conditions from...
their perspectives, ensuring that research participants are treated as subjects rather than objects of research (Attree, 2006; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Roets et al., 2013). With this thesis I want to contribute to the emic viewpoint of growing up in poverty, but also want to highlight the importance of taking note of outsiders’ (adult) views of child poverty in order to confront emic and etic perspectives. Analysing both provides insights on similarities and differences in perspectives, and helps to establish where communications are likely to falter and interventions are needed.

In chapters 4 and 5 issues identified by children as having a negative impact on their well-being were: the poor quality of public playgrounds; the unsafe neighbourhood; lack of opportunities to join clubs and activities; inadequate housing; parental unemployment and low-paid jobs. Disadvantaged children depend more heavily on public places than other children because of cramped housing, lack of money for organized activities and clubs, and lack of money to travel at weekends and holidays. Moreover, these children’s parents often cannot afford after-school care when they are absent. The public areas that are available to children are perceived to be unsafe and in poor condition and offer insufficient variation and challenge. Our findings are consistent with other Western qualitative studies on child poverty (e.g. Attree, 2006; Sutton, 2008; Van Gils & Willekens, 2010; Ridge, 2011; Roets et al., 2013) and thus once again point to the need to take action to improve children’s living and playing conditions.

Adopting a lifeworld orientation by using the photovoice method meant giving space to children to discuss their lives as they saw fit. It is striking that the children’s accounts do not focus only on deficiencies in their lives, but also on the resources to which they have access. Recently Reich et al. (2017) drew attention to the tendency in Western research paradigms to research the negative and accentuate disharmony, rather than appreciating and expanding upon the resources available within communities. Involving indigenous youth communities led them to identify strengths as well as limitations of the youth participants. Children in our study tended to discuss positive aspects of their lives before addressing negative aspects, suggesting that over time they felt comfortable enough to do so. Deficiencies and resources often go hand in hand. For example, while children discussed the inadequacy of playgrounds they also spoke of places in the outside sphere they value and where they meet with other children, compensating for lack of space at home. In addition, in some cases a single issue was presented in both a positive and a negative light and/or children’s tone changed over time. For example, at the beginning of the project, most children spoke of
having lots to do, such as attending clubs, singing lessons and sports activities. However, later on, it turned out that they had been speaking about activities they had joined in the past or would like to join if their families had more resources. At the same time children came to speak of the creativity and inventiveness they and their families developed to attend activities in the neighbourhood that were inexpensive or free of charge and to develop talents.

In conclusion, children's accounts of their lives provide insights into how children want to be approached. We already know from literature that poverty is surrounded by taboos and that children who face deprivation tend to avoid using labels as ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ and sometimes get angry or upset when others, like researchers, use these terms (Sime, 2008). Our findings provide additional insights into the nature of this avoidance, relating it to the relative nature of poverty and social identity considerations. Children's accounts bring us to the realization that there are two ways to approach children's lives, both of which have value and legitimacy. On the one hand children have inadequacies in their lives and on the other there are resources from which they can draw. One can emphasize the negative calling for intervention, or take notice of children's active attitudes vis-à-vis adversity as manifestations of agency that should be supported. In the view of this research there is a need for a balanced perspective that takes account of both, which can be the most beneficial in terms of having an impact on change.

2. How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?

Chapters 4 to 8 variously deal with the question of how children's experiences can best be understood. In both studies, procedures were developed and reflected upon, methods were employed, and children and adults were questioned, leading us to insights into requirements for meaningful consultations with children. These requirements, concerning the process, approach and methods used in consultations with children growing up in contexts of poverty, are summarized below:

*Time and graduality:* First, in our study we experienced the importance of taking time for discussions on sensitive topics to develop gradually. The topic of poverty in particular needed to be approached carefully, given the sensitivity of discussions concerning poverty in wealthy Western settings. We adopted Sime's (2008) and Roets et al.'s (2013) suggestion to
focus on the specific context in which the research takes place and consult children about their lifeworld in its entirety. We found that discussions with children about their lives as a whole were helpful to get an idea of the role poverty does (or does not) play in their lives and that general discussion slowly progressed into more specific discussions, including about what it means to be poor in the West. Furthermore, we experienced that rather than opting for one-off consultation, which often leads to thin descriptions and little impact, various stages of consultations are needed, as suggested in literature (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Borland et al., 2001; Hill, 2006). In particular, we found that children discussed positive aspects of their lives and conversations tended to be light before turning to more complex and problematic aspects of children's lives. By taking time and giving room to children to give direction to conversations, in our study discussions about poverty and deficiency unfolded gradually.

*Put children in the centre:* In line with the need to take time and let the process gradually unfold, in this study we experienced the importance of putting children in central position in order to let their thoughts and experiences lead the research. We chose to meet children's experiences and needs open-mindedly and without predetermined ideas in the following ways. First, the researchers set out to develop genuine cooperation with the children, which meant that although they had some initial ideas on the course of the process, increasingly room was given to children's ideas and initiatives, letting them give direction to the project, in particular what to photograph when. We chose, together with the children, procedures that fit their preferences. For example, the decision to let the activities take place in children's neighbourhood and in places they frequent, was partly prompted by the need to ensure that children felt at ease, as we know that children are highly sensitive to the context in which research takes place (Hill, 2006). Many of our encounters took place in the youth centre, a place where the children felt secure and that they regularly frequented and knew well. They often arrived before the start of our sessions or stayed after sessions had ended. In line with findings from Liebenberg et al. (2017) we encountered that casually meeting the children at the youth centre at these moments helped us to improve our understanding of their activities, their daily routines and their outlook on what is important in their lives. Furthermore, it has been noted that some children are not forthcoming in a group but open up in an individual interview, while others are nervous on a one-to-one basis and more confident in a group (Punch, 2002; Hill, 2006). In addition, we found that children, in particular girls, at times favoured all-friends group interviews, in line with literature that states that groups work best
if members know each other as it is easier talking with your friends (Hoppe et al., 1995; Green & Hart, 1999; Hill, 2006). For this reason the decision to work in a plenary group, in subgroups or with individual children, was made from week to week in consultation with the children. Finally, while children have the right to participate and many of them want to, we thought it important to ensure that we do not impinge on children’s own activities and give them the opportunity to decide from meeting to meeting whether to take part. This fits with findings that children see their ‘own time’ as a precious resource over which they like to have control and which needs protecting from adults’ time demands (Christensen et al., 2000; Christensen, 2002).

**Ethnographic approach:** An ethnographic approach to research subjects and their experiences and lives means that researchers engage with them in the field of interest and observe cultural phenomena from the perspective of the people involved, experiencing how they relate to the contexts in which they spend their lives. In our study, ethnography was used to gain insights into children’s perspectives on growing up in a context of poverty, and on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. The ethnographic approach fitted the requirement of graduality and proved to be helpful in exploring the phenomenon of child poverty from a child’s perspective, leading us to identify a taboo on poverty versus its ubiquity. Furthermore, ethnography was helpful in assessing the school gardening programme from the child’s perspective, which has not been done before in the Netherlands. Based on the experiences with ethnography in this study, I suggest that researchers select methodologies that are participatory, and engage children in such a manner that fosters a special bond, and that layers come off and new insights come to the surface. Again, time is a key issue, especially since children fence off parts of their living world. This not only demands commitment and genuine interest on behalf of the researchers or others involved, but also touches on ethics, as it is important to be sensitive towards and respect children’s boundaries concerning what they want and do not want to disclose (yet). Continual communication is necessary regarding what is captured for research purposes and what is not.

**Photovoice method:** Photovoice is an excellent participatory method for engaging children. The method enriches the research process by its focus on images that tell the children’s own stories and generate more empathy than words alone. Photovoice makes it possible for children to take charge of conversations, putting the image in the forefront and offering children the opportunity to clarify their stories verbally. In our study, the programme was not fixed, we were always open to adjust and adapt to the unexpected, for
example when children needed more time to get acquainted with each other and the researcher or when they had better ideas on activities. Liebenberg et al. (2017) indicated that flexibility of a project creates a space within which youth can become comfortable with the research process, develop an understanding of the intent of the project, and gain confidence to adapt the project as they choose. Consequently, they are able to assume as much or as little ownership of the process as they want to. In our study we started out with an open invitation to children to photograph aspects of their lives they consider important. However, since some domains of their lives remained underrepresented, as the project progressed we encouraged children to include these areas as well, leaving it up to children whether they want to.

In this study, we found that an extensive photovoice project that does not focus only on photography but also offers children the opportunity to travel, play and informally interact with each other and adults, facilitates an engagement with children for an extended period in a fun manner. As is pointed out by Hill (2006) children are attracted to methods that give immediate pleasure, and by enriching photovoice projects with other activities, it is possible to maintain contact with a group of children over a long period. This is important as employing photovoice once and briefly could lead to insufficient depth and false insights and interpretations. Surprisingly though, photovoice projects often are predominantly focused on photography, and variation of activities and time are not mentioned as factors for success (Wang et al., 2004; Strack et al., 2004; Necheles et al., 2004; Wang, 2006). Although the literature considers the need for enough photos to reach saturation (Strack et al., 2010; Nykiforuk et al., 2011), less consideration is given to the importance of taking enough time for a cyclical process in which new ideas for photography arise and are executed, and deeper layers of meaning are uncovered. Furthermore, it is important to come full circle by preparing a dialogue with relevant stakeholders in order to have children’s stories heard. This starts with giving children the opportunity to speak up in a way that fits their competences and interests, involving a mode of presenting with which they are comfortable and which moves policymakers to action.

Child agency and action: Child participation in research and agency are deeply connected, as acknowledging children’s ability to act and contribute to societal life is a condition for genuine participation, regardless of the domain or its nature. However, from our study I infer that by deliberately deploying an agency perspective, we deepen our insights into children’s lives and needs. This means that one recognizes that children not only have their
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own distinctive views but also are active in engaging with and shaping their environments. Taking an action-focused perspective that acknowledges and pays attention to child agency and the (social) resources children use, contributes to deepening insights into poor children's lives. Besides learning about the challenges children face, I infer that they actively strive to better their conditions and enhance their well-being. These insights could better enable policymakers and practitioners to arrange practices in such a manner that children's skills, involvement and sense of ownership are enforced. The analysis of children's behaviour regarding their school gardens and vegetables from an agency perspective showed that they became increasingly responsible for their vegetables, activated by programme routines that gradually grant them more autonomy and decision-making. This is in accordance with the idea that agency comes about as practices are performed and that these practices also provide the subjects with positions that guide their actions (Bollig & Kelle, 2016).

To reiterate, different aspects concerning the approach and methods used in this study worked together and contributed to gaining insights into children's experiences with and perspectives on growing up in poverty. As we chose to put children in the centre, time was needed for their personal development as well as their narratives on their lives to gradually unfold. The ethnographic approach through which children were approached in their natural environment of living and the photovoice method facilitated an intensive process in which we had contact with the children for a long period of time, getting to know them and their living conditions. By adopting an agency perspective, considering children as active human beings not only in research but also in their social environments, we developed broader insights into their perspectives and needs.

3. Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?

Changes and improvements in children's living conditions require the active involvement of children in the design, development and evaluation of policy and programmes. In this study, we experienced the benefits of child participation in policy-making processes as the photo project stimulated local policymakers to discuss the issue of youth poverty, taking children's perspectives into account. For many policymakers, it was the first time they had actively communicated with children in a policy context, and they were surprised with the new insights. This confronted them with their own ideas of what children are capable of and led them to wonder why they didn’t
listen to children before. Other research has pointed to the potential of photovoice to shift adults’ perceptions of groups of children, for instance recently unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Rogers et al., 2017). Our work shows that this may also be the case with children growing up in contexts of poverty. In addition, the policymakers became enthusiastic about the potential of child participation as a means to address and prioritize the issues and needs identified by children. The enthusiasm of the officials of the local council spread to the city of Amsterdam more broadly, leading to a large strategy meeting in which the examples of children were at the heart of the table. This shows that achieving successes locally and communicating these successfully can help child participation in policy-making processes spread to other sites or to a larger scale.

Time and graduality, as is discussed under sub-question 2, also have another dimension, relating not only to processes with involved children but also to policymakers. From chapter 6, I conclude that both children and policymakers need time to open up to each other and for cooperation. Room for communication can be created and expanded by involving children in a challenging and fun process on the one hand and gradually fostering the interest of policymakers in the process and output, and thus in children’s lives and stories, on the other. As we have seen in chapter 2, child participation is a two-way learning process and involves both children and adults. Based on the experiences in our photo project, I propose that children’s process is more about growth of confidence, while that of the policymakers is about becoming more receptive to children’s experiences and thoughts. These two aspects interconnect as children’s confident presentation of their experiences and thoughts can compel policymakers to listen, inciting them to action. In chapter 2 I considered the importance of self-esteem for and the active pursuit thereof by individuals (Crocker, 2000; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Crocker & Park, 2002). I stated that one of our aims with this study was to consider how child participation can contribute to tackling the issue of child poverty in a manner that enhances rather than diminishes self-esteem. By investing in children and stimulating their growth as well as the maturation of their narratives on their lives in their own pace, allowing them to uncover aspects of their lives as they see fit, self-esteem was enhanced and children were enabled to confidently enter into conversations with policymakers and others. Therefore, rather than starting out by connecting with and mobilizing policymakers as is suggested by Wang (2006), this research demonstrates an advantage in starting by empowering children to build their own narrative about their lives and neighbourhood.
4. What are children’s perspectives on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with children’s experiences with and perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. From our research on this programme we learned that participants are enthusiastic about school gardening. Fun and pride are important considerations for children in attending school gardening. The process of gardening is considered fun as it is attached to being free and learning in a playful manner away from the classroom. In addition, a sense of pride is gained from learning new things and developing as more autonomous and successful gardeners. Increasingly the gains of gardening become more tangible as children yield harvest like flowers and herbs and, in particular, vegetables. Children experience enjoyment and excitement in seeing their own vegetables grow and comparing these with other children’s and are proud when they have large quantities and big vegetables. Last, children state that eating their own vegetables is more ‘fun’ than eating store-bought ones, and express enjoying food preparation with their families, filling them with pride that ‘their vegetables’ are on the menu.

In line with literature that suggests that children are not prone to eating vegetables (Skinner et al., 2002; Pérez-Rodrigo et al., 2003; Cooke & Wardle, 2005) we found that eating vegetables and health interests are not primary aims for children. However, cultivating and consuming their own vegetables is considered to be fun and fills the children with a sense of pride, leading some children to want to eat their vegetables and even promote others to eat them. This underwrites the notion that availability and accessibility of vegetables, as well as the psychological consequences of eating them and social context, all play a role in children’s acceptance and willingness to eat vegetables (Keim et al., 2001; Cooke & Wardle, 2005; Wind et al., 2005; Libman, 2007). However, children’s increasing enthusiasm with the vegetables they grow and willingness to taste and even promote ‘their vegetables’ as we found in our research, does not mean that children gain a sense of the importance of eating vegetables for health purposes. Similarly, children’s suggested improvements are not necessarily aimed at eating more vegetables and enhancing their health but at increasing enjoyment and the convenience of gardening, which might contribute to more vegetable harvest and consumption.
Improving children’s vegetable preferences and consumption through school gardening is a process and, what’s more, not guaranteed. Different children achieve different results, dependent for example on their willingness to taste and the opportunity they have at home to use their vegetables. In order to strengthen the results of school gardening with regard to enhancing vegetable consumption by children living in poverty, it is important to combine it with health education. This should not, however, be at the expense of the freedom to cultivate their own vegetables as children consider this to be fun and it provides them with a sense of pride. For some children this might lead to a more lasting effect on vegetable consumption than education would, because it cultivates more intrinsic motivation to eat vegetables.

In chapter 7 the recommendation was made to implement participatory learning in school gardening as an answer to children’s desire for more autonomy to decide what to grow and to experiment with their gardens. At this point, I want to add to this that it might be conducive to use participatory techniques to research and design or improve school gardening programmes. This will enable programme makers to benefit from the advantages of child participation, as set out in chapter 2, in particular the unique and essential experiential knowledge children can contribute (Franklin & Sloper, 2005; Franks, 2011). Engaging children in a PAR trajectory concerning school gardening fits with the call from the children in our research for more autonomy and will lead to perhaps entire new insights as children might ask other questions than we did, leading to different recommendations that can be used in tailoring such programmes.

9.2 Overall conclusion

This thesis examined the significance of child participation in research and policy-making processes, its added value for understanding the child’s perspective on what it means to grow up in contexts of poverty, and on what is needed to enhance children’s lives and well-being. I started this thesis by underlining, in chapter 2, the importance of child participation and of finding out the child’s perspective for developing sound interventions aimed at improving the quality of children’s lives. In this study our specific group of interest was children growing up in contexts of poverty. Children were consulted and lessons were learned about their perceptions and experiences, and insights were gained into conditions for successful child participation among this element of youth populations. We came to the understanding
that although these children live in deprived conditions, which in some cases they themselves recognize and identify, they don't consider themselves or their neighbourhood as 'poor'. Moreover, we came to the realization that both deficiencies and resources have a place in children's self-perceptions and should be included in how they are approached.

From this and other findings I deduce important requirements for interventions aimed at improving children's lives. First, it is most important to consider how children represent themselves and consequently adapt vocabulary and develop informed procedures to fit how children view their circumstances. We already know from the literature that children living in poverty tend to avoid using labels such as 'poverty' and 'poor' and sometimes get angry or upset when confronted with these terms (Sime, 2008). Employing language indicating poverty and deprivation directly is of little use when children don't feel addressed, or may be even harmful when children purposefully reject such labels. However, in our research we found that, if sufficient time is taken and sound methods are used, children are keen on uncovering their needs and deficiencies in their neighbourhood. They should, therefore, be approached as partners with experiential knowledge that is of great value. Rather than focusing consultations with children on poverty, discussions should, depending on the aim, concern specific themes or, as we have done in our study, their neighbourhood as a whole. This does not mean that discussions about poverty should be shunned. Putting children in charge in a participatory process and employing a life-world orientation in which all themes are of interest allows room for all aspects of children's lives to be discussed, including poverty and deprivation.

Child participation using a range of qualitative methods turned out to be a good approach to reveal the perspectives of children on growing up in a poor neighbourhood. As also pointed out by Clacherty and Donald (2007), uncovering the child's authentic voice is a challenge for researchers and involving children as partners can help overcome this. However, authenticity is not guaranteed and with child participation new questions arise. Child participation does not simply resolve problems of power, exploitation or coercion (e.g. Alderson, 2001). In research with children disparities can even become more manifest as professional adult researchers and 'lay' child researchers cooperate intensively. Among the questions that might arise are: How can children work with professional researchers on equal, informed and unpressured terms? How much should professional researchers intervene to support children or to control the research? And who should have final control over the data and any reports, the children or adult or both
jointly? The answers to these questions are not pre-determined, but are dependent on children’s possibilities and preferences. Given the advantage of adult researchers in terms of power and experience and to avoid tokenism, appropriate conditions for children to find out about and communicate their wishes should be created by giving them the chance to participate in activities without feeling pressurised in any way. By making meetings fun and giving children space to informally engage, as we did in this study, creating a situation in which there are no right or wrong answers and children are allowed to ask questions just as much as answering them, gradually a sense of what children need and want is gained. It is important to realise that putting children in charge might also mean that they decide that their role is modest, perhaps even opting merely an informal and recreational commitment. At the same time, as children become more aware of the terms on which they want to contribute, it is critical to (1) give children who want to greater control over the agenda, (2) give them more time and space to talk about issues that affect them, and (3) enable children to interpret and explain their own data.

Participation processes involving children in contexts of poverty should target both children and adults, in particular policymakers. In part, separated trajectories are needed, since the challenge for both is different. While children need to grow as experiential experts articulating their needs and experiences, policymakers need to develop openness towards children and their thoughts, in part brought about by children’s compelling presentations. For this reason it is important to start with children, empowering them to speak up and working on their narrative on their lives and presentation abilities before addressing policymakers.

Furthermore, gaining profound insights into children’s lives and needs and bringing about meaningful encounters between children and policymakers takes time. It is of great importance to invest in children by setting up joyful and educational projects that are not only aimed at answering research questions and policy-making but also provide children with experiences they value, like travelling to other parts of the country for outings in which they are interested, playing ball and having informal conversations with researchers and other adults. Children appreciate attention and as relationships develop, more aspects of their lives are laid bare. In turn, time investments pay off as multiple goals are achieved and children’s positive development is supported.
Finally, our study revolved around two projects of different natures, and it is good to consider their respective contributions to child welfare. While the photo project is a new project taking as a starting point children’s experiences and perspectives on what is needed to improve their lives, the school gardening programme has had a long history in Amsterdam and a specific aim. In order to contribute to children’s well-being both types of project are important. Broad, open defined participatory projects aimed at understanding children’s lives leave a lot of room for experimenting and gaining experiences together with children. The school gardening has a specific focus and more structure in order to achieve its aims. Although its structured set-up is functional in training children in gardening and therefore appreciated by children, the children also call for more autonomy. Opportunities to incorporate participatory approaches, both in learning processes during and in the design and improvement of such programmes, could be explored. Projects like the photo project that take as a starting point children’s lives and have child participation as main focus, can serve as valuable testing grounds of how to do this properly.

9.3 Validity of the findings

Chapter 3 described which measures were incorporated in the design of the research to enhance the validity of findings. In this section, I reflect on the implementation of these measures.

Internal validity
The internal validity is concerned with the role of the researcher and the possibility that bias influences data and analysis. The researchers’ personalities were important factors in both the photo project and the school gardening project, as we were physically present and strived to build relationships with the children, not only to merely obtain answers to straightforward research questions. As the researchers were their own primary data-collection instrument, all our statements, silences and actions were important. In view of this, it is important to consider the researchers’ positionality. In the photo project, the principal field researcher (and writer of this thesis) had the same ethnic background as some of the children - belonging to an ethnic and a religious minority. This contributed to an atmosphere of trust and open-heartedness. The second researcher has a native, secular background and contributed a candid and inquisitive attitude. However, in spite of the differences in researchers’ backgrounds, there were also many common characteristics that distinguished them from the
children: both researchers are older than the children and highly educated. Both are interested in and have much experience in working with the theme of child participation in a context of poverty in the Netherlands but are not poor themselves. This did not seem to pose an obstacle in connecting with the children, especially since poverty and being poor was not at the centre of discussions with children. Instead, the focus was on their neighbourhood (or in the other study on school gardening) with which the researchers were much less familiar than the children. In addition, communication between researchers and children was two-way and led to lively informal conversations that produced in-depth insights.

In order to reduce researcher’s bias, we used several strategies. One important strategy was investigator triangulation, as several researchers were involved in data collection and analyses. In both the photo project and the school gardening project, two investigators entered the research field, conversing with children and making observations which were compared and reflected on, and formed the basis for joint analyses, from coding to write-up. This took place under the supervision of experienced academics who oversaw the entire project and carefully monitored the quality of execution. Another strategy was paying attention to discrepancies in evidence, discussing these elaborately in project groups. The presence of the researchers carries the risk of distortions due to differing child behaviour and socially desirable answers. The long duration of both projects, already discussed as one of the strengths of the study, contributed to diminishing such distortions as children gradually became used to the presence of the researchers and behaved naturally. Another important strategy of increasing validity is the use of sound methods. In both studies a combination of methods that strengthen each other and compensate for other methods’ weaknesses were used, such as the photovoice method, participant observation, individual interviews and group discussion. Furthermore, in addition to discrepancies yielded from the use of a single method, discrepancies produced from the use of two methods, for example between what the children said during interviews and what we saw during participant observations, formed the basis for extensive reflections.

**External validity**

External validity is concerned with the applicability of the findings to the broader context. The projects were mainly Amsterdam based and the findings are not generalizable to other sectors of the Dutch society that differ strongly from the groups researched. However, a few insights probably apply to other comparable areas and might be of use in approaching other
groups of children of mixed cultural backgrounds in affluent Western urban settings. In particular, there is reason to believe that the rejection of poverty also applies to other children. This means that although it is important to consider the specificity of each site, our experiences can be used for developing general approaches of children growing up in poverty that do not make discussion on poverty and deprivation central but rather children's lives and experiences – both negative and positive.

9.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

There are many issues relating to child poverty and its allied sociocultural problems to which future research could contribute significantly. Furthermore, the concept of child participation still has great potential for development through research and practice. This section considers some recommendations for further research based on the findings of this thesis and the limitations of its scope.

The researchers who formed part of this study spent an extended period of time working together with children living in conditions of poverty in the Netherlands, in order to gain insight into the children's own perspectives on their lives and needs. Invaluable insight was gained on how poverty is perceived by children; how in conditions of poverty, available resources are used by them; and how policymakers who seek to effect long-term change can benefit from collaborating with children and being informed of their perceptions and experiences. At the same time, child poverty is complex and cannot be understood or addressed from merely one stakeholder perspective. It would be interesting to bring together a range of people dealing with the context and the children from diverse methodological angles, as well as the children themselves. Consulting parents, educators, youth workers, swimming teachers etc. about their experiences with these children and these contexts could complement the children's own accounts.

To gain better insights into the lives and (social) resources of children living in poverty, we need to engage in an on-going exploration of domains in which children spend their time, such as sports clubs and community centres. Paying attention to the various contexts in which children live is important as it enables us to better understand their lives and where they take place. Furthermore, addressing the interaction between contexts and children helps us to understand children's agency through empirical
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observations of children’s actions within these contexts (Stoecklin, 2013; Lansdown, 2010; Dedding et al., 2015). Although there is growing research that acknowledges children’s agency, there is little that addresses the agency of children living in poverty, i.e. children’s strategies to mitigate their circumstances.

Research on the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty can be extended to other age groups, considering the specificity of children’s lives and differentiating between children. This might offer insights into the challenges and (social) resources facing younger children as well as teenagers across different domains. Furthermore, differentiating between experiences of girls and boys might also lead us to new insights. Methodologically, the study of child poverty still needs more attention. In this research, the photovoice method was mainly used, but other creative methods that fulfil the requirements should be explored as well and differentiated for different groups. For example, we found that girls were more willing to discuss their photographs in all-girl groups. Further research is needed to gain an understanding of this and other methodological requirements.

Furthermore, although the Amsterdam school gardening programme formed an important part of this research, an analysis of the short- and long-term effects of such a programme on the lives of children lays beyond its scope. For such an analysis we need more research on family dynamics during and after school gardening and harvesting, and on the long-term impacts on children’s consumption of vegetables.

This thesis presents 4.5 years of work that have been a personal journey and part of a concerted effort to reconfigure our understanding of child poverty in the Netherlands. When the work began in 2012, we knew little about how effective our methods might be, and whether child participation would in fact be an effective mode of intervention in this field. This thesis documents the evolution of the methods and my understanding not just of the issues surrounding child poverty in Amsterdam but also of their larger impacts on policymakers and practitioners. I have pointed out that children can not only participate responsibly in social issues concerning them, but that their participation can in fact offer valuable insights into long-term processes. But more work is needed for such a model to become a practical reality.
Conclusions and discussion
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Summary
Introduction

Close to half of the world's population, both in developing countries and in wealthy nations, lives in urban areas. One of the characteristics of many urban settings is the concentration of problems related to quality of life and the availability of resources. Of the urban population living in impoverished and suboptimal conditions, children are at a particularly high risk, as disadvantaged living conditions have a deep impact on children's well-being and the effects of their childhood experiences run well into their adult life, determining almost every aspect of their development: physical, emotional, psycho-social, behavioural and cognitive.

Much of the literature on child poverty deals with the so called developing countries, but in recent years there has been increasing attention paid to child poverty in wealthy countries as well. Research initiatives have identified the range of problems that children living in poverty need to grapple with on a daily basis. Among these are lack of or unsafe playing spaces; inadequate housing; and parental unemployment. They also face scarcity concerning the food environment, leading – in combination with other factors – to high levels of overweight and obesity in segments of Western urban populations with low socioeconomic status (SES). While in developing countries adults and children of high SES groups are at risk of becoming overweight or obese, in wealthy countries a gradient can be observed whereby both adults and children of socioeconomically disadvantaged households are more likely to be overweight or obese.

Given the scale of urban dwellers worldwide and the gravity and complexity of challenges facing urban populations, in particular children, it is critical to come up with new and refreshing ideas on how to improve the quality of life and well-being of those affected, not only in developing countries but also in affluent Western countries. Multiple studies have pointed out domains in which action is needed by providing evidence of the harmful effects of growing up in poverty on children's well-being, health and opportunities. Both public and private initiatives have been developed, with varying results, aimed at improving lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, for example focusing on healthy diets for children and prevention of overweight/obesity. As we know that child participation can lead to better services, it is important to consider its potential for improving interventions aimed at enhancing lives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty. Furthermore, given the consequences of poverty on children, it is of great importance to consider what their lives look like in order to
understand how they can be better supported. This means taking a close look at specific domains and practices in which children are involved, such as playing sites, school and home. One of practices in which children in Amsterdam are involved is the Amsterdam school gardening programme. Studying the Amsterdam school gardening programme is also important as it represents a promising intervention to enhance vegetable intake and prevent overweight/obesity in Amsterdam.

In this thesis I examine the realities facing children growing up in poverty in Amsterdam from their own perspective. I introduce and develop a participatory approach whereby initiatives to address the issue of poverty can be informed by the perspectives of those who experience its realities. In taking such an approach I hope to make explicit children's narratives about their lives and to inform policymakers and practitioners of these perspectives. This study aims to contribute to understanding the perspectives and experiences of children with regard to growing up in contexts of poverty, and to examine their perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme as an intervention to enhance vegetable consumption and prevent overweight/obesity and/or malnutrition. The main research question is framed as follows: *How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?*

**Theoretical concepts**
By studying children's lives, and incorporating participatory approaches, thorough insights are gained on the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty and what is needed to enhance their well-being. Both the process and the results of studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty are important subjects of study in this thesis.

Concerning the process of studying lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, four relevant concepts are highlighted: child participation, the child's perspective, child agency, and lifeworld orientation and everyday life. Since the declaration and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), we have seen a significant increase of interest in child rights and child participation. The adoption of the UNCRC meant an increased interest in involving young people through a range of participatory initiatives and consultations in order to capture the child's perspective, that is the child's insider perspective, based on what he or she considers to be important. Furthermore, the UNCRC challenges traditional conceptions of childhood, as it considers children to be subjects of rights,
implying they are, like adults, holders of agency. **Child agency** comprises the social capacity of children to act and create, and to change practices in order to achieve personal purposes. Finally, as this thesis deals with the question of how children perceive child poverty and how the child’s perspective on growing up in poverty can be grasped, a connection with the daily experiences of children is required. This is referred to as a **lifeworld orientation**, an interpretive paradigm that is rooted in theories of social pedagogy, and forms a methodological approach that takes into account the contexts in which children’s voices are produced and the circumstances of poverty that shape them. This contains a context-specific interpretation of children’s rights and interests, thus leaving room for different meanings, depending on these contexts.

In order to address the results of the study of the lives of children growing up in contexts of poverty, two concepts were incorporated in this thesis: policy dialogue and self-esteem. One key challenge of the current research was how to involve children effectively so that their stories are actually listened to and acted upon by policymakers. **Policy dialogue** is the process of adopting structured discussions into decision-making processes to help contribute to the development of evidence-informed policies. Local governments increasingly acknowledge the importance of taking children’s views into account to develop policies that fit their needs and daily reality, regarding them as stakeholders in their own right. It is necessary to design forms of dialogue and engagement that start from the position of the child. In light of this, we considered the importance of **self-esteem**. People are motivated to boost their self-esteem above their trait level and actively pursue self-esteem. In this study, we considered how child participation can contribute to children’s well-being. Since child poverty is a sensitive topic and there are indications that direct discussions on living in poverty can be challenging, we particularly explored how addressing child poverty and deprivation can be done in a positive manner that enhances rather than diminishes self-esteem.

**Research design**
The main research question that guides this thesis is:

*How can child participation improve our understanding of what it means for children to grow up in contexts of poverty, and of what is needed to enhance their lives and well-being?*
The main research question is further specified in the following sub-questions:
1: What is the child’s perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?

2: How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?
   2a: How can child poverty be discussed with children who grow up in contexts of poverty?
   2b: How can photovoice provide us with insights into daily activities of children growing up in contexts of poverty?

3: Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?

4: What is children’s perspective on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?

The study described in this thesis consists of two separate researches, both mainly situated in Amsterdam.

**Study 1: Studying perspectives and experiences of children growing up in contexts of poverty**

An extensive study was conducted on disadvantaged children’s lives and needs, resulting in three chapters of this thesis. In this study, we combined participatory action research [PAR] and ethnography, the former aimed at gaining knowledge about the children’s needs in order to give direction for policies and interventions that fit these needs. As part of the ethnographic approach, we conducted participant observation while working and travelling with the children.

The study was carried out in two deprived neighbourhoods in the provincial town of Hoorn and the city of Amsterdam. We were, in particular, sensitive regarding how to introduce this project to children. Children were not selected and invited on personal grounds. Instead, we aimed explicitly for a social mix of children by inviting all children from well-known deprived areas to participate in ‘a photo project on their lives and neighbourhood.’ Children were asked to take part in the project by local youth workers in Hoorn and by three primary schools in Amsterdam.
Photovoice was employed as a central method. A total of 29 children aged 8-14 years took photographs of things and places in the local environment which were important to them. In weekly meetings, focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews were conducted in which the children were invited to reflect on their photographs. Recruitment from an area of deprivation meant that most children were likely to be poor, although this was not assessed on an individual basis. When the issue of poverty explicitly came up in children's accounts, the opportunity existed for further discussions on the topic. At the same time, we were equally interested in the absence of reference to poverty. In order to contextualise the stories of children, the researchers also undertook informal conversations with parents, and conducted interviews with a primary school teacher, two youth workers and a policymaker.

The project was extended in Amsterdam with a dialogue between children and policymakers and a photo-exhibition. After the photo-exhibition, in the form of a photo stories table, stayed in the council office for a week for everyone to see and reflect on the photographs and the children's stories, the table was also exhibited at two schools and at a local library. At these locations, the children had the opportunity to discuss their photographs with their peers, communicate the results to their own communities and to influence local professionals.

**Study 2: Studying children's perspectives on the school gardening programme**

Two of the chapters in this thesis are dedicated to our study on children in low SES areas' perspectives on the Amsterdam school gardening programme. In an ethnographic study approach, participant observation was employed to gain thorough insights into children's thoughts on the programme and in particular how it affected vegetable intake, and their ideas for programme improvement. A naturalistic approach was assumed to enable the researchers to study children's experiences with gardening and harvesting in a natural setting and interpret these in terms of the meanings they have for the children involved. In participant observation, the researcher collects data by taking part in research targets' natural environments, and alternately adopting the role of active participant and observer.

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and select schools that had been participating in the Amsterdam school gardening programme for many years and that were located in city districts inhabited by the population of interest, i.e. children living in low-SES and high overweight and obesity
contexts. Since the selected schools were both already part of a larger mixed-methods study they also represented a convenience sample.

Between March and November 2015 two participant observers were present at all school gardening lessons to observe what events took place, what the children did and how they reacted to what they saw and heard. While participating in the gardening lessons of both schools, the participant observers assisted children in gardening activities, conversed with them informally and closely observed their actions and behaviour. Furthermore, to deepen our insights into children's perspectives on school gardening and the vegetables they cultivated, formal interviews were held with children from both schools. A FGD was held with the children from one of the groups to get a better understanding of the range of and variety in perceptions on school gardening and vegetable consumption. Finally, interviews were conducted with parents on what vegetables are eaten at home.

**Results**

*What is the child’s perspective on growing up in contexts of poverty?*

Children’s accounts of their lives provide insights into how children want to be approached. Poverty is surrounded by taboos and children who face deprivation tend to avoid using labels as ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’ and sometimes get angry or upset when others, like researchers, use these terms. Furthermore, children’s accounts bring us to the realization that there are two ways to approach children’s lives, both of which have value and legitimacy. On the one hand children have inadequacies in their lives and on the other there are resources from which they can draw. One can emphasize the negative calling for intervention, or take notice of children’s active attitudes vis-à-vis adversity as manifestations of agency that should be supported. In the view of this research there is a need for a balanced perspective that takes account of both, which can be the most beneficial in terms of having an impact on change.

*How can the experiences and perspectives of children who grow up in contexts of poverty best be understood?*

Different aspects concerning the approach and methods used in this study worked together and contributed to gaining insights into children’s experiences with and perspectives on growing up in poverty. As we chose to put children in the centre, time was needed for their personal development as well as their narratives on their lives to gradually unfold. The ethnographic
approach through which children were approached in their natural environment of living and the photovoice method facilitated an intensive process in which we had contact with the children for a long period of time, getting to know them and their living conditions. By adopting an agency perspective, considering children as active human beings not only in research but also in their social environments, we developed broader insights into their perspectives and needs.

*Under what conditions can children growing up in contexts of poverty and policymakers have a meaningful policy dialogue?*

Changes and improvements in children’s living conditions require the active involvement of children in the design, development and evaluation of policy and programmes. Both children and policymakers need time to open up to each other and for cooperation. Room for communication can be created and expanded by involving children in a challenging and fun process on the one hand and gradually fostering the interest of policymakers in the process and output, and thus in children’s lives and stories, on the other. Child participation is a two-way learning process and involves both children and adults. Whereas children’s process is more about growth of confidence, the policymakers’ is about becoming more receptive to children’s experiences and thoughts. These two aspects interconnect as children’s confident presentation of their experiences and thoughts can compel policymakers to listen, inciting them to action. By investing in children and stimulating their growth as well as the maturation of their narratives on their lives in their own pace, allowing them to uncover aspects of their lives as they see fit, self-esteem is enhanced and children are enabled to confidently enter into conversations with policymakers and others. Rather than starting out by connecting with and mobilizing policymakers, this research demonstrates an advantage in starting by empowering children to build their own narrative about their lives and neighbourhood.

*What are children’s perspectives on school gardening as a health-promoting programme and how, from the child’s perspective, can it be improved?*

From our research on the Amsterdam school gardening programme we learned that participants are enthusiastic about school gardening. Eating vegetables and health interests are not primary aims for children. Also, children’s suggested improvements for gardening are not necessarily aimed at eating more vegetables and enhancing their health but at increasing enjoyment and the convenience of gardening, which might contribute
to more vegetable harvest and consumption. Combining school gardening with health education might strengthen the results of school gardening with regard to enhancing vegetable consumption by children living in poverty, but should not be at the expense of the freedom to cultivate their own vegetables as children consider this to be fun and it provides them with a sense of pride. For some children this might lead to a more lasting effect on vegetable consumption than education would, because it cultivates more intrinsic motivation to eat vegetables. Finally, given children's call for more autonomy and room for experimentation, it might be conducive to use participatory techniques to research and design or improve school gardening programmes.

**Conclusions and discussion**

This thesis examined the significance of child participation in research and policy-making processes, its added value for understanding the child's perspective on what it means to grow up in contexts of poverty, and on what is needed to enhance children's lives and well-being. Our study showed that although children live in deprived conditions, which in some cases they themselves recognize and identify, they don't consider themselves or their neighbourhood as 'poor'. Moreover, both deficiencies and resources have a place in children's self-perceptions and should be included in how they are approached.

It is most important to consider how children represent themselves and consequently adapt vocabulary and develop informed procedures to fit how children view their circumstances. Employing language indicating poverty and deprivation directly is of little use when children don't feel addressed, or may be even harmful when children purposefully reject such labels. Rather than focusing consultations with children on poverty, discussions should, depending on the aim, concern specific themes or their neighbourhood as a whole. This does not mean that discussions about poverty should be shunned. Putting children in charge in a participatory process and employing a lifeworld orientation in which all themes are of interest allows room for all aspects of children's lives to be discussed, including poverty and deprivation.

Child participation using a range of qualitative methods turned out to be a good approach to reveal the perspectives of children on growing up in a poor neighbourhood, as it enabled capturing the child's voice. However, child participation is not without challenges. Among the questions that might arise are: How can children work with professional researchers on
equal, informed and unpressured terms? How much should professional researchers intervene to support children or to control the research? And who should have final control over the data and any reports, the children or adult or both jointly? The answers to these questions are not pre-determined, but are dependent on children’s possibilities and preferences. Given the advantage of adult researchers in terms of power and experience and to avoid tokenism, appropriate conditions for children to find out about and communicate their wishes should be created by giving them the chance to participate in activities without feeling pressurised in any way. It is important to realise that putting children in charge might mean that they decide that their role is modest, perhaps even opting merely an informal and recreational commitment. At the same time, as children become more aware of the terms on which they want to contribute, it is critical to (1) give children who want to greater control over the agenda, (2) give them more time and space to talk about issues that affect them, and (3) enable children to interpret and explain their own data.

Participation processes involving children in contexts of poverty should target both children and adults, in particular policymakers. In part, separated trajectories are needed, since the challenge for both is different. While children need to grow as experiential experts articulating their needs and experiences, policymakers need to develop openness towards children and their thoughts, in part brought about by children’s compelling presentations. For this reason it is important to start with children, empowering them to speak up and working on their narrative on their lives and presentation abilities before addressing policymakers.

Gaining profound insights into children’s lives and needs and bringing about meaningful encounters between children and policymakers takes time. It is of great importance to invest in children by setting up joyful and educational projects that are not only aimed at answering research questions and policy-making but also provide children with experiences they value, like travelling to other parts of the country for outings in which they are interested, playing ball and having informal conversations with researchers and other adults. Children appreciate attention and as relationships develop, more aspects of their lives are laid bare. In turn, time investments pay off as multiple goals are achieved and children’s positive development is supported.

Finally, this study revolved around two projects of different natures, and it is good to consider their respective contributions to child welfare. While
the photo project is a new project taking as a starting point children's experiences and perspectives on what is needed to improve their lives, the school gardening programme has had a long history in Amsterdam and a specific aim. In order to contribute to children's well-being both types of project are important. Broad, open defined participatory projects aimed at understanding children's lives leave a lot of room for experimenting and gaining experiences together with children. The school gardening has a specific focus and more structure in order to achieve its aims. Opportunities to incorporate participatory approaches, both in learning processes during and in the design and improvement of such programmes, could be explored. Projects like the photo project that take as a starting point children's lives and have child participation as main focus, can serve as valuable testing grounds of how to do this properly.
Samenvatting
Introductie

Zowel in ontwikkelingslanden als in welvarende landen woont bijna de helft van de bevolking in stedelijke gebieden. Een van de kenmerken van veel stedelijke omgevingen is de concentratie van problemen met betrekking tot de kwaliteit van leven en de beschikbaarheid van middelen. Van de stedelijke bevolking die in arme en suboptimale omstandigheden leeft, lopen kinderen een bijzonder groot risico. Achtergestelde leefomstandigheden hebben immers een grote impact op het welzijn van kinderen en de ervaringen uit hun kindertijd zijn bepalend voor bijna alle aspecten van hun ontwikkeling naar volwassenheid: lichamelijk, emotioneel, psychosociaal, gedragsmatig en cognitief.

Veel van de literatuur over kinderarmoede gaat over zogenaamde ontwikkelingslanden, maar in de afgelopen jaren is er ook steeds meer aandacht gekomen voor kinderarmoede in welvarende landen. Verschillende onderzoekers hebben een reeks van problemen geïdentificeerd waar kinderen die opgroeien in armoede dagelijks mee worstelen. Voorbeelden zijn een gebrek aan of onveilige speelplaatsen, inadequate huisvesting en ouders die werkloos zijn. Deze kinderen hebben ook te maken met schaarste in relatie tot de voedselomgeving. Dat leidt, in combinatie met andere factoren, tot een hoge prevalentie van overgewicht en obesitas in segmenten van Westerse stedelijke bevolkingen met een lage sociaal-economische status (SES). In ontwikkelingslanden lopen volwassenen en kinderen van hoge SES groepen risico op overgewicht of obesitas; terwijl in welvarende landen een gradiënt waargenomen kan worden waarbij zowel volwassenen als kinderen van sociaal-economisch kwetsbare huishoudens meer risico lopen op overgewicht of obesitas.

Gezien het grote aantal stedelingen wereldwijd en de ernst en complexiteit van de uitdagingen waar stedelingen, met name kinderen, mee kampen, is het cruciaal om nieuwe en verfrissende ideeën te introduceren om het welzijn en de kwaliteit van leven van deze mensen te verbeteren, niet alleen in ontwikkelingslanden, maar ook in rijke Westerse landen. Met wisselende resultaten zijn zowel publieke als private initiatieven ontwikkeld die gericht zijn op het verbeteren van het leven van kinderen die opgroeien in een context van armoede. Hieronder vallen activiteiten die zijn gericht op gezonde voeding voor kinderen en de preventie van overgewicht en obesitas. Aangezien bekend is dat de participatie van kinderen kan resulteren in diensten die beter passen bij de leefwereld van kinderen, is het belangrijk om te overwegen of participatie ook potentieel heeft voor het versterken
van interventies die gericht zijn op het verbeteren van het leven van kinderen die opgroeien in armoede. Gezien de gevolgen van armoede op kinderen is het bovendien van groot belang om na te gaan hoe hun leven eruit ziet om zodoende te begrijpen hoe zij beter kunnen worden ondersteund. Hiervoor is het nodig om de specifieke domeinen en praktijken waar kinderen zich begeven, zoals speelplaatsen, scholen en de thuismilieu, nauwlettend te bestuderen. Het Amsterdamse schooltuinenprogramma is één van de praktijken waar lokale kinderen bij betrokken zijn. Het bestuderen van dit programma is ook van belang omdat het een veelbelovende interventie is om de groente inname te verbeteren en overgewicht/obesitas bij Amsterdamse kinderen te voorkomen.

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik de dagelijkse realiteit van Amsterdamse kinderen die opgroeien in armoede vanuit hun eigen perspectief. Ik introduceren ontwikkel een participatieve aanpak waarbij initiatieven om armoede aan te pakken gevoed kunnen worden door de perspectieven van degenen die er dagelijks mee te maken hebben. Met deze aanpak hoop ik de verhalen van kinderen expliciet te maken en deze voor te leggen aan beleidsmakers en professionals. Deze studie beoogt bij te dragen aan het begrijpen van de ervaringen en perspectieven van kinderen met betrekking tot het opgroeien in een armoede context, en hun perspectieven op het Amsterdamse schooltuinenprogramma te onderzoeken als een interventie om groente inname te verbeteren en overgewicht/obesitas en/of ondervoeding te voorkomen. De hoofdvraag van dit onderzoek is als volgt geformuleerd: *Hoe kan kinderparticipatie bijdragen aan beter begrip van wat het voor kinderen betekent om op te groeien in een context van armoede, en van wat nodig is om de kwaliteit van hun leven en hun welzijn te verbeteren?*

**Theoretische concepten**

Door het bestuderen van het leven van kinderen en het inbouwen van participatieve benaderingen, worden diepgaande inzichten verkregen in het leven van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede en wat nodig is om hun welzijn te vergroten. Zowel het proces als de resultaten van het onderzoek naar de levens van kinderen opgroeien in contexten van armoede zijn belangrijk in dit proefschrift.

Wat betreft het onderzoeksproces naar de levens van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede, worden vier relevante concepten uitgelicht: kinderparticipatie, het kind perspectief, *agency* van het kind, en *lifeworld orientation* en het dagelijkse leven. Sinds het aanvaarden en ratificeren van het Internationale Verdrag van de Rechten van het Kind, hebben
we een aanzienlijke toename gezien in de belangstelling voor de rechten van het kind en kinderparticipatie. Het aannemen van het kinderrechtenverdrag betekende een toegenomen interesse in het betrekken van jonge mensen door middel van een keur aan participatieve initiatieven en consultaties, om het kind perspectief vast te leggen. Dit betekent dat het gaat om het perspectief van de insider, gebaseerd op wat hij of zij belangrijk vindt. Daarnaast stelt het kinderrechtenverdrag traditionele concepten over de kindertijd en opgroeien ter discussie, aangezien het verdrag kinderen ziet als subjecten met rechten, wat impliceert dat zij, net als volwassenen, over agency beschikken. Agency van het kind houdt in dat kinderen de sociale capaciteit hebben om te handelen en te creëren, en om de (dagelijkse) praktijk te veranderen om persoonlijke doelen te bereiken. Aangezien dit proefschrift de vraag wil beantwoorden hoe kinderen zelf over kinderarmoede denken en hoe het perspectief van het kind ten aanzien van het opgroeien in armoede begrepen kan worden, is het noodzakelijk om de verbinding te zoeken met de dagelijkse ervaringen van kinderen. Dit wordt ook wel lifeworld orientation genoemd, een interpretatief paradigma dat haar oorsprong heeft in theorieën van de sociale pedagogiek en een methodologische benadering betreft die rekening houdt met de context waarin de stem van kinderen wordt geproduceerd en de omstandigheden van armoede die daarop van invloed zijn. Dit behoeft een context-specifieke interpretatie van de rechten en belangen van kinderen en laat ruimte voor verschillende betekenissen, afhankelijk van de context.

Om de resultaten van het onderzoek naar het leven van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede te adresseren, zijn in dit proefschrift twee concepten opgenomen: beleidsdiaalloog en zelfvertrouwen. Een van de grote uitdagingen in deze studie was de vraag hoe kinderen zo effectief mogelijk betrokken kunnen worden zodat door beleidmakers echt naar hun verhalen geluisterd wordt en dit leidt tot actie. De beleidsdiaalloog refereert aan het proces van het includeren van gestructureerde discussies in het beslissingsproces om bij te dragen aan de ontwikkeling van evidence-based beleid. In toenemende mate erkennen lokale overheden het belang van het includeren van de zienswijzen van kinderen om beleid te ontwikkelen dat tegemoet komt aan hun behoeften en overeenkomt met hun dagelijkse realiteit. Daarmee worden zij erkend als rechtmatige belanghebbenden. Het is noodzakelijk om specifieke vormen van dialoog en betrokkenheid te ontwerpen die als vertrekpunt de positie van het kind nemen. Zelfvertrouwen is hier een belangrijk concept. Mensen zijn gemotiveerd om een positief zelfvertrouwen actief na te streven. In dit onderzoek hebben we gekeken naar hoe kinderparticipatie kan bijdragen aan het welzijn van het
kind. Aangezien kinderarmoede een gevoelig onderwerp is en er aanwijzingen zijn dat het op een directe wijze bespreken ervan een uitdaging kan zijn, hebben we in het bijzonder onderzocht hoe we kinderarmoede en achterstand op een positieve manier kunnen benaderen, op een wijze die het zelfvertrouwen verhoogt in plaats van verlaagt.

Onderzoeksopzet
De onderzoeksvraag die in dit onderzoek centraal zal staan, luidt:
Hoe kan kinderparticipatie bijdragen aan beter begrip van wat het voor kinderen betekent om op te groeien in een context van armoede, en van wat nodig is om de kwaliteit van hun leven en hun welzijn te verbeteren?
De onderzoeksvraag is verder uitgewerkt in de volgende deelvragen:

1: Wat is het kind perspectief op het opgroeien in contexten van armoede?

2: Op welke manier kunnen de ervaringen en perspectieven van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede het beste worden begrepen?
   2a: Op welke wijze kan kinderarmoede worden besproken met kinderen die opgroeien contexten van armoede?
   2b: Hoe kan de methode photovoice bijdragen aan het verkrijgen van inzicht in de dagelijkse activiteiten van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede?

3: Onder welke condities kunnen kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede en beleidsmakers in een zinvolle dialoog met elkaar treden?

4: Wat is het kind perspectief op schooltuinwerk als gezondheid bevorderend programma en hoe kan het vanuit het perspectief van kinderen worden verbeterd?

De studie, zoals beschreven in dit verslag, bestaat uit twee afzonderlijke onderzoeken die beide hoofdzakelijk zijn gesitueerd in Amsterdam.

Onderzoek 1: Het bestuderen van perspectieven en ervaringen van kinderen die opgroeien in armoede
Een uitvoerig onderzoek heeft plaatsgevonden naar het leven en de behoeften van economisch achtergestelde kinderen, resulterend in drie hoofdstukken in dit proefschrift. In dit onderzoek zijn participatief actie onderzoek [PAR] en etnografie gecombineerd. PAR was erop gericht inzicht te krijgen in de behoeften van de kinderen om interventies en beleid te kunnen ontwikkelen die beter aansluiten bij deze behoeften. Als onderdeel van
de etnografische aanpak, hebben we participerende observatie toegepast tijdens het werken en reizen met de kinderen.

Het onderzoek is verricht in twee achtergestelde buurten in Hoorn en Amsterdam. We gingen zorgvuldig te werk bij het presenteren van het project aan de kinderen. De kinderen werden niet geselecteerd of uitgenodigd op grond van hun persoonlijke kenmerken. In plaats daarvan is de keuze gemaakt voor een sociale diversiteit aan kinderen door alle kinderen uit economisch achtergestelde buurten uit te nodigen voor ‘een fotoproject over hun leven en buurt’. De kinderen werden benaderd voor dit project door lokale jeugdwerkers in Hoorn en door drie basisscholen in Amsterdam.

De photovoice methode is als centrale methode gebruikt. In totaal namen 29 kinderen tussen de 8 en 12 jaar foto’s van objecten en plaatsen uit hun directe omgeving die voor hen van betekenis zijn. Tijdens wekelijkse bijeenkomsten werden groepsdiscussies en interviews afgenomen waarin de kinderen werden aangespoord na te denken over hun foto’s. Door het rekruteren van deelnemers in economisch achtergestelde buurten was het aannemelijk dat de meeste kinderen opgroeien in armoede; dit is echter niet per individueel kind onderzocht. Wanneer het onderwerp armoede expliciet opkwam in de verhalen van kinderen, ontstond de mogelijkheid dit onderwerp verder te bediscussiëren. Tegelijkertijd waren we in gelijke mate geïnteresseerd in de afwezigheid van referenties naar armoede. Om de verhalen van de kinderen verder in context te kunnen plaatsen, hebben de onderzoekers ook informele gesprekken gevoerd met ouders en zijn interviews afgelegd met basisscholleraren, twee jeugdwerkers en een beleidsmedewerker.

Het project is in Amsterdam uitgebreid met een dialoog tussen de kinderen en beleidsmedewerkers en een fototentoonstelling. De tentoonstelling, in de vorm van een foto verhalen tafel, bleef hierna nog een week in de stadsdeelkantoor, waar iedereen de foto’s kon bezichtigen en reflecteren op de verhalen van de kinderen. De tafel werden ook getoond op twee scholen en in de lokale bibliotheek. Op deze locaties hadden de kinderen de mogelijkheid hun foto’s te bespreken met leeftijdgenoten, de resultaten te bespreken met buurtbewoners en konden zij invloed uitoefenen op lokale professionals.
Studie 2: Onderzoek naar het perspectief van kinderen op het schooltuinprogramma.

Twee hoofdstukken in dit verslag handelen over ons onderzoek naar de perspectieven van kinderen in lage SES gebieden op het Amsterdamse schooltuinprogramma. Een etnografische benadering werd gehanteerd, waarin door het observeren van participanten inzicht werd verkregen in de ideeën van kinderen over dit programma, de invloed ervan op de groenteconsumptie en mogelijkheden tot verbetering van het programma. Een naturalistische benadering werd gekozen om de onderzoekers in staat te stellen de ervaringen van de kinderen met tuinieren en oogsten te bestuderen in een natuurlijke omgeving en deze waarnemingen te interpreteren in het licht van het betekenis ervan voor de betreffende kinderen zelf. Tijdens participerende observatie verzamelt de onderzoeker informatie door op te gaan in de natuurlijke omgeving van de doelgroep en daarbij de rol van actieve participant en observator af te wisselen.

Purposeful sampling werd gebruikt om scholen te identificeren en selecteren die reeds vele jaren deelnamen aan de Amsterdamse schooltuinprogramma en die waren gelegen in stadsdelen bewoond door de doelgroep van dit onderzoek, namelijk kinderen die leven in een context met een hoog aandeel lage SES huishoudens en een relatief hoge prevalentie van overgewicht en obesitas. Aangezien beide geselecteerde scholen al onderdeel waren van een breder mixed-methods studie was er eveneens sprake van een zogenaamde convenience sample.

Tussen maart en november 2015 waren twee observatoren aanwezig op alle schooltuinlessen om de gebeurtenissen, wat de kinderen deden en wat hun reactie was op hetgeen zij zagen en hoorden te observeren. Tijdens het deelnemen aan de tuinlessen van beide scholen assisteerden de observatoren de kinderen bij de activiteiten, voerden zij informele gesprekken met hen en observeerden ze nauwkeurig hun handelen en gedrag. Verder werden formele interviews afgenomen met kinderen van beide scholen om een verdiepend inzicht te verkrijgen in de wijze waarop de kinderen tegen het (school) tuinieren en de door hen gecultiveerde groenten aankijken. Een groepsdiscussie werd gehouden met de kinderen van één van de groepen om zo meer inzicht te verkrijgen in de variatie in opvattingen over het schooltuinwerk en groenteconsumptie. Tenslotte werden interviews afgenomen met ouders over welke groenten thuis werden gegeten.
Resultaten
Wat is het kind perspectief op het opgroeien in contexten van armoede?

Verhalen van kinderen over hun leven geven inzicht in hoe kinderen willen worden benaderd. Armoede wordt omringd door taboes, en kinderen die worden geconfronteerd met onterering hebben de neiging om labels als ‘armoede’ en ‘arm’ te vermijden en worden soms boos wanneer anderen, zoals onderzoekers, deze termen gebruiken. Bovendien brengen de verhalen van kinderen ons tot het besef dat er twee manieren zijn om het leven van kinderen te benaderen, die beide waarde en legitimiteit hebben. Enerzijds hebben kinderen tekortkomingen in hun leven en anderzijds hebben zij middelen tot hun beschikking waar zij kunnen putten. Men kan de negatieve aspecten aanwezig in het leven van kinderen benadrukken en interventies daarop afstemmen, of de actieve houding van kinderen ten opzichte van tegenspoed zien als manifestatie van agency die moet worden ondersteund. In het licht van dit onderzoek is er behoefte aan een evenwichtig perspectief dat rekening houdt met beiden. Van daaruit kan worden gewerkt aan een maximaal positieve verandering.

Op welke manier kunnen de ervaringen en perspectieven van kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede het beste worden begrepen?

Verschillende aspecten met betrekking tot de aanpak en methoden die in deze studie werden gebruikt, werkten samen en hebben bijgedragen tot het verkrijgen van inzicht in de ervaringen van kinderen met en perspectieven op het opgroeien in armoede. Omdat we ervoor hebben gekozen kinderen centraal te plaatsen, was tijd nodig voor hun persoonlijke ontwikkeling en voor het geleidelijk ontvouwen van hun verhalen. De etnografische aanpak en de photovoice methode maakten het mogelijk een intensief proces met de kinderen te doorlopen waarbij we langdurig contact met hen hadden en we hen en hun leefomstandigheden hebben leren kennen. Door een agency benadering te volgen, waarbij kinderen worden gezien als actieve mensen, niet alleen in onderzoek maar ook in hun sociale omgeving, ontwikkelden we diepere inzichten in hun perspectieven en behoeften.

Onder welke condities kunnen kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede en beleidsmakers in een zinvolle dialoog met elkaar treden?

Veranderingen en verbeteringen in de leefomstandigheden van kinderen vereisen de actieve betrokkenheid van kinderen bij het ontwerpen, ontwikkelen en evalueren van beleid en programma’s. Zowel kinderen als
beleidsmakers hebben tijd nodig om opener naar elkaar en voor samenwerking met elkaar te worden. Ruimte voor communicatie kan worden gecreëerd en uitgebreid door enerzijds kinderen mee te laten doen in een uitdagend en plezierig proces en anderzijds de belangstelling van beleidsmakers in het proces en de output, en daarmee in het leven en de verhalen van kinderen, te bevorderen. Kinderparticipatie is een tweerichtings leerproces en betreft zowel de rol van kinderen als van volwassenen. Terwijl in het proces van kinderen de focus ligt op de groei van zelfvertrouwen, gaat het bij de beleidsmakers meer om het ontvankelijker worden voor de ervaringen en gedachten van kinderen. Deze twee aspecten zijn aan elkaar geraadpleegd, aangezien de zelfverzekerde presentatie door kinderen van hun ervaringen en gedachten de beleidsmakers er toe kan bewegen te luisteren en in actie te komen. Door in kinderen te investeren en zowel hun persoonlijke groei als de ontwikkeling van hun verhalen over hun leven in hun eigen tempo te stimuleren, wordt het zelfvertrouwen van kinderen bevorderd en zijn kinderen in staat deel te nemen aan gesprekken met beleidsmakers en anderen. Derhalve toont dit onderzoek aan dat het gunstig is te beginnen met het aanmoedigen van kinderen om hun eigen verhaal over hun leven en buurt te creëren in plaats van te beginnen met het in contact treden met en mobiliseren van beleidsmakers.

Wat is het kind perspectief op schooltuinwerk als gezondheid bevorderend programma en hoe kan het vanuit het perspectief van kinderen worden verbeterd?

Uit het onderzoek naar het Amsterdamse schooltuinprogramma hebben we geleerd dat deelnemers enthousiast zijn over schooltuinwerk. Het consumeren van groenten en gezondheidsbelangen zijn geen primaire doelstellingen voor kinderen. Ook de voorgestelde verbeteringen van kinderen voor het schooltuinprogramma zijn niet noodzakelijkerwijs gericht op het consumeren van meer groenten en het verbeteren van hun gezondheid, maar op toename van plezier in en gemak van tuinieren. Dit kan er wel in resulteren dat kinderen meer groenten oogsten en consumeren. Het combineren van schooltuinwerk met gezondheidseducatie kan de resultaten van tuinieren versterken met betrekking tot het verhogen van de groente consumptie door kinderen die in contexten van armoede leven. Dit mag echter niet ten koste gaan van de vrijheid om hun eigen groenten te cultiveren, aangezien kinderen dit leuk vinden en het ze een gevoel van trots oplevert. Voor sommige kinderen kan dit leiden tot een meer blijvend effect op groenten consumptie dan educatie alleen, aangezien dit het ontstaan van meer intrinsieke motivatie om groenten te eten stimuleert. Tenslotte, gezien de vraag van kinderen naar meer autonomie en ruimte voor experimenten, kan het
bevorderlijk zijn om participatieve technieken te gebruiken om schooltuinprogramma’s te onderzoeken en te ontwerpen of te verbeteren.

**Conclusies en discussie**

Deze studie was gericht op het doorgronden van de waarde van kinderparticipatie in onderzoek en beleidsontwikkeling. In het bijzonder betrof de studie de waarde van kinderparticipatie voor het begrijpen van het kind perspectief op opgroeien in een context van armoede en op wat nodig is om het leven en het welzijn van kinderen te verbeteren. Onze studie toonde aan dat kinderen, hoewel ze onder gedeprimeerde omstandigheden leven, zichzelf of hun omgeving niet beschouwen als ‘arm’. Teneinde recht te doen aan de zelfperceptie van kinderen, is het van belang zowel tekortkomingen als aanwezige middelen waaruit zij kunnen putten op te nemen in hoe deze kinderen worden benaderd.

Het is in het bijzonder van belang te overwegen hoe kinderen zichzelf presenteren, vocabulaire consistent aan te passen en processen te ontwikkelen die aansluiten bij hoe kinderen hun omstandigheden zien. Taal gebruiken die armoede en ontbering aanduidt is weinig effectief wanneer kinderen zich er niet in herbekennen en kan zelfs schadelijk zijn wanneer kinderen met opzet zulke labels afwijzen. In plaats van in consultaties met kinderen de nadruk te leggen op armoede, moeten discussies, afhankelijk van het doel, specifieke thema’s of hun complete leefomgeving betreffen. Dit betekent niet dat discussions over armoede moeten worden vermeden. Kinderen leiding geven in een participatieproces en hun leefwereld als geheel onderwerp van studie maken, betekent dat er ruimte is voor het bespreken van alle aspecten van het leven van kinderen, inclusief armoede en ontbering.

Kinderparticipatie in onderzoek bleek een goede manier te zijn om de perspectieven van kinderen op het opgroeien om een arme wijk vast te leggen. Echter, de deelname van kinderen is niet zonder uitdagingen. Onder de vragen die zich kunnen voordoen zijn: Hoe kunnen kinderen met professionele onderzoekers werken op gelijke voet, op basis van de juiste informatie en zonder pressie? In hoeverre moeten professionele onderzoekers ingrijpen om kinderen te ondersteunen of het onderzoek te controleren? En wie zou de zeggenschap moeten hebben over de gegevens en eventuele rapporten, de kinderen, de volwassenen of gezamenlijk? De antwoorden op deze vragen zijn niet vooraf vastgelegd, maar zijn afhankelijk van de mogelijkheden en voorkeuren van de kinderen. Gezien het voordeel van volwassen onderzoekers in termen van macht en ervaring en om schijnparticipatie te vermijden, moeten passende voorwaarden worden gecreëerd waaronder
kinderen hun wensen kunnen ontdekken en communiceren. Bijvoorbeeld door hen de gelegenheid te geven om aan activiteiten deel te nemen zonder op enige manier druk uit te oefening. Het is belangrijk om te beseffen dat kinderen de leiding geven over hun eigen proces kan betekenen dat zij beslissen dat hun rol bescheiden is, of zelfs dat zij een informele en recreatieve betrokkenheid kiezen. Tegelijker tijd, als kinderen zich meer bewust worden van de voorwaarden waaronder zij willen bijdragen, is het cruciaal om (1) kinderen die dit willen meer controle over de agenda te geven, (2) hen meer tijd en ruimte te geven om te praten over problemen die hen beïnvloeden, en (3) kinderen in staat te stellen hun eigen gegevens te interpreteren en uit te leggen.

Verder moeten participatieprocessen met kinderen die opgroeien in contexten van armoede gericht zijn op zowel kinderen als volwassenen, in het bijzonder beleidsmakers. Gedeeltelijk afzonderlijke trajecten zijn nodig, aangezien de uitdaging voor beiden van verschillende aard is. Terwijl kinderen moeten groeien in hun rol als ervaringsdeskundigen die hun behoeften en ervaringen communiceren, is het voor beleidsmakers van belang dat zij openheid ontwikkelen voor de kinderen en hun ideeën, gedeeltelijk veroorzaakt door overtuigende presentaties van kinderen. Om deze reden is het van belang te beginnen met kinderen en hen in staat te stellen te spreken en te werken aan een verhaal over hun leven alsmede aan presentatievaardigheden alvorens beleidsmakers te adresseren.

Het verkrijgen van diepgaande inzichten in het leven en de behoeften van kinderen, en het realiseren van zinvolle ontmoetingen tussen kinderen en beleidsmakers heeft tijd nodig. Het is van groot belang te investeren in kinderen door middel van het opzetten van plezierige en leerzame projecten die niet alleen als doel hebben onderzoeksfragen te beantwoorden en beleid te ontwikkelen, maar kinderen ook voorzien van ervaringen die ze waarderen, zoals het reizen naar andere delen van het land voor uitstapjes die hen interesseren, voetballen en het hebben van informele gesprekken met onderzoekers en andere volwassenen. Kinderen waarderen aandacht en naarmate een relatie ontwikkelt, komen meerdere aspecten van hun leven aan het licht. Tijdsinvesteringen betalen zich uit, aangezien meerdere doelen worden bereikt en de positieve ontwikkeling van kinderen wordt ondersteund.

Tenslotte maakten twee projecten van verschillende aard deel uit van deze studie, en het is goed om hun respectievelijke bijdragen aan het welzijn van kinderen te overwegen. Terwijl het fotoproject een nieuw project is dat als
uitgangspunt de ervaringen en perspectieven van kinderen op wat nodig is om hun leven te verbeteren neemt, heeft het schooltuinprogramma een lange geschiedenis in Amsterdam en een specifiek doel. Om bij te dragen aan het welzijn van kinderen zijn beide typen projecten belangrijk. Breed opgezette en open gedefinieerde participatieve projecten gericht op het begrijpen van het leven van kinderen geven veel ruimte om te experimenteren en ervaringen op te doen, samen met kinderen. Het schooltuinprogramma heeft een specifieke focus en meer structuur om zijn doel te kunnen bereiken. Mogelijkheden om participatieve benaderingen, zowel in leerprocessen als in het ontwerpen en verbeteren van zulke programma's, kunnen worden onderzocht. Projecten als het fotoproject die het leven van kinderen als uitgangspunt nemen en kinderparticipatie als belangrijkste focus hebben, kunnen dienen als waardevolle proeftuin om ervaring op te doen met hoe je dit goed kunt doen.
Samenvatting
Dankwoord
Dankwoord

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