

The problem of children's right to participation in early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT: Participation, a highly debated topic, is understood as a right to self-determination and a right to be involved in the decision-making in matters that concern one's life. Also, in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Germany, children's participation plays an important role, embedded in the legislation. However, research shows that children still do not participate in decisions in their daily life in childcare facilities. This problem has been linked to the negative attitudes of early childhood educators, their fear of losing control, sharing power with children, or even lack of knowledge. The recent qualitative case study, examining educators' participation perspectives by applying semi-structured interviews and a focus group, demonstrated that educators understand what participation means differently and view it as a concept rather than a right. However, they perceive it as having enormous importance and are keen to embrace it. Their attitudes depend significantly on their experiences and the behavioural scripts they internalized. Another factor influencing children's participation is the organizational culture of a childcare facility. It is correlated with the quality of care in childcare settings. To this end, studying and ensuring positive work relationships proves to be necessary. Applying collaborative leadership and democratic, participatory structures is essential to children and adults alike. A genuinely respectful environment designed to promote self-determination, deep reflection, ongoing training, and support are key in realizing children's right to participation in ECEC.

KEYWORDS: children's right to participation, perspectives of early childhood educators, organizational culture, childhood studies

BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

Participation of children has been codified as their right in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN 1989), inspired by the philosophy of Janusz Korczak and Maria Montessori (Milne 2008:46). It recognizes that children are social actors, can mould and voice their viewpoints and make decisions concerning their own life (James & James 2020), despite being historically omitted and even marginalized (Montessori 2020; Zeiher 1996). This children's right also applies to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services (Kangas 2016). The ECEC "includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content. The early childhood period is commonly defined as birth to age 8" (OECD 2001:14). In the context of Berlin, Germany, the ECEC service is called a kindergarten¹, or KiTa. The topic of participation has been widely debated, and yet still, children's right to exercise participation in ECEC is seen as poor (Maywald 2014). Early childhood educators have previously been shown to understand and interpret the notion of participation in varying ways (Kangas 2016; Mentha, Church & Page 2015).

Meanwhile, Hansen, Knauer and Friedrich (2006) believe that the role of educators as participation's gatekeepers and role models is highly significant. Their study demonstrates that participation is blocked by negative attitudes and feelings of fear, insecurity, and distrust, but also by insufficient structure and poor methods of adults working with children. One must ask, how do those feelings and views emerge? Is it really how educators feel and view participation? How is it understood, and why is it so problematic to apply a participative style of pedagogy? This paper attempts to answer these questions and presents findings from the recent qualitative case study, which examined early childhood educators' perspectives on the right to participation by inquiring into their biographies and personal and professional experiences. The study also explores understanding, attitudes, practices, methods of participation, and the organizational culture of kindergartens.

CHILDREN IN SOCIETY

Historically, the way adults perceived children was an evolving, complex process inspired by thinkers and philosophers. To name just a few, Thomas Hobbs believed that the best parenting method is through demanding a complete submission to adult power in a strict, obedient environment, a result of a belief that children are sinful and wicked (James, Jenks, & Prout 1998). John Locke introduced the notion of *tabula rasa*, believing that the transfer of knowledge is the most important element that will achieve a better society (James et al. 1998). Jean Jacques Rousseau convinced many that

¹ Kindergarten is the name of a German ECEC setting, technically caring for children from three to six years of age. Children from birth to age three are cared for in krippe. However, very often krippe and kindergarten are joined together and shortly referred to as KiTa (Kindertageseinrichtung) (Berliner Vorschrifteninformationssystem 2020).

children in their angelic-like nature need protection from the cruelty and deprivation of the adults' world (Woodhead & Montgomery 2002). And Jan Piaget, "the giant in the field of developmental psychology", initiated the view of children as developing through set stages, becoming a set of skills, understanding, and wisdom (Sanrock 2006:226) gradually. The theories of developmental psychology, showing children through the lens of a biologically determined journey from utter incompetence to complete, adult-like competence, have primarily dominated and shaped the image of the child society in the present day (Wyness 2018). Esser, Baader, Betzand, & Hungerland (2016) provoke a question in this focus on the development and socialization of children, how do adults pay attention to the voices of children?

Are they, as Montessori (2020:10) states, "forgotten citizens", waiting for adulthood to claim their rights? Or maybe outsiders, a product of a generational order (Zeiber 1996:11)? Liebel (2008:35) writes, "according to the notions of childhood that predominate in the world today; children are primarily regarded as the potential for the future or as future citizens", subject to and dependent on adults' power (Zeiber 1996; Liebel 2008:42).

The new sociology of childhood offers a different view of the child, in which children are "actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James & Prout 1997:5). Children have an agency (James and James 2012), the power to co-construct their life, "to influence, organize, coordinate, and control events taking place in their social world" (Alanen 2009:170), and to speak on their own behalf (Wyness 2018:72). Going further, children should not be seen as dependent on adults but as social actors with a role to play in the process of interdependency, a role in which adults and children are equally and mutually dependent on each other (Alanen 2009). According to Wyness (2018:76), participation (in educational institutions) can be one of the means to recognize children's agency.

PARTICIPATION

Participation, a highly debated concept, tends to be understood in various ways, according to Lansdown (2010:11). It is commonly interpreted as a word "to describe the forms of social engagement" (Lansdown 2010:11). Thomas (2007:199) makes two further distinctions in the concept of participation. He views it as actions or as outcomes of such. But he also points to a difference between participation as a decision of one as an individual, the self-determination, and as a democratic decision-making process within a group of more people. Self-determination can be seen as the basis of participation (Schneider 2019:79). And in this paper, self-determination and decision-making capacity are seen as coming together, as holistic participation. Hart (1992:5) reminds one of the enormous impact and importance of sharing decisions on the whole community. He states, "It is how a democracy is built, and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship" (Hart 1992:5). Moving further, in order to examine participation in relation to children and also early childhood education, it is of huge importance to

become an overview of significant thinkers in this field. The philosophy of Korczak and Montessori are the most influential with regards to this concept (Milne 2008:46)

JANUSZ KORCZAK AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

Henryk Goldszmit, known under the published author's name of Janusz Korczak, was a person whose interests were mostly in the fields of medicine, social work, journalism, and literature. He treated sick people of all ages, managed an orphanage, educated children, and wrote articles and books dedicated to them (Markowska-Manista 2020).

In his published work, Korczak (1929:5) acknowledges children's economic and physical dependency on adults, leading to uneven power relations. It is giving children a lesson that younger or weaker people can be dismissed and ignored. It is a lesson of strength and power, which can become problematic for the future of society (Korczak 1929:6). Korczak dislikes the focus and methods of upbringing and socialization of children, the control, harsh discipline, also applied in the name of protection. Children will not only be important to society when they are adults, but they are important to it at any time of their lives. They are a part of adults' realities and deserve appreciation, respect, empathy and, kindness. They deserve equality (Korczak 1929). These values are key elements in Korczak's philosophy. They should be applied in everyday life, but also in educational settings and institutions. Korczak believed that learning is a mutual process for both children and adults, with everyone involved having an opportunity to gain a valuable lesson (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Oleđzka 2020:143).

This philosophy has impacted the pedagogy in countries all over the world, as the style and techniques are extraordinary, intriguing, and stirring. (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Oleđzka 2020:141). He implemented a court of peers, children's parliament, and council of self-government, through which children were intrinsically involved in managing and running their environment, living space and reality in a fully democratic way. Undertaken tasks and duties, to fulfil the needs of all, were appointed on a voluntary basis and without adult interference (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Oleđzka 2020). The self-development and training of one's self-confidence were important elements of everyday reality, with children betting against each other in relation to gaining new competencies. There was a special area designed for downtime or quiet-time in aid of self-regulation. "Remembrance cards", a tool used by the parliament of children, marked the meaningful experiences (positive and negative) in children's lives. In the orphanage space created for children by Korczak, older children assisted younger or those new to the establishment to ensure proper support was provided. Keeping everyone up-to-date with current matters was another important domain contributing to the participatory and democratic environment. The tools set in place to provide information and the ability to complain were a letterbox, a newsletter edited by children and adults alike, and an information board (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Oleđzka 2020:151).

In relation to professionals working with children, Korczak recommended applying deep self-reflection. He believed that knowing oneself well would assist in becoming a better, more empathic educator (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Oleđzka 2020).

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARIA MONTESSORI

Doctor, feminist, accomplished academic, and an advocate for children is in a nutshell who Maria Montessori was (Montessori 2020). As a result of her vivid interest in children and their causes, she became one of the world's most influential and famous pedagogues and children's rights supporters (Montessori 1976). Montessori (2020) also viewed children as the margin of society, subjected to the total control of adults, like slaves subjected to dictators, having to obey and attend educational institutions. And yet disrespected, dismissed, and ignored children will develop into miserable adults (Montessori 2020:21). Regarding children as future resources is not preparing them at all for life in society (Montessori 2020:26). They should rather be seen as equal with all other people (Montessori 2020:10). Montessori recommends creating a ministry of children, to be consulted by other ministries, and protection of civil rights of children. Another idea is nominating thoroughly prepared adults to represent children and their rights in legislation. Moreover, education should not be a matter decided only by adults but by including children, the ministry, and their representatives in decision-making processes (Montessori 2020:29).

CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

Although the notions introduced by Korczak and Montessori were surely innovative and controversial during the time of their lives, children's participation is now a right included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, UN 1989), ratified by nearly all countries around the world (Lansdown 2010)². This particular right is codified as Article 12 of the CRC (UN1989), in which it is stated that all children have the capability to form viewpoints and opinions at any stage of their lives that can be expressed in a variety of ways (Lansdown 2010:12). But is it enough for children to be able to voice their views? According to Lansdown (2010:12), "in order to contribute their views, children need access to appropriate information and to safe 'spaces' where they are afforded the time, encouragement and support to enable them to develop and articulate their views". Lansdown also believes (2010:12) that children's voices should have the real power to impact life in any areas affecting them and influence decision-making processes.

Art. 12 of CRC (UN 1989) attempts to regulate participation by limiting the capacity of decision-making for younger, less mature children, which has been subjected to wide criticism (Lansdown 2010:13; Cordero Arce 2015:291–292). Participation can be understood as consisting of four steps: acquiring information, developing a view and vocalizing it, reception of the opinion by others and contemplation and lastly, decision-making (Alderson and Montgomery 1996, as cited in Lansdown 2010:13). The child who is not mature enough (in adults' viewpoint) might be excluded from the decision-making process, while the adult continues to retain the power over the child (Lansdown 2010:13). The dependency is also criticized by Cordero Arce (2015: 291–292), who questions the genuine nature of such participation. For this reason, he

² The CRC (UN 1989) was only not ratified by United States of America (OHCHR 2020).

proposes moving from participation to the notion of children's citizenship.

Nevertheless, Lansdown (2010:13) believes that articles 5 and 13 of the CRC complement the right of children to participate. Art. Article 5 stipulates that responsible adults have the responsibility to inform and support children in exercising their rights. Article 13 gives children the right to know and express their viewpoints (United Nations 1989). Adults are motivated towards sharing or even renouncing the obligation to make decisions with regard to children (Lansdown 2010:3). Lundy (2007) agrees and states that art. 12 of CRC must not be interpreted separately but complementing and being complemented by other rights.

MODELS OF PARTICIPATION

Despite increasing recognition that children are rights holders, their participation is often not satisfactory (Hart 1992). With the model "The Ladder of Participation", Hart (1992:8) initiated a discussion and further academic attempts to reflect on and reevaluate participation.

The model introduces steps in the form of a ladder that visualize the complex problem of participation (Hart 1992). It begins with non-participation (*manipulation, decoration, and tokenism*) and is considered the most common form associated with children's civic engagement in society (Cordero Arce 2015:292). In short, *manipulation* occurs when the drive behind actions is not clear or when children are asked to voice their comments but not given feedback (Hart 1992:9). *Decoration* happens when children are involved in action without being given information or able to take part in the planning and execution of the activity (Hart 1992:9). *Tokenism* is defined as "instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions" (Hart 1992:9). Participation means being involved in an activity that includes children in the planning process, purpose and outcomes, decisions and provides a space for individual contribution (Hart 1992:9). And yet, the critics of this model say, "there is a danger of abstracting children's participation as an end in itself and thus losing sight of the way in which children and adults are interconnected, and the ways in which adult structures and institutions constrain children" (Morrow 2008:122).

Shier (2001:110) proposes a model with applying critical questions to aid reflection about the level of participation aimed at organizations and professionals working with children. The way to participation and equality in relation to decision-making is through listening to children, supporting them, and including. Whereas Lansdown (2010:20) introduces three categories of consultation, collaboration, and child-led participation and states that "the extent of children's actual engagement can be assessed by considering the level of their involvement alongside the point at which they become involved."

All the three described models share a common characteristic, a hierarchical structure of assessing participation. Lundy (2007:932) offers a different, non-hierarchical approach, seen as helpful in applying other models and in portraying participation as

a right and not as a theoretical abstraction (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015). She (Lundy 2007:932) proposes linking Art. 12 of CRC (UN 1989) to others, such as Art. 2 (right to non-discrimination), Art. 3 (best interest), Art. 5 (the right to guidance from adults), Art. 13 (right to information), and Art. 19 (right to be protected from abuse). There are four interlinked and complementing sections proposed by Lundy (2007:933): *space* (safe, unbiased environment), *voice* (diverse formats thereof), *audience* (a listening ear with authority), and *influence* (feedback on the outcomes). Lundy (2007) recommends adults working with children engage in training aiming at the coaching of the model's appropriate function.

Interestingly, Hultgren and Johansson (2019) disagree with hierarchical models described on the basis of their reliance on children's age and capability to participate and hence omitting the youngest. Participation should rather be based on mutual respect, communication, and observation, rather than being scrutinized because of the power (in)equality. Adults working with the youngest children should closely observe them, experiment with various resources and options, and deeply reflect, let themselves be led by children's clear preferences and decisions (Hultgren and Johansson 2019).

WHY PARTICIPATION?

Being able to participate is important for children for many reasons. Children can benefit from feeling included (Hultgren and Johansson 2019), more confident and autonomous (Kangas 2016; Sinclair 2004). Participation supports the improvement of children's skills. It encourages them to be more self-reliant, it endorses active communal membership. Moreover, children practice and master communicating, solving problems, and conflict resolution. They have an opportunity to use their creativity and to develop a sense of responsibility for others (Stroß 2007:157–158).

Kangas (2016:8) believes that participation is a powerful tool in empowering others and a vital part of educational processes. Grothe (2019:49) points to the kindergarten, an establishment educating and caring for children in their earliest years of life, as the place where children develop their knowledge about life in a larger community outside of the family unit. Children soak in this social construction and the distribution of power in society. Experiencing kindergarten means learning about what democracy is therefore the role of participation is significant in discovering own place in the community (Grothe 2019; Maywald 2019). But being involved in co-creating their reality is also beneficial for adults, argues Stroß (2007:157). Early childhood educators could be relieved in their tasks by children taking on responsibilities and developing a sense of community's needs (Stroß 2007:157). In such a scenario, children's voices and position could become more vital, leading to phasing out structures of hierarchy within the educational institutions (Liebel 2017:172).

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS AND PARTICIPATION

Hansen, Knauer, and Friedrich (2006) believe that children's opportunities to participate depend on adults' readiness and willingness to include such strategies and tools

in their work. Participation can only take place if pedagogues create the space, respectful atmosphere, room and provide support for such to take place (Rieker, Mörger, & Schnitzer 2016; Grothe 2019; Schneider 2019a). Early childhood educators' tasks are to guide children and support them, conduct observations, record progress and evaluate it in the team of other professionals. Other responsibilities include having a deep empathy and understanding of each child's need and constructing a safe, stimuli rich and nourishing setting. To participate, children need to become partners and co-constructors of the community's environment (Grothe 2019:51). For this to take place children need to be trusted to constructively learn from mistakes. In turn, the participatory culture will ensure that high quality of early years services is provided (Schneider 2019a:116).

But what do early childhood educators need for participation to be implemented? Westrich (2019:92) believes they need confidence and bravery to face long-established hierarchies. They need the ability to continuously self-reflect, communicate well with others, and guard children's right to participation (Westrich 2019:92). Schneider (2019b:79) finds determination and assertiveness equally important. Another important virtue is the ability to empathize to large extents in order to correctly read signals shown by the youngest, non-verbal children (Maywald 2019:40). Such sensitivity goes back to the attachment theory of Mary Ainsworth, developed in the "Strange Situation" experiment (Santrock 2006:357).

CULTURE'S INFLUENCE

This theory aided in comprehending the influence of parenting on developing children (Santrock 2006:358). Fische's (2004) research shows that safe and loving parenting benefits children cognitively, emotionally, and socially already in pre-school. Simultaneously, the bond between children and their parents is not universal and depends on the culture of the family's environment (Santrock 2006: 358–359). Therefore participation is a cultural construct (Rogoff 2003). It has been found that culture affects the behaviour and brain, and this phenomenon is the centre of "cultural neuroscience" (Han 2017:24). What is culture, then? Macionis and Plummer (2008:128) see it as "designs for living: the values, beliefs, behaviour, practices and material objects that constitute people's way of life. Culture is a toolbox of solutions to everyday problems. It is a bridge to the past as well as a guide to the future". It is also language, the cultural success, the notion of reality (Blaschke 2006:49). Culture can be arranged into the material, social, and subjective (Han 2017:9). Material refers to commodities, social to accepted behaviours, and "subjective culture refers to shared ideas, values, beliefs and behavioural scripts in the human mind" (Han 2017:9). Culture might be passed on, but it is dynamic rather than static. Accepted norms can transform when applied in another social setting (Han 2017:9)—internalizing behavioural scripts and particulars of culture itself can take place through imitating others (like in the case of babies), through receiving and implementing instructions of others, and finally, through collaboration with peers (Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner 1993).

All these above-described processes mean that social norms, relations, even the

way people react are shaped by their life encounters and background (Rogoff 2003), but even experiences gathered by their parents and grandparents (Rogoff 2003:279). Through passed on cultural capital, children develop a sense of how they fit in society (Rogoff 2003:307). They also discover the extent of their own (in)dependency by experiencing control over them. Some communities endorse strict adult control and the cult of authority, whereas others view such as stance as disadvantageous (Rogoff 2003:229). Paradoxically, the perceived progress of humanity in the form of industrialization became the point of its degradation, at least in terms of children's participation. From this time, a point on children was disconnected from adults and adult-like events because of their young age and enrolled in educational institutions (Rogoff 2003:20). Lansdown (2010:16) pinpoints the irony of this phenomenon, the progressive, human-rights-oriented societies were not as progressive after all, as they deprived children of their right to participate.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND HIDDEN CURRICULUM

ECEC services are not only institutions of public service but also businesses hiring employees, which in turn are a part thereof (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 2007). Businesses and organizations are perceived as developing their own norms and values, which act as directives in the workplace (Allaire & Firsirotu 1984). Allaire and Firsirotu (1984:213) believe that each organization has a "sociocultural system composed of the interworkings of formal structures, strategies, policies and management processes and of all ancillary components of an organization's reality and functioning". Each also has a "cultural system" of shared norms, values, and even symbols (e.g. Logo) (Allaire & Firsirotu 1984:213). The employees or other involved parties influence the organization by their individual experiences and fulfilled roles (Allaire, Firsirotu 1984:215).

According to Rogoff (2003:258), "by participating in the everyday formats and routines of cultural institutions and traditions, children engage in their underlying cultural assumptions". Children in schools and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings grasp not only the knowledge that is intended to be passed on to them by professionals, but they also learn the ins and outs of hierarchy and structure of a given service. Through interaction with others, children internalize norms and values, defined as a hidden curriculum (Giroux 1981:72), a significant element of organizational culture (Allaire and Firsirotu 1984). The importance of such within ECEC cannot be undermined, as the youngest children first experiences serve as a fundament for their later life (Jančec & Vodopivec 2017:35). Jančec and Vodopivec (2017:35) believe that children go through rapid development in their first years of life, where their character and viewpoints mould and fasten, where behavioural scripts become internalized. The biggest impact on these processes will have the most present adults, influencing children's view of the world and values they see as dearest. For this reason, ECEC professionals are seen as highly important and influential in the transfer of cultural capital. This refers to the perception of participation, its importance, and execution (Jančec & Vodopivec 2017). Early childhood educators influence and co-construct not only the hidden curriculum but influential in terms of children's play space, daily

activities and routines, structure, and communication, which in turn is determined by a setting's organizational culture (Jančec & Vodopivec 2017). The culture of an ECEC setting has then a significant impact on the quality of care and education provided (Kangas, Venninen, & Ojala 2016).

PARTICIPATION AND ITS PART IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN ECEC IN GERMANY

Participation of children in Germany is regulated by legislation. Germany ratified the CRC (UN 1989) in 1992 (OHCHR 2020). Having rights applies to all German citizens from birth on (§ 1 Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch 2020). Children should be given space for autonomy and independent thinking, alongside with an opportunities for discussions (§ 1626, 2, BGB, Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz 2020). According to the Children and Adolescents Law (Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz) SGB VIII (§ 8 Subsection 1), children shall participate in the decisions relating to children and youth welfare services. ECEC services are under the obligation to respect children's rights, to ensure that the 'best interest' of children is met, to protect and finally, provide participation opportunities in decision-making processes within the structures of the institution (§ 8b, § 45 (2) 3, SGB VIII, Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, 2020). The latter remains to be difficult to implement (Tietze, Viernickel, Dittrich, Grenner, Hanisch, & Marx 2016:21).

Historically, a kindergarten was an institution to care for the youngest children when the parents worked, with the nuclear family model as a prevailing one. There was a very clear power relationship between adults and children. The first were making decisions; the latter were expected to obey (Allen 2017). Also, nowadays, kindergarten places are in high demand, and children are not only in full-time care but also from a very young age (Maywald 2014). The number speaks for themselves; 95% of four- and five-year-olds and 55% of two-year-olds are taken care of in ECEC German services (Prengel 2016). However, Maywald (2014) points that the quality, hierarchy, and structures remain the same as decades ago. Children's voices are not respected and integrated into their kindergarten realities (Grothe 2019:50). Children's ideas are not incorporated into practice (Sommer-Himmel, & Titze 2018). Prengel (2016) believes more research is needed about children's participation in kindergartens.

"Die Kinderstube der Demokratie", extensive action-based research, demonstrated that implementing participation depends largely on early childhood educators and their interest in it, as well as their attitude, mindset, and perspective (Hansen, Knauer, & Friedrich 2006). It was demonstrated before that early year's professionals possess a varied understanding of the concept of participation (Kangas 2016; Mentha, Church, & Page 2015). Kangas (2016:34) shares her own encounter of working with educators who distrust children's capabilities and doubt their agency. She writes: "to me; it seems, that there is still ignorance about children's rights and some educators seems to think, that it is in their power to decide whether or not children may participate in the everyday decision about their lives" (Kangas 2016:34). Hansen, Knauer, and Friedrich (2006) discovered that a negative mindset towards participation might

be caused by feelings such as distrust, scepticism, disbelief and doubt. But where are those feelings coming from? There is a lack of research on the cultural impact of ECEC settings and its employees. Gaining a better understanding of ECEC services by examining their educators' attitudes, beliefs, personal experiences, and biographies could prepare a better fundament for professional training. Gaining insight into educators' perspectives and organizational culture might help answer why participation is not correctly implemented and practised in ECEC settings in Germany.

METHODS

The study was conducted within the qualitative methodology and is a case study focused on early childhood educators employed in a FRÖBEL organization. FRÖBEL is a provider of ECEC settings in ten of Germany's administrative areas. There are currently 197 facilities with estimated 4200 employees taking care of 18,000 children. The organization's kindergartens are also based in Australia and Poland (FRÖBEL 2020a). FRÖBEL is involved in and participates in many projects, actively cooperating with many partners in order to provide high-quality Early Years Education and Care. Many of the settings apply a bilingual concept by hiring native speakers and the languages used are English, Spanish, Italian, Polish and Dutch (FRÖBEL 2019). The organization is involved and supports research in ECEC, provides its own employees with an extensive further training programme, and even prepares for work soon-to-be educators in own academy (FRÖBEL 2019). The Mission Statement (FRÖBEL 2020b) pinpoints the company's contribution in providing services based on democracy, sustainable development, and participation. Some children's rights are encapsulated in the statement, such as the right to identity, education, protection from abuse, and participation. The tasks of managers of ECEC services include promotion of transparency, diversity, and non-discrimination as well as positive team building. They are also guardians of FRÖBEL's organizational culture (FRÖBEL 2020b).

Early childhood educator is in this study understood as an employee of FRÖBEL organization, whose responsibilities are those of any state-acknowledged educators and include observation of children's development and documentation of such, working with parents, and counting into setting's adult-child ratio. The participants were sampled by using snowball and purposive sampling techniques.

The study applied two methods of data collection. The first method was the in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven early childhood educators with varying degrees of work experience and working with children of different ages. The Interviews were conducted in person or online, leaving the choice to participants in the light of the COVID-19 Pandemic. At the time of data collection, there was flexibility regarding social distancing and government restrictions. The second method was a focus group that took place in an online setting, in which six early childhood educators took part and further explored topics partially examined or highlighted during the interviews. Thematic analysis was used in order to analyze collected data (Braun & Clarke 2006).

With regards to the collection and transcription of data, the aim was to adhere to human research ethics procedures (The University of Newcastle Australia 2017). Prob-

ing into participants' biographies posed a risk of evoking hurtful memories, which obligated sensitivity and ensured that participants were not becoming upset (Orb, Eisenhower and Wynaden 2000). It also required protecting myself from possible negative or traumatic personal stories (Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes 2011; Fahie 2014).

FINDINGS

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

All participants recalled memories from different times in their lives. They portrayed the varying cultural backgrounds they grew up in, spread in many locations and on three continents. The participants fondly remember the celebrations and feelings of belonging to a community. The memories of own kindergarten attendance are dim for the most. One participant, however, describes pleasant memories thereof, while the other recalls authoritarian, strict, and off-putting educators and a set unchallengeable structure of the day (Skrzypczak 2021:32).

“As citizens, as a member of the society, you have to go through this socialization process, which starts with your family”, stated one participant, recognizing the cultural learning process that influences children (Skrzypczak 2021:32). Some participants grew up in big families, some in small. Some believe in having “had a really easy and privileged childhood”, carefree and loving. In contrast, the others are left with hurtful or even traumatic memories (Skrzypczak 2021:31). Many participants grew up experiencing authoritarian parenting style, characterized by discipline and (corporal) punishment, although a couple of participants experienced a space for discussion, joint decision-making, and parental support. Rules set by parents were to provide structure and are to this day perceived as a “moral compass” (Skrzypczak 2021:32). The above-mentioned parenting style and a viewpoint were perceived by some as necessary and ended up being replicated, for as one participant states, “it’s a natural way for adults to make decisions above the head of the children because they already naturally know what’s best for the child” (Skrzypczak 2021:33). However, other participants repel such attitudes and confront them on a regular basis, recognizing the internalized behavioural scripts. Some vocalized the fighting of internal battle of values passed on by parents and more attachment-based methods of upbringing children. One participant connected the authoritarian parenting style with low self-esteem, while the other found it strange to suddenly be respected at the point of becoming an adult. Adulthood is said to be something “ingrained in our brains because we heard it from our parents, from other teachers. We heard it directed at ourselves, and a two-year-old, a one-year-old who is throwing a tantrum, is trying to tell us something” (Skrzypczak 2021:33). This ever reappearing confrontation, a process thereof, became a motivation for one participant to dedicate her career to working with children and in ensuring children in her care enjoy a trauma-free childhood. De facto, all participants demonstrated a high degree of engagement and passion when working with children. Respect, empathy, and information were identified as values that educators strive for (Skrzypczak 2021:33-34).

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

In order to fulfil their tasks well, educators need some character traits and qualities. One participant calls them “fundamental qualities”, and such categories shall include “empathy, tolerance, patience, understanding, creativity, self-discipline, consistency, ability to bond with children, passion for the job, being a good listener, an active listener and being open-minded”. Moreover, an educator should be able to self-reflect and to be genuine or authentic (Skrzypczak 2021:34).

Educators have many professional duties, such as protection or support. One of the mentioned important tasks is creating a space for children to share their thoughts and opinions but also making sure that their opinion is vocalized appropriately, if not verbally. Recognizing this responsibility means viewing educators as gatekeepers to participation (Skrzypczak 2021:34-35). However, just as educators need to fulfil many tasks, they also face many struggles. The main challenge that participants recognized was a lack of time, which can significantly diminish participation. Often, decisions are being made on the spot as there is not enough time for discussion and inclusion of all parties involved. Working with parents, a need to adhere to a particular structure of the day, and supervising children are other mentioned issues. Dealing with staff shortage is thought to be an enormous problem, posing a great obstacle in implementing participation. It can only take place if there are enough adults in the kindergarten. When educators are missing from their workplace, “the efficiency of care is prioritized” (Skrzypczak 2021:35-36). Time issues and not enough support due to missing colleagues cause rising stress levels. Generally, participants feel under pressure most of the time, with participation being one of the affecting elements, due to the amount of work required from educators to implement it. The process of self-reflection and remaining empathic at all times towards children requires a lot of work. It is not easy to focus on the opinions and needs of children and give them time for independent problem-solving rather than follow their own instincts and quickly find a solution for children (Skrzypczak 2021:36).

Problems with the team and insufficient management support are also recognized as a challenge. Educators often feel there is no space for their own contribution in decision-making processes and that their voices are not listened to. Consequently, participation remains to be seen as a struggle, challenging to organize, time and energy-consuming when there are so few time resources already (Skrzypczak 2021:35).

CHILDREN IN SOCIETY AND THEIR PARTICIPATION

“The child always has to fit in, adapt to the parents, to the adult’s life,” said one participant (Skrzypczak 2021:40). The other adds that children are not allowed to have a say, an opinion. Children are compared to disabled people, with both groups being marginalized in society. Children are not consulted about the choice of their educational institution, nor its design and functionality. Children are misunderstood. But their rights are also less important than economic growth (Skrzypczak 2021:38).

It was demonstrated that participation is understood in a variety of ways. One participant states that the concept serves as a “buzz word”, a marketing trick to benefit

FRÖBEL (Skrzypczak 2021:37). Most of the time, participation is perceived as self-determination, an ability or space to make decisions about own needs or taking part in the offered activity. A few educators believe that participation is also about taking part in the decision-making process, contributing to the community of both adults and children, a concept that sounds well theoretically, but is difficult to implement. Nevertheless, adults role is to support children and act as gatekeepers to their participation. It is also within their professional duties to provide children with information and more self-determination opportunities (Skrzypczak 2021:38-39).

Participants agreed that children should be involved in structural decision-making processes to some extent. Children's capacity to apprehend consequences of such were questioned, concerns arose as to the organization of such process and fear of chaos was expressed. The worry that educators' work becomes even harder when implementing participation is the main reason educators feel reluctant. At the same time, participants showed a great deal of respect towards children by being receptive to their learning, passion, and yearning, but also by their own deep self-reflection. Children are taken seriously, even if unable to communicate verbally, and there is a lot of focus on the individuality and character of each child. Participants also recognized the role of the environment in a child's development and participation and the need for an open, welcoming, well-organized space (Skrzypczak 2021:39).

Although some participants expressed hesitation and reluctance towards participation, they all recognized the many benefits such practice entails. It gives educators the possibility to make their daily work easier. Children have an opportunity to become pro-active in their social environment, curious, resilient, and self-confident. Participation aids in better emotional self-regulation, social skills, understanding of human rights values. It promotes the development of seeing oneself as part of the community (Skrzypczak 2021:40).

Some participatory methods are already used by the participants. Children are granted a lot of freedom to make individual choices relating to food, napping, or outings. Morning circle is a means to give children information about available activities or the structure of the day. Projects led by educators are often based on children's interests and ideas. Some participants expressed a wish to introduce a children's parliament, facing challenges; however, due to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, which further impedes children's ability to participate (Skrzypczak 2021:40-41).

WORKPLACE

Participants perceive their workplaces as hugely influencing children's scope of participation. The buildings can either promote this children's right or hinder it significantly due to poor design and closed spaces. The space, educators, and setting's manager are thought to be interrelated. FRÖBEL's framework, an "open space" incorporated in all of its kindergartens, allows for free movement and for making individual choices. However, it can prevent educators from giving children the needed support at the right moment. The study's participants view FRÖBEL as greatly respecting children's

rights. Protection, development, education are at the core of the organization, as well as participation, which is often thematized (Skrzypczak 2021:41).

The management of kindergarten plays an important role in implementing those important values at FRÖBEL, which often occurs by putting forward various projects or goals. “Sometimes you get given, sometimes you get given the rules, and you don’t know if they’ve come from the Leitung (en. management) or from FROEBEL somewhere above or, and you’re like, this is a terrible rule. This rule sounds like it’s come from someone who’s never worked with children before,” stated one participant (Skrzypczak 2021:42). Little or no monitoring is also viewed as problematic, along with scant support for educators in implementing concepts and ideas. There are a “lot of demands on the educators and not really the structures in place” (Skrzypczak 2021:42). Moreover, participants see themselves as excluded from decision-making processes, and they feel disrespected. One participant said: “It’s like sometimes we’re taking care of the children to get all the rights to participation and listen to their desires when our Leitung is not actually doing that with us” (Skrzypczak 2021:42).

Going further, participants view the management of kindergartens as unable to deal with team problems. Quitting work is a common result of unresolved conflict between employees, to which managers turn a blind eye. A common strategy is swapping colleagues in the teams rather than dealing with the problem itself. Educators in this study wish for themselves more support from their management. “If the team is not working, of course, nothing is working” (Skrzypczak 2021:42). Finding common ground for a number of people with different experiences, backgrounds, and values is a difficult process. Communication is not always flawless with different interpretations of issues and colleagues who are not open to new ideas. A good, open-minded working atmosphere is significant in order to learn and develop further goals. Such teams and their ability to reflect and construct meaning together in relation to participation are viewed as more successful in their implementation (Skrzypczak 2021:43).

DISCUSSION

Each participant of the study had a unique background and different life experiences (Skrzypczak 2021:45). Rogoff (2003:274) believes that people reproduce behaviour and views by “generalizing experience from one situation to another”. In the light of this statement, it can be argued that many educators replicated the opinion of adults’ superiority towards children. Many educators experienced an authoritarian parenting style, and some even find it appropriate (Skrzypczak 2021:45). However, some educators confront such upbringing methods, are conflicted by them, but also are motivated to support children in growing up in a different, more respectful way (Skrzypczak 2021:46). This process of internal revision and shift proves that cultural impact does not determine one’s values endlessly (Han 2017; Rogoff 2003).

The study demonstrates that there is a different understanding of participation among the participants, which has already been claimed by Mörge, Rieker and Schnitzer (2016:8). It is perceived rather as a power to make own choices, to self-determination. However, it is just a part of the bigger picture and not the wholesome in-

terpretation of participation, as already defined in this paper. It is not viewed as a right of each child but rather as a theoretical notion (Skrzypczak 2021:44). Lundy (2007) highlights the importance of continually engaging in the process of participation. She believes that ongoing training should be provided to all who work with children to excel in understanding art. 12 of CRC. The support could be provided by trained participation experts (ger. Multiplikator*in), whose tasks would also include monitoring and evaluating participative methods and strategies in the kindergarten. Moreover, it is proposed to establish the role of the Ombudsman for Children's Rights for each ECEC provider. Every organization taking children's rights seriously is also recommended to establish a Children's Parliament or Children's Advisory Board, to give children opportunity and space to contribute on the structural level (Skrzypczak 2021:47–48).

Some educators recognize their role as gatekeepers to children's participation and the need to be authentic (Skrzypczak 2021:47). Authenticity, empathy, and deep understanding of each child were, as postulated by Korczak, qualities needed to work with a participatory pedagogy (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Olędzka 2020).

Nevertheless, one strives to involve children in decision-making on a communal level is opposed by others' perspectives to give children opportunities to express views to make them feel respected. Educators view participation as in need of control and thorough organization. They fear children (especially the youngest) are not capable of being involved to this extent and want to protect them from harmful consequences ([author] 2021:44). But they also feel losing own control over their children (Rieker et al. 2016). Therefore, children are still not trusted to make decisions about their own lives; they are refused to be seen as social actors with an agency. They are perceived as a society's capital of the future, but not of today (Liebel 2008).

Despite their reservations, early childhood educators believe participation to be of huge significance, benefiting children in many ways. Through it, children have the opportunity to become more resilient, confident, curious about the world. They can master their communication, social and emotional skills. Educators are interested in children's participation and they reflect on its process. This attitude is thought to be partially inspired by FRÖBEL's organizational culture, as this establishment incorporated art. 12 of the CRC in the organization's mission statement and frameworks for each of its ECEC centres (Skrzypczak 2021:44-45).

Although children are provided with information, listened to, and given a space to make their own choices, there are no tools used to ensure children can engage in structural decision-making ([author] 2021:45). These findings prove to not fulfil the legal obligations of ECEC services (Westrich 2019:91). Westrich (2019:91) proposes children's parliament or a fixed time for consultation with the management as means to improve children's participation. There are many more methods conceived by Korczak that can be revitalized and used in educational institutions for children (Markowska-Manista & Zakrzewska-Olędzka 2020). According to Rogoff (2003), children of all ages have the capacity to participate in and contribute to their communities just by simple means of taking care of a specific task. Moreover, utilizing more tools might support educators' daily work and reduce pressure and stress levels. Practising participation can also be a method of learning and improving one's understanding (Skrzyp-

czak 2021:47). Lundy (2007) cautions against the accidental application of tokenism or decoration. Children must be listened to, but also respected and taken seriously. She proposes documenting the meetings with children and giving them feedback on the extent of their own contribution.

Going further, the findings demonstrate that there is an urgent need to examine the organizational culture in ECEC services. Ineffective communication, problems between colleagues, feeling unappreciated and disrespected are, to name a few, issues that block the application of participatory pedagogy. Work relationships and the kindergarten's atmosphere will impact the development of children's values and views (Jančec & Vodopivec, 2017). Participation must apply to all people involved in an ECEC setting; it needs to be part of the service's culture in order to work (Schneider 2019:115). Kindertartens should aim for a democratic, respectful, and secure environment for adults and children alike (Schneider 2019), a duty of managers (Pohlman 2019:127). Providers of ECEC services are obliged to not only ensure proper frameworks in place but also monitor their application (Pohlmann 2019:125–126). Moreover, it is recommended for kindertartens' space to be thoroughly examined on an ongoing basis to ensure the design and layout promote participation in the setting (Skrzypczak 2021:48).

The study's limitation is missing perspectives of kindertartens management, as well as the generalizability due to the small number of participating early childhood educators. It could be useful to repeat the study with German-speaking educators to gather more data, as this study was conducted only in English.

To sum up, it is clear that the perspectives of early childhood educators about participation and its implementation depend on many different factors (Skrzypczak 2021:51). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007:86) think that "early childhood institutions carry great symbolic importance. There are statements about how we, as adults, understand childhood and its relationship to the state, the economy, civil society and the private domain". Therefore, investing in the organizational culture, training of educators and proper implementation of democratic, participative strategies is necessary for ensuring a better society. The participatory culture of now will shape citizens' future democracies (Maywald 2014; Sinclair 2004; Lundy 2007). It is also a duty of ECEC services to ensure children's right to participation is respected and practised, for as Korczak says, "children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be – the unknown person inside each of them is our hope for the future" (Korczak, as cited in COE 2009:7).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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