

2. Needs Analysis: Participation of Children and Parents in German Kitas

As stated in the above, the project was designed to lead to the sustainable development of education and children's day care in German Kitas. On the other hand, it must also take into account the specific requirements of the cooperating Kita. Therefore, a two-step needs analysis was developed. The needs analysis focused on the subject "Participation of Children and Parents in German Kitas".

In step one, we wanted to establish the educational policy requirements and current needs of the children's day care system and its professionals in the country. For this purpose, we analyzed the education plans of the federal states in search of answers to the following questions:

- How is the subject of participation addressed in the education plans?
(definition, conceptual frameworks, target groups, educational methods)
- How is participation legally and structurally incorporated?
- Which standards, competencies or procedures should be considered and performed with regard to participation?

In a second step, performed right at the beginning of the project, customized questionnaires (**Annex 2 + 3**) and semi-structured interviews (**Annex 4 + 5**) were used to interview parents and professionals about their own definitions of "participation". It was also established how they believed participation should be integrated into the educational routines of the cooperating Kita.

The sample was composed as follows:

- Interviews of educational professionals: N=3 (random selection)
- Interviews of parents: N=3 (random selection)
- Questionnaire for educational professionals: N=12 (participation of all professionals of the facility)
- Questionnaire for parents: N= 10 (Questionnaire was distributed to the parents, return approx. 24%)

On top of that, 15 (mainly older) children were interviewed in groups of 5 children about their opportunities to participate in the Kita. Due to the linguistic and cognitive limitations of the children, the interviews revealed no information that could be used or evaluated. It turned out that the subject of participation/involvement was too abstract for the minds of small children which is why these minds had stored nothing that could have been retrieved. The children therefore were in no position to reflect about their opportunities of participating in the system.

2.1 Analysis of the Education Plans of the Federal States: Participation in the Kita

The framework agreement of the Federal States (2004) represents an agreement about the principles of the educational work of day-care facilities for children in Germany. The actual details of how such facilities must operate are then filled in by the various education plans on the level of the individual federal states. The framework agreement defines day-care centres as educational institutions with their own profiles and educational methods that must be characterized by the principles of integration and support. The framework agreement identifies aspects "... whose relevance cuts across all curricula and that have the nature of cross-subject learning objectives" (2004, 4). They include:

- teaching and encouraging the children how to learn (the skill of learning)
- intercultural education,



- educational work with gender-consciousness, individual support of children with development risks and (impending) disabilities,
- support for children with special talents and
- **involving children in decisions that have an impact on their life at school, taking into account the stage of their individual development.**

About the participation and the role of the parents, the document says: "Educational professionals and parents share a common responsibility in education and upbringing, and they need to work together as partners. It is very important to engage the parents regularly in discussions about their children and to offer them information and training. When making decisions on important matters that affect the day-care centre, **the parents should be involved accordingly**" (ibid. 2004, 6). Within the confines of their joint framework agreement, the federal states are free to determine the details and processes of their pre-school education systems, according to what best matches their specific requirements. In the following, we shall set out what provisions the education plans of the individual states make for realizing and implementing participatory concepts.

2.1.1 Participation of Children

All education plans are based on the thought that children are self-active and self-determined actors in the educational process, which must therefore focus on the role of the child as a driving force behind its own development.

"A child discovers, investigates and designs its world and all the things and relationships that belong to this world, through unconventional activities with all its senses right from the first breath. Every child wants to learn and educates itself on its own initiative" (Educational Program of Berlin 2014, 14).

"Children's day-care centres need to see children as acting subjects in their own educational process, who – through their own skillful actions – construct their own development, education and learning processes, because children strive to conquer their world from the moment they are born. They gain experience, design their world and develop ideas about it" (Recommendations for Education, Rhineland Palatinate 2004, 13).

This concept of "education as self-education/-Bildung", which is a centrepiece of all education plans, requires the children's own participation. A successful system of educational support and encouragement requires participation and active involvement. Therefore the plans call for the recognition of children as skillfully acting individuals and for ways of involving them actively into the daily process of education. This philosophy provides the foundation for all education plans, and the idea of actively engaging children in the construction of cooperation schemes as one form of active participation and involvement is implicitly accepted, albeit not explicitly affirmed.

Other education plans advocate the concept of children's active participation mainly on two grounds: some derive the need for the participation of children from a subject-oriented understanding of education and argue that participation is a crucial key to education. Examples include the following:

- In the Orientation Plan for Education in Baden-Württemberg (2011), the Chapter on "Foundations and Objectives of Educational Work" says: "Participation, inclusion, the recognition and high valuation of diversity and the consistent focus on the needs of each child are essential principles of a child-friendly basic education and of the orientation plan" (Chapter 1.1).
- North Rhine-Westphalia treats the idea of children's participation as a cross-subject learning objective in its plan (see the Chapter on "Education for a Sustainable Development"), describing participation as



a fundamental element in the design of educational processes. No details, however, about the methods or about the forms that such a participation might take are provided, and the conceptual framework of the plan is not explained.

- The Education Programme of Berlin (2014) also identifies participation as a dimension of education with relevance for all subjects (see the Chapter on “Education Is Participation and Performance”).
- In the framework of the federal state of Bremen, participation is only briefly mentioned in the Chapter on “Methods of Educational Work”: “..... when planning and implementing educational programmes, it must always be taken into account that children should be actively involved in as many stages as possible” (2004, 36).
- The recommendations for education in the state of Rhineland Palatinate also represent the view that the active participation of children has a firm place in the methodological arsenal of educational work. The chapter on “Independent Learning and Participation of Children” says: “Educational work should be designed in such a way that the children are stimulated to act and to learn independently. Children shall learn to make their own decisions and to be held accountable for their decisions. Through participation in the everyday life of the Kita, children experience key principles of democracy. Participation requires a respectful attitude from the teachers, which needs to be reflected by everyday activities and in particular by their teaching methods such as holding children's conferences” (2004, 45). Participation is also mentioned in the section on “Establishing Communities and Networks of Relationships” where it is said to strengthen resilience and self-sufficiency. The recommendations of Rhineland-Palatinate state resemble the framework agreement of the states inasmuch as they, too, talk about cross-subject learning objectives, but they fail to treat them as separate dimensions.

Secondly, participation is seen as an imperative that is rooted in a democratic understanding of education (participation as a key to democracy). Examples include the following:

- The Thuringian education plans for children under the age of 10 put the role of participation in a social context. The chapter on “Cultures of Education” calls for the participation of children in two sections, once under the heading “Children's Rights” and once under “Active Involvement and Co-Determination (Participation)”.
- The orientation plan for education in Lower Saxony deals with the issue of participation in its chapter on “Basic Values of a Democratic Society”.
- The educational plan of Hessen addresses participation in the context of autonomy and social responsibility (2008, 25). On top of that, an entire chapter is dedicated to the topic “Cooperation and Participation”, which demands the participation of children as a logical consequence of a democracy's perception of itself and which goes on to describe numerous skills that children can acquire through the practice of democratic patterns in their everyday world, thus developing their personalities (107).
- In the educational plan of Bavaria (2012) the “principle of democracy” is described as a cross-subject learning objective within fundamental educational principles. “The principle of democracy informs the entire educational process and implies an active pursuit of democratic principles in the world of daily routines. It is based on a culture of encounters that follows democratic principles, and thus it is based on partnership and cooperation” (2012, 22). Furthermore, a chapter with the title “Key Processes for the Quality of Education and Training” deals in detail with the “participation of children in the educational process and the life of educational institutions” (2012, 389ff). Like other education plans, the Bavarian education plan describes the general philosophy of participation, specific educational objectives and participatory elements of educational practice, but it also includes suggestions towards the development of a comprehensive culture of participation.
- The guidelines for the educational mission of Kitas (Schleswig Holstein 2008) focus on the participation of children in the context of power and distribution of power between adults and children and advocate symmetric relations where children need to assume a certain level of responsibility. Like in

the framework agreements between the federal states, the topic of "More Participation – Taking Into Account the Relationship Between the Generations" is dealt with in the chapter on "Cross-Subject Learning Objectives in Children's Day-Care Centres".

If one considers the totality of the educational plans, there are large quantitative differences (from 8 lines in NRW to approx. 27 pages in Bavaria) with regard to the treatment of the subject "participation". The degree of detail also varies, with only a few plans providing practical or immediately applicable suggestions of how to implement a participation scheme. Not one of these education plans gives participation the rank of a separate topic: they all treat it as a cross-subject learning objective and as a "supra-ordinate dimension" of the educational process. The participation of children is referred to either in different contexts or with different thematic priorities.

2.1.2 Participation of Parents

A review of the education plans also reveals that the term participation is used almost exclusively in relation to the target group of children. The participation of parents in Kitas is dealt with in separate chapters and under headings such as "Educational Partnership with Parents" (Hessen, Bavaria, Rhineland Palatinate, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), "Cooperation with Mothers and Fathers" (Schleswig Holstein), "Cooperation with Parents – Educational Partnership" (Thuringia) and "Responsibility for Education – Parents and Families are Experts and Active Partners" (North Rhine-Westphalia). There are hardly any qualitative, only quantitative differences between these plans in the description of the relationships between professionals and parents. While some educational plans describe the relationship between parents and professionals in a fairly detailed way, specifying objectives, principles and practical methods of implementation (Bavaria, Hessen, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), others restrict themselves to the description of guidelines and fundamental principles (North Rhine Westphalia, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt) or focus on a specific topic (Schleswig Holstein: Education and Proactive Educational Policies). The most frequently used word to describe the co-operation between parents and professionals is that of "partnership of education", and – in respect of the need to support the educational functions of the nursery school – it is said that the "partnership of teaching ... needs expanding to a partnership of education" (Hessen).

Correspondingly, some education plans demand a "partnership of teaching and education" (Baden Württemberg, Rhineland Palatinate) (Hebenstreit 2008, 119). In the different education plans, this partnership is associated with various characteristics, a list which might serve as a description of participation processes or as their general requirements:

- Reciprocal, based on partnership, equal, open, transparent, mutual, active, regular, jointly;
- Cooperation, appreciation, transparency, cooperation, acceptance, awareness, recognition, partner, alliance, sharing, openness, dialogue, respect, encounter at eye level.

Some education plans (Hessen, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Bavaria) furthermore describe different functions of the cooperation between educators and parents. They explicitly describe the parents' co-determination (Hessen), cooperation/collaboration (Mecklenburg - Western Pomerania) at the Kita and involvement/co-responsibility (Bavaria) of parents in decision-making processes and demand the formal and structural integration of parental involvement into the institutions' structures. The Educational Program of Berlin (2014, 51) describes participation opportunities of parents as a continuation of the partnership of education on an institutional level and as important building blocks for the development of democratic structures. Lower Saxony's orientation plan for



education (2005, 10) focuses on the involvement and participation of parents as an "Element of Civic Culture".

While all education plans demand a partnership between professionals and parents and talk about the need to meet each other "on eye-level", the participation and cooperation with the parents is primarily considered as the task of professional educators.

"In order to promote teaching partnerships and to establish appropriate forms of participation for parents, the professional educators must take the initiative and approach the parents. They issue invitations to parents' meetings and discussion groups and conduct surveys together with the parent representatives. They speak to the fathers and mothers, always aware of the need to comply with the parents' family cultures. They also discuss with individual parents which forms of participation would be suitable to their life situation and make appropriate arrangements" (Education Program of Berlin 2014, 51).

Based upon this, some education plans (e.g. Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) list the requirements and quality criteria/qualifications that the professional educators must possess.

2.1.3 Conclusion

In principle, the demand for participation can be found in all educational plans. The participation of children and parents is usually addressed independently in separate chapters. With some exceptions (such as the Bavarian educational plan), the relatively general demand for participation as a cross-subject learning objective is phrased in rather sparse, non-specific and theory-driven language, whereas the curricula for individual subjects are described in fine detail and often illustrated with examples. This suggests that participation in the context of early childhood education is considered less important than the educational fields, although a lasting and serious implementation of participatory methods in Kitas might have broader effects and consequences on education, development and childlike learning. Schweitzer (2010) arrives at similar results in her analysis of four education plans. She notes that it should be critically questioned whether this imbalance can lead to misinterpretations and whether the required concept of participation can be interpreted and practically implemented in this way. It therefore appears, judging from the education plans of the federal states, that the actual implementation of participatory processes in children's day care centres will always face the difficulty of breaking down a cross-cutting issue to the point where it acquires relevance for the every-day tasks of teaching small children. It therefore is important to deliver more than a mere verbal commitment to the establishment of participation, but also to act and to implement and realize these education plans. It is difficult to say to what precise extent the participation of children is an every-day feature of the educational work in children's day care centres if all you have to go by are the education plans. (Schweitzer 2010, 41; Rehmann 2010, 48)

With regard to the participation of parents, a similar problem exists. Many education plans describe the theoretical construct of educational partnership rather generally through leitmotifs and basic characteristics. There are only few specific indications for the implementation or methodological and didactic design of this partnership. Furthermore, the terms "participation", "involvement" or "co-determination" – inasmuch as they are used at all – appear to describe a world where parents and professional educators mainly cooperate in committees and public bodies, leaving little room for any forms and possibilities of a more direct, everyday parental involvement. So far, there are no studies specifically dedicated to the participation of parents. Viernickel et al., however, state that any project



and its requirements can only be successfully managed when the need to directly involve families is recognized as equally important as the school education of the children itself (Viernickel et al. 2013, 126). On top of that, the studies of Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al. (2006), Friederich (2011) and Viernickel et al. (2013) have revealed a significant need for an improved cooperation between parents and professional educators, mainly in view of reviewing attitudes and of the methodological skills of the teachers. They argue that this issue needs to be better integrated into teacher training courses, professional development courses and supervision processes. This again demonstrates what we have already seen with the participation of children: that, in order to realize ambitious participation targets, it is not enough to write them down in a mission statement.