

## 2.2. The Needs of the Cooperating Kita: Attitudes Towards and Practices of Participation

After the educational and theoretical obligations and recommendations regarding the participation of children and parents in Kitas have been illustrated (based on the education plans), the qualitative survey of professionals and parents of the *Aufwind* Kita at Saßmicke is meant to indicate which concepts of participation are predominant in the Kita and how participation is currently practiced and realized in the routine operation of the centre. The results of the quantitative study essentially confirm the findings of the qualitative analysis while providing an additional insight into questions and issues which were not or only partially addressed in the interviews of the respondents. The results of the quantitative analysis cannot be described in detail here, but are available in **Annex 6**.

Generally, the term "participation" of parents and professionals is described as a process or right of co-determination, participation and joint responsibility. Sometimes, the term is paraphrased, or alternative terms are used including "to be involved", "to participate in a cause" and "to be heard". Based on the interviews, three main patterns of attitudes and actual practices of participation in the everyday life of the cooperating Kita can be identified:

- A generally critical or ambivalent attitude to participation
- A situational and intuitive involvement of children and parents
- A partial participation on special occasions or in special situations

Here too – similar to the education plans – the attitudes and forms of participation of parents and professionals are addressed in different contexts and with thematic priorities. Statements about a legally binding and structurally embedded participation of children, demanded as a quality standard in the National Action Plan (BMFSFJ 2010 421), are largely absent from the interviews.

Institutionalised forms of participation for parents are briefly mentioned, but with little positive and appreciative connotation.

“Generally, no such things like parent’s evenings. Many (..) parents do not attend. We are always glad, specifically (Name) and myself in the small groups, when there are enough people to have a quorum for a parents’ council.” (FK3, 6)

The **participation-critical and ambivalent attitude** goes along with the fact that the daily lives of children in the Kita is essentially determined by the professionals and also needs to be determined by them from an adult point of view. Although the participation of children is not questioned in general, it is always pointed out that this is only possible in a certain context, within institutional structures and in accordance with rules set by the professionals. Within such a framework, children are given small, simple participation opportunities to develop their personalities. These may be extended depending on the situation, but are generally determined by the professional teachers.

“It is very important that the children can develop freely, that they learn what they really want. But it must also stop somewhere, well, there must be limits. That is clear, but, within their own scope, within what they understand, they should already have a say.” (E1, 4)

“Of course, there are fixed structures and rules, but within those, they are able to make small-scale decisions. (It is important) that one makes it quite clear that there are certain structures, that there is a framework of rules and yes, that there are rules that have to be followed such as simple consideration, social behaviour. But in this framework there are several options to choose, to decide ...



Also a say in where I want to play what I want to play, but it is possible in this framework of structures, which are granted, like free spaces ...“ (FK2, 2)

“They can decide, today I wanna do this, I would like to do that. BUT I would never let the reins slip out of my hands completely.“ (FK1, 3)

People with critical or ambivalent attitudes argue by pointing out that participation – especially where young children and children with disabilities or development disorders are concerned – is an unreasonable and excessive demand. They emphasize that the question of how far participation should go causes uncertainty and that the task of giving equal weight to diversity and heterogeneity represents a challenge in the Kita’s everyday life.

“Yes, I think this is DIFFICULT. I find it difficult, because I am not sure, whether I find that GOOD for children or up to WHICH DEGREE I find that ok. Because on the one hand I think that children should not HAVE TO determine so much, as it is not easy for children to make decisions. In the first stage of their lives, they have enough to do with finding themselves, and then to MAKE them decide ... I take a highly critical view of this.“ (E2, 2)

Disability and developmental disorders are also seen to restrict the potential for participation. In this context, communication skills in particular are described as the basic prerequisites for the participation of children. Not all children have such skills, which can make participation appear more difficult or even unfeasible.

“And when there are children who are able to express themselves WELL and explicitly, and who are as articulate as they are self-assertive, then it is EASY, they make it easy for everybody. But then there are children, where it is more difficult, one has to take care, that (laughs) they do not slip through. (..) Because it can be, that they express that verbally, or a xy (name) expresses his wishes and needs with gestures, or show them like xy (name).... A lot is also just GUESSING, testing. (..) Think about new things and try to (..) find out, where they can bring themselves in at best, what they like, and what they can do in every day-life and WANT to do. So, it is not always easy. For some children it is really DIFFICULT... sometimes you have to SLOW THEM DOWN or PUSH them into the right direction. I think, that this sometimes does NOT look like direct self-determination, but that is what it is meant to be.“ (FK3, 3)

Another aspect which is seen critically in the context of participation and that may cause ambivalent attitudes is the aspect of time. Professional educators especially point out that participation requires time or time resources. The statements make clear that the wide range of demands and responsibilities of the professionals exceeds the time and the resources provided to initiate and to manage appropriate and customized co-determination and participation processes. On the other hand, it is argued that so much time is needed because child development is a lengthy and time-consuming process, and participation as a first step towards self-responsible, adult lives may take years to develop and to be implemented in practice.

“Often it happens, just when you are under time pressure, or you are poorly staffed, I am sometimes annoyed about myself, that I somehow get involved too much, although I know: if I gave him TIME, he would do it alone. I need ... but at the moment, I mean, I had to take it off him, because I still have this and this and this to do on the list...“ (FK3, 5)

“So, for me there are still very large question marks, about what, with regard to the implementation ... that’s a process ... Sometimes, I have children in a group for three years without a major change and



after these three years, something developed. Real self-determination at the end of the nursery school period..." (FK1, 7)

While the limits of children's participation will be more likely explained by a lack of children's skills and a lack of time structures, the participation of parents seems to depend largely on the will of the parents to get involved and to participate, to dedicate time. Parental participation is more often understood – by parents as well as by professional educators – as an active process of participation and active involvement than it is criticized for being insufficient in scale. Frequently cited reasons for a lack of parental involvement include the parents' (apparent) lack of interest, anxiety, stress and "too much work already".

"So what I find basically beautiful is when parents ARE once involved, because I think that's a little bit sad that it is, as I see it, often too little. Maybe also because many parents are not necessarily all that interested. I would appreciate it if one could force them for their own good, so that they become more aware of everything." (E3, 4)

"I think they always say that's very important, but when it COMES DOWN TO IT, it is but then / it fails due to many framework conditions ... then they want to decide as much as possible, if possible, but sometimes it is fear, sometimes boredom, unwillingness, stress of everyday life... Maybe it is important to sit in the same boat more often. (FK2, 5)

When asked for examples of child participation in everyday life, the parents and professional educators described events and activities in which professionals had given children in certain situations the opportunity to determine – individually or collectively – important topics that they wanted to talk about and on which they wanted to arrive at some sort of common decision. This included mainly opportunities to express oneself in play situations, to help design the rules for joint activities (e.g. breakfast) and to take a stand in issues about spatial and other arrangements; but always within confines, basic rules and regulations having been determined by the professional educators. In contexts of **situationally/intuitively granted participation (self- and co-determination) in educationally framed everyday situations**, professional educators recognize their educational responsibility and maintain their authority in the event that the child does not head into the direction which they believe is the correct one.

"...What they are trying to put together / what they are playing now and so on. It's clear that they shall determine it themselves. Of course, sometimes games must be played under guidance or in a circle of chairs. Where they arrive after, well, having received some guidance." (E1, 4)

"Have a say in chair circles, what do we do, how could it look like now. To remodel corners of activity. Three years ago, we redesigned these corners a bit ... playtime opportunities within the group. (...) Determination of game themes, too. So depending on where it is going...and yes they determine then, where it goes and you ask them, tell me about it, what could you play. In that sense, by simply taking up their interests. The children tell somebody something and thus determine their subject or what has just happened in our group." (FK2, 3)

The frames set by professionals reflect their normative ideas, their educational goals or the structures of the everyday organization of the institution. In principle, the professional teachers are certainly aware that an involvement of children into decision-making processes has the potential of stimulating the development and self-education of the children.



"I believe that it gives him a lot of security because the things he can do constantly repeat themselves. And when he gets an assignment, that also makes him confident, that somebody apparently thinks he is capable of doing it. Well, I think that he likes it. He is always very proud and (laughs) happy." (E3, 4)

"I think this is important because when they REALIZE that they can decide a lot by themselves, they become more independent. So that / (..) The more they can make on their own, and also give them their free space, and sometimes allow for mistakes, that's totally okay .. (..) the better they can estimate things themselves, make decisions and defend their opinions." (FK3, 4)

Nevertheless, opportunities for self- and co-determination are only granted spontaneously, depending on the situation and intuitively, i.e. not in accordance with established rules.

"And how that looks in detail, I decide very often, I think, according to INSTINCT, so: Do I give a child the chance to do as he or she wishes, for example, in a conflict, do I let them settle it by themselves? Or do I step in? Or I let children determine on their own where they play, or do I make suggestions, or do I even perhaps say "Do that now exactly as I tell you!" That depends highly on the situation and again is related to the child, which is then again subjective: What do I trust him to do? And what I know, what that specific child can do." (FK3, 1)

Other statements reveal that the level on which participation is granted in the *Aufwind* Kita is actually rather low and that both parents and children mistake "pseudo-participatory" practices for the "real thing". Some statements reveal an understanding of participation as "taking part" and "joining in". Participation is all about the opportunity of doing things self-responsibly. This attitude does not *per se* include the possibility of making one's own decisions or to have a say in group decisions. Parents also defined participation as information, consultation and mutual exchange. These stages are indeed important prerequisites, but they do not serve as sufficient criteria for high-quality or high-level participation. Neither do they represent viable forms of practiced participation.

„...So, I have the feeling that (..) the children are well integrated into the processes ... That he simply well, yes, he assists. Be it in the washroom while brushing his teeth, that he knows where his towel is. Where any of these things belong to or when the food is being prepared, that the kids set the table and even get a cloth in their hands at the end. An older child may wipe tables, for example, or put the chairs back to where they belong. What I also find very nice, is that they carry out the work, and it really does not matter whether there is still a grain of rice left, what counts is the fact that the child do it." (E2, 3)

„... Yes. So that someone is getting involved just a little bit. Partly maybe TO HAVE a say, if you want. And, of course, to get informed even when things are about to happen that could have been otherwise swept under the carpet." (E2, 1)

As a third pattern, partial **forms of participation** are mentioned in the interview statements. These are used in the cooperating Kita on special occasions and in special situations when they are gradually developed further to become structurally embedded forms of participation. Partial participation allows children and parents to propose options, wishes and requirements that go beyond the daily routines and to assist in the design of common projects and activities such as celebrations, games or other exercises in the phase of settling in (familiarizing).

"There are also, I think, as I have not been involved in it for a quite a long time, yes, kindergarten festivals, potato festivals, festivals of the friends of the institution, summer festivals, lantern crafting, afternoon singing. So, I guess, there are opportunities for parents to get involved." (FK1, 5)

“I also liked the FAMILIARIZING, as I could attain it in a quite flexible way. There already we have already been HEAVILY involved, up to this point ... I have accompanied xy (name of child) and in doing so I have also witnessed how they do that. And they were flexible, as xy (name of child) could not separate from me after two or three days. So they extended the period with regard to the child. And I could also have continued it, but then I eventually said that we move rather backwards, maybe it's just too early for the child. But that was always in close consultation with me, what is good for the child, what makes sense, and not whipping out a paper called The Berlin Model, page three, so-and-so many days have elapsed (laughter), now you must go.“ (E2, 7)

Parents and professional teachers agreed that events relating to disability, therapy and inclusion were particularly important for the implementation of partial participation. Their statements show that the professional educators deal with these topics intensively and try to provide a wide range of participation opportunities especially for the parents.

“I am invited to the therapeutic appointments with respect to xy (name of child) where I SHALL also take part. I think that is a good idea ... There's an extra note which was given to xy (name of child) that I can join the therapy that she receives, I think once a month... thus, I learn it a bit, because I've also previously accompanied her all the time. Those are the first points of contact that I had experienced here. (E2, 6)

“Now we also have many taxi children with me in the group. It is then just nice if ... We have these note booklets, we make entries every DAY, and the parents can, if they want ... well, they can play a part, I think, in a really easy way.“ (FK3, 6)

This particular willingness to make considerations for the specific situations of children with disabilities and their families is very positively assessed by the parents and presented in an appreciative manner. In the view of the parents, this form of partial participation is a way of “practicing” inclusion which enables the children to participate in life.

“... And what I find really great about xy (Name of a child), and what I really noticed about xy (name of child), is that she is involved in everything. She does not have the physical requirements, because of her age. But she is involved in everything. So if it's time to eat, then xy (name of child) goes there, xy (Name of a child) is allowed to sleep when she is tired, she plays just normally with all the children, no matter how old the children are or what her options are. She is pushed in a pram when they play outdoors, for example. She becomes involved EVERYWHERE, EVEN at occasions where one might first think, yes, yes, she cannot do that at all. And I find that REALLY really good.“ (E2, 3)

“Yes for my daughter that means perhaps even more than for a healthy child, because she, I guess, has often been rejected in the course of her life or maybe even pushed to the background. Yes, and for xy (name of child), this means, regaining the ability to participate in normal life.“ (E2, 4)

As a summary it can be said that it is indeed known what participation should deliver, but that the term is mostly defined by its restrictions or its limitation to certain activities and areas of participation. The critical/ambivalent attitude towards participation expressed by many interviewees and the fact that situational participation and participation opportunities on special occasions are restricted by the rules and educational principles of professional educators show that “participation” in the cooperating Kita is still understood as “taking part” in activities that are offered by the staff. Although the contextual frameworks of a stimulation of self-education, the learning of democratic patterns of behaviour and participation are largely (or totally) ignored, the professionals exhibit good intentions towards the development and the education of the children and cooperation with the



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parents. In view of the development and inclusion awareness targets of their education, the children are provided with spaces in which they can develop self-sufficiency and responsibility in the framing of joint decisions, while their parents are encouraged to involve themselves in the life of the Kita. Nevertheless, the facility lacks legally and organizationally entrenched structures of participation for children; existing bodies where parents could raise their voices are underused and hardly provide serious options of participation.