

Children's Participation in Research: An Approach to Social Work Research

Abstract: Recent decades have seen an increase in the number of studies involving children and based on participatory research methods and approaches. This rise has been both national and international, mirroring the expansion of the transdisciplinary, internationally rooted field of Childhood Studies. This article outlines three research projects and examines their varied approaches to research, ranging from the question of how participation in communicative practice can be reflected in data collection with children, to the implementation of child rights projects whose research design and data analysis take children's participation into account. The authors' intention is to draw the attention of the profession and discipline of social work to the significance of child-rights-centred research, and to stimulate its scrupulous advancement. The article underlines how important it is to demand children's participation and to empower children during participatory research processes complying with the obligatory implementation of children's rights. Purely protective patterns of conduct can be expanded into emancipatory processes of experience and education.

Keywords: Participation, children's rights, participatory research

Zusammenfassung: In den letzten Jahrzehnten haben Studien mit Kindern, die auf partizipativen Forschungsmethoden und -verfahren basieren, neben den transdisziplinären und international verankerten Childhood Studies auch im Bereich der Sozialen Arbeit national und international zugenommen. Dieser Artikel untersucht anhand der Skizzierung dreier Forschungsprojekte verschiedene Forschungszugänge beginnend von der Frage, wie Partizipation in der kommunikativen Praxis u.a. auch in der Datenerhebung mit Kindern reflektiert werden kann, bis hin zur Durchführung von kinderrechtsorientierten Projekten, die im Forschungsdesign und bei der Auswertung die Partizipation von Kindern berücksichtigen. Ansinnen der Autorinnen ist es, die Bedeutung kinderrechtszentrierter Forschung

stärker in den Fokus der Profession und Disziplin der Sozialen Arbeit zu bringen und deren kritische Weiterentwicklung zu stimulieren. Hervorgehoben wird, wie die Forderung nach Beteiligung und Befähigung von Kindern in partizipativen Forschungsprozessen der verpflichtenden Umsetzung von Kinderrechten entspricht, rein protektive Haltungsmuster werden zu emanzipatorischen Erfahrungs- und Bildungsprozessen erweitert.

Schagworte: Partizipation, Kinderrechte, Partizipative Forschung

1. Introduction

The last 30 years have seen many developments in the field of children's rights which have also been reflected in the field of social work. Children's rights are commonly categorised as rights to protection, provision and participation¹ (see Cantwell, 1997; Milne, 2017; Sandberg, 2018). In this article, we will focus on children's rights to participation and how social work research can contribute to the advancement of children's rights and children's participation (based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [hereafter UN CRC]).

First, we will look at the connections between social work and children's rights and participation. Second, we will present three different research projects that focus on different dimensions of the Lundy Model of child participation. In analysing the research projects, we will examine how this type of research can enable and consolidate children's interaction in research processes, allowing them to express themselves as addressees of social work. Third, we will highlight the findings of three research projects conducted in Germany to show how children's participation can be enhanced during data collection when conducting research with children in the field of social work. Finally, we will reflect critically on children's participation in social work. We aim to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the implicit and explicit conditions which apply when communicating with children in practice (e.g. research practice), so that Article 12 of the UN CRC does not remain a merely programmatic or moral stance.

1 In this paper we define children as "every human being below the age of eighteen years" (Article 1 UN CRC).

2. Connecting social work with children's rights and participation

The connection between children's rights and social work can be established in many ways. First, children are addressees of social work, and many fields of professional practice and conduct in social work are linked to children (child welfare and protection, school social work, family social work, community work). As social work is a "human rights profession", "children's rights belong to both the ethical and theoretical foundations of social work" (Reynaert & Roose, 2015, p. 95). Children's rights are increasingly "regarded as a frame of reference for social work, where they are considered to be a key lever for commitment in the social work practice" (Roose & De Bie, 2008). Children's rights found their international legal basis in the UN CRC, which "became an important instrument for social work through the development of practices that are based on the framework of children's rights" (Reynaert & Rose, 2015, p. 95) and was used as a reference for drafting the 2002 Training Manual published by the International Federation of Social Workers (hereafter referred to as the IFSW). The manual provides social work professionals with guidance on how to implement the ideals of the UN CRC in their work with children, emphasising five central ideas for social workers from a children's rights perspective (IFSW, 2002, p. 8):

- children have to be accepted as being;
- childhood has to be considered valuable as such;
- children are active agents of their own lives, and children's views must be respected;
- children must not be discriminated because of their age;
- social workers have to pay attention to the special vulnerability of children.

The manual submits the proposition that social work training and training materials should ensure that courses on the issues of "participation" are part of social work schools and curricula (IFSW, 2002, p. 73). The term "participation" is used in an overarching manner, and is defined by Lansdown as "an ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and that full consideration of their views be given, taking into account the child's age and maturity" (Lansdown, 2011, p. 3). Consid-

ered in the context of social work, participation can be defined as “the aim of (...) involving users (clients) in the choice and provision of social work/ social education programmes and services” (Schnurr, 2005, p.1330; Schnurr, 2018, p. 631)².

This can imply that, as addressees of social work and as individuals and social actors who are competent and have the capacity to take decisions, and whose opinions are to be taken seriously, children are “given better information and more say in the process of social work intervention” (Hill, 1998). This view suggests that, as Kosher states, participatory practices should be welcomed in social work practice (Kosher, Ben-Arieh & Hendelsman, 2016, p. 31), and that social workers can promote and implement children’s rights in their everyday practice by ensuring that children can participate in decisions about their lives (Lansdown, 2005; Liebel, 2013).

However, in the field of social work, children’s rights and children’s-rights-oriented approaches requiring their involvement and participation in decisions affecting their lives have not been fully pursued or implemented to date (in particular the UN CRC and the application of Article 12 – the right to express their views and have them taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity) (Holland, 2004). There seems to be a discrepancy between children’s perspectives on their own participation and professionals’ understandings of child participation (Wolff et al., 2013). Participation varies depending on the existence of tensions between what adults and children want, professionals’ personal assumptions about children based on the images they have of them, and the skill of the professionals supporting children (Bell, 2011). The results from recent studies conducted in Germany show that children want more participation in all areas of their lives (Andresen, Wilmes, & Möller, 2019). The IFSW suggest that if social workers are “ready to listen to children and to make a reality of their participation rights” (IFSW, 2002, p. 9), children’s rights can be advanced and implemented in social work practice and research.

As stated by Cristina Martins, “overall, children’s rights should have a larger part in decision making. Research [...] can play a significant role in this” (Martins, 2016, p. 119). We submit that social work research can help improve children’s rights, and that although 30 years have passed since the ratification of the UN CRC, there is still no interdisciplinary approach to research with children, and they still fail to be recognised as legal entities in all relevant dimensions of the research process.

2 Translated by the authors.

3. Child-rights based participatory research and the Lundy Model

Participatory research involving children has been a trend since the early 1990s. Participatory research focuses on “generating knowledge from the perspective of those being researched, rather than from the perspective of the researcher” (Beazley & Ennew, 2006, p. 191). As such, the “main principle of the approach is that the people whose lives are being studied should be involved in defining the research questions and taking an active part in both collecting and analysing the data” (Beazley & Ennew, 2006, p. 191).

The key difference between participatory research involving children and other research approaches “lies in the location of power in the various stages of the research process” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1667–1668). Participatory research alters the location of power within the research process by involving children in the different stages of the research project with the aim of “challenging power inequalities between children and adults and producing higher quality research knowledge” (Spyrou, 2018, p. 159).

Child-rights-based participatory approaches may assist children in the formation of their views. Applying a human-rights-based approach to research with children, a child-rights-based approach to research should take into account the fact that: “The research aims should be informed by the [UN] CRC Standards; the research process should comply with the [UN] CRC standards³; and the research outcomes should build the capacity of children, as right-holders, to claim their rights, and build the capacity of duty-bearers to fulfil their obligations” (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012, p. 78). All the above-mentioned steps influence the way research is conducted. Especially in the field of social work research, this means a shift towards listening to children, emphasising their acts of communicative meaning-making in interactions, and taking them seriously.

In Germany, participatory research still receives little support and is not part of the mainstream academic discussion about qualitative research methods (von Unger, 2014). There are various reasons for this (for example, participatory research interventions require researchers to play an active role in social processes found in the research field). However, we believe that participatory research helps to understand social reality, and it is useful to involve research partners in the knowledge production process. Partici-

3 One example is including children in research using procedures that are safe and inclusive (Articles 19, 2 UN CRC).

participatory research and participatory approaches using children as co-researchers (Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011, p. 719) or as primary researchers (Kellett, 2010, p. 90–91; Alderson, 2000, p. 241) promote a view of children as experts in their own lives (Thomas & O’Kane 1998). Various scientists have applied participatory research approaches with children. Schäfer & Yarwood developed their research question together with children (2008, p. 125). Kellett initiated a research project in which children developed the research design, implemented it and drafted the research report from their perspective. The participating children were named as co-authors of the report and academic papers (Kellett, Forrest, Dent & Ward, 2004). Lundy and McEvoy report studies in which children discussed the research process, including analysing and interpreting the results (2012, p. 134). In some cases, children took part in training sessions before taking on the role of co-researchers (Kellett et al., 2004)

To apply a child-rights-based approach to research, all research phases should be considered (framing, conducting and disseminating research). When framing the research (defining the aims of the research, the research question), one means of applying the children’s-rights-based approach is that children are involved in developing the research question and, with it, their understandings of their rights (the aim being to inform them about their rights). As such, using methods that respect children by emphasising their participation, take into account ethical standards, and consider children a part of the dissemination of the results are indicators denoting a children’s-rights-based approach (Reppin, 2019). Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that participatory research alone will reduce a possible power imbalance between children and adults. The ethos of participatory research – “to give children a voice” – can also be practised “as a top-down approach where power is handed down from the powerful to the powerless” (Schubotz, 2020, p. 15).

As the above points show, a child-rights-based participatory research process postulates that child participation is central. Therefore, in the research projects conducted by the authors of this article, it was important to maintain child participation throughout the research process by using approaches that help children (in dialogue with researchers) to express their own opinions on the topics which are important to them, even when these are not congruent with the researcher’s interest. This approach is based on the presumption that there the researcher’s interest differs from what is relevant for children. In this type of situation, the dialogue takes place in a process of mutual alignment, a process of co-production which acknowl-

edges children's verbalisations, opinions and views (see also Boyden & Ennew, 1997).

The facts that children's perspectives are heard and accepted, and that children themselves are treated as competent, fully fledged research partners, are important aspects of complying with the criteria and guidelines recommended by Lundy & McEvoy for participatory research (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012).

Since 1992, more than 30 participation models have been developed, often focusing on the participation of children in research and practice. These include models by Hart (Ladder of Participation, 1992), Treseder (Degrees of Participation, 1997), Shier (Pathways to Participation, 2001), Lardner (Clarity Model of Participation, 2001) and Lundy (Lundy Model of Child Participation, 2007).

With the aim of emphasising children's rights in the field of research and practice in social work, we will now look at the Lundy Model of Child Participation, which arose from prior collaboration among partners in international research projects (especially "Participation for Protection" [hereafter referred to as P4P]).

The Lundy Model of Child Participation represents an innovative child-rights-centred approach to research and practice in social work. This model implements the right to participation and all other rights formulated in the UN CRC.

The Lundy model was inspired by Article 12 of the UN CRC and "constitutes an attempt to provide a practical precis of Article 12 which condenses the wording of the provision without sacrificing its scope and meaning" (Lundy, 2007, p. 933).⁴ The Lundy model proposes "that the successful implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of the implications of four separate factors: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence" (Lundy, 2007, p. 932).⁵

4 Article 12 states that "states parties shall ensure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child and shall take into account the views of the child appropriately and in accordance with his or her age and maturity" (Lundy, 2007, p. 932).

5 The first element (space) states that children should have the opportunity to express their views. The second element (voice) emphasises the need to make it easy for children to express their views. The third element (audience) emphasises that the view must be heard. Finally, the fourth element (influence) emphasises that the view must receive an appropriate response (Lundy, 2007). The four elements are important to achieve the serious, full and inclusive participation of children based on international human rights standards.

However, it is important to remember that for the practice of social work, the implementation of participation based on the Lundy Model of Child Participation requires “practitioners to be pro-active; to actively create the conditions for facilitating and implementing each of the four elements of the right” (Kennan, Brady, & Forkan, 2019, p. 216). This implies that social work professionals should first create a space for children to express their views (for example by inviting them to attend meetings and reviewing the results with them to ensure accuracy). Second, they should enable children to express their view (e.g. by identifying how they would like to hear about the decisions made in the context of their family assistance). Third, it implies that children’s views should be listened to (for example, if the child’s views influence the recommendations submitted in decision-making processes). And fourth, it indicates that children’s views should be acted upon as appropriate (for example, that children should influence decisions such as the choice of children’s homes).

In the framework of the P4P Project, the authors applied the Lundy model to the field of social work research in Germany. It became clear that the practice of ensuring that the views of children were listened to and acted upon respected children’s rights and the principles of ethical research, and can be applied to influence service provision by an adequate training of social workers.

4. Research findings on how children’s protection can be enhanced by participation

In the following we will describe three research projects. One project was conducted as a means of empowering children in communicative processes in social work practice (BeKinBera). This formed the starting point for a second research project which considered children as subjects of research (Participation for Protection [P4P]), followed by a third research project which took the same approach (Children as Shifting Agents). The projects emphasised the shift in the representation of the child as subjects by “repositioning children in knowledge production through research *with* and *by* children” (Mason & Watson, 2014, p. 2757).

4.1 Child-rights-oriented research project developed for children: BeKinBera

The research project “Participation and Empowerment of Children and Juveniles in the Counselling Process” (BeKinBera)⁶ ties in with Laura Lundy’s political demand for a “legally binding obligation” to give children opportunities to form and express their views, and to listen to and act upon children’s perspectives. This framework helps analyse how the ways children express themselves are supported or hindered, and what kind of difficulties emerge in the mutual process of understanding. Taking a child’s-rights-oriented approach to research in social work, the project aimed to analyse children’s participation in intergenerational and institutional communication settings with social work professionals.

The research project analysed how, when language is used in specific communicative activities, specific patterns are created to ensure that children can freely express their views. It also examined what kind of communicative activities hinder or suppress children’s expressed views. Based on actual dialogues, it explored the issue of how, when professionals addressed children and their views, their communicative activities restricted and stimulated children’s efforts to participate.

The analysis focused on the context-related communicative conditions in which participation (as defined in the UN CRC) is constituted as a relationally based communication process between professionals and children. This was pursued by investigating conversational activities between children and professionals step by step, using the concept of Conversation Analysis (CA) at a microscopic level. This is seen as an innovative ethnomethodological approach (Garfinkel, 1967) for exploring children’s everyday social worlds (Bateman, 2017). Through the transcription and microscopic analysis of everyday institutional utterances, researchers investigated how children’s voices are asserted, elicited and responded to during the co-production (ibid.) of everyday social settings by social work professionals and children who have experienced violence. In following this CA approach, BeKinBera deals “with the methodological issues of children’s voices” (Åkerlund & Gottzén, 2017, p. 42). This is seen as a necessary but

6 The project, entitled “Beteiligung und Befähigung von Kindern und Jugendlichen im Beratungsprozess” in the original German, was funded by the Hessian Ministry for Science under the leadership of Prof. Heidrun Schulze, Kathrin Witek and Ulrich Reitemeier; additional information regarding this research project can be found at www.bekinbera.de.

neglected issue in childhood studies research investigating “how children’s voices are produced in their local, cultural and societal contexts” (ibid. p. 42) when it comes to challenging and reflecting on naturalistic presumptions that children’s voices are “authentic accounts”, and aiming at a critical, reflexive representation (Spyros, 2011).

Based on a data corpus in BeKinBera, the researchers identified certain phenomena which were relevant to how interaction between adults/professionals and children can be made more successful; how the communicative activities of children’s participation are established, how they actually get an opportunity to speak, and how professionals respond to their conversation activities. The following interaction phenomena were identified. (Schulze, Reitemeier, & Bialek, 2015, p. 91–97):

4.1.1 Creating participation identities

The interaction phenomenon of *Creating participation identities* describes a powerful aspect of a communicative practice which offers space in which the children can act based on the professional’s construction of the image of the child. The conversation partners play an equal part in creating participation identities by attributing, accepting or rejecting personal and social categories, based on implicit or explicit expectations about the conversation. The “*participation identities*” position is geared towards processes of making one’s own and others’ social traits relevant. This is particularly evident in professional-child interaction since, when exercising their role, professionals often rely on specific assumptions about “the child” as an anthropological and developmental construct, or about what a child “should be like” from the viewpoint of normative expectations.

4.1.2 Creating transparency

Focusing on this aspect, we consider whether the contextual constituents⁷ of an interaction can be made transparent for children in a conversational situation (and if so, how), or whether they remain implicit.

Professionals or researchers have great responsibility for creating transparency when dealing with children in a communicative setting, due to their power to define situational objectives. The degree of transparency has

7 Such as institutional conditions – e.g. a conversation in school between a teacher and pupil or in psycho-social settings such as an inquiry about victimisation or witnessing.

important consequences for participation conditions in general and children's modes of participation in particular. The creation of transparency is a key prerequisite to child's-rights-oriented practice, in research and elsewhere: it significantly shapes the process of developing a sense of safety and building trust, and thus should be recognised by professionals as necessary during interaction.

4.1.3 The organisation of understanding

Georg Simmel (Wolff, 1950) defined "Verstehen" (understanding) in the sociological sense as grasping things more deeply from the inside, rather than from the outside, looking in. In every conversation, this aspect of "Verstehen" is an ongoing interactive process. We are focusing primarily on the aspect of understanding and being understood, which is an essential and continuous effort in all interactive processes. During interaction between adults/professionals and children, intergenerational knowledge and differences in their perspectives often complicate the organisation of understanding. In educational settings, professionals should be careful to forge a step-by-step process with the children, creating a dialogue that includes constant feedback – and to ask themselves and the child what difficulties might arise for both sides in making themselves understood, and why.

4.1.4 Constructing relationships of recognition

In the context of child-rights-oriented thinking and practice, it should be observed how both intersubjective and structural mutual recognition of relevance are supported during acts of talking. Relationships of recognition (or: interactive conditions of recognition) can also be observed in the ways in which children are helped to express their views in their own way in order to articulate themselves.

When respective modes of participation in the interaction process are recognised, children experience what it feels like to be taken seriously and receive respect for their contributions and the modalities of interaction (e.g. seriousness, play) that they bring to or prefer in the conversation. It is only if their contributions to the interaction are recognised as valuable, suitable, stimulating, etc., if they are understood in terms of their relevance and framework of interpretation, and if their input is taken up and then processed as part of further interactive activities, that children can experience themselves as individuals worthy of recognition.

4.1.5 Communicative engagement of the child

This interactive phenomenon has the potential to inspire participative orientated data collection in research with children. When supporting children's conversational activities in professional interactions, it is important to create the necessary conditions, enabling children to freely express themselves about what they consider relevant in a concrete situation. Professionals should stimulate the children to find their own words to (re)construct their life experiences and give meaning to this. One should avoid an interrogative communication structure by means of steering questions and answers as this will restrict the children's own narratives. It is also essential to have a collaborative exchange and therefore asking the children about what questions and conditions in the dialogue are "good" and "helpful" for them. In other words establishing a kind of metacommunication over the conversation. This can decentre the power of the adult person and convey that children can actively influence the communicative interaction.

Vygotsky's activity-oriented developmental psychology, and his book "Thought and Language" (1934/1986), convincingly explain how sensitisation and cognitive learning processes occur through social exchange when languaging – in terms of "producing language" – as a "dynamic, never-ending process of using language to make meaning" (Swain, 2006, p. 96). With this underpinning understanding words become objects of communication which requires an increasingly reflexive use of language from researchers / practitioners and at the same time convey narrating competence to children – or stimulating that competence (Schulze & Witek, 2014). That means that they must be guided by the words and expressions used by the children and should not transfer them to an adult model of cognition. This requires a shift from an adult-centric stance to a children's perspective whereby the children are considered as active actors and active meaning making subjects in their lives and social environment. The increased focus on the children's perspectives creates deeper insights how children deal with life circumstances and how these are interconnected with their world's view and the way how they positioning themselves to their experiences (e.g. violence). All of the narratives that children express concerning their selves and their interpretations of the situation should be seen as situational and interactive co-produced meanings and relevancies, which occur in an intergenerational figuration.

The children's communicative engagement, whether it involves far-reaching or self-limiting forms of participation, reflect their emotional state

and willingness to cooperate and also serves as an indicator of whether the conditions are supporting the children's agency in the respective situation.

4.2 Research project involving children and based on children's rights (research with children): Participation for Protection (P4P)

"Participation for Protection" (P4P) was a project aimed at improving child-centred approaches and rights-based support for children who experience violence, and enabling those who work with them to better understand their needs. The project was funded by the European Commission (2017–2019)⁸.

The project originated from the belief that training resources for trainees and professionals are often developed by adults, from an adult perspective, and that there was a need to shift the focus to children's experiences in order to better respond to their needs. To this end, research was conducted on children's experiences of and perspectives on what constituted violence, what the barriers to disclosing violence and seeking support might be, what constitutes useful support, and how professionals could better respond to their needs.

The research used a child-rights-based participatory approach, and two groups of children followed the research as advisors (forming Children's and Young People's Advisory Groups, hereafter referred to as CYPAGs), helping to develop participatory approaches and capture the experiences of

8 The P4P was carried out and led by the Queen's University in Belfast, with partner universities spread across 6 European countries. In Germany, the team was composed of Tanja Grendel, Davina Hüblich, Rita Nunes and Heidrun Schulze at the RheinMain University of Applied Sciences. Other countries and researchers participating in the project were: Northern Ireland, UK (Siobhan McAlister, Katharina Lloyd, Laura Lundy, Michelle Templeton, Karen Winter, Queens University, Belfast; Kate Moffett, Paula Rodgers, Include Youth Belfast); England, UK (Nicola Carr, University of Nottingham); Belgium (Stefaan Pleysier, Johan Put, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven; Katrien Herbots, Sara Lembrechts, Ellen Van Vooren, Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten), Republic of Ireland (Bernadine Bradym, Danielle Kennan, National University of Ireland, Galway), Austria (Sabine Mandl, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights Research Association), Romania (Maria Roth, Eva Laszlo, Universitatea Babeş Bolyai). The results of the project, gathered in the form of materials developed with children and aimed at children, professionals and parents, are available online at <https://www.hs-rm.de/de/fachbereiche/sozialwesen/forschungsprofil/partizipation-von-kindern-im-kinderschutz-participation-for-protection-p4p>.

children. These CYPAGs provided insights into the key issues underlying the project and helped the researchers design the project, interpret the results and disseminate the findings. A variety of methods were used to collect the data, and the input from the CYPAGs aided the design of appropriate, accessible child-friendly material. The data was collected in two stages. In the first stage, a survey was conducted of 1300 children aged 8–18, in all the countries involved in this study. As an example of child participation, at this stage, the CYPAGs helped compile the survey questions and consent forms, and interpret the data collected with the researchers. In the second stage, focus group discussions were conducted with children who had experienced different forms of violence. In Germany, a total of 25 children participated in the focus group discussions. At both stages, the data collected were treated confidentially and anonymously.

The data from the focus groups were divided into the following three key themes using the “Thematic Analysis” method (Braun & Clarke, 2006): a) understanding harm b) relationships and c) child-centred practice. Structured in this way, the data were analysed with the support of the CYPAGs. The CYPAGs helped the researchers create dissemination tools for children, such as a sign posting leaflet, and an animation⁹. All in all, the research was child-rights-oriented and participatory.

The data collected from the survey and focus group discussions indicate that it is important to recognise that children wish to have an important role regarding their protection and the exercise of their rights. Children’s experiences, shared in the data collected, show us that children have had negative experiences with many professionals who they believed were trained to protect them. Children demonstrated through their articulations that in child protection practices, the childhood discourse of the child as vulnerable and not being able to take decisions prevailed. From the data analysis, the most important aspect of a professional’s support is communication. Children explained that listening to children and involving them in decisions that affect their lives, as well as keeping them informed about decisions, is an important part of enforcing their rights and consequently their protection. Linked to this was the revelation that adults should give children feedback on the actions adults undertake. In the same vein, adults should keep children informed of decisions and the reasons for ruling out other options. The children explained that this would help them understand

9 The results of all the data collected, resources for professionals, and information for children and young people were made available online on the different project partners’ websites.

their situation better, make them feel respected and possibly encourage them to seek support. It can be concluded that children prefer a childhood discourse in which they are understood as rights bearers who are capable of understanding and taking decisions relating to their lives, consequently benefiting their protection. In summary, children's participation in research about violence can have the beneficial impact of making them feel that they are being taken seriously, heard and informed about their rights. This chimes with the statement at the CRC/C/GC/12 that the implementation of the right to be heard is reflected in different settings and situations of children's lives: in the family, in alternative care, in education and school, and in situations of violence.

Children's involvement and participation can help them to better understand how they are being protected against violence and become better acquainted with their rights.

4.3 Research project involving children's participation and based on children's rights (research with children): children as shifting agents

Relying on the experience gathered and the lessons learnt from the P4P project, the project "Children as shifting agents" focuses on the participation of children who have been confronted with the child protection system in Germany (especially children exposed to domestic violence). Some of the preliminary results of the data collected will be presented in this paper in order to emphasise that children's protection can be enhanced by their participation. A total of 28 children aged ten to seventeen participated in the study. The selection criteria were based on the children's exposure to violence within the family and their contact with the child protection system (either through family assistance, living in a children's home, in an emergency placement for endangered children or a foster family). Children's involvement in the focus groups was promoted, and the research was partially accompanied by a separate group of children who had experienced domestic violence. These were trained¹⁰ in research skills, enabling them to interpret some of the results of the data collected with the 28 children who

10 According to Syrou, "training children in research methods also attempts to address the power differences reflected in the degree of skill possessed by adults and children which may exacerbate the extent of control of the latter by the former" (Syrou, 2018, p. 165).

participated in the focus group discussions. This research project highlights the demand for children's participation and inclusion in social work research.

From the children's accounts, it became clear that some had experienced resistance from professionals and parents relating to their participation. One of the factors that might explain this is the scarcity of communication with them, given that the children's participation in their "own child protection" depended on the information made available to them by professionals. According to children's articulations, where professionals held information back from children and therefore did not take children's views into full account, or facilitate their participation, children were discontent with their involvement. Communication about the processes of child protection is, in children's narratives, a major component of their participation. Skilled professionals' communicative skills can facilitate their relationship with children and encourage the disclosure of their issues and fears relating to their own protection. To encourage this, it is important for them to build a relationship with professionals based on trust and recognition. Children revealed that they needed to find a dynamic with professionals and that they needed to trust professionals; time, openness and perseverance by professionals was necessary to build the dynamic and trust.

Linked to the scarcity of communication, children also indicated that they needed to understand the decisions taken by their carers or professionals, and that they wished to be taken into account when decisions about their child protection were taken (for example about placement options). In several groups, children explained that over time they gained a deeper understanding of the measures taken in terms of their child protection, in some cases resulting in *a posteriori* acceptance of their situation.

An examination of the articulations of the children involved in this research makes it clear that the discourses of childhood are reproduced in the context of child protection (namely, the discourse of the child as vulnerable). It is important to shift the childhood discourse to a discourse in which children are a rights-bearers and adopt a child-centred child protection approach. An approach of this kind should focus on children being involved in making decisions about their lives, and in identifying what form of comprehensive, inclusive communication helps them handle the choices implemented in their child protection. In summary, it is important that child participation is implemented in the practice of child protection.

From these research projects conducted in Germany, we thus demonstrate that interacting with children when collecting data, and reflecting on these

interactions, can benefit children's well-being, participation and self-determination. This can also be described as "doing" research. In our view, research that is oriented towards children's rights – i.e. participatory research – can, as Houghton writes, have an impact that goes beyond research: "Empowerment requires a change in adult:child relations and respect for children's individual and equal voice(s). Furthermore, the experience needs to be *emancipatory*: young people want direct access to politicians and to have real power within the political system (...). A child-centric view of research ethics opens up a whole new perspective and refocuses current thinking onto children's agency, power and impact." (Houghton, 2015, p. 245, emphasised in original)

Specifically, we note that whether research is participatory or not reflects the way in which linguistic communication is established in research (and practice) and reveals the existing power asymmetry between children and adults (Schulze, Richter, Nunes, & Schäfer, 2020).

5. Participation as validation of children's rights in social work

Finally, we will reflect critically on children's participation as a means of substantiating children's rights in social work. In this article, we argue firstly that children's rights, including the right to participate, should be included in professionals' performance, and secondly that social work should include children and treat them as (completely unique) human rights holders and full participants in procedures that affect them¹¹.

We suggest that the legally guaranteed rights of the UN CRC (Articles 2, 3, 13 and 17), which are linked to the right of participation, are not yet sufficiently reflected in the overall design of research with children, nor in communication and the interactional/situational co-production of children's statements within research. This has a lot to do with the fact that many procedures in which children are the addressees of social work are constructed by and for adults, leaving children out of the equation. Considering that the intergenerational power relations in research involving children cannot be avoided or denied, it is important to raise awareness of the interactions occurring within the research processes and to reflect on the

11 This includes the assurance that children can participate in their own care, and that children are to be consulted in the planning, development and evaluation of services for children.

relationships established during the research in a critical manner with regard to the inherent hierarchical generational relations (Schulze, Bialek, Witek & Affeld, 2018; Schulze, Nunes, & Schäfer, 2020).

If the addressees of social work can participate, they can influence and improve their skills and resources. However, it is important to underline the fact that the addressees are highly dependent on the professionals. That reminds us that embracing children's rights in social work practices should be designed to deconstruct power relations and, as such, seek change in relation to structural matters.

One of the key principles of social work practice is to work in a child-centred way by listening to and taking the child's voice into account as much as possible (Milner & O'Byrne, 2009); therefore, social work interventions should be closely associated with child-centred practices. These practices can be achieved if social workers provide a child-friendly environment¹² when meeting children, reflect on professional or personal assumptions about children (otherwise their utterances could be understood as "childish communication") and give greater consideration to the child's voice. In order to implement children's participation in social work, both the organisational and the interactional structures within social work practices have to change. A shift is needed in professional higher education and training (by including children's rights in the university curricula of social work programmes), in the ethos of the profession, and in the practices of the work developed. Professional conduct is needed that emphasises professionals exchanging ideas (through training and seminars, which implies governmental support) as well as critical thinking (by offering an opportunity to spend time reflecting on the work effectuated). It is also necessary for child participation to be put into practice on a large scale which will not only impact children's lives but also affect and change policies and political decisions. By virtue of its mandate, the social work profession must be concerned with children and their rights.

6. Conclusion

Taking the example of three research projects, this paper intended to highlight how children's perspectives can lay the foundation for change in social

12 A child-friendly environment calls for the creation of transparency as well as recognition towards the child.

work practice and research, and enhance professionals' skills and knowledge, leading to them applying a child-centred approach when working with children. To achieve this goal, we addressed the advances made in the 1990s with regard to strengthening children's rights and the importance of hearing children's voices in social work practice and children's-rights-based research in social work. We looked briefly into different demands, dimensions and critical aspects of child-rights-based participatory research to add emphasis to child participation. This analysis emphasised the demand for child participation as a way to endorse children's rights in social work.

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