

## Editorial: Participation and Social Work / Social Pedagogy

Participation is an important issue in democratic societies – and thus a topic addressed in many academic disciplines. Social work and social pedagogy are primarily concerned with participation in society that is as extensive as possible. This includes being involved in shaping living conditions, the ability to make one's own life plans, and the power to influence different aspects of life. At the same time, social work and social pedagogy are sensitive to questions around unequal social, economic, and political resources, and to other background circumstances that can lead to social problems and disadvantages. Accordingly, social work and social pedagogy are involved in a balancing act: they have to create the conditions for participation in situations where people experience social disadvantage and restrictions.

The term “participation” indicates the close connection between the spheres of politics and education; it describes “processes of subjectivation in the context of logics of socio-cultural belonging and participation which are currently appearing, for example, in relation to current problems within society and education policy, in the form of questions about inclusion and integration” (Jergus, 2020, p. 453). Against the background of processes of change in the welfare state, participatory practices cannot be unreservedly advocated. Regarding forms of societal ambivalence, among other things, they require critical discussion. This shows how societal problems such as social (in-)justice, (in-)equality and inclusion vs. exclusion or poverty are interlinked with discourses about opportunities for participation.

In social work, and especially in child and youth welfare, participation is not only a formal requirement but also, ultimately, a legal obligation and task (Scheu & Autrata, 2013). This is also reflected in the quality criteria of the FICE Austria (2019) for residential child and youth welfare. Participation plays a central role in the entire care process, from risk assessment and assistance planning to participation in the life and daily routine of the socio-educational institution. An orientation towards participation is a constitutive feature of professionals' attitude. Opportunities for children, adolescents, and parents to have a say, to help shape and to participate in decision-making enable them to see themselves as “experts” in their own lives; they promote the assumption of responsibility and learning processes.

In addition, however, the participation of professionals in the organizations and the system partners is also required to achieve conducive development environments and successful forms of support (FICE Austria, 2019).

In many European countries, the rights to participation, co-determination and a say in decision-making have firm roots in corresponding child welfare laws and the countries' constitutions. Those rights are also set out for all children and young people in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Convention on Human Rights and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should also be named explicitly. The theory behind these legal norms, which act as guidelines for social work, is based on three rationales (Schnurr, 2011, p. 1063 ff.):

Firstly, from the perspective of the theory of democracy, participation is seen as guaranteeing freedom, equality and the recognition of a wide range of different, (publicly) clashing interests.

Secondly, participation is seen as a key concept behind an understanding of social work as a service which relies upon users actively taking part (especially in scheme planning) and upon circumstances which encourage co-production.

Thirdly, by laying the foundations for participation in social work, education theory and pedagogical practice are providing for the fact that the beneficiaries of child welfare services, in particular, often do not have the prerequisites necessary for active participation: thus, one challenge lies in creating opportunities (e.g. for education) which make it possible for them to participate at all (see also Bütow & Maurer, 2013).

A fourth rationale which can be added to this reasoning is that participation is a comprehensive principle focusing on social spaces rather than individuals, and aims to connect social services within the community and through multiprofessional cooperation. By this means, it helps to prevent the undesirable circumstances and developments which have recurred throughout the history of social work due to tendencies towards compartmentalism and exclusion (see some of the appraisals of the history of residential care, e.g. Ralser et al., 2017; Imširović et al., 2019).

Participatory approaches and methods have become increasingly established in the world of social work research. Participatory research offers an in-depth insight into clients' experiences, and expressing their views and making their voices heard gives them opportunities to help social work progress (AGJ, 2020). It expands the classic repertoire of methods used in empirical social research and offers fresh perspectives for researching into social reality as "partners" (Mayrhofer, Wächter, & Pflegerl, 2020).

The contributions on the main topic of this volume can be divided into four thematic lines of discourse: 1. organisation(s), institutions and social spaces, 2. clients, 3. the angle of professional practice and 4. the angle of research practice and research methodology.

## **Participation in organisations, institutions and social spaces**

Two contributions examine the complex conditions behind the production of participation in organisations, institutions and social spaces.

*Petra Bauer, Nina Wlassow and Mirjane Zipperle* focus on users' perspective on quality development measures in educational support ("user-inspired quality development"). In a three-year practical development project in a region in southern Germany, involving managers and professionals in child and youth welfare as well as scientists, the question of how the voices of users can be made heard and given weight was investigated. Different methods and instruments were developed and used for former clients and their parents (standardized questionnaires, biographical narrative interviews, family discussions, spontaneous interviews with former addressees using a set of postcards, etc.). The authors discuss the multi-layered challenges and tensions of participation that arise from this project. These include research methods and bias about the group of people interviewed, the relationship between the different perspectives, and the extent of participation granted in the project.

The contribution "Protection concepts as participatory processes of organisation development" by *Mechthild Wolff, Sonja Riedl, Meike Kampert and Kirsten Rösel* addresses the topic of structural power imbalances among professionals and those in their charge in the field of child and youth welfare, and discusses possible means of overcoming such imbalances by setting up and implementing corresponding protection concepts. Given the many historical and recent abuse scandals that have been revealed in educational and healthcare institutions, there seems to be an urgent need to fundamentally scrutinise the different types of internal logic and power relations found in organisations. The authors' reflections are thus based firstly on the inalienable rights of children and young people to protection and support, and secondly on their participation in every part of the child and youth welfare process. In this contribution, children are presented as having a basic social right to participate in the design of key organisational processes used to analyse situations and develop prevention and interven-

tion measures, and to appraise possible instances of injustice. This is seen as a means of making pedagogy sensitive to children's rights. At the same time, participatory organisational development not only offers an opportunity to empower children and young people, but can also be made accessible to disadvantaged people via relief organisations.

## Participation and clients

The contributions analysing participation from the point of view of beneficiaries relate both to the aspect of enabling social and political participation and to that of grasping opportunities for participation in social work schemes.

*Markus Ottersbach* examines protests by marginalised youths as unconventional forms of political participation, using findings on the social selectivity of political participation to show that youths in marginalised neighbourhoods are in fact interested in politics, but that their attempts at political participation are discredited as "illegitimate participation". A comparison of protests by youths in Germany and France reveals that although topics such as social inequality, the effects of urban segregation and discrimination are relevant to marginalised youths, they have little knowledge of how to gain public attention, make themselves heard and wield an influence. As established political education schemes are geared towards the middle class, the author believes that opportunities lie in community youth work which recognises the topics and techniques typical of marginalised youths and seamlessly links in with their forms of political participation as the basis for political education work.

In youth careers guidance based on labour market policy, social work's aspirations towards participation come up against restrictive institutional limits. *Ruth Enggruber* and *Michael Fehlau* examine how people attending vocational preparation measures experience opportunities for participation. They reveal that there are a wide range of views about opportunities for participation, and distinguish between three types of attendees. The authors identify one type who try to fit in and follow the rules, and another, rebellious type who use conflicts as an attempt to take part in decision-making, due to their limited opportunities for participation. A third type of attendees are characterised by a moderately critical attitude; they accept instructions and rules while simultaneously seeking opportunities to exert an influence. Altogether, this contribution registers a lack of transparency with regard to institutional requirements and the power balance, which makes it

difficult for the attendees to participate in the sense of actively taking part in processes of negotiating, making decisions and shaping the measures they attend.

*Stefan Eberitzsch, Samuel Keller and Julia Rohrbach* probe into experiences of participation among children and young people in residential child welfare services. To this end, they have carried out a review of the English- and German-speaking research literature, offering an overview of empirical studies that focus on the young people's perspective. As well as systematising the theoretical connections and the approaches used by the different research methods, the review of the findings reveals that their experiences of opportunities to participate play a key role in their acceptance of the support they receive. Although formal participation processes are now widespread, the various institutions differ widely in terms of the opportunities for participation they provide. Above all, the children and young people who were surveyed wanted a greater say in everyday decisions that are relevant to them.

## Participation from the angle of practice

Two contributions take up the subject of scientific analysis and the ways in which participatory practice is reflected in different fields of social work.

The article by *Katharina Gundrum* and *Gertrud Oelerich* discusses the question of how the use of personal social services can take on damaging forms for users due to a lack of opportunities for participation. An interview study with two former users is used as an example to illustrate the fundamental importance that the affected users attribute to being able to participate when using such services, how they experience a lack of opportunities for participation, and how a lack of participation makes care relationships more difficult and can ultimately have a negative impact on their own ability to cope with life. A 21-year-old young woman with a mentally ill mother who has made use of social pedagogical family assistance describes in retrospect that she felt misunderstood and unheard by the professionals in terms of her needs, wishes and concerns and what consequences this has for her. A second example refers to a 17-year-old adolescent with extensive experience in a total of 11 different socio-educational institutions, who mainly experiences "pseudo-involvement" there.

*Michael Wrentschur* presents forum theatre as a possible means of connecting social work's "cultural mandate" to re-politisation and the opening up of opportunities for social participation. Having explained the concept

and method of forum theatre, he uses examples of projects to show how participatory theatre work can be used to empower the people involved. Wrentschur understands participation as a comprehensive process that extends from developing and performing plays to holding discussions with political decision-makers. By fulfilling social work's "aesthetic mandate", forum theatre projects can help groups of people affected by inequality and disadvantages to find their own self-determined ways of expressing their situation and their concerns, and to become involved in the political discourse.

## Participatory research methodology and research practice

Four contributions focus on the challenges of participation in research on different levels, with different objectives and involving different people or groups of people.

The article by *Marilena von Köppen*, *Kristina Schmidt* and *Sabine Tiefenthaler* examines the question of how to deal with the asymmetry found in research relationships with people in institutional contexts. Taking up a stance on three participatory research projects with different target groups and settings (people with learning difficulties, nursing home residents, women with a background of refugeeism), the authors probe into the following questions: How can these groups be equal research partners? What effects arise from the differences in power and knowledge between the academic researchers and the co-researchers? And how can they be overcome to ensure that participation is not only superficial? The theoretical framework that links these three projects is the concept of ethical symmetry. Drawing upon Foucault's concept of the *dispositif*, the empirical analysis carefully examines the interpellations made to both the academic researchers and to the co-researchers. Viewing agency as relational, the authors go on to investigate how these actors dealt with the interpellations. By linking the two sides, they are able to bring to light, on one hand, how it is possible to do ethical symmetry, and on the other hand, the overarching significance that has for the theory and practice of social work.

The contribution by *Rita Nunes Richter* and *Heidrun Schulze* also addresses the question of how subjects (in this example, children) can be involved in research. Both authors point out that the number of participatory studies with children, alongside transdisciplinary childhood studies, has risen both internationally and nationally, including in social work. Three international research projects are used to present and discuss various as-

pects of children's participation, delving into questions around how to achieve participation when collecting data with children, or how to carry out projects with an explicit focus on children's rights. The authors believe that if research consistently respects children as subjects, then it may be possible for research and practice not only to adopt a more consistent view of children and young people as a group of subjects with agency, but also to reflect critically on the profession and discipline of social work as a whole, and to further refine it.

*Rahel More* has conducted participatory research with mothers and fathers with learning disabilities. In her interesting participatory research project, she analyses what learning disabilities mean for parenting, working hand in hand with this target group, which has been marginalized in research so far. Four individuals with learning disabilities formed a reference group for the analysis of six interviews with professionals from the field of child and youth services and disability aid. The potential and challenges of this research process include aspects such as accessibility of the written material, motivations and expectations for the project, and limitations of participation (reference group was only included in the analysis of the interviews). Participatory research exhibits "added value" and has emancipatory potential. It is important to continuously address and reflect on the power asymmetries in the roles (researchers, co-researchers) that are immanent to the research methodology.

In their contribution, *Waltraud Gspurning, Andrea Mayr* and *Arno Heimgartner* address the problem of how to successfully establish a form of cooperation between researchers from universities and co-researchers from practice that is as unhierarchical as possible. They investigate this question by analysing research workshops held as part of the NEP research project on new approaches to volunteering and participation, involving volunteers from three organisations. Research workshops are considered an important form of participatory research. The empirical material obtained at these research workshops was used to identify the fields of conflict within participation which were brought to light in this article. These offer impressive proof of how impossible it will be to solve certain systemic problems and challenges in the sphere of participatory research as long as the latter does not consistently take into account the subject positions adopted by all those involved, and scrupulously analyse the organisational logics and the balance of power and recognition in theory and practice.

The general section contains two contributions. *Wolfgang Hagleitner, Andreas Trummer* and *Christian Altenweisl* use a statistical analysis of data

from two large youth welfare agencies to compile a comparative longitudinal study on developments in residents' ages on entry and leaving, and the length of stay in residential youth care. As well as recording an increase in the age at entry and a decrease in the age on leaving, the authors also show that during the period investigated, from 1993 to 2016, brief care episodes became more frequent and long stays rarer, suggesting a change in the type of client. This raises questions about the field's future development, covering topics such as how to shape transitions, how to deal with the "revolving door" problem and the question of inclusion vs. specialisation. To generate data that is relevant to the management of services, they argue in favour of amassing a comprehensive, nuanced, reliable and valid collection of data; something which is so far lacking in the Austrian context of child and youth welfare.

In her contribution, *Sabrina Luimpöck* addresses the significance of culturalization and multilingualism in biographical case work with refugees. In her narrative interview study with ten refugees from Chechnya, oriented towards grounded theory, she elaborates on the importance of narrating one's own life story in the context of normative expectations of integration and develops ideas for professional reflectivity.

Following the articles, this issue also contains reviews of recent publications from various fields of social work by *Jacob Kornbeck*, *Angela Wegscheider*, *Carolin Ehlke* and *Severine Thomas*, *Andrea Nagy* and *Julia Ganterer*.

Our special thanks go to *Ernst Kocnik*, who assisted us in preparing the manuscript for this issue.

*Birgit Bütow, Hannelore Reicher and Stephan Sting*

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