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Making an impression: portfolios as instruments of impression management for teachers in early childhood education and care centres

Abstract

The study presented here examines the contribution of portfolios to the communication between parents and early childhood education and care centres. Using content analysis techniques, 2104 portfolio entries are examined with a view to establishing what impression they are intended to create. While the actual purpose of portfolios emphasizes the children as producers and addressees, the study shows that portfolio entries are made primarily by the teachers with the parents as addressees. On the basis of Erving Goffman's concept of 'impression management' five main topics (topoi) are elaborated, which characterize the impression the teachers make: the portfolios contain entries that present the children as (1) having fun, (2) cultivating friendship, (3) being prepared for school, (4) receiving high-quality care and (5) valued as individuals. These topoi give indications of the different ways the teachers understand their role and how they perceive themselves, as well as providing an insight into the kinds of beliefs underlying their pedagogical work.

1. Introduction

1.1. The portfolio in German early childhood education and care centres: diverse forms of implementation

Portfolios are the most widespread form of pedagogical documentation in German early childhood education and care (ecec) centres (Jasmund et al. 2012). They are also part of the standard repertoire of pedagogical documentation methods in many other OECD countries (OECD 2011). Despite this widespread use of portfolios, only a few empirical studies examine portfolios in practice. These studies deal mainly with special types of portfolio (Appl et al. 2014; Gilkerson and Handson 2000). Most of the other publications describe in theoretical terms what working with portfolio means and their value from a pedagogical point of view. The analysis of literature on portfolios in ecec centres shows considerable variation in the way portfolios are interpreted and how they should be implemented. The design and structure of portfolios varies considerably in Germany. Most facilities adapt the principle of the portfolio to their own ideas and capabilities. Although some publishers and/or individual federal states have devised elaborate plans for portfolios, and have produced their own pre-printed forms for use in portfolios (e.g. Elschenbroich et al. 2008), many centres adapt these forms, develop their own forms, or do not work with such pre-printed forms at all (H. Knauf 2015b). Against the background of this variety it is important to present in detail what can be understood as the common core of portfolios in early childhood education. This will be elaborated in the following.

The portfolio is a form of pedagogical documentation that is set up individually for

every single child. Usually, a portfolio consists of a folder or file with the child's name and sometimes photo on it. The file is mainly a collection of pictures the child has drawn or painted, art and craft work, photos of the child, learning stories, favourite songs and stories (H. Knauf 2015a). The individual pages are usually stored in clear plastic pockets. The entries in the portfolio are normally in chronological order, but in some cases the portfolio is structured according to content categories, e.g. skills, experiences, self-descriptions, favourite songs (Krok & Lindewald 2007). While areas of education or learning objectives are important structuring elements in other countries (Project Zero and Reggio Children 2011), these generally do not play a part in the structuring of portfolios in Germany.

The high degree of individuality of portfolios is also apparent in the use of learning stories, which are often an important component of portfolios. The concept, originally developed by Margret Carr (Carr 2001) in New Zealand, was adopted and adapted for the German context by the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) in 2007 (Leu et al. 2007). It is only rarely implemented in this form, however; instead centres usually develop their own variations on this approach, in which a short sequence is described and illustrated with photos (H. Knauf 2015a). Thus the word portfolio has become a collective term for various forms of documentation, in which work produced by the children and reports on each individual child are gathered.

From a pedagogical point of view, portfolios have several important qualities distinguishing them from other forms of pedagogical documentation, or combining the objectives of different forms of documentation. The individuality of the portfolio is seen

as especially positive. As a free form of documentation, the portfolio makes it possible to include elements that are appropriate for each individual child, and thus to record his or her individual developmental paths, interests and themes, without comparing the child to a universal norm or to other children. If a portfolio is assembled with a wide range of different documents, it can tell a story that is meaningful for all those involved, especially the child: a "story of ideas, investigations and learning" (Stacey 2015 p. 6). Portfolios are also seen as a valuable opportunity for children to reflect on their own learning. Seitz and Bartholomew (2008), for example, describe the opportunities for self-evaluation and self-reflection as a particular strength, and suggest that the portfolio encourages young children to take responsibility for their own learning. In contrast, Winter (2006) argues that the demand for self-reflection and meta-reflection associated with portfolio work presents a risk for children under 6, because this self-reflection might make them feel insecure. There is also a danger, according to Winter, that the immediacy of relationships and experiences might be destroyed (ebd.). Furthermore, the portfolio can be seen as a kind of covert curriculum, which places excessively high demands on children's metacognitive competencies (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth 2014). In contrast, educational theorists influenced by social constructivism see reflection on one's own learning as crucial if educational processes are to have a lasting effect – and therefore criticize the form of the portfolio, which is often reduced to a kind of folder for collecting material (Kroeger and Cardy 2006). In this context, the emphasis on the educational process is also seen as a strength of the portfolio, while many other documentation methods focus (solely) on the outcome.

Finally, the portfolio offers a range of opportunities to include other actors in addition to children and teachers. Various studies show, for example, that the portfolio can play an important role in including parents in the work of education, as parents can participate in the documentation by making their own contributions and by looking at the portfolio entries with their children (Appl et al. 2014; Gilkerson and Hanson 2000; Stacey 2015). The transition between kindergarten and primary school can also be supported by portfolios (Backhaus et al. 2014; Richter et al. 2012). However, many of those involved see this transfer of information from the ecec centre to the school as problematic, and fear that children may be stigmatized (Jasmund et al. 2013).

These different assessments of the portfolio not only reflect different positions; they also reflect the above-mentioned diversity in the implementation of the portfolio principle in early childhood education.

In light of this heterogeneity, it seems all the more important to take a closer look at the actual implementation of portfolios. For this reason, the study presented here does not examine general concepts or approaches, but the portfolio entries themselves as given phenomena in the real world of early childhood education and care. The central question here is what impression of the work in children's ecec centres is given by portfolios, and what information this impression conveys about teachers' understanding of themselves and their role.

1.2. Goffman: definition of the situation

The impression given by a portfolio is not a matter of chance. Like other communications, the portfolio is deliberately constructed to create a particular impression. The defining characteristic of communication between humans, according to Goffman (Goffman 1999), is that it is designed to make a certain impression. Goffman uses the term 'impression management' (IM) to describe this construction of an impression for the people around us. What impression people wish to make depends largely on what expectations they think others have of them. But since nobody knows for sure what other people expect of them, certain expectations are imputed to others. IM is therefore based to a considerable extent on expectations and assumptions. Goffman's perspective demonstrates that the social significance of situations and communications is a construction of the actors involved.

The goal of communication analyses focusing on IM is to identify the expectations and assumptions associated with the impressions people are seeking to create. The idea is that this will make it possible to work out "how social life is organized" (Dellwing 2014, p 75). Previous studies have examined IM's significance for corporate communication (Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen 2013) or for individual and private communication (Kobsa et al. 2012), though the focus here has mainly been on how convincing the impression is for its audience, or in other words, how successful the IM is (Crant 1996). As yet, however, there have been no empirical studies for the educational sphere.

1.3. Impression management with portfolio entries

A portfolio is a collection of photos of the child, pictures he or she has drawn or

painted, and favourite songs or poems, often with comments added. This is a way of recording moments from life in the ecec centre. The target audience is mainly the child and his or her parents. In most ecec centres, the portfolio is conceived as a memory album (H. Knauf 2015b). It does not reproduce an objective truth, but is the result of certain perceptions and interpretations, and thus of a more or less deliberate process of creation. Figure 1 shows that two operations are used to construct meaning when assembling a portfolio (Leu 2011). Firstly, the selection of objects for inclusion in the portfolio necessarily means that only a part of the totality of life in the centre is reflected. This selection already involves the construction of meaning: only certain hand-picked moments contribute to the impression being created. As Urban et al. (2015) show, this selection makes it very clear which activities of the child are regarded as "worthy of observation".

Fig. 1: Operations of meaning construction when assembling a portfolio

The second important operation in the construction of meaning is the contextualization of the objects in the portfolio. In most cases this is done by the teacher, who describes or comments on the objects and thus places them in a particular context.

Portfolio entries are a written form of communication. When analysing these with reference to IM, our focus is on the meanings that those assembling the portfolio wish to convey. As a rule, these are the teachers. In view of this, analysis of portfolios can give information about which situations the teachers fundamentally regard as important (operation 1), and what meaning they ascribe to the situations depicted (operation 2).

Thus IM in portfolio production is characterized by two modes of action: selection and contextualization.

The analysis of portfolios using Goffman's concept of IM is based on the assumption that pedagogical documentation is not an objective representation of reality, but that it presents a meaning which is constructed (= made) by the teachers.

2. Method

The central question of the study presented here is what impressions teachers wish to create when making portfolios. The aim is to examine what attributions and expectations are linked with these impressions, and how these become visible in products of pedagogical documentation. Using a cultural studies concept borrowed from Hall (Hall 1997), the portfolio is seen as a form of representation of culture. In this sense the portfolio is a cultural product, because it serves to create meaning. In this article, the focus is not on reception, but on the production side: on the processes of regulation that take place during production, and on the associated effects on the identity of those involved, particularly the teachers.

The empirical study is based on 25 portfolios from 23 different German ecec centres. Using theoretical criteria, the greatest possible range of different centres were selected (maximum contrast), in order to cover the widest possible spectrum of conditions for portfolio-building (Kelle and Kluge 2010). The selection is based on the principles of qualitative sampling and makes no claim to representativity. The sample includes four

municipally-run centres, ten church-run centres, and eleven centres run by independent organizations. Nine of the centres have 4 groups or fewer, nine have 5 to 6 groups, and the remaining seven centres have 7 or more groups. 6 portfolios come from nursery groups (ages 0-3), 19 from kindergarten groups (ages 3-6). Centres from both rural and urban areas are included. Each centre has a mission statement mentioning a specific content focus and/or pedagogical idea on which its work is based. Here too, an effort was made to include different approaches when drawing the sample. Thus the sample includes centres based on the situational approach, centres modelled on Montessori or Reggio, ecec centres practicing open work and forest kindergartens. Many centres also take an integrative or inclusive approach, cutting across these different concepts.

The 25 portfolios contain a total of 2104 portfolio entries. On the basis of a preliminary inspection, formal categories were established to record the type (e.g. picture, photo, text) and authorship of the entries. The material was then studied again and classified according to the impression given by the entries. Groups were formed on the basis of the material (Muckel 2011). This careful approach, based on the material itself, corresponds to the exploratory method of the study: since there are virtually no existing empirical studies on portfolios in ecec centres, the aim was to avoid imposing an external set of categories. The portfolio entries were then re-examined and assigned to the categories established, so that they could be analysed statistically. Following the principles of grounded theory, theories were developed on the basis of the categories, and entries typifying these theories were identified and analysed as examples on the

micro-level (Breuer 2010).

3. Findings

3.1. Portfolios: voice of the teachers

The everyday-life in ecec consists of a multitude of activities, occurrences, interactions and communications. Not everything can be documented; thus, a selection has to be made. Consequently, this selection of entries for the portfolio is the first operation that is critical for impression management (IM). In the literature on the use of portfolios, it is assumed that potential portfolio elements are initially collected by teachers and children in a folder or box. The teachers and children then regularly look through this to decide what will actually go into the portfolio (T. Knauf 2011). In this study it was not possible to reconstruct to what extent this practice has been applied in the portfolios examined here. What is clear, however, is the authorship of the individual portfolio entries. As Figure 2 shows, the majority of portfolio entries are created by teachers (61 %), while 38 % are works produced by the children themselves, mostly in the form of pictures or handicrafts. Quotes from the children (0.1 %) and contributions from the families (0.8 %), e.g. letters from the parents, only make up a very small proportion of the content.

Fig. 2: Authorship of the portfolio entries

The overview gives a preliminary impression of how much the teachers influence the

portfolio. This is in strong contrast to the perception that children are able to partici-pate in the creation of the portfolio – something frequently evoked as an advantage of portfolios in the literature (Huhn and Schneider 2008). In comparison to other forms of pedagogical documentation, the portfolio does potentially offer children special op-portunities for participation: even young children can be involved in the selection of portfolio entries. The dominance of the teachers' contributions, however, makes it clear that many portfolios are documentation *about* the children, and not so much docu-mentation created with or by the children.

Analysis of the nature of the entries makes this finding even clearer: by far the largest number of portfolio entries consist of photos with comments by the teachers: of all 2104 portfolio entries, 838 are photos with comments from the teachers; this comes to just under 40%. Moreover, roughly a third of the entries classed as "works by the chil-dren" in the categorization presented in Figure 2 are task sheets or worksheets filled in by the children. In other words, this is something that the children have done, but on the basis of very closely specified instructions, as it is shown in an example in Figure 3. The craft works contained in the portfolios are also mainly based on predefined tasks, in which the children apply techniques developed by adults, as the example in Figure 4 shows.

Fig. 3: Worksheet (PF16)

Fig. 4: Craft work (PF19)

Fig. 5: Picture with explanations by the child

In contrast, the portfolios analysed contain only a relatively small number of entries that reproduce the children's voices in largely unfiltered form. These are mainly pictures by the children with explanations added by the practitioner; in these cases the explanations have obviously been supplied by the children, as the picture in Figure 4 shows. The examples also show, however, that most of the pictures have been created at the suggestion of the teachers; in Figure 5 this is made clear by the caption, "Our expedition into the imagination". In summary, the portfolios contain almost exclusively documents that are defined by the teachers. The practice examined here is therefore at odds with the participatory nature of the portfolio which is often emphasized in the theory (Gilkerson and Hanson 2000; T. Knauf 2011). Thus the portfolio turns out to be an object that is primarily designed and controlled by adults.

3.2. Primary and secondary target audiences

The content of the portfolios is intended to document the time the child spends in the centre. The target audience is not precisely defined. Krok and Lindewald (2007) identify the children themselves as the main addressees, and the parents and teachers only as secondary addressees. In the portfolios examined here the same target audiences can be discerned, with numerous portfolio entries being phrased in such a way that they directly address the child, as in the following examples:

> For you, boredom doesn't exist. You always come up with a fun activity. (PF15)
>
> At the moment you're trying to pour [a drink] into your cup. (PF13)

Other contributions describe what can be seen in the pictures and photos more neutrally, and apparently without addressing a specific group of people, as in these quotes:

> Expedition to the […] Valley, to the forest (PF 17)

> At the dentist's in May 2014 (PF23)

> E. celebrates her 5th birthday (PF12)

> We play 'Doggie, Doggie, where's your bone' in the goodbye circle (PF20)

In some cases, words are put into the child's mouth. The captions for a documented situation (consisting of 4 photos) read as follows:

> (Photo 1) M. puts a tyre on his head…can I do that too? (Photo 2) I'll give it a try… (Photo 3) Not so hard at all (Photo 4) Yeah! Did it! (PF 33)

Sometimes speech bubbles or thought bubbles are drawn onto a photo to give an interpretation of the child's thoughts. In the following example, the photo shows a child having breakfast, with the comment: "Hey, who's disturbing my breakfast?"(PF 20). In another portfolio, the daily routine is described from the child's point of view. The text reads:

> The group room is divided up into individual play areas. In this prepared environment I can choose from the materials and games available, between individual play and play with others, and I determine the duration of each play activity myself. The activities offered in the group room are always being renewed and changed, in line with my needs, to give me plenty of opportunities to try things out. (PF12)

This example makes it particularly clear that the child's perspective is a rhetorical device and not an interpretation of imagined childish thinking. The elaborate language, in particular, indicates that the parents (and not the child) are the target audience. In terms of content, too, only the parents can be the intended addressees, as the child is already familiar with the daily routine.

3.3. Intended impressions

The premise of this study is that every act of communication is determined by the desire to create a particular impression (=Impression Management, IM). Thus the portfolio entries are shaped by the impression that those controlling the portfolio wish to make. As shown in section 3.1, these are mainly the teachers. Here the target audience for the IM is the parents, who are addressed either openly or indirectly via the children, as established in section 3.2. the IM largely plays out between the adults involved, as illustrated in Figure 6. The literature frequently refers to the triangular relationship between child, parents and practitioner (Fröhlich-Gildhoff 2013). In the portfolios examined here, however, the children tend to have the function of a rhetorical addressee.

Fig. 6. Parents as target audience of teachers' impression management

The analysis of the material shows that the teachers find it particularly important to convey the following five impressions to the parents:

- fun,
- friendship,
- preparation for school,

- high-quality care

- focus on the individual.

The following discussion shows how the teachers try to create these impressions. Here each portfolio has its own emphases, i.e. not every portfolio aims to create all these impressions.

Fun

The portfolio entries are chosen in such a way that parties, festive occasions and other high points in the year make up a large part of the content. This includes, in particular, birthdays and seasonal events, such as Easter, the summer fete, the lantern festival or St. Nicholas's Day. These activities are documented with photos in the portfolios, and often given a headline-style commentary. Here the children can be seen with lanterns or Easter baskets, for example, and with smiling faces. These pictures foreground the sunny side of life in the ecec centre; the selection of these aspects emphasises the topos of fun.

In nearly all the portfolios, this topos is referred to and directly articulated in everyday situations as well. It often features in comments on photos. Sometimes portrait photos of the child are given a corresponding caption, e.g. "You're a happy child!" (PF15) or "We have lots of fun with you!" (PF15). Such comments frequently accompany photos showing children engaged in particular everyday activities, as can be seen in the following quotes:

M. has dirty hands and lots of fun! (PF13)

We sang, danced, and laughed a lot. We all had a great time! (PF13)

You always have a great time in the ball pit (PF20)

A contest is lots of fun for all ages (PF17)

Some comments emphasize the child's fundamental well-being, as in one portfolio which states: "You felt really happy with the starfish" (PF20). These examples directly attribute "having fun" to certain situations. Here "fun" becomes a collective term for positive feelings such as happiness, security and contentment. At the same time, however, "fun" is also a label for less specific situations, which teachers perceive as positive in a more diffuse way. As a result, picture and situation do not always seem to match, as in Figure 7:

Fig. 7: Picture and text do not always match

This also shows a problem in the production process of photo entries in portfolios: the development of the photos usually takes some time, because it is necessary to wait until enough photos have been collected, then they have to be ordered, and it often takes weeks before they are developed or printed. By then, the original situation is often no longer present in the minds of those involved. The concept of "having fun" then seems to be a solution, a way to find a positive but ultimately meaningless description for the picture. Even if the actual connection to the situation is rather weak, the topos of fun is used as a fallback, because it is understood as a universal category which meets the expectations of the portfolio's recipients. Clearly, it is very important

to the teachers to document how happy the children are in the centre.

Friendship

A topos found in nearly all the portfolios relates to the community existing between the children. Often group photos are titled with slogans that are intended to emphasize the children's solidarity, e.g. "We're a good team" (PF20). A picture of all the children is thus charged with meaning, giving the impression that these are not simply children standing next to each other, but that they are socially and emotionally connected to one another. The concept of friendship plays a very similar role, for example when a picture of three children is given the caption "Friendship is great" (PF17), or "My best friends" (PF17). Here too, a particular closeness and communality is imputed to a small group of children.

The topos of friendship gives special emphasis to the integration of the individual child into the group. This also becomes apparent in portfolio entries in which a child is "chosen" by others, as in the following comment on a photo: "When B. celebrated his 5th birthday, you were allowed to sit next to him at breakfast" (PF12). The inclusion of this event in the portfolio makes it clear that it is seen as especially important. As with the topos of "having fun", the aim here is to make it clear that the child is happy and feels comfortable in the centre.

Preparation for school

The analysis of the portfolio entries shows that preparation for school is another important topos. One eighth (12.3 %) of the documents to be found in the portfolios are

worksheets in which the children are supposed to practise skills regarded as relevant for school. These tasks are found solely in the kindergarten portfolios (and not in the nursery portfolios); in fact, in the kindergarten portfolios, 16 % of the entries consist of such worksheets. Typical tasks involve categorization ("Where does it belong?", as in Figure 3), writing letters and numbers, drawing lines based on a set model, "spot the difference" activities, mazes, and counting exercises.

Besides the quantitatively high proportion of portfolio space devoted to such worksheets, there are also comments on photos which give the impression that the children are being thoroughly prepared for school. The following caption, for example, emphasizes the use of books, and thus points to the promotion of literacy:

> Now and again we've read one of the books the children have brought in, and learnt lots of interesting new things (PF12)

Some portfolios also document trips to primary schools, in which kindergarten children are able to gather first impressions of their future school.

In contrast to the topos of "having fun", which is found in all the portfolios, only just over half of the kindergarten portfolios contain the topos of "preparing for school" (10 out of 19 portfolios). These centres see it as particularly important to communicate to parents that children are being well prepared for the requirements of school.

High-quality care

It is obvious from all the portfolios that the centres want to demonstrate the high quality of their educational provision. In contrast to the section on preparation for school, this is not primarily about cognitive activities, but about more holistic activities. Many portfolio entries show photos documenting everyday situations, which are given a particular focus by the accompanying comments. Activities in the outdoor area are a regular component of the day in most centres; however, a photo of a child playing outside, with the caption "We like being outdoors" (PF20), stresses this in a particular way. The link with the word "like" (expressed in German with the adverb *gerne*) emphasizes the positive underlying mood, and the plural form means that this statement describes the preferences of the whole group, not just the individual child in the picture. In the context of the widespread belief that contact with nature and time spent outdoors has positive effects, especially for children of kindergarten age, this portfolio entry transforms an everyday activity into something of particular educational value. Such infusions of meaning can also be found for many other everyday activities, such as toothbrushing ("We're practising brushing our teeth properly" (PF16)) or reading aloud and healthy food ("The reading circle in front of the fruit platter" (PF17)).

However, the portfolio entries also show extensions and special versions of familiar activities, which might have remained unnoticed without explicit mention in comments and captions. For example, a photo in which children can be seen drawing pictures has the added description "Drawing by music". Without this, it would not be clear that the children are consciously listening to music while drawing, and are thus in a very specific situation. The beneficial value of this activity is expressed even more directly by the

comment: "When drawing in this way, the children's thoughts roam freely, they're at one with themselves, they draw whatever comes into their heads" (PF12). A photo of a child in the garden is given greater importance by the comment below it: "Exploring (*Entdeckung*) in the garden with the bug viewer" (PF18). The exploratory, researching nature of the child's activity is considerably boosted by the emphasis on "exploring" or "discovery" (*Entdeckung*) and the mention of the instrument being used ("bug viewer").

Certain actions play a major role in the portfolios. These do not have to be parties and celebrations (see section on "having fun"), but can also be expeditions to the fire station, the forest, or the zoo, or larger projects such as, in this example, a rubbish project:

> We collect rubbish in front of the ecec centre. We sort rubbish brought in from home. The children don't want people to throw rubbish on the ground. We want to install rubbish bins in front of the ecec centre, and we need money. M. rings the bank and explains the situation. We write a letter to the bank and ask for money for a rubbish bin. (PF25)

Thus in many centres the portfolio is a collection of documents recording prominent and special events.

Unusual activities offered by the teachers in the centre itself also show educational aspirations, as in the photos of a "Blasparcours Mundmotorik" ("obstacle course for oral motor skills") (PF19), in which the children have to blow in a certain direction with a straw, for example. This also offers the teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their own expertise.

All in all, the purpose of portfolio entries with this topos is to show the special educational activities provided by the centre or the teachers, and to demonstrate that the children are being offered a challenging and diverse programme which supports their development in many different ways.

Focus on the individual

Some of the portfolio entries – in contrast to the topoi "preparation for school" and "high-quality activities" – present the everyday observations of the teachers. The result is short, personal descriptions. These are often simple situations, in which, however, the child being observed has a distinctive experience:

> Today we played with the cars. We put a mat on the podium and let the cars roll down it. You took a car, put it on the mat at the top and let the car go. You observed closely how it rolled down the sloping mat. Then you went and got the next car out of the basket [...] You tried out different cars – big cars, little cars [...] I was impressed that you studied the cars and the sloping mat for such a long time and so persistently. You were concentrating hard and didn't let anything distract you. (PF24)

The following example depicts a play situation involving two children:

> This morning you were playing with [...] in the hallway. Since you both wanted to wrap the blanket around you, but you only had the one, you came up with the following: each of you was to have the blanket for a certain time. You set up the sand timer so you'd know when to change over. Here [in the photo] [...] was waiting while you ran along the hallway with the blanket around your shoulders. I was especially pleased that you found a solution without an educator having to get involved. (PF21)

This focus on micro situations is also demonstrated by the photos used, which foreground details. Figure 8 shows this kind of combination of text and image.

Fig. 8: Learning story: "Dear T., at pick-up time I.'s mum was standing in such a way that her bag was in your field of vision. You were so fascinated by the gold clasps and tassels that you came closer, very carefully, and at first touched the tassels very gently. Then you looked at and felt every detail very closely with your eyes and fingers. You did it very carefully and didn't pull on the bag or try to open the zip. I thought it was nice that you treated the object so respectfully."

These portfolio entries are representative examples of records of situations designed as learning stories. Sometimes this topos is also found in the case of smaller glimpses of everyday life in the ecec centre, which are not embedded in a whole story. An example is a picture of a child at a washbasin, with the comment: "You like going to the washbasin, and you're pleased when the water goes on and you can splash around" (PF29).

The impression given here is of precise and very individual observation by the practitioner. The detailed description makes it clear that close attention is being paid to the child described, and that even small everyday events are regarded as valuable and important. On the one hand, the teachers become visible as precise observers, who are sensitive to important moments, and sometimes also encourage children to experience new things by offering small stimuli (supplying shaving cream, laying a mat on the podium). On the other hand, however, the teachers take a step into the background, because they are not (primarily) reporting on something they have provided, but on

the activities of the child. Thus the impression which dominates is that the child's needs and interests are the centre of attention.

In the data material analysed here, entries of this kind are only found in the portfolios from nurseries. There may be various reasons for this: work with under-threes usually involves fewer guided group activities (e.g. expeditions, joint craft activities) (Ahnert & Eckstein-Madry, 2013). This means that the emphasis on special events that can be observed in many kindergarten portfolios has no place here, and children's everyday life and free play therefore attracts greater attention. In addition, the groups are smaller and the staff-child ratio higher (Bock-Famulla & Lange, 2014), so the conditions are better for more individual observations and documentation.

4. Discussion

Portfolios in ecec centres are designed to document the life of an individual child in the centre. The analysis from the perspective of impression management makes it clear, however, that portfolios also encompass another dimension: they convey an impression of the pedagogical work of the centre in general and of the teachers in particular. These impressions do not arise by chance, but are shaped by the teachers, who usually dominate the production of the portfolio entries.

Investigating IM is intended to help explore mechanisms for the production of certain impressions, in order to develop a better understanding of modes of communication. In relation to portfolios in ecec centres, the study presented here makes it clear that

teachers are seeking to create certain impressions through the selection and contextualization of particular events.

According to Goffman, the impression a person seeks to create is guided by certain assumptions (Goffman 1999). When producing the portfolios, the teachers are clearly guided by their ideas about what expectations parents have of their child's time in the ecec centre. It seems obvious to assume that these imputed expectations also reflect the teachers' own expectations of their work. We cannot determine, here, to what extent the expectations imputed to the parents coincide with or diverge from the teachers' own expectations. However, what this analysis of the portfolios shows is how the teachers want their work to be perceived, and what parts of their role they regard as important. Here different priorities become apparent from the different ways the various topoi are addressed: while some of the portfolios contain mainly entries on the topoi of preparation for school and high-quality provision, others include a greater number of entries focused on fun and friendship.[1] These varying priorities reflect different ideas about education in ecec centres. Such differing concepts of education have to be understood in the light of changes in the way the role and function of ecec centres are perceived. ecec centres in Germany are not only a place for the care and socialization (*Erziehung*) of children, but also for their education (*Bildung*). In keeping with this, the portfolio entries analysed here share one important element: they all show children as learning and developing subjects, and are part of the constitution of an institutional process of "doing education" (Schulz 2013).

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[1] No statistical analysis will be undertaken here because of the low number of portfolios; such an analysis would not only be inconclusive, but would give a distorted view of the material.

Nonetheless, the portfolios give different answers to the question of what exactly education in early childhood means. The portfolios dominated by worksheets preparing children for school seem to interpret education primarily as the acquisition of the cultural technologies of writing and arithmetic, while the portfolios documenting small developmental steps represent a social constructivist understanding of education, in which it is seen in the context of individual development. Other portfolios, through their emphasis on fun and friendship, demonstrate that social and emotional integration is seen as an important mandate of the centre. The study presented here is not intended to reveal negative developments in the common practice of portfolios. Rather, the intent has been to clarify that a portfolio documents and conveys much more than the activities and achievements of a single child. It has shown that portfolios can play an important role in the impression management of ecec centres. As the analysis of the portfolio entries shows, this is not so much a matter of whether they leave a "good" or "bad" impression. Instead, the portfolio entries show what is regarded as important and valuable, and are therefore indicators of the professional pedagogical beliefs prevailing in the ecec centre. What Ronald Lally (2009, p. 75) writes about the diaries produced in Reggio Emilia undoubtedly also applies to portfolios: they are to be understood as "part of a bigger reality", and as the result of professional work in a particular context.

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