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# **Documentation as a Tool for Participation in German Early Childhood Education and Care**

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# **Documentation as a Tool for Participation in German Early Childhood Education and Care**

*“Documentation can offer children and adults alike real moments of democracy. Democracy which has its origin in the recognition and the visualisation of difference, brought about by dialogue.” (Rinaldi 1995)*

## **0. Abstract**

The aim of the study presented in this paper is to find out whether the documentation practices in German ECEC centres are compatible with the notion of participation by children. Children’s participation has to be seen as a general educational issue in the context of democratic and inclusive education, but also as a specific aim to foster the learning and reflective competencies of the individual child. This makes it all the more important to know whether participation can be found in early childhood key practices – for example documentation. The research examines the documentation practices in 40 ECEC centres in Germany. On this basis, the paper outlines what the main forms of documentation are (portfolio, documentation panels, presentations of children’s work) and what importance children’s participation has for these forms. It shows that participation is of minor relevance in the documentation practices in most of the ECEC centres examined. Only a few centres involve children extensively in documentation and include documentation in their daily work. If participation is part of the documentation practices, a “pedagogy of listening” (Rinaldi 2006) as conceived by the Reggio approach can be found.

## **Keywords**

Pedagogical documentation, participation, Reggio approach, democratic education

## **1. Introduction**

Today, strengthening children's participation is an important goal of pedagogical institutions. This applies to both schools and ECEC centres. Educational institutions are seen here as the breeding grounds of a democratic culture in a democratically constituted society: the idea is that children should learn, right from the start, to defend their interests and take responsibility (Bentley 2012; Dockett, Kearney, and Perry 2012; Woodhead 2005); in short, children should be supported as they develop into active citizens. This basic idea was manifested in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989 (United Nations 1989). International organisations such as the OECD identify children's participation as a key concern (OECD 2011). The work of John Dewey still offers an important basis for studying the correlation between education and democracy (Dewey 1916/2012). The question of how children's participation can be achieved also plays an important part in pedagogical research (e.g. Westwood et al. 2014; Lansdown 2009; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2009). There are now numerous approaches suggesting how children's participation can be brought about (e.g. Coelen; Daner 2012; Brunner, Winklhofer, and Zinser 2001), and how different measures can be classified (Francis and Lorenzo 2002; Hart 2013), however, the actual implementation of participation in everyday educational work often presents problems (Westwood et al. 2014).

The recent literature includes various articles linking the pedagogical topos of democratic education and participation with the documentation of children's learning processes (Emilson and Samuelsson 2014; Falk and Darling-Hammond 2010; Miller 2014; Picchio, Di Giandomenico, and Musatti 2014). The basic idea is that documentation is one of the things that can help to achieve more participation in ECEC centres. Documentation comprises all forms of verbal and visual recording of children's activities, with the aim of making their thinking understandable and their learning visible. Documentation has thus become a core pedagogical process in early childhood education (Alasuutari, Markström, and Vallberg-Roth 2014; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013; Fthenakis 2009; Helm 2007; OECD 2011; Schäfer 2011; Viernickel and Völkel 2007). Recently, various studies have dealt with documentation: for exam-

ple, Kroeger and Hardy (2006) explore the possibilities offered by documentation, e.g. for the individual support of children, for a better understanding of group experiences, and for the appreciation of children's work. In addition to this, the documentation of children's learning processes can make the pedagogical work of the educators visible (Emilsson and Samuelsson 2014; Goldhaber and Smith 1997), and offer the prospect of "professional growth and communication for adults" (Gandini and Goldhaber 2001). In particular, publications that establish a link with Reggio pedagogy, or whose authors come from the Reggio Emilia context, describe extensive positive experiences with documentation, and highlight its positive influence on children's learning (Forman and Fyfe 1998a; Gandini and Goldhaber 2001; Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer 2007; Rinaldi 2011; Vecchi 2011).

At the same time, there is criticism of standard documentation practices. For example, Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth (2014) establish that documentation plays a crucial part in the construction of a 'normal child', and Basford and Bath (2014) identify documentation as part of an "assessment game", which the ECEC centres are obliged to play.

Studies also show that the systematic implementation of documentation is often difficult: the problems mentioned are the time and effort involved, the often overwhelming quantity of data, and the high demands placed on practitioners, who are expected to simultaneously work with the children and document this work (Emilsson and Samuelsson 2014; Kroeger and Hardy 2006). Apart from the fact that there has so far been little research on documentation at all (Emilsson and Samuelsson 2014), a review of current publications on the subject of documentation shows that most articles relate to the presentation and evaluation of individual projects, or describe and reflect on particular techniques (Appl, Leavitt, and Ryan 2014; Birbili and Tzioga 2014; Dockett, Kearney, and Perry 2012). There has as yet been no empirical and systematic analysis of the practice of documentation in ordinary ECEC centres. Since documentation is a basic element of ECE (as shown above) research is needed to understand and refine

documentation practice. The analysis of how and why certain ways of documentation are practiced should lead to more suitable forms of documentation. In addition, the perspective of participation might show in which ways documentation can be a tool for democratic and inclusive education. The present article aims to fill this research gap, describing and categorising the everyday practice of documentation in 40 German ECEC centres, and analysing this in terms of the importance of participation.

## **2. Methods: Analysing visual data**

The theoretical discourse links pedagogical documentation with different purposes, such as transparency of learning activities, better understanding of children's thinking and learning, assessment, professional development and communication with parents (H. Knauf 2015). Participation cannot be seen as a self-evident and integral part of all practices of documentation, although many authors recognise enormous potential for involving children in social learning processes (Emilson and Samuelsson 2014; Falk and Darling-Hammond 2010). But what role does participation play in pedagogical documentation in empirical reality?

In order to determine the impact of participation in pedagogical documentation, the study presented in this paper tries to discover what kind of documentation practices are employed by educators in early childhood settings. Beyond this, it also aims to analyse in what ways participation is implemented in these procedures in practice.

For this purpose, German ECEC centres were visited and studied. In order to achieve high validity, a broad variety of centres was sought as a basis for this study (Flick 2014): centres with different basic parameters were chosen, under the assumption that these would influence documentation practices. These parameters included whether the centre followed a particular pedagogical approach, and if so, which one, the size of the centre, the working conditions

(such as child care ratio), the type of funding agency (*Träger*) and the size of the municipality the centre is located in. Based on these selection criteria, 40 ECEC centres were chosen which reflect the scope of ECEC in Germany. Staff and families consented to the examination of documentation practice and the subsequent analysis and publication of the findings. During these visits, formal aspects of documentation were to be recorded, e.g. how exactly the documentation was carried out and by whom, where the documentation was kept, who was involved in the situations or samples of work presented, and how old or how up to date the documentation was. A further aim was to record the experiences and attitudes of the stakeholders towards documentation.

Mixed methods were used to gain a better understanding of the documentation practices. The set of instruments consisted of a standardised form for a systematic record of the documentation practices in the centres, a visual data entry form, a photographic record of the situation, and a qualitative interview with the head of the centre. In addition, a written survey of the centre's staff and parents, concerning their experiences with and attitudes towards documentation, was carried out prior to the visits.

This paper is mainly based on visual data. The analysis of the data showed that the visual and photographic records delivered a wealth of useful information, especially about the importance of participation. Besides the explanatory power of the photographs, they provide unambiguous information about the research question.

One aim of the study was to identify the main documentation procedures in German ECEC centres. The first step was therefore to classify the material collected by the kind of procedure involved. The other aim was to understand in what ways children are given the opportunity to participate in documentation. The second step of the analysis consisted of a systematic and detailed examination of the visual data, followed by the construction of categories based on

the data (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Six main indicators of children's participation were identified:

- inclusion of comments by the children,
- production of documentation and selection of pictures etc. with the children,
- accessibility
- visibility and comprehensibility for children
- non-judgmental attitude to children's achievements
- presentation of activities and samples of work initiated by the children.

The data was then analysed in terms of a reflective interpretation (Bohnsack 2011). Each piece of documentation was analysed in its context. The final step was to analyse the verbal data given in the interviews, in order to understand the motives for certain ways of dealing with documentation, and thus shed further light on the visual findings.

### **3. Results and discussion: Participation in pedagogical documentation**

The focus of this analysis is the role children and their perspectives play in pedagogical documentation. The research shows that three forms of documentation predominate: portfolios, documentation panels and presentations of children's work. It becomes clear that the opportunities for participation depend on the kind of documentation procedure used. The presentation and discussion of the results in the following section is therefore aligned with the three main documentation procedures. Firstly, each procedure is described in terms of appearance and content, and secondly, the extent to which they allow participation is analysed.

#### ***3.1 Portfolio***



Portfolios are an individual form of documentation and are prevalent in German ECEC (Jas-mund et al. 2011). With two exceptions, all the ECEC centres visited for this study use portfolios. While the appearance and the terminology is similar in most centres, there are a number of differences in the content, structure and quantitative volume of the portfolios.

*Appearance.* As is standard practice in Germany, the portfolios we found were folders dedi-cated to individual children. Each folder is labelled with the name of the child it belongs to. Sometimes there is a photo of or a drawing by the child stuck to the front. In most ECEC cen-tres, all the sheets inside the portfolio are inserted into punched pockets to prevent soiling or crumpling.

*Contents.* In about half of the ECEC centres, portfolios were simply used unsystematically as collecting folders. These portfolios follow a chronological order, beginning with the child's entry to the centre and ending with the transition to primary school. Sometimes a cover sheet marks each completed year. The other half of the ECEC centres have developed a differenti-ated structure for the portfolios, in which only certain items relating to the children can be found (Huhn and Schneider 2008). Sometimes portfolios even contain a table of contents.

Typical categories for structuring the portfolio are:

- That's who I am
- That's what I can do
- These are my interests
- Me as researcher and explorer
- Me as an artist
- My best drawings
- My favourite songs and rhymes
- My treasure chest
- Beautiful and amazing things

Portfolio inscriptions in Germany are usually not related to specific learning areas or objectives. All the portfolios examined during this study contained drawings, other things made by the child, and pictures of the child. About half of the ECEC centres also include the child's favourite songs and games, and records of interviews with the child, in the portfolio. For this nearly all the centres use pre-printed forms of the kind provided by funding agencies or ministries (cf. Elschenbroich et al. 2008). Around a quarter of the ECEC centres visited have developed their own series of pre-printed forms (see Fig. 1) or even a sample folder as a guide.



Fig. 1: Learning story with pre-printed form

These centres have a concept of an ideal portfolio, and the adequacy of each portfolio can be compared to this benchmark. This practice is meant to ensure a certain quality level. In order to meet this standard, around 20% of the ECEC centres even provide a checklist. The purpose of a 'complete' portfolio is connected to the idea of equal treatment for all children. The idea is that the portfolios of all the children attending the centre should be comparable to one another. Two thirds of the portfolios examined contained learning stories: a series of photos of a situation, with comments by an educator, as seen in Fig. 2.



Fig. 2: Learning story with educator's comments

Learning stories can be traced back to an approach developed by Margaret Carr (Carr 2001) in New Zealand. Their aim is to allow a holistically oriented analysis of the child's learning dispositions (Leu et al. 2007). Only one of the centres visited follows this original concept of learning stories, however; all the others interpret this approach broadly as the narration of a

short sequence of actions, illustrated by photos. In these cases only one educator develops the learning story, and it is not subsequently discussed or jointly analysed by the team.

*Participation.* A basic clue to participation is the accessibility of the portfolios. In nearly all the ECEC centres visited, the portfolios are within reach of the children. Only in some nurseries are they locked in a cupboard to protect them from being damaged by the (smaller) children. Obviously, children have to participate in the creation of the portfolio, for example by drawing pictures, which are then filed in the portfolio. But there are broad differences in the extent to which the child is included in the selection of drawings, or asked for annotations and explanations about his or her drawings or the pictures inside the portfolio. The ability to participate depends on the age of the children. The older children grow and the more they can use language as a medium for communication, the more they can be involved in the portfolio work. The following two quotes from the interviews with the educators illustrate the range of methods, experiences and attitudes involved:

I always do this together with the children. I mean, I don't shape the portfolio alone without the children perceiving it. They are with me. This kind of talk is always nice. Taking the time with a single child or with a couple of kids. It depends on their age.

I must say, children don't like these things very much, they prefer playing. It always sounds so good, but when they've done it once, they've had enough of it {...} participation always sounds so fantastic but many children get bored with working on the documentation {...} I think it is important that children co-decide {...} but it doesn't have to be focused on too much. Because children partially have different interests {...} they are proud of it and like to look inside from time to time but this cannot be the centre of their lives. There has to be a different emphasis, I find. Children can make such a portfolio in school on their own. But I think it's even better when the children can play on their own and not glue in their drawings on their own. Once it's ok, but not always.

The reality examined in this study shows that the portfolio is – as indicated in the second quote – primarily the educator's work and responsibility, and not the child's. Fig. 2 presents a

typical portfolio, compiled solely by the educator. This might be related to the fact that many of the ECEC centres examined here focus not on the process of documentation but on the final product. This relates to the finding that about half of the centres use pre-printed forms as described above. The portfolio is often seen as a showcase for the efforts of the ECEC centre, and not so much as a tool to understand the children. Participation is mostly understood as including work by the children and not as a joint construction of the children's perspective or as a chance to give them a voice. The role of participation in the majority of portfolios examined in this study is therefore a subordinated one.

### ***3.2 Documentation panels***

Posters with pictures of outings, field trips and similar activities carried out by the children's group are another feature of pedagogical documentation practice. This kind of wall documentation has received next to no attention in scientific or conceptual accounts; isolated mentions can be found only in the context of the Reggio approach. In Reggio Emilia, documentation panels are a typical and common part of the centres and the classroom environment, and are referred to as "talking walls" (T. Knauf, Dux, and Schlüter 2007; Thornton and Brunton 2014). In the context of the Reggio approach, documentation is meant to be more educational than informational (Forman and Fyfe 1998b).

*Appearance.* The variety of forms of documentation panels found in this research is wide. It ranges from pictures hung on walls with little or no comment (Fig. 3), or short verbal notes on the day's activities (Fig. 4), to extensive combinations of pictures, drawings and annotations by teachers and children (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3: Documentation panel with no comment

## Das haben wir alles gemacht...

Dienstag, den 12.06.14

Endlich haben die Wechsel-  
zahlkassen geschafft sich zu  
treffen!

Was gemacht wurde ist  
leider geheim! 😊

Montag, den 16.06.14

Endlich hat es mit unserem  
Besuch im Krankenhaus geklappt!

Wir haben viele interessante  
Dinge w.z.B. über Verbände  
erfahren.

Außerdem haben wir von  
einer Krankenschwester einen  
Gips an unserem Arm be-  
kommen. Das war besonders  
spannend! 😊

Fig. 4: Documentation panel with short verbal notes on the day's activities



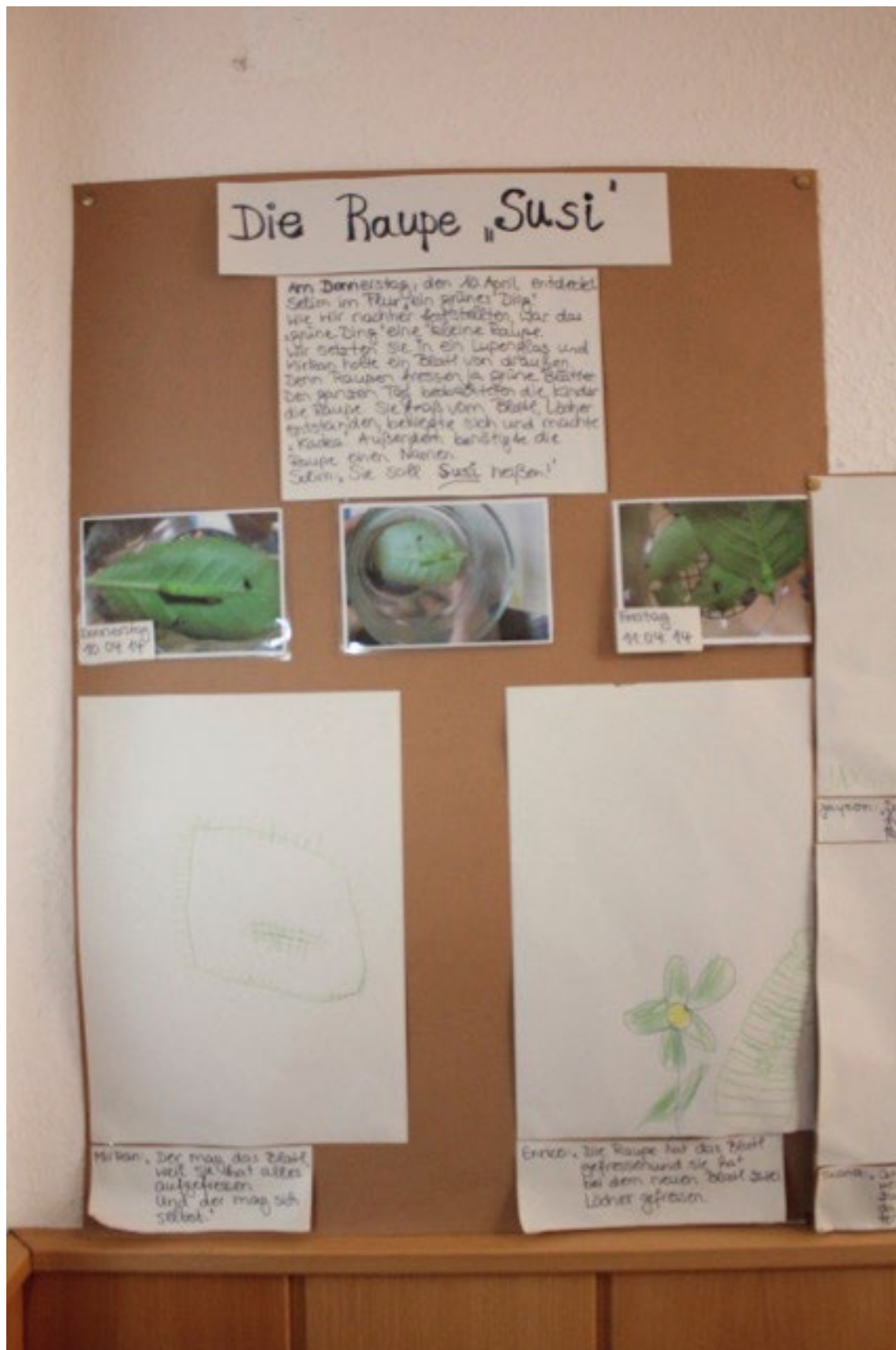


Fig. 5: Documentation panel with pictures, drawings and annotations by teachers and children

Documentation panels can be made up of photos, drawings or artefacts, texts by the children and texts by the educators. Usually photos, drawings and printed texts are glued on a poster board. Sometimes documentation panels are designed on a computer, or the different parts of the documentation are just stuck on the wall. Most documentation panels are placed in the cloakroom, close to displays with information and news for parents. But they can also be found in the foyer, the corridors, the classroom and the gym, and even in the baby change area and the lavatory.

*Contents.* In most ECEC centres visited for this research, documentation panels deal with the activities of the day and are used as a diary or to highlight special events, such as a trip to the fire service or to the forest (Fig. 3). Some educators try to write down something about each day's group activities. A quote from the documentation panel in Fig. 4 may serve to illustrate this:

16.06.14: Finally we managed to visit the hospital today. We learned lots of interesting things, e.g. about bandages. And a hospital nurse put our arms in a cast. That was quite exciting.

This example shows that the contents often become simple statements of fact and that they focus on the things the group *did* and not on the things the children *care* about. In rare cases, documentation panels show typical activities for the area or room they are actually placed in. Fig. 6 shows a documentation panel in a room where the 'children's parliament' is usually situated. This kind of documentation gives the children visual cues, showing them what to do or what not to do. Many posters of this nature can be found, pointing out rules (e.g. to be quiet) or giving information to children (e.g. about the day's menu). Given that children up to the age of six are usually not able to read, the rationale for such visual cues is obvious.



Fig. 6: Documentation panel giving visual cues

*Participation.* Participation depends on the extent to which children are involved as producers and addressed as recipients of the documentation panel. In the documentation panels examined within this study, they are rarely involved as producers. Usually the photos presented are taken by the educators, and the texts are conceived and written by them as well. Less than a quarter of the centres include quotes or annotations by the children in their documentation panels. Instead the documentation panels typically consist of pictures glued onto construction paper, with headlines, explanations and comments added by the educators (Fig. 3). It is not possible to observe whether children are involved in selecting the pictures shown on the panels. However, few educators claim to have selected the pictures with the children. In these cases, quotes by the children are often included, thus revealing the children's reflections and perspectives. Drawings by the children, which can show other views on an event or topic, are also rare. The majority of documentation panels have been made without the participation of children. Furthermore, the content is often obviously aimed at parents, as can be seen in the

daily reports in Fig. 4. This coincides with the height at which the panels are displayed: they are often located at adult eye level and not at children's eye level. All in all, documentation panels are broadly used as an instrument for reporting and reflecting *on* children and not *with* children. In terms of participation, it is clear that children are rarely involved in either producing or reflecting on the panel documentation. Clearly the potential for participation is not recognised in many ECEC centres, where panels are primarily seen as evidence of the educators' performance, and focus on information (for parents) and not on education.

### ***3.3 Presentations of children's work***

Drawings, handicrafts, collages and constructions made of building blocks are typical examples of the things produced by children in ECEC centres. This basic form of documentation of the children's work is rarely a topic of scholarly consideration. This is perhaps surprising, given that they can be seen as "the manifestations of children's learning" (Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer 2007). Although the production of objects seems to be a natural part of ECEC work, only about a quarter of the centres visited provide presentations of these objects.

*Appearance.* The presentation of children's work depends on the nature of the work. Drawings and other two-dimensional objects are, of course, put on walls or other flat surfaces. They are sometimes glued onto construction paper or (on rare occasions) framed. Three-dimensional objects, in contrast, are presented on a shelf, table or windowsill. In many cases different items made by a group of children are presented together, with one common heading. In rare cases, ECEC centres manage to integrate three-dimensional objects, drawings, pictures and text (by the educator *and* by the children). Only in a few cases are the objects labelled with the name or with the date of production. In some centres the products are exhibited in classrooms (Fig. 8), but mainly they can be found in the corridor or in the hall for other children or parents to see.

*Content.* The items presented cover the whole variety of ECEC creative work: graphical or constructive representations of the topics children are involved in, for example animals, plants, protagonists of fairy tales or TV series, friends and family, all kinds of vehicles, or just abstract explorations of colours, shapes or materials. Different kinds of paper are used, as well as clay, wood, wire, paint, fabric and other materials.

*Participation.* Here too, eye-level displays are an important factor, as are comments by the children and photos of the production process. The study shows that presentations of drawings are often hung high up, while three-dimensional objects are always presented at children's eye level. The reason might be a practical one, because most tables and benches in ECEC centres are at children's level. Furthermore, drawings are usually positioned higher up to protect them from being pulled down by smaller children. Greater differences than in the position could be found in the texts accompanying the children's work. In many ECEC centres, the items are at most labelled with the name of the child. In some rare cases, educators provide additional information, mainly comments by the children explaining the item. This can be seen in Fig. 7, where a photo is even added showing the children during the production process. In this presentation, children become visible as the designers and creators of the object.



Fig. 7: Children's drawing added by a picture of the child while painting it

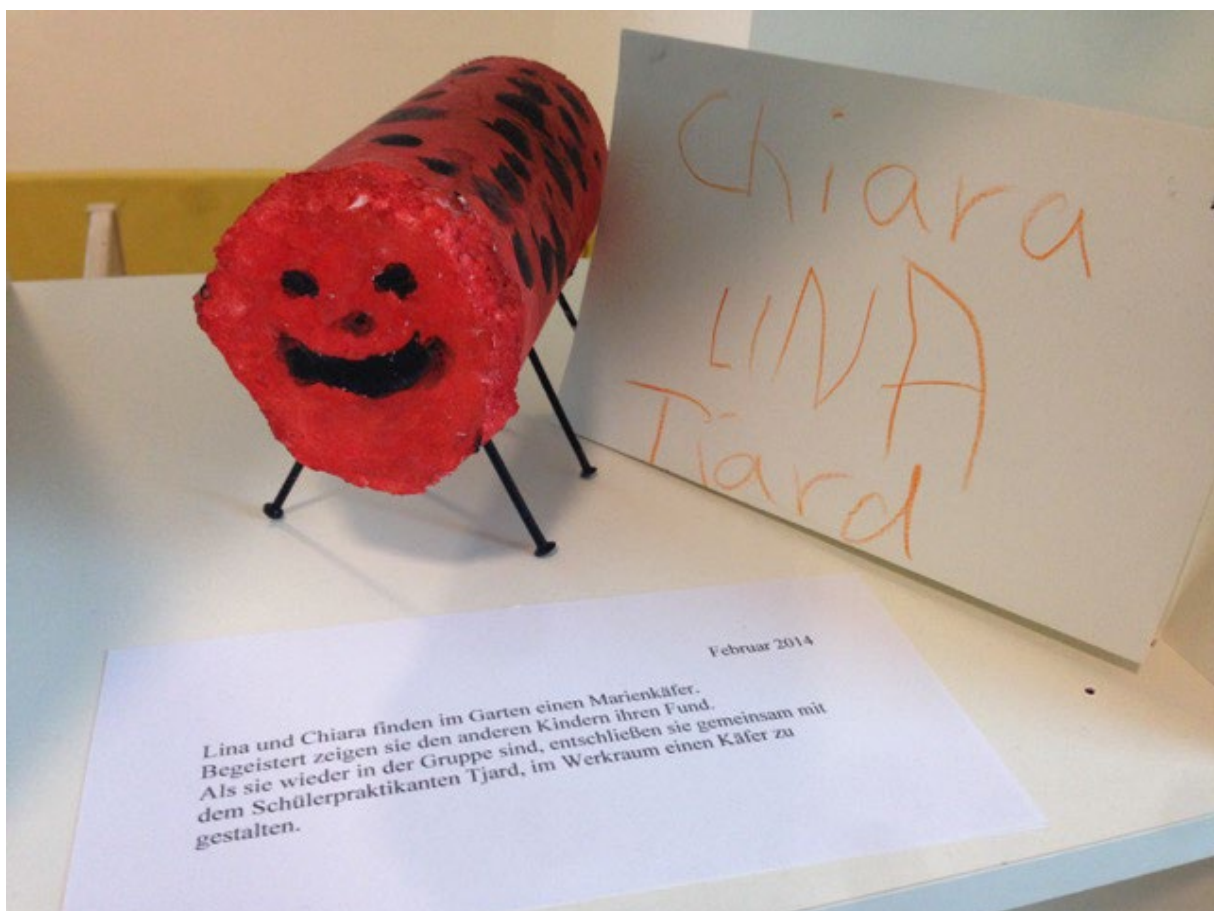


Fig. 8: Presentation of a handicraft based on the child's own idea

A final measure of participation is the extent to which children have decided for themselves what topic or technique they want to deal with. Often children of one group are encouraged to paint the same item (e.g. butterflies) or use the same technique (e.g. hand printing). In contrast, participative settings are indicated when creative ideas developed by the children themselves are presented (Fig. 8). This, however, can only be found in half of the ECEC centres visited. Thus children's participation in the presentation of their work can be described as basic. Obviously, children are involved here as producers and manufacturers, but the exhibitions rarely portray the production process in such a way that children's work becomes visible to themselves or to others, and they seldom explore the ideas behind the products or provide context as a stimulus for reflection. This shows that participation in the presentation of children's work is of minor importance.

#### **4. Conclusion**

While the different ECEC centres use quite similar forms (portfolio, documentation panels and presentations of children's work), the way they actually use them is very diverse. The scope of the participatory procedures in documentation varies accordingly. The study shows that children are involved in many ways in documentation. In most of the ECEC centres visited during this research, documentation is considered as something that the educators do in addition to their child-care work; sometimes documentation even seems to be a showcase for the educators' work instead a reflection of the children's experience. Fostering participation and thus supporting learning activities is generally not seen as a purpose of pedagogical documentation.

Only some of the ECEC centres examined involve children in documentation. These centres see children as the (main) addressees of the documentation. They manage to focus on learning processes as well as involving children in the work of documentation. Three of the ECEC centres visited are inspired by the Reggio approach, which puts emphasis on documentation;

these centres all practise a high level of participation in their documentation. But there are also centres not influenced by Reggio, which give considerable weight to documentation.

This observation leads to a common root of documentation and participation: there is much to indicate that greater attentiveness to the diverse forms in which children express themselves is an important influencing factor. If ECEC centres are to be experienced as places where children actively learn democracy (Knauer and Sturzenhecker 2013), then a listening attitude, one that explores and respects children's needs and interests, is crucial (Lansdown 2009). This basic attitude underlies both the documentation practice in the Reggio approach and the endeavour to bring about more efforts at participation on the part of children. The repeatedly mentioned fact that participation is often conceived from an adult point of view (Kellet 2006), and therefore does not lead to an adequate form of participation, can be altered by this "pedagogy of listening" (Rinaldi 2006).

All in all it can be said that ECEC centres, which let children participate in documentation are on the whole much more advanced in their documentation procedures. The realisation of a broad documentation may not be possible without the involvement of children. High-level documentation may only be possible with a high level of participation – and vice versa. Further research is needed to find out what incentives, ideas and attitudes drive these intense efforts at pedagogical documentation and – linked to this – participation.

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