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Participation at the margins – participation practices from the viewpoint of young people in residential care

Partizipation an den Rändern – Partizipative Praktiken aus Sicht junger Menschen im Betreuten Wohnen

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ABSTRACT

This article critically discusses young service users' participation rights and participation processes in residential group care concerning the challenges, requirements, and opportunities that such a form of organised participation entails for them. A comparative analysis of findings from two qualitative studies from Germany and Switzerland is an empirical basis. Experiences of lived, negotiated, or subtle struggles for the participation of children and youth in everyday institutional life are presented. Identified resistant practices of children and youth, which are of great importance to them, deviate from the usual organisational and normative requirements for participation. The article closes a vital research gap: It presents young people's strategies for dealing with organised and sometimes tokenistic participation. The focus on the self-will of the young actors offers the possibility of supplementing a frequently normative discourse about securing children's rights in alternative care without making the lifeworld of the young service users and their views a starting point for interventions and legal interpretations. Moreover, the results of both research projects indicate that participation in the everyday life of young people in residential care organisations entails special requirements and challenges, which will be presented here in more detail.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Beitrag setzt sich kritisch mit den Partizipationsrechten und Partizipationsprozessen junger Nutzerinnen und Nutzer im Betreuten Wohnen auseinander und fragt nach den Herausforderungen, Anforderungen und Chancen, die eine organisierte Beteiligung für junge Menschen mit sich bringt. Eine vergleichende Analyse von Befunden aus zwei qualitativen Studien aus Deutschland und der Schweiz bildet die empirische Grundlage. Es werden Erfahrungen von gelebten, ausgehandelten oder subtilen Kämpfen um die Beteiligung junger Menschen im institutionellen Alltag dargestellt. Identifizierte widerständige Praktiken von Kindern und Jugendlichen, die für sie von

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großer Bedeutung sind, weichen von den üblichen organisatorischen und normativen Anforderungen der Fachkräfte an Partizipation ab. Der Beitrag schließt eine wichtige Forschungslücke: Er stellt die Strategien junger Menschen im Umgang mit organisierter Beteiligung sowie Formen der Scheinpartizipation vor. Die Fokussierung auf den Eigenwillen der jungen Akteure bietet die Möglichkeit, einen häufig normativen Diskurs über die Sicherung von Kinderrechten in den stationären Erziehungshilfen zu ergänzen, und die Lebenswelt der jugendlichen Adressat*innen und ihre Sichtweisen zum Ausgangspunkt von Interventionen und Rechtsauslegungen zu machen. Die Ergebnisse beider Forschungsprojekte weisen zudem darauf hin, dass Partizipation im Alltag von Kindern und Jugendlichen in stationären Einrichtungen besondere Anforderungen und Herausforderungen mit sich bringt, die hier näher dargestellt werden sollen.

Introduction and state of research

In Germany and Switzerland, residential childcare is an essential and large component of out-of-home care. In 2022, 121,005 children and youth were placed in residential group care in Germany, while 86,047 young people were placed in foster families in 2022 (Destatis, 2023). The number of young people growing up in residential care in Switzerland can only be aggregated incompletely at the federal level and currently cannot be accurately reported. Based on information from individual cantons, Seiterle (2018) estimates this figure at 12,000 to 14,200 as part of a project for 2017, which corresponds to 0.7 to 0.9% of the resident population. Around 5,000 children and youth were in foster families at the time.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 12, states, from a professional point of view, the inevitable necessity of listening to young people's concerns, wishes, and complaints and giving them due weight. According to this, opportunities for participation and complaint have become a significant part of implementing child protection in the child and youth welfare system. There is ample evidence that the opportunity for participation is of great importance for the upbringing of young people in out-of-home care. Participation promotes the well-being of children and youth in residential care (Magalhães et al., 2021) and leads to more significant commitment to the agreements made, increased self-esteem, and stronger effects of the interventions (Ten Brummelar et al., 2017).

While it is essential to recognise that the type of out-of-home care (foster care and residential care) plays a vital role in the realisation of opportunities for participation and complaints, especially those that affect the direct everyday lives of adolescents, this article focuses on the organised participation of children and youth in facilities such as children's homes and residential group care in Germany and Switzerland. The article compares experiences of participation by young people in everyday life in residential care and so-called resistant practices in this context based on the findings of the two projects.

Studies that asked young adults about their experiences with the child welfare system reveal that young people are often at the mercy of what others (adults) decide for them. Mostly, they are not allowed to express their own wishes and needs or to play a serious role in relevant decisions (Sahl et al., 2021). Purtell et al. (2022) refer to this as a 'loss of agency' for adolescents with out-of-home care experience, especially compared to their peers without comparable experiences. This applies to everyday decisions that determine the course of help itself.

Youth placed in out-of-home care in the context of child protection have very often experienced a blatant disregard for their rights at various levels. They are also affected by decisions that change their lives to a much greater extent than their peers who grow up in families. At the same time, they are involved in situations of decision-making that require them to overcome extremely high barriers to access (meetings to plan the service, participation procedures in the facilities to safeguard

children's rights) (Magalhães et al., 2021). They often encounter participation ideas and concepts from professionals and organisations that rely heavily on verbal negotiations (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007). A cross-national literature review also shows that the use of participation methods and instruments developed by (adult) professionals alone is not sufficient for young people in residential care, as they run the risk of excluding or deterring individual young people or even, in the worst case, entire groups (Eberitzsch et al., 2021).

The results of the projects presented in the following show that such actions, which, from the professionals' perspective, are often seen as resistant practices, may initially have to be interpreted and recognised as demands for participation or forms of participation as such.

Presentation of both participation projects

The qualitative study funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), 'Participation in Residential Childcare' (project no: 419403819) (Equit, 2024a), investigates how participation and complaints processes of young people in residential care groups are arranged in everyday life, what role the legally mandatory formal participation and complaints procedures take in this, and whether the protection of young people in the facilities is guaranteed through complaints processes, as is currently presupposed, for example, by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN-CRC) and in the implementation of protection concepts in German child welfare. The study analyzed the reconstructed organisational culture for each residential group (Equit et al., 2024; Fine, 1996). Against the background of the definition of organisation by Fine, idiocultures in residential care are defined 'as a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis for future interaction' (Fine, 1996, p. 129). Shared experiences and meanings of actors characterise these 'cultures of small groups' (ibid.). 27 residential groups from 18 child welfare stakeholders in four German federal states were examined. The sampling criteria were an urban-rural comparison, different facilities concepts, and investigating facilities in East and West Germany. A total of 233 children and youth aged 6 to 21 with and without a history of migration were surveyed. In addition, 168 professionals (including 27 managers) between the ages of 23 and 77 were interviewed. Even though this is a qualitative study, the project's results can be assumed to represent the variance of residential group care in Germany due to the comprehensive and criteria-based sample. Young people and professionals received detailed information about the project and the data protection regulations before the group discussions and interviews. Group discussions were held with professionals and young people in each residential group. Expert interviews were conducted with the management. The data were analyzed using the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2010; Nohl, 2017). First, the formulating interpretation, which includes the analysis of the mentioned topics in group discussions, was made. Second, the reflecting interpretation was conducted. It reflects on how the topics were discussed and how participants addressed each other. As a result, the implicit orientation of the group, the so-called 'framework of orientation', was reconstructed for each residential group (including the views of young people and professionals). Frameworks of orientation are closely connected to the implicit knowledge and habitualized practices within these groups. The group discussions with young people, professionals, and expert interviews with members of the senior management of one residential group were combined into one 'case'. From 27 residential groups, 15 cases were analyzed following the steps described. An initial sense-genetic typology was developed (Amling & Hoffmann, 2013) based on the considerations of documentary organisational research (Amling & Vogt, 2017). Based on the composed synopsis (thematic progression) of the group discussions, the 12 remaining cases were assigned to the types, whereby one deviating case could not be assigned to the typology. The tertium comparationis of the typology comprises the reconstructed orientation frameworks of professionals and young people.

In the project 'How we see this!' (Eberitzsch et al., 2023), which was funded by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland and implemented with the Swiss Association of Social Pedagogy Integras as a cooperation partner, participation processes and instruments were developed together with

young people from various residential care facilities. This development project ran parallel to the research project, so we are not going into it in depth here. Very briefly, young people from three residential care homes defined key areas of life where participation is or would be very important to them. These were developed in self-organised workshops and a self-organised conference. They were accompanied by a youth worker who offered various methods for developing these areas of life. Based on these areas, implementation plans were then drawn up with the employees and posters and stickers were produced to make it possible to discuss participation in these areas in other residential care homes (Rohrbach et al., 2023). In addition to this development project, the research study focused on how young people experience their options for action in the residential care context. Further, we wanted to know how this results in habitual positioning patterns vis-à-vis the professionals and the residential care services. Twenty-three young people between the ages of 9 and 16 took part. They lived in four residential group units from three residential child and youth welfare centres in German-speaking Switzerland (ibid.). To collect and interpret the shared experiences of the different groups about the research interest, an approximately 90-minute group discussion, according to Bohnsack (2010), with two to ten participants, was conducted in each of the four residential care homes. All discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Group discussions are conducted to explore the experience of a collective and, thus, their common orientation. Bohnsack calls this knowledge the collective orientation and cannot be queried explicitly by the participants, as this is unconscious knowledge. Based on these research interests, dense passages were selected for this purpose, which were interpreted by formulating (What was said?) and then reflecting (How was something said?). The reflective interpretation serves to identify the orientation frameworks of the discussion groups, for which a comparison of the different discussions is necessary (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). The cross-case interpretation of four discussions was somewhat too small to form a type according to Bohnsack (2010). We therefore undertook a typological characterisation of the groups in the form of generalised hypotheses.

The results of both studies were compared due to the similar research questions, group discussions with similar target groups, and the use of the same analysis method. The comparison of the two projects is based on data triangulation (Denzin, 2009; Flick, 2011). The tertium comparationis to compare the data from both projects was the reconstructed frameworks of orientation among the young people. While comparing the frameworks of orientation of young people in both projects, it became apparent that power dynamics described by youth are connected to the participation processes described. The German study developed the sensitising concept of 'hegemonic orders' to analyze power dynamics in residential groups (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). It contains three different aspects of power dynamics: First, clientization processes are conceptualised (Järvinen, 2014). Clientization is seen as a transformation in which the troubles brought to social organisations were changed via the narrative practices of professionals to become workable by the organisation. Assessing young people as 'good' or 'bad' clients aligns with participation and complaints processes (Equit, 2024c). Second, group discussions analyzed power dynamics according to generational orders and adultism (Alanen, 2005). Third, organisational hierarchies, management leadership, and professional perceptions were examined (Tiitinen, 2018). In addition, the reconstructed orientations of the professionals in the German project were also included.¹ The Swiss project assumes a dynamic perspective on power and participation as well. It tries to understand and analyze challenging power relations between actors, biographies, groups, and organisational and societal structures (Kraus, 2021). Power imbalances and dependency relationships between professionals and young people, as well as among their peers, were analyzed. Among the institutionally determined opportunities to powerfully reify young people is the fact that all of life encompasses day and night, and all parts of the private sphere are affected by organisational logic (Kindler & Fegert, 2015; Gabriel & Keller, 2019). In addition, some children have had massive experiences of powerlessness and abuse of power by people close to them in their life history (Schmid et al., 2013, p. 48 ff.). Above all, these power imbalances make it necessary to think and understand the conditions and forms of participation from the children's perspective (Eberitzsch et al., 2023). The following sections

present the insights of the compared study results, which show three similar participation processes of youth and power dynamics in residential group care in Germany and Switzerland.

Views and practices of young people in the context of participation in care

When comparing the results of the two projects, it was noticeable that the children and youth surveyed described stubborn and sometimes resistant forms of participation concerning the co-determination they experienced and practiced. These practices were related to the hierarchies and power dynamics in the residential group that were experienced and reconstructed in the facilities.

Resistant practices in rigid power dynamics

The results of both studies show that the power dynamics between professionals, on the one hand, and young people, on the other, significantly influence the participation processes. In both projects, the authors independently found residential groups whose power dynamics are to be described as violent. Professionals enforce rules and routines in everyday life against the will and resistance of young people. Deviations from the professionals' guidelines are sanctioned. According to the descriptions of the young people interviewed, a process was reconstructed, reminiscent of a spiral. It consists of strict guidelines on the part of the professionals, deviation on the part of the young people, sanctions on the part of the professionals, and resistance on the part of the young people. This process continues in everyday life. In both projects, the young people in these residential groups unanimously describe everyday life as rigid and hierarchically organised. They describe pronounced processes of suffering and experiences of bullying, racism, and daily 'running battles' with professionals. Although legally prescribed formal procedures for participation and complaints are anchored in the residential groups², the young people describe their opportunities for participation as marginal, and children's rights are violated in everyday life in these facilities.

In the German project, the hegemonic orders in these groups are dominated by enforcing professionals' strict guidelines using discipline and coercion. The young residents report devaluation and bullying by professionals. In one case, physical violence was used (a social worker threw water bottles at young residents, and they were yelled at. One staff member tore off their bed covers while they slept, revealing their naked bodies). Strategies of enforcement by professionals include verbal devaluation (verbal abuse and shaming), derogatory portrayals of clients (young residents are labelled as deviating from so-called 'normal youth', as unable to participate and adapt), and systematic curtailment of young people's rights (everyday control practices such as room searches, opening young people's private mail without their consent, refusal to allow access to files, omission to offer help or blocking access to external confidants). In all three cases with violent hegemonic orders, the senior management of the residential group relativised and tolerated the violence. The senior management explicitly follows the professionals' decisions (Equit, 2024c). Young residents, as well as professionals, show little dissent in the group discussions. Dissenting opinions are not discussed in the respective groups because they do not occur or are concealed or silenced. Professionals describe participation as a kind of 'privilege' that is only granted to young people if they behave 'responsibly,' which means following the rules from the perspective of the professionals; the supposed deficits of young residents are the reason why they can rarely be involved in decisions that affect them. This argument legitimises the rigid rules and restrictions. The following quote from a professional illustrates this:

We have children who never sat at the dining table with anyone else. They sat in front of the computer or in front of the television while eating. You ate when you wanted to. That's the point: does a child have the right to say, 'No, I don't want to eat with the others?'

The professionals do not question participation in the group discussions. The supposed deficits and problematic behaviour of young residents are cited as a reason for denying their rights. The denial of

rights is usually woven into pedagogical arguments, e.g. ‘too much’ participation and freedom of decision would be overburdening and ‘harmful’ to the development of children and youth (Equit, 2024d).

However, rigid hierarchies are not linked to the absence of participation. The results of both projects show that these young people find experiences of participation elsewhere and in other ways. In this case, however, they - as a collective or individually - must devote far more energy to circumventing or reinterpreting the structures, hurdles, and boundaries they experience as rigid in everyday life. Professionals quickly perceive participation as a resistant practice.

Young people describe the professionals as powerful because they severely limit their opportunities for participation. In their discussions, they are mainly guided by the limits and restrictions they experience. This leads them to evaluate the social structure in ranks (or hierarchies) where they occupy a significantly lower rank than the professionals. Due to this lower level, they feel assigned to, they see their concerns and wishes as secondary. Although they find ways to address their concerns, they constantly work through the existing controls and regulations. Accordingly, they depend on the processes, structures, and individual professionals in their services. As a group, the rules that make it impossible for them to participate, express or act out their concerns, wishes and needs are primarily relevant to them. For them, living in a residential care facility is a collective experience where rules and safety dominate their everyday lives and their individuality.

In both research projects, the analyses of the group discussions with the young people show that they devote much energy to devaluing the orientation towards group interests prescribed by the professionals and finding substitute experiences of empowerment and decision-making through more covert, resistant practices. As a result, they can mainly negotiate offers or rules not prescribed by professionals. To be heard or to be able to pursue the group’s concerns, the young people have to show a great deal of initiative. Moreover, they have to try to circumvent the rules and controls of the professionals. Alternatively, they receive help from other adults, such as in the example below, where a mother intervenes in everyday life from the outside.

Berta: Where you once were a little disrespectful to the adults: there was vanilla ice cream for dinner

Claudia: Mum’s ice cream?

Berta: ((laughter)) vanilla ice cream and Simone (social pedagogue) then said that you weren’t allowed to eat that, and then you snatched the phone out of the adults’ hands.

Alina: Oh yeah.

Claudia: Did I do that?

Berta: You ran into the bathroom, locked the door, and called your mum ((laughter))

Eve: Yes.

Claudia: I don’t even remember ((laughter))

Eve: Yes.

Alina: Yes, you are so ...

Berta: Your mummy phoned Simone afterward and said: ‘my daughter is having vanilla ice cream!’ ((laughter))

Claudia: Ah yes, that’s right ((laughter))

(Swiss project, Group A)

This excerpt shows that when young adolescents seek participation or a feeling of self-efficacy, they do not submit to the given but bypass it and thus always question the power relations. They create their power sources through these practices to produce participation and self-efficacy. The loss of power does not necessarily have to be recognised by the professionals but can be communicated

within the peer group. In residential groups with rigid hierarchies, group discussions with young people, based on the work of Goffman, therefore revealed back-stage narratives and behaviours. In these, they mutually confirm their own behaviour and image beyond the devaluation by professionals. These narratives are dominated by demarcations and devaluations towards the professionals, which simultaneously imply a valorisation of the young actor's image. The perception and problematization of rigid hierarchies by the young people in the group discussions were reconstructed in both research projects.

Selective participation by professionals

In the previous examples, young people's participation mainly occurred through resistant practices. In contrast, different participation practices were reconstructed in both projects, in which professionals selectively allowed participation. These selective and situational participation practices by young people were found in facilities that are not dominated by rigid guidelines and sanctions but only work with strict rules and routines. Accordingly, young people achieve participation opportunities through negotiation strategies and situational-resistant practices.

However, the findings of the two studies differ in how professional selective participation works. In the Swiss study, selective participation promoted individual negotiation practices among young people. In contrast, the German study showed that participation was facilitated selectively via collective practices (e.g. collective wishes about changed times of leisure activities and different distribution of tasks). Selective opportunities for joint participation mean that professionals selectively enable opportunities for participation in group concerns. It is true that young people - or at least those willing and able to get involved - are empowered to stand up for their concerns. However, this selectivity is problematic insofar as it increases the power position of the professionals and the powerlessness of the young people. Ultimately, the adults in the situation make this selection unpredictably, by chance, or as a favour.

The results of both studies highlight that it is crucial to what extent children and youth can repeatedly (and not arbitrarily) question and adapt existing regulations in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the reliability and transparency of these rules play a crucial role in young people's experience of participation opportunities. The findings also show that youth living in residential groups whose participation is selectively permitted also perceive power differences and hierarchies. However, they experience these as a collective in a different, less rigid form. They share the experience with the first group that their needs can disappear behind regulated procedures. However, they are heard and recognised to some extent, although this is often linked to the condition that they meet the facility's requirements or that of the respective professional.

The selective admission of participation was carried out in the respective projects with different justifications. In the Swiss project 'How We See This!' (Eberitzsch et al., 2023), situational criteria were used, such as a certain age or adherence to specific rules opening up participation opportunities for young people. Youth in the Swiss study stated that opportunities for participation in the residential groups were experienced as dependent on the situation and the professional. The concerns of the young people are seen, but at the same time, the staff still decides on which topics and how often they allow them to have a say. To address their concerns, they often choose to engage directly with the professionals, which can range from constructive to confrontational. They try to play off existing institutional rules depending on the situation. Agreement with the fixed collective routines in the residential groups formed the prerequisite for selective participation opportunities in the findings of the German project. Young residents reported that their opportunities for participation depended on the existing collective routines and rules in everyday life. If the established routines in the groups were not interrupted, children and youth could demand participation opportunities in group-related activities and seek their realisation.

In contrast to the comparable group in the Swiss project, individual requests were mostly rejected. Professionals judged them to be inconsistent with the collective rules and daily routines.

This comparison highlights the challenge of the facilities to find an appropriate balance between individual and group-related participation processes.

The negotiation processes and handling of wishes for participation by the young people differed in the two projects in that the selectivity in enabling participation was recognised as an individual pattern in the first project and as a pattern to be negotiated collectively in the second:

Ferdi: I mean, it should be up to us when we go to the room, so yes.

Erdal: I don't have to go to the room

Ferdi: We should feel comfortable there, yes, and I mean/

Daniel: Why are we locked up?

Ferdi: Yes, I mean, at home, you don't say to yourself: 'Yes, go into the room now'. I mean, you have to be able to do that yourself later.

Daniel: Do we still need a nap or what?

Erdal: ((laughter))

Ferdi: Because that's all right, we're actually there so that the parents have a bit more support, and we can learn something for the future. But we learn like nothing, so to speak; we're just there, and there are just rules, and we have to stick to them.

(Swiss project, Group C)

In group C, participation, therefore, is the maintenance of self-recognition. However, successfully negotiating opportunities for participation is also always a way of being recognised by the group or the home. However, this also means that participation is experienced and evaluated as the perpetuation of categories of inequality within the residential care programme: Not everyone can participate equally in everyday life and its negotiation possibilities due to different skills, behaviours, and underlying needs, but also due to unchangeable prerequisites such as age. Unless - like the first group (B) - they find their way outside the framed processes to experience self-efficacy.

In some facilities of the German project, group-related fixed daily routines are prioritised. Professionals, children, and youth agree that routines in everyday life are good and helpful. Professionals point out that a clear 'structure' supports the development and learning processes of the recipients. Children and youth report that opportunities for participation are often bureaucratised. Written forms must be filled out when making a complaint or requests to change leisure times, and they must be submitted in the form of written applications to the whole team. This bureaucratisation prevents personal wishes for a say from being considered. In addition, young people living in residential groups where participation is selectively permitted criticise the fact that their complaints are often not heard or not taken seriously by professionals. One example is the excerpt from the group discussion with Amadou and Lilly. Seven other young people took part in the group discussion.

Amadou: For example, there's a complaints box. I have

Lilly: ^Lyou've written in there often enough^L

Amadou: Written something in there so often, like, well, put something in there

Lilly: ^LBut it doesn't get taken out^L

Amadou: But I feel they don't even open it; they completely ignore it. They just walk by.

(German project)

Amadou states that he has frequently written complaints and put them in the specially designated letterbox. Lilly agrees. However, he believes the professionals must empty it, read the complaints,

and take them seriously. Instead, the professionals ignore the letterbox. Amadous attempts at participation by using the letterbox failed.

The hegemonic order between youth and the professionals and between the professionals and the management in these facilities were characterised as paternalistic. In this context, paternalism means that professionals and management impose guidelines and rules on the children and youth, explaining that this is in their best interest. Participation and complaint processes are bureaucratised in these facilities and geared toward the group's interests. The paternalistic hegemonic order often does not allow young people's individual concerns and complaints to be recognised. Collective concerns and complaints are most likely to be heard and acknowledged if the concerns fit into the given routines and structures of everyday life. Requirements and restrictions towards young people are legitimised and enforced to ensure the 'well-being of all'. Spontaneous wishes of young people (e.g. to spend the night at a friend's house, to spontaneously arrange to meet up with friends) are often not considered legitimate participation by professionals. Either the young people experience a rejection of their wishes because the professionals regard them as pedagogically undesirable (e.g. new smoking rules). Or the peer group itself judges its own wishes as unrealisable and does not express them at all.. The assessment of whether the statements and wishes of young people constitute legitimate complaints or requests for participation is made either by the professionals or, in some cases, by the management.

Dynamically enabled participation

The findings of both projects also include the third form of participation. It is characterised by professionals making young people's individual and collective participation possible. Professionals support young residents in bringing in personal concerns and requests for change and negotiating these with professionals and group-related concerns. In both projects, young people concurrently report that they can constantly and reliably live their needs for participation and have a say in the day-to-day running of the home. The group cohesion in these facilities is described as good and positive. Within the residential group, young people also position themselves individually with their opinions and concerns, which are discussed and negotiated in the collective. A group discussion from the German project illustrates this:

Interviewer: How is everyday life here?

Ahmed: Good

Denise: When we have school, the care workers wake us up, and we go to school. After school, we return home, eat, and have leisure time.

[...]

Jenny: Sometimes we go on trips, for example, to movies

Dennis: Yes.

Denise: Mini golf.

Jenny: Swimming, all sorts of things, just what we feel like doing

(German project)

Young people who experience satisfactory participation in everyday life appreciate the facility and the professionals. As in this group discussion, the young people describe their daily life as good. They report a wide range of leisure activities. They also express criticism and wish for improvements in everyday life (e.g. faster Wi-Fi). The relationship with the professionals is positive in facilities that work in a participatory manner. The term cooperation characterises the hegemonic orders in participatory facilities. The management explicitly asks the professionals to cooperate with young people

and build appreciative relationships. The management also demands and encourages reflection and teamwork among professionals, for example, to develop solutions and methods for dealing with problems. Young people also cooperate with professionals, for example, when dealing with individual issues or conflicts and seeking support or when it comes to the group's interests. Cooperation and mutual exchange, as well as negotiation, are benchmarks for the evaluation of professional action in these facilities. Participation and cooperation with other children, youth, and professionals are also requirements for young service users to become part of the residential group. The professionals name limitations to those mutual negotiations, including resolving and clarifying conflicts, in that they cannot be managed as a daily requirement. Professionals at one facility, for example, named a young person's 'special needs' as a limit. Due to his impairment, he needed fixed daily routines that allowed no or only very marginal deviations and negotiations in everyday life. The young person was transferred to another facility, which stipulates everyday life considerably stronger through regulations and routines.

In the Swiss project, two residential care groups recognised the possibility that their concerns would be considered. However, there is little distinction between these groups. The 'mumbling group' includes young people who report little about their opportunities for participation. However, narratives indicate that there may be individual agreements and that perceived differences regarding rules and permissions seem to be accepted by the young people. In addition to negotiable matters, this group also has a perceived power imbalance. The power imbalance concerns issues that are not discussed directly but at a higher level with the consequence of the exclusion of young people. Negotiation processes that are experienced as non-transparent lead to strong dissatisfaction. The optimistic horizon of this group is (individual) agreements that they can reach with the professionals, but only if these are transparent and prompt. If excessive unequal treatment leads to dissatisfaction, this is not discussed confrontationally (as in other care home groups) with professionals, and arguments are not made against the individuals but against their actions.

In the 'self-evident group', the second group here, young people experience their opportunities for participation in everyday life at home. Addressing issues and reaching agreements is perceived as consciously encouraged here. Although certain restrictions are also mentioned, these are perceived as understandable and feasible. Young people in this subgroup manage to fulfil these conditions effortlessly and as a matter of course. They are guided by what is offered to them and how their everyday lives are structured or not structured. Coexistence is also central. The group rejects behaviours that could disrupt togetherness. They achieve their goals effortlessly. Restrictions on freedom due to certain behaviours are accepted but only affect 'the others'.

Conclusions

The research results presented here offer a wealth of insights into the challenges of implementing participation in residential childcare and the potential for professional organisation, support, and promotion of participation by professionals in these groups. At the same time, the article closes a vital research gap: It presents research findings based on two studies on participation in the everyday life of young people in groups that have received little attention in the extensive professional discourse on safeguarding participation rights in residential care (cf. Equit & Purtell, 2023). Young people's strategies became clear for dealing with tokenistic participation, demanded participation, and organisational forms of participation and complaint procedures, which by no means fit seamlessly into their ideas and coping strategies. The notion of young people's sense of purpose offers the possibility of supplementing an often normative discourse on safeguarding the rights of the service users – without making their lifeworld and their views the starting point for interventions and legal interpretations (Gharabahi, 2023).

The reconstructed and classified forms and practices of participation in the daily life of residential group care show that the opportunities for young people to participate and complain depend

mainly on the residential groups' power dynamics. Young people and professionals in both projects report various participation opportunities and practices in groups where professionals and organisations encourage participation and complaints. Young people in these groups experience a high participation level. The benefits of the participatory culture are made clear. Reference must be made to crucial conditions and prerequisites to evoke and run this group culture. The power dynamics that structure everyday life in the groups are specified and controlled at the management level, reconstructed by the German project. The group management ensures that and sees how conflicts and complaints are resolved (in a participatory manner). The central instrument is the distinct culture of negotiation and discussion between the different positions, aiming to reach a consensus or even allow both opinions to stand alongside each other as equally valid. The results of the German study also show that the various complaint procedures are not decisive in the perception and processing of complaints by professionals. The hegemonic orders and, embedded in these, the understanding of complaints and the scope for professionals to negotiate individual arrangements for solutions with young people are decisive for the processing of complaints expressed by young people (Equit, 2024b).

However, in facilities where professionals selectively allow participation, young people often find their wishes and complaints go unheard. The findings of both studies show that children and youth explore deviations from the rules and routines to open the scope for action and experience their agency without questioning the order of the residential group and the authority of the professionals. These forms of deviation are essential for the theorisation and understanding of participation. Slide deviations of existing rules and routines open up participation in practice beyond 'voice'; they consider the young people's own sense of participation. While 'voice' is crucial in conceptualising participation in Hart and Lundy's theoretical models, participation at the margins shows that performative practices and agency represent a crucial area of youth-initiated participation that professionals tolerate and recognise. The granting of scope for action depends not least on the hegemonic orders in the residential groups and, thus, on the professionals and the organisational hierarchies. The discretionary scope of the professionals is decisive for the recognition or disregard of participation by young people in everyday life. There is a lack of theoretical concepts conceptualising performative, resistant practices as a kind of youth-led participation.

The relevance of participation is particularly evident in facilities where it lacks. Violent hegemonic orders and constant conflicts in the everyday life of the residential living group illustrate how much participation is necessary. The results of the projects show what discretionary powers professionals can use to conceal violence. In facilities with violent power dynamics, professionals point to the formal participation and complaints procedures, which are, however, constantly undermined in the children's and young people's stories. It becomes clear that the protection of young people cannot be ensured through participation and complaint procedures.

The comparison of the two projects on participation at the margins allows a contrastive examination of obfuscation practices and discretionary scope in implementing participation rights. Concealment practices are essential for participation. They open spaces for self-initiated participation and agency for young people beyond organisational guidelines. However, discretionary spaces are also an opportunity for professionals to legitimize themselves and expand their claims to power and security vis-à-vis young people, such as in the bureaucratisation and formalisation of complaints processes that make it difficult for young people to use them. Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look at the conceptualisation of protection and participation in the everyday life of residential groups. It remains doubtful that children and youth will use complaint procedures to report institutional violence, based on the research findings (Equit, 2024b). The findings on participation at the margins show that the theoretical and empirical investigation of performative participation practices is worthwhile but has not yet been systematically recorded in the professional discourse. However, self-initiated participation practices by young people should be systematically linked to implementing participation at the margins.

Notes

1. The results presented in section three do not represent the typology of the German study. Instead, the reconstructed frameworks of orientation of the young people and professionals surveyed were used to highlight similarities and differences in both projects.
2. Participation and complaint procedures in the German projects range from group evenings with or without adults, mailboxes for complaints, forms for complaints, children's home councils, complaint officers, consultation hours for complaining, different consultations for complaining (ranging from complaints about food or rules up to child protection issues), Ombudspersons for complaints, different brochures about children's rights and the complaint procedure within the facility, specialized feedback for the complaint procedure, etc.

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