

Children bring transformation to the system. Results from the KoSy project - competent systems with the Situational Approach

Katrin Macha

*Institute for the Situational Approach at the International Academy Berlin
gGmbH (INA).*

ORCID: 0000-0002-5907-9492

Lena Claßen

*Institute for the Situational Approach at the International Academy Berlin
gGmbH (INA)*

ORCID: 0009-0001-3860-8535

Authors' notes

Katrin Macha is in the last stage of finishing her doctorate on “Children as actors in a competent system – how children can participate in quality development in early childcare” at the University of Potsdam, Germany. She is the Director of the Institute for the Situational Approach at the International Academy Berlin gGmbH (INA). After graduating in pedagogy, she worked on and then managed various projects for quality development and ‘Bildung’ in children’s centres (e.g. quality for school children in children’s centres, quality in the situational approach, external evaluations according to QuaSi, children's perspectives in the children’s centre advisory board). She is an advocate for children’s rights and perspectives on all levels of the ECEC system and uses critical and post foundational theory to work towards a reciprocal dialogue between theory and practice. Correspondence or questions can be sent to macha@situationsansatz.de

Lena Claßen holds a master’s degree in Practical Research in Social Work and Education from the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences Berlin, Germany. Their master’s thesis talks about the crucial role of management in ECEC settings in Germany concerning the inclusion of children’s perspectives, opinions and rights. Lena has been a research associate at the Institute for the Situational Approach at the International Academy Berlin gGmbH (INA) since 2023. Prior to that, they studied Early Childhood Education and worked in multiple children’s centres, mostly in bilingual settings. They can be contacted at classen@situationsansatz.de.

Abstract

With a systemic view of the ECEC system (Urban & Macha, 2022) the Institute for the Situational Approach (ISTA) develops its projects as a combination of practice development and research. The project ‘KoSy - competent systems with the Situational Approach’, funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, is an example for how this process of knowledge development works: In a participatory research setting, our team, together with educators and through them with children, explored where children have points of contact with the children’s centre’s provider in their everyday lives and how children perceive providers. The results show that children do develop an idea of the system in which their children’s centre is integrated. Once they have the necessary information, they are eager to contribute and take part in decision making. Adults in the system can profit from children’s perspectives if they can welcome their ideas and create spaces of dialogue. This questions the view of children as incapable of understanding and contributing to the system. We seek to be open for new ways to see the agency of children and to underline how important it is to value and use the views of children to improve the ECEC system.

Keywords: children’s perspectives, ECEC system, systemic view, early childhood studies

Introduction

Within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)-system certain perspectives have more impact than others, are more welcome to introduce change, do lead the discussions on pedagogy and quality. Some perspectives, mostly from marginalized groups, are silenced, ignored or not considered. We see it as a necessity as researchers to reflect critically on these processes and to take responsibility to conduct multi-perspective dialogue with all actors in the system to support their influence in the system.

In this article, as one example of our work at the Institute for the Situational Approach (ISTA) at the International Academy Berlin gGmbH, we present a project where children's perspectives had an impact and potential to change their children's centres and influence the providing organizations. To date, children have only played a minor role in the dialogue between practice and theory in the organizational development of children's centres or in the field of ECEC in Germany. While the inclusion of children's perspectives on the quality in children's centres is now accepted (Einarsdottir, 2014; Gaches & Gallagher, 2019; Lundy, 2007; Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2021), it is an undiscussed question whether and how children can be involved when it comes to decisions and processes at the level of the providing organizations. What ideas do children have of the 'provider level'? Do they know who works there, what people do, and who is responsible for decisions? These are the research questions for the research presented in this article.

This approach challenges foundations in pedagogy as an anecdote from initial research shows. In a conversation with a stakeholder in ECEC in Germany in 2015, we discussed the various elements and actors in a competent system. When asked what role children play in this, they answered that children can only contribute to their context in the centre and do not yet understand the system because 'they are children'. In our research presented in this article and our work at ISTA, we constantly question this view of children as incapable of understanding and contributing to areas in which they are not (yet) typically involved. We seek to be open for new ways to see the agency of children and their participation in the system. This approach is profoundly influenced by the concept of childism (Biswas et al., 2023; Burman, 2023; The Childism Institute, 2021). Childism focuses on experiences and views of children. It helps to see and understand the world from their perspectives. Childism criticises assumptions about children's capabilities, resources, and resulting disadvantages for children in mainstream foundational research. This is accompanied by fundamental criticism of generational and social power structures (Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Tesar, 2016). Also, the systemic view of the ECEC system (Urban et al., 2012; Urban & Macha, 2022) contributes to this critical approach and underlines how important it is to value and use the views of children to improve and work within the system of ECEC.

In this article, we present the results of the project 'KoSy – Kompetente Systeme mit dem Situationsansatz' (Competent Systems with the Situational Approach) conducted by ISTA. The project was funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation. In its exploratory phase from December 2022 to September 2023, it consisted of three complementary strands: scientific research on the topic of competent systems and organisational development, the conception of systemic organisational development of providers, and the exploration of children's perspectives on providing organizations. In the latter strand, we engaged in a participatory research process with educators and through them with children, trying to understand where children have points of contact with the providing organization of their children's centre in their everyday lives and how children perceive providers. The results show that children do develop an idea of the system in which their children's centre is integrated. They also show how deeply children can and want to engage in the change of the system once they have the necessary information and spaces to explore and express their ideas. Within our project team, we also developed five key factors for functioning and developing competent systems, strongly influenced by the experience and results from the children's perspectives.

The article starts with two sections on background information about the German ECEC system and the understanding of theory and practice within the Situational Approach and the discourse on children's perspectives on quality on which the research is based. We then present our research methods and findings of children's perspectives on providing organizations. Finally, we end with the discussion and main conclusions from the project towards the dialogue between theory and practice.

The German ECEC system

In Germany, every child (from their first birthday) has the right to attend a children's centre¹, while in the case their parents are working, children from 8 weeks on can attend a children's centre. ECEC is seen as public responsibility and generally binding objectives are set out in the Child and Youth Welfare Act (*SGB VIII*, 1990):

1. promote the child's development into an independent and socially competent personality,
2. support and supplement the upbringing and education in the family,
3. help parents to better reconcile working and raising children
4. (§ 22 Para. 2 SGB VIII).

The public providers (youth welfare offices or state youth welfare offices) have the overall planning and controlling responsibility for the services at communal level, with the aim of providing comprehensive and needs-based services in a timely manner. They are required to delegate the provision of welfare services including ECEC to independent providing organizations (e.g. associations, organisations, societies, or companies). Church, welfare, and youth organisations make up the vast majority of independent or private non-profit providers. Parents' initiatives or parents' associations are also active as independent organisations. Only a small number (3%) of providers are private for-profit organizations (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). If independent providers cannot provide enough of the necessary places in childcare, youth welfare offices must provide children's centres themselves.

While in parent-led smaller children's centres parents and staff often make decisions consensually, there is a strong hierarchy in many providing organizations. The managing directors are responsible for quality, the staff, and building according to laws and regulations and in contact with the local youth welfare offices. Often, at the next level of the organization there are regional leaders responsible for the children's centres and counsellors working on conceptual development, recruiting, and personnel development.

On the local level in each children's centre, there is mostly one person in a management position. Sometimes in larger children's centres a team of two or more people. They are responsible for the quality and development, staff and HR and often facility management in their children's centre. The educators work in smaller teams and often come together with the whole team at a monthly team meeting and for inhouse trainings. Children's centres vary in size from small (10-25 children and approximately 2-5 educators), medium (40-90, children with approximately 10-20 educators), to larger children's centres (100-200 children with approximately 35-45 educators) (Bock-Famulla et al., 2023). The ratio of educators to children depends on the age and disability status of the children and the country regulations and is regulated by the State. Germany has a long tradition of constructing a strong difference between school pedagogy and ECEC. Therefore, the term *Lehrer*innen* (teacher) is not used in ECEC settings and in this article, we use educator or practitioner to address the people who are professionally working with the children in the children's centre.

Outside the providing organizations and youth welfare offices, there are more actors within the system such as academia, vocational training schools, unions or other educators' organizations, parents' organizations, foundations, and quite a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Institute for the Situational Approach (ISTA) who conduct practice research projects, trainings, or consulting. Each German State sets a conceptual ground with a pedagogical curriculum, laws, regulations, and the funding of certain projects or initiatives which fit in their agenda.

The larger providing organizations, parents and some educators' organizations can influence the conceptual progress in a State.

Within the German academic work, there is little research on providers and the system of ECEC (Bergs-Winkels et al., 2023; Bock-Famulla et al., 2023; Fthenakis et al., 2003; Schelle & Blatter, 2023). But there is a growing interest in that topic and the idea of the competent system (Schneider et al., 2015; Urban & Macha, 2022; Wiff, 2023). The idea of a competent system has its origins in the 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (CORE) project (Urban et al. 2011, 2012). In a competent system, competence is understood as something that is made up of the three dimensions knowledge, values and practices and is related to all actors and their relationships in the child day care system. The actors are both human and non-human and the relationships between them can be found at individual, institutional, inter-institutional and governance levels. A change at one level of the system always means also considering the changes (and conditions) at all other levels and the relationships between the actors. All actors and their interactions are responsible and form the competent system.

Dialogue between theory and practice within the Situational Approach

Based on a systemic view of the ECEC system (Urban & Macha, 2022) the Institute for the Situational Approach (ISTA) at the International Academy Berlin develops its projects as a combination of practice development and research. We see ISTA as an actor contributing to the system through a qualitative, critical, and resource-orientated perspective. ISTA takes on the role of a catalyst, picking up on the impulses from the field, especially from marginalized groups such as children, analysing them, and feeding them back into the system in a reinforcing way.

Since the first publications on the Situational Approach (Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung, 1974) the starting point of the educational work is a dialogue-based development of children's centre-specific curricula which are developed jointly by practitioners, researchers, and parents. In the Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung and all other projects, including in the later Institute for the Situational Approach, there is a mixture of academically trained employees and such with a practical background. One principle of the Situational Approach is the dialogue between theory and practice and learning from and with each other as academics and practitioners through, ideally, joint thinking and research processes in participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The guiding principle here is the idea of multi-perspectivity (Preissing & Heller, 2009) and the focus on negotiation processes and dialogues (Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Moss, 2016). The systemic view of the system of children's centres and ECEC (Urban & Macha, 2022) plays a central role. It is important to see the entire organisation within the system to understand the actual conditions, communication channels, and the use of existing resources (Urban et al., 2011; Urban & Macha, 2022).

Pedagogy is not static but created in a process of negotiation between the various stakeholder groups, in which different perspectives contribute to a better understanding of the situation. Approaches are weighed and decisions are ultimately made with the greatest possible consensus (Moss, 2016). In order to further improve this negotiation process for the development of educational quality, there are also calls for the interests and perspectives of children to be more closely involved (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2021; Nentwig-Gesemann & Thole, 2023). This requires not only adults who listen to them, but also the space and opportunity to express themselves (Lundy, 2007; Macha, 2023).

Children's perspectives on quality in ECEC centres

In recent years, an intensive discourse has emerged in research on how children and their perspectives can be more actively involved in quality development in children's centre in Germany. The projects *QuaKi - Childcare centre quality from a child's perspective* (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2017) and *Children as actors in quality development* (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2021) developed quality dimensions and

aspects of childcare centres from a children's perspective. Since 2016, ISTA has also included children's perspectives in all of its projects (Macha, 2023; Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Macha & Hildebrandt, 2023). Exploring children's perspectives has been part of everyday pedagogical practice in children's centres that work according to the Situational Approach since the 1970s (Arbeitsgruppe Vorschulerziehung, 1975).

This work shows that children are able to express themselves in a differentiated way, have views and opinions on the things that concern them and the world that surrounds them and want to influence these. The Situational Approach challenges the positioning of the child as objects of a discourse led by adults who advise on what is 'good' for the child without seeking or considering their perspectives. In contrast to this approach, in mainstream research and practice children have rarely been recognised as actors. The study *Children as Stakeholders in children's centres* also comes to this conclusion in its preliminary considerations: Children have mainly been perceived passively in the discourse on quality development to date, although it is assumed that they have their own ideas on how educational practice should be organised (Witton et al., 2020). External evaluations and research at ISTA using the QuaSi method of exploring children's perspectives on quality clearly confirm this. Children are capable and willing to contribute to the discussions on quality once they are asked. The problem is nevertheless that adults do not recognize their feedback as productive and worth working with enough (Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Macha et al., 2024). In addition to the children's ability to assess pedagogical meetings and life in the children's centre, it is also important to implement their right to express their opinions and have a say in all matters that affect them.

Laura Lundy's (2007) model for the further differentiation of Art. 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) describes four relevant dimensions that must be considered when it comes to the right of children to express their opinions in all matters affecting them and to be given due consideration:

1. Space: Children must be given the space and opportunity to express their views.
2. Voice: Children must not only be allowed to express their opinions, but also be accompanied/encouraged to express their views.
3. Audience: Children need adults who listen to what they say and take an interest in them.
4. Influence: The views expressed by children are followed by appropriate (re)action by responsible adults so that it is clear to children that their comments have an impact (Lundy, 2007).

Children therefore have the right and are able to develop their opinions and contribute them to the discourse on quality. The role of adults is to support them in this and to create dialogues with the children in which they can contribute their opinions.

While the inclusion of children's perspectives on the work in children's centres that directly affect them is now becoming more popular (Einarsdottir, 2014; Macha, Urban, et al., 2023; Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2021) it is unknown whether and how children can be involved when it comes to decisions and processes at the level of the childcare centre provider. What ideas do children have of the 'provider level'? Do they know who works there, what people do and who makes decisions?

Methodological approach

In the KoSy project, we launched a research workshop to explore these questions. Four virtual meetings were held between April and July 2023 with nine participating educators and leaders from seven children's centres in four States working with children from 1 to 6 years old, in one case with children from 6 to 12 years. The meetings were organised around the idea of a joint research group consisting of the project team and the participating educators. All participants could contribute their ideas, topics and interests, enabling a cooperative, participatory process that facilitated participation in the ECEC system beyond the project itself (Thomas, 2021; von Unger, 2014). The exploration was also inspired by the format of the *Research Forum* (Thomas et al., 2019) a participatory research methodology derived from citizen science, and the idea of Sustained Shared Thinking (Hebenstreit-Müller et al.,

2022; Siraj-Blatchford, 2012). The methodology is characterised by freedom from hierarchy, participation, and openness (Thomas et al., 2019). The aim was a joint approach to the research topic, the reflection of observations and changes throughout the project between the participants, and the support of the educators in the exploration by the researchers. The participating practitioners took on the role of researchers in the centres and approached the common themes of children and providers in a variety of ways. Initially, a three-week observation phase took place, during which the educators paid more attention to and observed where and when children came into contact with the topics of the organisation in everyday life. These observations were reflected together in the group of participating practitioners and us researchers during the second meeting and the next steps were then planned using the planning steps of the Situational Approach

1. explore: analyse a situation
 2. decide: set goals
 3. act: shape situations
 4. reflect: evaluate experiences
- (Kobelt Neuhaus et al., 2018, 45f.).

The project team supported the participating educators with material and information on the project in child-friendly language, such as a video message to the children. In the following phase, the educators collected initial material that depicted the topics and points of contact between children and providing organizations and documented initial changes in the children's centres. These results were reviewed and reflected on at the next meeting.

The collected data consists of the recordings of the group discussions as well as an interview, approximately one hour of additional audio material from children, 25 minutes of video recordings and several minutes, logs, reports, and photographs. All audio recordings were transcribed, anonymised, and analysed. Video recordings, photographs, reports, minutes, notices, and other data collected by the centres were not fully included in the analysis for this article due to time constraints. The open approach to the research and the involvement of the educators made it possible to collect diverse and dense material.

Guided by Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) the transcripts were initially open-coded and then further summarised in several loops by the project team; additional material was collected and analysed at the same time. With regard to the ethics in exploring children's perspectives, attention was paid to compliance with current standards during the research (BERA, 2018; Gaches, 2021). In addition, declarations of consent for participation in the project were submitted not only to the custodial adults, but also to the participating children.

Results

The meetings with the educators as well as in the individual explorations in the children's centres were based on the planning steps of the Situational Approach (Kobelt Neuhaus et al., 2018). Firstly, the practitioners were made aware of to the topic and then asked to explore the current situation, i.e. the children's knowledge of the provider of their children's centre and the wider system. The first meeting already showed that the educators were changing their view of the situation in the children's centre. A person said at the end of the session:

‘Ich muss sagen, (...) ich hab darüber gar nicht so viel nachgedacht und reflektiert (...) ich habe aufgehört (...) [mit dem Träger] in diesen Austausch zu gehen (...). Ich glaube, ich war mit meinem Rücken zum Träger (...), dieser Austausch (...) hat so viel in mir ausgelöst (...) Das war mir als ich mich hier angemeldet hab, gar nicht so bewusst.’

‘I have to say, (...) I didn't think and reflect on it that much (...) I stopped (...) going into dialogue [with the provider] (...). I think I turned my back on the provider (...), this dialogue (...) triggered so much in me (...) I didn't realise that when I registered here.’ (transcript of meeting 1, paragraph 94).

The practitioners' explorations with the children in their practice were subsequently reflected on and analysed in the second meeting. Findings here related to the moments in which contact between children and people from the providing organizations occurred or shared topics became visible which happened in some centres. The lack of points of contact or common themes in other centres also became clear. From the on-site explorations, the educators developed the next steps for action in the children's centres: ideas on how they could make the topic of providers and the wider system accessible to the children. For example, visits to the administration of the provider were planned so that the children could get to know the people working there. The children planned the trip to the central office, met the managing director, and enjoyed the provided food. Before the visit, the educator and the children had worked on interview questions but according to the educator the children did not engage in that interview, and were not pressured to do so. In another children's centre educators and children established a 'research group' in which the children worked on which actors/actor groups are present and important in the institution and in the wider system. During the third and fourth meetings, the participating practitioners and researchers reflected again on the findings on the accessibility of the wider system and the interests of the children, discussed changes, and planned the next steps jointly. Processes initiated by the children, such as the election of group representatives, also were shared.

The educators identified needs and goals that emerged from their observations in the children's centres and the discussions within the research group. In the case of groups of children who previously knew little about the system to which the centre belongs, the practitioners provided information about the provider and/or talked with the children about their ideas, using organisational charts available in the children's centre. When the children had specific questions, i.e. who is responsible for mowing the lawn, they went in search of the answer together and thus gave the children an insight into the system. The educators reflected in the research group how their participation in the project already changed their approach in that situation. Before, they said they would have taken the child's comment on the grass that has to be mowed to the manager of the children's centre. Now, they understood that this question shows deeper interest from the child and they use it as a research question they work on together. In this the educator learned a lot about how the child saw and understood the organization of the children's centre and further facility management.

In the case of incidents at the centre, such as a broken tap, the educators enabled the children to participate in finding a solution and prioritised a discussion with the children instead of taking over the responsibility and just fixing the problem. In this example, a child accompanied by the children's centre's management called the plumber to make an appointment. The plumber then invited a group of children to join them while they fixed the tap and explained what they did. In that situation, the child had a chance to take responsibility for the centre.

The educators supported efforts by the children to ask questions and receive answers, as well as to take their concerns to other levels, such as presenting their wish for changes to the lunch menu to management. In one of the participating centres, a children's council was elected so that the children could vote on their concerns in the future and have representatives bring them forward, for example to higher management. Furthermore, the educators observed and documented the processes together with the children, which showed the need of a shared language with shared symbols, clarifying terms and entering into dialogue with each other.

All participants in the research group had the opportunity to contribute ideas and, in some cases, supported each other. In addition to the significant role of adults and the fact that many of the children's themes and interests are already related to the organisation even without intervention, the results of the exploration also show the relevance of passing on information to the children. After all, the adults know more about the system and can orientate themselves within it easier than the children and thus can provide the children with the necessary information about it or access to it. An important prerequisite for this seems to be a shared language between the groups

of actors, so that understanding the conditions of the system is possible at all. The following example shows the changes that accompanied the implementation of the project in one place in more detail.

Bist du mutig? - Are you brave? – A case study from a children’s centre

In one of the participating children’s centres, an after-school centre with children aged 6 to 12, a position in the housekeeping department was vacant during the project. The leader of the children’s centre reported:

‘Und das haben die Kinder mitbekommen und haben dann gesagt: „Ja, und wo können wir mal entscheiden, wer hier her kommt?“ (...) Und dann haben sie sich beratschlagt (...) haben dann erst mal Gruppensprecher gewählt (...) [daraus] wurde dann, dass ein Kinderrat gewählt wurde (...) Der ganze Hort hat sozusagen einen Kinderrat gewählt, [es] gibt drei (...) Vorsitzende. (...) das (...) war so ein Selbstläufer‘ (Transkript Veranstaltung 3, Absatz 96).

‘And the children heard about this and then said: “Yes, and where can we decide who comes here?” (...) And then they consulted with each other (...). First of all, they elected group representatives (...). [From this] a children's council was then elected. (...) The whole after-school care centre elected a children's council, [there] are three (...) chairpersons. That happened on its own’ (transcript of meeting 3, paragraph 96).

The first task of the group spokespersons and the children's council was to agree on questions that management should include in the job interviews. Some of the children's questions, as can be seen from photographs provided by the centre, relate to the necessary skills of the new housekeeper, such as:

‘kannst du gut/lecker kochen?’ ‘Can you cook well/deliciously?’, others relate to interactions with each other, such as: ‘Bist du nett?’ ‘Are you nice?’ or ‘Nehmen Sie Kritik gut an?’ ‘Do you take criticism well?’ and still others ask: ‘bist du mutig?’ ‘Are you brave?’ or ‘magst du Demokratie?’ ‘Do you like democracy?’.

The manager reports:

‘Dann habe ich gesagt: „warum mutig?“ - Ja, ob sie genug Mut hat, um hier neu anzufangen. (...) Also, sie haben das wirklich sehr ernst genommen‘

‘Then I said: “Why brave?” - Yes, does she have enough courage to start fresh here. (...) So, they really took it very seriously’ (transcript of meeting 3, paragraph 96),

and:

‘Der Junge (...) der geschrieben hat: „magst du Demokratie?“ für den war das ganz arg wichtig, weil er aus einem Land kommt, wo es keine Demokratie gibt (...) „wenn einer das nicht mag, hat der bei uns im Hort nichts zu suchen“‘.

‘The boy (...) who wrote: “Do you like democracy?” it was very important to him because he comes from a country where there is no democracy (...) “if someone doesn't like it, they have no place in our after-school care centre”’ (transcript of meeting 4, paragraph 47).

This shows that the children not only have wishes and criteria for decisions on organisation level, but are also interested in getting involved, participating and (co)deciding.

The wider system also reacted to the establishment of the children's council and the new representatives - for example, the vice-principal invited the chairperson of the children's council to participate in the general teachers' conference: 'Vielleicht habt ihr ja auch was, was ihr einbringen wollt?', 'Maybe you have something you want to contribute' (transcript of meeting 3, paragraph 96), management quotes from the conversation. Further meetings with important stakeholders in the system are also planned and networking with other after-school centres in the area is being considered. This shows that the participatory approach of the project was not only realised in the research group between the adults but was also transferred to the level of adults and children: participation in the process also enables participation in the system.

Discussion

Which voices are considered, demanded, or forgotten in the discourse on the ECEC system? Diverse groups of actors operate in the system, each working on a specific task, focusing on a section of the system and thus contributing to its functioning (Urban et al. 2011; Urban & Macha 2022). Each of these groups such as representatives of the providers, counsellors, administrators, HR-department, facility managers, researchers managing directors in the centres, staff, parents, etc, including children have the right and competence to take an active part within the system and to contribute to its development. Their views of the system, its goals and practices differ depending on the education, attitude, or training of the individual and what their role in the system requires. Quality cannot be seen as something static, but as something shaped in a negotiation process between the actors, including children in which the different perspectives contribute to a better understanding of the situation, reactions and procedures are weighed against each other and decisions are made with the greatest possible agreement (Moss 2016).

To date, this multi-perspective approach has rarely been transferred to the context of children's centre providers. From a systemic perspective, the same principles apply here and lead to the joint development and realisation of goals. An important finding from the research is the need to focus more on the initiation and organising of appropriate participation processes, so that the various perspectives, including the children's perspectives can be obtained and considered. When the different points of view come together, a new picture can emerge, and new, more suitable solutions can be developed. Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide (2013) describe that children must be allowed to become active players in everyday life and in dialogue with educators and to participate in democratic learning processes based on a trusting relationship with them (Sommer et al., 2013). Macha, Ries-Schemainda and Schmidt (2023) also encourage children to critically question power relations, to start dialogue with educators on power relations and shape them together (Macha, Ries-Schemainda, et al., 2023). Nentwig-Gesemann and colleagues (2017; 2021) developed quality dimensions and aspects of child day care centres from a children's perspective. Nevertheless, these discourses take place centering the individual children's centre and do not take the provider, organisation, or system into account. Prengel points out that 'child participation takes place under the paternalistic responsibility of adults' (Prengel 2016, 34). The question of what power results from the right to express one's own opinion is therefore dependent on the adults who grant children opportunities for self-determination and co-determination - or not. Lundy (2007) comes to a similar conclusion - children only have the opportunity to express their concerns and opinions and thus experience themselves as self-efficacious if adults feel obliged to listen to them.

Many of the participating children in the research initially had no ideas about the term 'provider' but were familiar with the concept of people who take on certain roles within the institution. The children were aware of the special position of the management, but they did not know their responsibilities, duties, or areas of work. During the exploration, the educators identified needs and goals, provided information, discussed their ideas with the children, went in search of answers together, provided insights and supported the children's efforts to take their concerns to other levels. It was always about entering into dialogue with each other.

How the adults organise their role was a key in our exploration to ensure that the children gain access to the system and the providing organization. The educators repeatedly talked about the interest of the representatives of the organisation in the children's perspectives. Direct contact and dialogue between children and management requires a sensitive approach as well as resources for building relationships. The children were interested in taking an active role in the system, participating in decisions, and contributing their expertise. However, they are not in a position to demand this role themselves: Adults have a responsibility to make the system accessible to them. A critical analysis and reflection of power structures within the system (MacNaughton, 2005) and a childist approach (Abebe & Biswas, 2021; Burman, 2023) can be powerful catalysts to open up this possibility. An important step to gaining access to the system for children is a common language so that issues can be discussed and negotiated.

The placement of the topic has already led to various changes in the participating providers and children's centres, not only in the processes, but also in terms of sensitising the practitioners who make the topic accessible to the children in the first place. Further research is needed here.

During the KoSy project we developed five key factors for competent systems: It became clear that it is necessary to continue to consistently think systemically about organisational development, as all stakeholder groups involved, including children, can provide important impetus for this and, in addition, needs can be uncovered, and questions can arise in the joint process. It is necessary to include the perspectives of all stakeholders, including children that participate in the system and to pay greater attention to ensuring that actors who have previously received little recognition are also considered. Here it becomes clear how important it is to sensitise powerful actors/actor groups within the system, as they (can) open, regulate, and restrict access for others. An 'actor of actor ship' can provide support here (Claßen et al., 2024; Eichberg, 2021) taking responsibility for developing the processes and ensuring that all relevant perspectives, including children's perspectives are obtained and taken into consideration. Finally, the innovative power of children's perspectives for organisational development processes with childcare providers is evident in the context of the explorations in the facilities.

Conclusions for cooperation between practice and theory

The research and results of the KoSy project have led to conclusions for cooperation between science and practice:

A shared language and the ability to engage in dialogue with one another and make oneself understood is essential to enable joint work on decisions and processes. This is especially necessary to consider when children are involved in negotiations or dialogue. The shared topics between the actors do not have to be created - they are abundant and arise from everyday interaction in which all groups and decisions influence each other. What is needed is awareness of these shared issues and the moments in which they become evident, as well as to the question of who is involved or affected in which situations and whose voice has not (yet) been heard. More powerful actors in the system or a moderator like the 'actor of actor ship' are responsible to explore and invite marginalized actors, such as children or (sometimes) families or staff, and be open to their ways of expressing their views. Constant work in this direction can (hopefully) lead to a higher awareness of power dynamics and their reduction (Biswas et al., 2023; MacNaughton, 2005).

Only together and in dialogue, all actors, including children can create suitable knowledge and impulses for the further development of practice and theory based on the respective circumstances and available resources. The implicit knowledge available in the field is made explicit through the shared language between the groups of actors and can thus be discussed and negotiated. All actors and perspectives, including the children's must be heard, as they all contribute to development and can generate new knowledge and practice through dialogue ('meaning making', Moss, 2016).

Children are important actors in the field who are able and willing to express their perspectives and are also able to understand and negotiate issues at the level of the organisation - if the adults ensure that the necessary information is available to them and that they can gain access to the other levels of the system. Researchers are also responsible adults who move in the field and whose behaviour can ensure that children's perspectives are given space and being listened to (Lundy, 2007) - or they can further marginalise children if they do not consciously take seriously their responsibilities to children's perspectives.

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¹ In this article we choose the term children’s centre to describe the institutionalised places of childcare. The overall term used in Germany for publicly funded settings is Kindertageseinrichtung (Kita). There also exists a differentiation due to the age of the attending children into Krippe (birth to three years old), Kindergarten (three to six or seven years old/ primary school) and Hort (seven to 11 years old, after primary school). This differentiation is not strict. Very often, a children’s centre caters for all these age groups, and many use the term Kindergarten for the whole centre.