



The child – Object or subject of child care?

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ABSTRACT

The term “subject” and its theoretical implications are essential to German tradition of social pedagogy and social work. If we look back in history, there is a sharp contrast to the practices of social work, especially in the field of child and youth welfare. This applies to Switzerland, Germany and internationally. In Swiss history, objectification is most clearly expressed in the German term “Verdingkinder”, which terminologically indicates the active process of objectification (Ding = object). Informed by historical research, questions can be addressed to current practice of child and youth welfare. Against the background of current research results, it seems too easy to dispose of the critical questions in the past. The article looks in the historical rear-view mirror to assess the Swiss “state as a parent” and to develop conclusions for contemporary questions of child and youth Welfare. The analytical framework will focus on the categories of objectification and subjectification, informed by Martha Nussbaums theories and theories of the German-speaking social pedagogy by Michael Winkler.

1. Introduction

Current discourses on children’s rights, including participation, reflect the changed cultural approach to children in many societies around the globe. In these discourses, children appear as bearers of rights and as subjects, equal to adults. However, the processes of change, which seem positive at first glance, conceal fundamental subject-theoretical questions of growing up from a socio-pedagogical perspective. In distinction from political or legal questions of the implementation of children’s rights, this paper understands the orientation towards the subject as a fundamental *prerequisite* of educational processes (Gabriel & Tausendfreund, 2019). More radically formulated, subject orientation is the necessary precondition of any child care intervention that works.

The paper takes a historical perspective based on knowledge of the history of children in care settings and on empirical material from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) study “Life trajectories after residential care placements in the canton of Zurich 1950–1990” (2014–2018). This historical retrospective reveals patterns of reification that raise central questions about the practice of child and youth care today. These patterns are critically contrasted with results of a recent study on “Placement Break down in Foster Care” (founded by the Jacobs Foundation, 2015–2018) which included the children’s perspectives on breakdown. In addition, the paper discusses theoretical approaches that represent subject-theoretical premises of German-speaking social

pedagogy (Winkler, 2021) as well as writings on subject and recognition theory (Honneth, 1992; Ricœur, 2006), and questions of integrity (Pollmann, 2018) and links them to the empirical data. Against this backdrop, the paper is a first approach to pursuing questions of subjectification and objectification in the context of children and youth growing up in care settings.

2. History of child care in Switzerland – A frame to current practice

The history of children in care and care interventions worldwide provides numerous examples of children who were exploited for economic, political, colonialist, or religious reasons. The so-called “Home Children” (Harrison, 1979), for instance, was a relocation scheme where more than 100,000 children were sent by governmental foundations for the poor and charities from the United Kingdom to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa as cheap migrant workers. This often happened without their parents’ consent. Although the programme was largely discontinued in the 1930s, it was not entirely terminated until the 1970s (Harrison, 1979).

De Mause (1974) stated on the history of childhood in general that it “is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awake. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and abused” (de Mause 1974, opening paragraph). Considering various

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studies from diverse countries, this is true for the history of children in care and the history of care settings for children as well. For more than three decades, there has been a public debate in various countries about the fate of children, in residential and foster care in the last centuries. These debates were often triggered by cases of abuse that came to light.

In Switzerland, similar debates began as early as the 1980s, initially in connection with the charitable foundation Pro Juventute¹. In Switzerland, over the past century, tens of thousands of children and young people have been placed in foster care and residential care. Swiss research situates placements in child care in the context of poor relief and guardianship systems. Well into the 20th century, the responsible authorities regarded the dissolution of families and the placement of children in residential or foster care as an effective remedy against poverty. It was also a means of establishing social conformity. From this perspective, placing children in out of home care was part of a social welfare policy that more highly valued discipline or costs than participatory rights and equal opportunity (Hauss, Gabriel & Lengwiler 2018). The high degree of pressure to adapt and conform that both public and private welfare institutions exerted on socially marginal groups and on individuals living in precarious circumstances has been extensively documented in diverse studies that touch systems for children in care, e. g. guardianship, child protection, and welfare practices (Galle & Meier, 2009; Hauss and Ziegler, 2010), administrative containment (Rietmann, 2012), compulsory education (Furger, 2008), eugenics and the medicalization of social deviance (Dubach, 2013; Wecker & Braunschweig, 2012, cf. Hauss et al., 2018).

Much attention in Swiss research on the history of children in care was placed on involved actors of the state and church. Thus, the experience of children in the regular residential care placement process came somewhat out of academic focus in Switzerland even though many of them suffered from lifelong vulnerability due to their experiences. Little attention was paid to their personal integrity and development. Research also shows that they were often subject to social isolation, forced labour, or even sexual or physical abuse: Current research shows that rights, safety, and well-being of children in care were unimportant or only of marginal importance once the placement decisions had been taken (Hauss et al., 2018, Lengwiler et al., 2013). Due to their experiences, many of those children suffered from lifelong vulnerability (Gabriel, Keller & Bombach, 2021). Between 1950 and 1990, many child protection measures ended up in penal institutions, and sometimes in the adult penal system – a common administrative practice in Switzerland (UEK, 2019). Research has shown that the children's needs and perspectives did not play a crucial role in placement decisions (Businger & Ramsauer, 2019). More emphasis was placed on maintaining social order and conformity and the established power balance, entirely following the logic of those within the system who had the power, authority, and the right to act on behalf of the state (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019).

Beside these findings on residential institutions, one particular striking key example for the history of children in care in Switzerland is the so-called "Verdingkinderwesen". The German term "Verdingkinder" terminologically indicates the active process of objectification of the child (German: Ding = English: Object). Due to widespread poverty in large parts of the population in Switzerland children of poor families were placed mainly in rural areas. "Verdingung" refers to the placement of children as cheap labour force (contract children) – especially in agriculture. Until 1910, many of these children were even auctioned off at fairs to those who demanded the lowest boarding fees. Many of these children died of mistreatment or even starvation and thirst. Others survived but suffered throughout their lives from violence, contempt, and lack of affection they had experienced (Zatti, 2005, Leuenberger &

Seglias, 2008). The contract children scheme was common practice in Switzerland up to the mechanisation of agriculture at the end of the 1960s, and in some cases even later. Since the 1950s, these child labourers, were mostly called "foster children". The Swiss government officially apologized to those affected in 2013.

The contradictory relationship between economic and social disciplinary measures on the one hand and the child welfare-related mandate of child care on the other hand can clearly be derived from history. A look at historical research also shows that the orientation toward the child and its needs is recent in Switzerland (Lengwiler et al., 2013). In recent years, the discussions have revolved primarily around foster children and institutionalised children, as well as other victims of coercive measures (UEK, 2019).

Looking at today's child care, we have known since 2008 that the degree of children's participation in placement decisions is low in Switzerland: 53.3% of six to 12-year-olds and 23.6% of 13 to 18-year-olds in out-of-home placements say they have not been informed about the reasons for the placement (Arnold et al., 2008, p. 106). From an international perspective, this finding is no exception. Similar results can also be found in other countries (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez & Pastor, 2017, Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Cossar, Brandon & Jordan, 2016; ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). Overall, it can be concluded that the existence of children's rights alone does not ensure that they will be implemented in the placement process or in the day-to-day life of residential care institutions. Furthermore, current studies conducted in various national contexts raise doubt about the safety and protection of children in care today. The Commission Samson (2012, p. 147) on "Sexual Abuse of minors in institutions under the authority of the government" stated that in Dutch residential childcare homes, the probability of being abused is more 2.5 times higher than for other children of the same age. Fifty percent of the perpetrators of violence are peers and only two percent of the cases are known to the professionals (Commissie Samson, 2012, p. 146). The lack of knowledge concerning the remaining 98 percent of cases not perceived raises the question beyond the Netherlands of what growing up in an out-of-home placement means for young people and how safe it is in any country. This question is particularly important to answer in child protection cases where children are placed from a non-safe environment to a residential care facility. Several more studies show internationally a significantly higher risk of abuse in residential childcare homes, e.g., for Germany (Rau et al., 2019), Norway (Greger et al. 2015) or the USA (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Currently, there are general data on incidents, agency responses, and political implications of child protection (UBS Optimus Foundation, 2012), but no representative findings are available that focus on the risk of abuse in today's childcare Institutions in Switzerland. If children are removed from their family for reasons of child protection, the central question seems to be whether their integrity is protected in the new place or not.

3. Methods and studies the paper is based on

The paper refers to two research projects conducted at the Institute of Childhood, Youth and Family of the Zürich University of applied Science (ZHAW). Ethical approvals were reviewed according to Swiss cantonal and national standards for both studies:

- (1) the research project entitled "life trajectories after residential care placements in the canton of Zurich 1950–1990". The study was part of the research network: "Placing Children in Care 1940–1990", funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation – Sinergia Program (funding no. 14769).

Besides an archive study ($n = 606$ files) the project comprised biographical interviews ($n = 39$ former residents of children's homes in the canton of Zurich). The interviewees experiences residential care between 1950 and 1990. The earliest date of an interviewee leaving care

¹ A Swiss youth welfare foundation established in 1912 under the auspices of the "Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft" (Swiss Society for the Common Good).

was in 1951, and the last left in 1989. This means that at the time of the interviews the interviewees were between 25 and 85 years old. The distribution of interviewees was gender balanced (Businger & Ramsauer, 2019). The reasons for entering the children's home and the age on entry varied. A frequent reason for leaving was to start vocational training at the age of 16 to 18 years. The research aimed to trace, analyse, and interpret the patterns of people's lives, the crises they experience, and their coping mechanisms. It particularly aimed to understand how the life trajectories of adults relate to their experiences in residential care. The research approach took into account that there are complex interactions between resilience and vulnerability (Gabriel, Keller & Bombach, 2021). Following the Werner and Smith (1982) quote: "Not all development is determined by what happens early in life" (p. 2), the project was broadly geared towards positive and negative developments. Children "who (...) swim when all known predictors say they should sink" (Cowen and Work, 1988, p. 593) were of special interest. Another objective of the research was to determine whether and where the formative experience of growing up in residential care between 1940 and 1990 resulted in similar outcomes for different individuals. The reconstruction of individual courses of life was the central goal of the study, which was conducted in the tradition of phenomenological, ethnomethodological, and interactionist science. Through qualitative analysis, based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), central themes and questions were reconstructed from the data on the basis of testimonies and differentiated in a circular manner. The interest in knowledge is not limited to the individual case or to the descriptive retelling of individual life stories, but it focuses on intersubjective experiences, and on recurring contexts of meaning.

(2) the research project entitled "Foster Care Placement Breakdown" (funded by the Jabobs foundation, 2015–2018). An international team of researchers from the ZHAW School of Social Work in Switzerland, the University of Siegen in Germany, and the University of London in England has conducted the study. The aim of the study was to evaluate the reasons why foster care placements in England, Germany, and Switzerland are disrupted. To fulfil these objectives, the project team conducted narrative interviews with foster children and parents who had experienced a breakdown of the foster placement ($n = 60$) and analyzed files relating to foster care placement breakdowns ($n = 200$). The analysis of the individual case structure allowed for an ensemble of factors, which is embedded in concrete life experience and biographical processes, to be analysed hermeneutically (Bombach, Gabriel & Stohler, 2018; Gabriel & Stohler 2020). This procedure is to be supplemented by qualitative biographical methods capable of distinguishing between universal, generation-typical, and biography-typical case structures (cf. Garz, 2000; Hildenbrand, 2005; Loch & Schulze, 2012).

The two studies refer to different points in time. However, they share a common topic and a common approach. Both are qualitative, narrative approaches in survey and analysis, which focus on the perspective of the (former) children and their experiences of care in a biographical perspective over time.

3.1. Selected results from "experiences of residential child care in Switzerland (1940–1990)"

The strong impact of residential care experiences on a person's life manifested itself in turning points and critical life events, as well as in certain life domains even decades after the person had left the care facility. Individuals often report, for example, having great difficulty engaging in social relationships with colleagues, friends, partners, and children:

"[It's] very difficult [...] because you don't really trust anyone [...]. You lack that sense of basic trust that children normally have" (Adrian).

Analyses show that these impacts are closely associated with experiences in the care setting. Memories of institutional care evoke feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a sense of being left on one's own. Jonas, who also spent his childhood in residential care, expresses feeling out of place or superfluous:

"Yes, sure. My God, they might just as well have thrown us away. [...] You were simply superfluous, like a piece of meat. We were kept alive, nothing more." (Jonas)

This quote reveals how these individuals perceived themselves as children; they were only one of many children in residential care, and they saw little evidence that they were valued as an individual. Of course, not all children who were placed in residential care are ultimately psychologically burdened by their care experience. However, care experiences can manifest themselves unexpectedly, having an impact on the care leavers for the rest of their lives. There is a recurring pattern in the interviews that can be described as the experience of objectification. This feeling of being objectified is often linked to a violation of integrity and a lack of agency (Bombach, Gabriel & Stohler, 2018).

The experiences of numerous formerly institutionalised children showed that they were denied vital dimensions of human recognition (in the sense of Honneth, 1992) during their childhood. In addition to physical violence, they qualified experiences of contempt as incisive: This type of experience refers, for example, to family interactions that violate needs and claims for attention, respect, and appreciation. Especially for those who were placed in a residential institution in early childhood, the question of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their own birth plays a lifelong significance. The intergenerational connections of recognition and disregard become clear in the following quotation:

"I relied on my mother, but she ran away to Spain, I can't rely on my father, he said that a friend of his was also involved in group sex and that's when we conceived you as an accident, so that was my father, at 18 he also told me that, that's when I knew I didn't have a father" (Paul)

This case is exemplary for many life courses of former children in care. The knowledge of their origins and the absence of recognition by their biological parents often cause lifelong vulnerabilities.

Many reports of residential care experiences describe 'invasive encroachments' on the integrity of children and young people in care by peers and adults.

"When you're locking up a bird for such a long time and then all of a sudden you say: Fly away, fly away now! And the bird is not flying away and you are wondering why the bird isn't flying away." (Frank).

Feelings of 'shame' and 'guilt' for being placed in a residential children's home are indicators that their integrity was violated, most perspicuously among people who have kept their experiences in the children's home a secret from their children and partners to the present day. One aspect which seems to be crucial in this regard is the social dimension of integrity in the context of reappraising and publicly addressing the history of residential care. A lack of understanding or a failure to recognise experiences in care that harmed their integrity can cause suffering and further undermine the integrity of the people affected (Gabriel, Keller & Bombach, 2021, p. 5).

3.2. Selected results from "children's experiences of today's child care: foster placement breakdown experiences"

The file analysis showed that the professionals saw little reason to document the children's perspective. The children's point of view or even their perspective on the professionals' decisions was only marginally and not systematically included:

- Children's opinions and consent, assessments hardly existed;
- Documents of the children were hardly available;
- History of the child was seldom written down and often incomplete;
- Descriptions and assessments from third parties were copied and adopted

In addition, the children's testimonies revealed a lack of concern for their experiences or feelings. Louis, a 16-year-old boy put the experienced objectification in a nutshell. His placement in a residential care facility started in 2010 with an experience of objectification. Louis' biographical theme of "...being run into the ground" reflects his father's repeated violent abuse. The unpredictability of his father's violence is crucial for Louis, "(...) because I had to be afraid all the time that he would hit me for some little thing". His mother does not react nor protect him; according to her own statements, she already "hated Louis in the womb". The situation of helplessness is aggravated by the fact that Louis' cries of pain can be heard in the whole block of flats without anybody intervening. The Swiss child care and juvenile justice system only react later reinforcing his experience of powerlessness and being at the mercy of others. The experience of reification and being controlled by others is directly linked to the institutionalisation of Louis and his sister.

"yes and then they pulled me out of school and I was delivered to the children's home ... that was a huge shock" (Louis, 16).

It is not the violent father who is removed from the family, but Louis who is placed in a children's home. If we listen to children's testimonies about their experiences with child protection, we find multiple forms and more examples of objectification. One young person compared the legal guardians to birds of prey circling above in times of manifest crises:

"and they have to do extreme things to get their attention" (Sarah, 14).

In many cases, biographical themes of powerlessness and objectification were amplified by experiences in child and youth welfare:

"Well, actually I didn't want to live there, that was already the case before 2014. I mean, many things happened that you don't need to experience. [...] You can't really do much on your own. And I mean, in my case now, or if it's really a crap situation, you're not taken seriously anyway. You're just a foster child anyway. You have nothing to say, even though it's your life and you can't help it that you're a foster child." (Kim, 13 years)

The self-perception of children as having no rights in out-of-home care often leads to feelings of powerlessness instead of agency. Therefore, it is indispensable to acknowledge and include the child's perspective in decisions regarding their lives, primarily to avoid experiences of objectification and reification. Professionals often mention the child's age and maturity as reasons for not doing this systematically, as mentioned in the UN Convention on children's rights. Besides the inadmissibility of this argument, it indicates that there are major deficits, especially in dealing with younger children. This is documented as an example at the start of the foster care placement of a four-year-old girl. When the girl asked where her mother was, she was told that her mother had just gone to the bathroom. In reality, she had already left. This was the beginning of a foster child placement in 2015 which subsequently led to several placement changes (Gabriel & Stohler 2020).

3.3. Linking empirical results to a first outline of a theoretical framework of subjectivity for children in care

With the strengthening of the professional orientation toward the best interests of the child and children's rights, not all questions of the past and present child care are answered. What we can see in the history of children in care might be called objectification (or reification) of children. Objectification is commonly examined at the level of society, but as a type of dehumanisation, it can also refer to institutions or to

individuals. Nussbaum found the common understanding of objectification too simplistic. Objectification or reification more broadly means treating a person as an object without regard to their personality and dignity. Although Nussbaum (1995) specifically addresses the sexual objectification of women, she coincidentally covers the questions raised by the history of child care. According to Nussbaum, a human being is objectified if one or more of the following properties are applied to them in an analytic sense (Nussbaum 1995):

- "Instrumentality" – treating the person as a tool for another's purposes
- "Denial of autonomy" – treating the person as lacking in autonomy or self-determination
- "Inertness" – treating the person as lacking in agency or activity
- "Fungibility" – treating the person as interchangeable with (other) objects
- "Violability" – treating the person as lacking in boundary integrity and violable, "as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
- "Ownership" – treating the person as though they can be owned, bought, or sold
- "Denial of subjectivity" – treating the person as though there is no need for concern for their experiences or feelings (p. 257)

Some of these dimensions can be traced in the above mentioned empirical findings. They affect the personal integrity. Experiencing such contempt can lead to an impairment of self-confidence and trust in the world – as voiced above among others in the quotes by Adrian and Kim – which does not affect physical but psychological and social integrity.

The socio-philosophical concept of "reconnaissance" (Ricoeur, 2006) seems ideal for examining the relations of recognition between generations. Ricoeur (2006) adds to a passive dimension "(démander à) être reconnu": "(to) be recognised, to demand to be recognised" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 39) an active dimension of "reconnaître". This means "to (re) recognise something, objects, persons, oneself another, one another" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 39), as it was the case with Paul, when he was denied the knowledge of having a distinct father. Ricoeur's addition is a dialogical and interactive component of "reconnaissance" as the basis of socially acquired abilities to recognise yourself and others.

These experience of not being "recognised" or "accepted" by parents often plays a central role in the biographies of formerly institutionalised children. Both nationally and internationally, studies indicate that the mortality rate is higher among people who were in residential care (Gabriel, Keller & Bombach, 2021, p.5). Suicide and life-threatening, risky behaviour can be understood as a radical answer to the central, basic question on integrity posed by Pollmann (2018): 'Is my own life worth living?'. If the answer is negative or ambiguous, this can be a sign of fundamental disruptions in their integrity, or even its total loss. 'Fear' and 'depersonalisation' are emotional indicators that a person's integrity may have been disrupted. According to Pollmann's (2018) definition, people have integrity if, in a manner relatively free from internal and external constraints, they are able to live their life (i) in accordance with their own, firm will, (ii) within the limits of the morally tolerable, and (iii) based on an integrated ethical and existential self-understanding and (iv) with a general feeling of wholeness, which at the very least requires them to be mentally and physically unscathed (Pollmann, 2018, pp. 77–126).

The socio-pedagogical concept of the subject is fundamentally anchored in German idealism and German educational philosophy. It sets itself apart from the Anglo-American tradition of thought, which was more concerned with empiricism than with mind and consciousness. The need to include the experiences and perspectives of the children is, from this point of view, a basic requirement for the success of professional social pedagogy in out-of-home placements. Addressing the child as a subject is understood as a fundamental prerequisite of education and social pedagogy and the «restart of education» (Gabriel &

Tausendfreund, 2019; Lüpke, 2004) in an out-of-home placement. The following remarks are embedded in the tradition of German-speaking social pedagogy which considers the subject as a core category of social work and defines «Subjectivation» as its central professional aim (Winkler, 1999 & 2021). From this perspective, the child always “remains to be recognised as a subject”. No matter how small the expressed subjectivity may seem, it is irrelevant whether it is “infringed and damaged, dependent and controlled”. This implies that “a suffering subject is not addressed merely as a victim, but as an acting and responsible individual”. The problematic situation is part of the biographical reality in which the subject is virtually entangled (Winkler 2021, pp. 148–150). Subjectivity is not just a theoretical construct, it must substantiate itself through action (Winkler (2021):

- Subject status cannot be separated from the notion of action and activity; it is inextricably linked to creativity.
- Subjects are autonomous and responsible beings, whereby the concept of dignity “marks the minimum condition that must be fulfilled in social interaction”.
- Subject status presupposes experience and history: history as its own product and not only as past and present; the subject has its own time and can create its own future.
- Subjectivity implies self-reference in three ways: self-reflection, development of one’s own identity, environmental change “for the sake of its own humanisation”. (pp. 141–148)

In summary, this means: “The subject is the (...) mode in which modern humans can endure the contradictions of the world and at the same time take the initiative, find new foundations and change them. In it - first conceptually, but then also as a motive guiding action in real terms - the disposition over the world is conquered” (Winkler, 2021, p. 138). If we regard children’s homes as places that support the development of children as human subjects in the tradition of German social pedagogy, the following central requirements can be formulated (Winkler, 1999):

- They must provide existential security and protection.
- They must have an error friendliness that allows the individual actors to playfully try out and adopt social rules. Socio-pedagogical places must provide space and time to allow for testing, failure, and re-testing.
- They must open perspectives for the future, ... which can build on the existing life story, but also allow for a break with this life story.
- They must provide opportunities for development and learning processes by allowing for a new arrangement so that the subjects can tailor it to their needs.
- They must not be enclosed spaces but must offer the possibility to visit other places as well as to allow for a return.
- They must provide an environment where social and cultural rules and norms of society can be experienced, tested, and shaped.
- (pp. 321–322)

If we want to avoid that children become objects of social, political, or religious interests, it is essential to strengthen the children’s perspective and their status as a “subject” of care.

4. Conclusions: The perspective of the child

The dichotomy between the child as subject or object of education (Oelkers, 2010) is more than a philosophical German concept. The empirical findings of the cited studies show that, historically, one can speak of an objectification of the child and that even today the fulfillment of the subject-theoretical claim in child and youth care remains a desideratum, the implementation of which must be scrutinised. This is especially true when professionals disregard the children’s perspective.

From a socio-pedagogical point of view, the orientation towards the

subject is a fundamental prerequisite for all professional claims or models of child care. The results of the discussed historical and current research lead to the question of whether Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires a more radical interpretation: “1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. 2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law” (UN General Assembly, 1989).

Even when opinions are freely expressed by children, their consideration is wide open to relativization by professionals due to the reference to “maturity”. It does not seem surprising that younger children in particular are deprived of information about important decisions in their lives and co-decision-making (Arnold et al., 2008). Recent studies also show that the degree of participation varies according to age and correlates with the knowledge of one’s rights (Andresen, Willems & Möller, 2019; Tausendfreund et al., 2020). Basically, it must be kept in mind that only the child’s expression – also independent of his or her maturity – does not yet mean that it will be heard or even taken into account by professionals. Taking the situation of the Netherlands (Commissie Samson, 2012) as an example, we can ask: How can it be that 98% percent of all sexual assaults in residential care facilities remain undetected? The finding of a “lack of child-centeredness in child protection” (Alberth, & Bühler-Niederberger, 2015) could potentially be part of an internationally valid answer. Patterns of intervention and professional perspectives must be called into question as to whether they hear and take notice of children’s voices. This goes far beyond legal or political questions of participation.

When the empirical findings on the perspective of children in care are connected with theories of social pedagogy, participation – in the sense of radical subject orientation – can be understood as a basic prerequisite of all educational processes in the fields of social work. From the perspective of social pedagogy, successful growing up and development is fundamentally a dialogical and thus also a mutually cooperative process: without the willingness of adolescents to be educated, all efforts of adults are in vain. However, to let the participation of children and adolescents take effect pedagogically, more is needed than the simple implementation of political procedures. In this socio-pedagogical sense, the radical recognition of the subject status of adolescents is a central demand that goes far beyond the implementation of children’s rights. However, not the claim in itself but its realisation that must be the benchmark for child and youth welfare now and in future. In this respect, participation should not be understood exclusively in legal or political terms. It requires a subject-theoretical basis if it does not want to undermine or overlook/conceal the questions outlined above. However, it takes more than the simple translation of political procedures to make the participation of children and young people pedagogically effective. In this socio-pedagogical sense, the recognition of the adolescent’s subject status is a central claim that goes beyond a reference to children’s rights alone.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Thomas Gabriel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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