

Submission for the 2021 Day of General Discussion “Children’s Rights and Alternative Care”:

**Title: *"How we see this!" The Perspective of Children in Care as a Starting Point for Quality Development of Residential Childcare***

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The purpose of this submission is to contribute findings to the DGD 2021 that focus on the perspective of the affected children and open them up for the professional discussion on high quality residential childcare. The team of authors starts from the following premises: Children have the right to participate in all issues that affect their lives (UN CRC). Constant participation experiences of young people are a fundamental prerequisite for their personal development as well as for the development of willingness to be educated. This is especially true for children growing up in residential childcare. That is why today, in contrast to the past, which was often focused on discipline, the protection, promotion and participation of young people are at the centre of residential care (UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, 2010). However, studies indicate that the implementation of participation in the everyday life of residential child and youth care still faces many challenges (ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). Against this background, the question arises how participation can be realized in residential care. To what extent do the institutional structures of the facilities allow children to participate there? What opportunities do placed children receive to develop the competencies of expressing opinions and co-determination?

**1. The development project**

These are the questions addressed by the project *"How we see this" The perspective of children in care as a starting point for quality development?* of the ZHAW School of Social Work. It examines how young people in residential settings experience and perceive opportunities for participation. For this purpose, children from different institutions were given the opportunity to express their opinions, to discuss them with other young people and, based on this, to participate in the development of working materials for practice. The project is funded by the *Mercator Foundation Switzerland* and carried out in cooperation with the professional association *integras*. In addition to other, research-related goals, the project focused on two goals in particular: firstly, to enable young people from different institutions to exchange information about their participation opportunities and, secondly, to work out topics in which the young people would particularly like to participate. Additionally, it is one of the project's goals to further develop the findings into working materials that can be used to sensitize professionals, but also the young people concerned, to a more focused implementation of participation. Together with children between the ages of 9 and 16 from three institutions in Switzerland, twelve areas of life were identified in which participation is particularly important to them. Based on this, a poster with the areas of life and other materials were designed in cooperation with the project team, a graphic designer and the young people involved. The twelve areas of life point to general experiences, views and wishes of young people in residential childcare and can thus form a point of reference for the international debate on the further development of participation.

**2. Meaning of participation from a developmental-psychological and social-pedagogical point of view**

Before presenting two of the elaborated topics of young people's lives, basic questions should be discussed first: What do the young people's demands for participation in the twelve life topics have

to do with a) central developments in childhood and adolescence? b) pedagogical demands on participatory residential childcare practice?

a) It is clear from educational science and developmental psychology that self-efficacy, independence and other competencies relevant to life are not formed automatically with increasing age. They are only made possible – or, if no experiences are possible, inhibited – by experiences and confrontations in the differentiated interplay of disposition and environment (Böhnisch, 2017). Accordingly, relevant developmental tasks of adolescence relate to qualifying, bonding, consuming, and participating (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2016). Because the accomplishment of developmental tasks is primarily to be seen as the young people's own achievement (Wolf, 2013), they must be able to take an active role in accomplishing them as they grow older. In doing so, something crucial should not be misunderstood: Participation does not mean that young people decide and determine for themselves (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). Rather, the development of self-determination and autonomy is the goal to be achieved in the long run. This is achieved thanks to gradually increasing participation, which is adapted to the respective needs.

b) The elaborated areas of life, in which children in care want to participate, stand for more than a random collection of topics: On the one hand, the topics provide an insight into the life worlds of young people growing up in institutions. On the other hand, the demands for (more) participation transported by the themes also point to known gaps between aspiration and implementation in group settings or in individual case work (Eberitzsch et al., 2020; Holden et al., 2014). However, striving for a comprehensive implementation of a culture of participation is necessary to work social-pedagogically in residential care (Gabriel & Keller, 2015). Participation should therefore not only be understood as a right to participate: Without jointly designed processes and places, adolescents' willingness to be educated or formed remains mostly low (Gabriel & Tausendfreund, 2019). Consequently, social-pedagogical work and participation are mutually dependent. At the same time, this interaction also counteracts the danger of institutional objectification and disempowerment of young people. The following examples of basic social-pedagogical principles illustrates the interplay between the professionals' understanding of the child and the introduction to social expectations and norms:

- The child should be approached as a co-actor, rather than affirming him or her in a passive stance or overemphasizing developmental deficits (e.g., Holden et al., 2014; ten Brummelaar et al., 2018)
- Reciprocal pedagogical processes enable self-determined living rather than dependencies created by static structures (e.g., Bettelheim, 2007 [1950]; Ziegler et al., 2012)
- Relationship networks are to be understood as biographically important and promoted across institutional boundaries instead of being prevented and excluded (e.g., Eberitzsch & Keller, 2021; Wolf, 2010)
- Critique of power is to be allowed offensively, rather than solidifying rules of subjugation (e.g., Equit et al., 2017; Goffman, 1973)

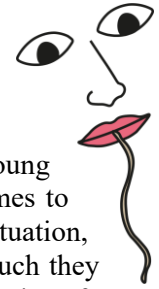
### ***3. Exemplary areas of life in which participation is important to young people***

The twelve areas of life were visualised and are illustrated in the appendix. Two of these topics are now presented here as examples: *food rules and culture* and *Love, feelings and sexuality*. The topics are introduced with the respective visualization and quotes from the young people and then reflected on regarding development aspects as well as with reference to the professional discourse and, selectively, children's rights.

### 3.1 Having a say in food rules and culture

"Don't be so picky about food, just eat...we don't want to hear that!"

"Food is life!"



*Young people's perspective:* "Don't be so picky (...), just eat (...)" is a phrase that young people described as an unpleasant example of a food situation. Especially when it comes to eating, it is a very important concern for them that no pressure is built up. In the eating situation, they want to be able to determine for themselves as much as possible what and how much they eat. In this context, the young people would like to have a say in various ways: in the choice of menu, the amount of scooping, and in the power to define unhealthy food such as sweets or so-called fast food. When it comes to food as a topic that is close to the people themselves, constraints associated with living in an institution seem to be condensed for them. For this reason, they are concerned that regulated procedures do not take precedence over individuality when it comes to eating, or that regulations are not generalized too much. Accordingly, they are also bothered by reward and punishment mechanisms around meal rules.

*Developmental requirements:* Eating, as an existential form of consumption, involves developmental demands such as developing awareness of having enough or of one's own taste. Furthermore, adolescence is about the gradual learning of autonomous provisioning, about planning and preparing meals that are as healthy as possible, but also about learning to enjoy. Eating partly also represents a relief strategy in the case of stress, which is why it is also necessary to find an appropriate way of dealing with stimulants such as sweets, etc. (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018). Recognizing one's desires and state of mind in relation to basic needs such as food is considered the basis for engaging young people in productive engagement with other aspects of their environment beyond that (Müller, 2009; Redl, 1971).

*Eating in the context of residential care:* Eating represents an everyday practice in residential institutions (Behnisch, 2018; Rose & Adio-Zimmermann, 2018) and is a topic that affects young people very directly. This also explains why a denied right to a say is sometimes particularly close to them here. Professional discourse also points out that food has a high significance in the institutional daily routine and contributes decisively to how recognition as well as forms of care and community are lived and general well-being is made possible (Behnisch, 2018). To what extent the organizational setting of the institutions can include the individual needs of the young people in meal rules and culture seems to be an important starting point to strengthen the well-being and the working alliance with the young people.

*Legal aspect:* In the context of the area of life " food rules and culture ", the complex promotion and protection mandate in relation to the granting of care (UN CRC Art. 3) and the best possible health (Art. 24) is condensed. Only through the principle of participation, through the joint definition of rules and life of a culture, can these mandates be linked together.

### 3.2 Talking about love, feelings, sexuality in everyday life

"Letting real life into the children`s home"

"I want to learn how girls tick!"



*Young people's point of view:* Young people make it clear that learning how to deal with love and sexuality and connecting with their desires and needs is of central importance to them. In the selected quotations, boys refer to the fact that they experience the rules that make their contact in the home with girls more difficult as being far removed from life - girls also picked up on this in a comparable way. The young people also make it clear that prohibitions on withdrawing with others or the tabooing of their intimate wishes and thoughts by the institution do not correspond to the realities of their lives. Therefore, in this sensitive topic, talking about rules and prohibitions is always also talking about their often-unsettling search for first experiences, gender identity and physical acceptance - for their respective "real lives".

*Development demands:* All young people face the developmental tasks of developing body and gender identity as well as attachment skills during adolescence (Böhnisch, 2017; Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2016). Part of this developmental task is to develop acceptance for one's own physical and psychological constitution, to deal with sexual needs and partnership. This development goes hand in hand with emotional detachment from parents or close caregivers. At the same time, however, young people are often still afraid and shy of self-responsible sexuality and possible failure (Böhnisch, 2017). Therefore, it is important that they can also talk about such needs, fears, and desires with trusting adults or peers (Böhnisch, 2017; Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2016).

*Love, feelings, and sexuality in the context of residential education:* Offering settings of trusting exchange that meet the needs of young people is especially challenging in residential education: On the one hand, young people may bring with them stressful prior sexual experience. On the other hand, intimate topics are often institutionally tabooed (Domann et al., 2015; Schröder, 2017). If sexuality becomes a topic in the home's everyday life, this often happens in a temporally isolated, abstract and heteronormative way. This allows little reference to the individual finding sexual identity (Hartwig, 2015). Rules provide a necessary framing and can create protection and trust. However, undiscussed prohibitions or unrecognized group dynamics can strongly inhibit natural and necessary developments of adolescent emotional and love worlds (Böhnisch, 2017). They can also contribute to making it impossible to name past or even current experiences of assault because of the lack of language and opportunities for discussion (Commissie Samson, 2012). Instead of installing too much prohibition and control, there is a need to create enough opportunities here for all young people to be able to name feelings in their own way and to share rules about this in everyday life (Mantey, 2020).

*References to children's rights:* In the context of the area of life of love, feelings and sexuality, the challenging task of protecting young people, some of whom are pre-exposed, from undesirable developments by enabling them to develop in a well-framed way is condensed: the mandate to protect in terms of granting care (UN CRC, Art. 3) and protection from all forms of sexual exploitation (UN CRC, Art. 34) can thus not only be achieved through tight rules and control. The right to care, protection and development, especially in such intimate and vulnerable issues, can only be granted through the additional discussion of issues and rules of conduct. These enable the building of trusting relationships and places.

#### ***4. Using the children's themes as impulses for the development of high-quality childcare***

As shown in the two examples, relevant professional points of reference can be found for each of the twelve themes. This makes it clear: the young people indicate fundamental aspects of residential childcare that strongly influence their well-being. Their perspective is centrally important to better understand the impact of residential settings and to be able to implement approaches for quality development. All twelve themes developed in the project provide guidance and impulses for quality practice (Keller et al., 2021). The project results of the collaboration with young people also include other materials that encourage practical discussion (see appendix). These provide a basis for creatively promoting exchange between professionals and young people about their concerns. In order to open up the impulses from the project for the international professional debate, the project team is working on the translation of the texts. Thus, the aim is to provide knowledge to promote participatory institutional cultures and to contribute to high quality home education and the well-being of the children living there.

Additional document: Appendix, including visual materials and bibliography