

# HOW TO BE POLITICAL? EXPLORING EARLY CHILDHOOD UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS ECOLOGICALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY

**Gudrun Marci-Boehncke<sup>1</sup>, Matthias Rath<sup>2</sup>, & Madeleine Rusch<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Institute for Diversity Studies, TU Dortmund University (Germany)*

<sup>2</sup>*Institute for Philosophy, Ludwigsburg University of Education (Germany)*

## Abstract

The interdisciplinary project PoJoMeC, funded by The Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany, investigates children's understanding of politics at preschool and primary school age. We understand the theoretical background of the primarily didactic research, the ecological model of human development according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), as a process "emerging from the interaction of individual and context" (Rosa, & Tudge, 2013, 244). We interpret "context" as a fundamental medial orientation (Lichtenberger, 2012). Our research methods focus on the children's explicit knowledge, their medial sources of information, and their concepts of rule-governed action. The paper presents a pilot study on the PoJoMeC project.

On the one hand, this pilot study concretizes the survey of the socio-ecological rule systems that constitute the students' political consciousness at the respective levels. On the other hand, this paper extends our concept in terms of argumentation theory by using a matrix from philosophy didactics. In the study, nine students from upper primary school classes (grade 4) are interviewed. In our research conception, we assume this group of students can reach general rules on Bronfenbrenner's macro system level. In the next step, we analyzed the interviews concerning the quality of the justifications the students gave for the validity of their rule assumptions on the micro-, meso-, and macrosystem. In doing so, we draw on Frank Brosow's (2020) TRAP-Mind-Theory. The TRAP-Mind-Matrix provides an instrument to capture the cognitive appropriation of social rules to understand the political in general. Parents, media, and schools have essential political responsibilities in this context.

**Keywords:** *Political thinking, early education research, ecological theory of human development, TRAP-Mind-Theory.*

---

## 1. Introduction

Climate change, peace, sustainable development, and inclusive participation of different groups in our society are just some of the tasks that need to be tackled politically today and tomorrow. UNESCO (2019, 2021) has summarized these tasks in the *17 Sustainable Development Goals*, which are strongly normative. They deal not only with the environment but also with its protection, health maintenance, and the entire diversity of society. Not only should this diversity be enshrined, but human rights should follow. Such goals require the acceptance of society as a whole to be realized. Active participation in social reality depends, above all, on the political understanding of citizens. However, this requires knowledge and general political awareness, which must be imparted and acquired from an early age.

In what follows, we understand "politics" as human communication and action to establish and enforce generally binding regulations and decisions within and between people. Creating an awareness of what this responsibility means and what role everyone should play in it is a central educational goal. To this end, we have already described elsewhere the theoretical framework within which a political or civic education must be conceptualized (Marci-Boehncke, Rath, Goll, & Steinbrecher, 2022). This civic education must begin early because political attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes also develop in early childhood and are difficult to change throughout life.

For modern society, moreover, media play a central role in conveying and developing a worldview and thus also in safeguarding democracy (Marci-Boehncke, Rath, Delere, & Höfer, 2022). Language is just as important as images, films, and other forms of communication. We thus advocate a broad concept of media that goes beyond a purely technical perspective. The world, and thus potentially

every citizen, is internationally networked. Global citizenship education in the digital age depends on knowledge of the initial conditions of political thought. Formally, these questions seem answerable regarding developmental psychology (cf. Wegemer, & Vandell, 2020). In terms of content, however, what constitutes political consciousness as a condition of political education is unclear, especially for early childhood. Knowledge about what children understand by politics and whether or what political competencies they bring with them to elementary school and develop by the time they move on to secondary school is still scarce. Empirical research seems particularly difficult in this age group because the topic is considered very abstract. Given the children's rudimentary writing and reading skills, it is impossible to study larger cohorts (cf. van Deth, Abendschön, Rathke, & Vollmer, 2007). Due to the young age, political participation is hardly perceived here. In contrast, older school age is already well-researched (cf. Hunter, & Rack 2016; Rowe 2005; Flanagan 2014).

The heterogeneities of the research, the target group, the subject-specific questions, and the wide-ranging object field initially suggest a multimethod approach. In this context, previous studies (Marci-Boehncke, & Rath, 2013) also allowed us to draw on experience in child-directed questioning (interviews) with playful approaches. Recently, we have extended this range of methods to include picturizing strategy (Tkotzyk, & Marci-Boehncke, 2022; Tkotzyk, Lategahn, & Marci-Boehncke, 2022). That also brings symbolic picture cards into play. In our pilot study to be presented here, they are also an entry point into the discussion of the social frame of reference of the political rules and the environmental topics that the children choose.

## **2. Social frame of reference and medial mediation**

With a social frame of reference, we highlight the different social systems people access for themselves during their development. These frames of reference expand in the context of ontogenetic development. Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979) has differentiated five systems, beginning with the microsystem immediately surrounding the child through the mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The macrosystem and exosystem include, among other things, the state political organization and the related ideological attitudes and beliefs that determine a policy. The mesosystem provides the institutional bridge between the micro- and macrosystems and determines the institutional framework of the microsystem and its actors.

We limit our study to the three main systems micro-, meso- and macrosystem. The microsystem is the closest social framework that goes directly beyond the individual, such as the family with parents, followed by the mesosystem that includes the first educational institutions, such as kindergarten and school, and later peers. Finally, the macrosystem is a system of general social order in which general laws apply, which we represent in our study through Germany. These systems, conceived concentrically by Bronfenbrenner, provide the material, each of varying complexity, for developing a child's political consciousness. However, the politically relevant aspects, the increasing social integration of the child into existing social structures and their regularity, remain strictly separated in the systems. While these systems are thought to be permeable, they seem differentiated in the process. Following the revisions Bronfenbrenner made to his theory, Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Opppenheimer, Vega-Molina, and García Coll (2017) were able to construct a less delineating model of human development. In this, culture, in its various manifestations, has a comprehensive function in the expansive structure of social relations. Language and communication are the central practices of the culture in this regard. Drew Lichtenberger (2012) extends this systems model of Bronfenbrenner quite substantially. He directly adds to the innermost circle of the microsystem, a "ring" of media communication that encircles the individual. That is to make clear "how technology can now mediate many of our direct interactions with our world and one another." This media ring symbolizes media presence from early childhood (Marci-Boehncke & Rath, 2013). In the media-influenced microsystem, symbolization, and thus media, becomes the central mediating agent of regularity.

To capture the political awareness of rules, we decided in the pilot study to focus on a topic discussed in families, educational institutions, and the public sphere: the protection of the environment. We focused on the children's "ecological awareness" (Capra, 2012) or "ecological consciousness" (O'Sullivan, & Taylor, 2004). With Capra (2012), we argue that "ecological literacy" is a central educational goal in the school mesosystem and that "ecological awareness" is a good conversation starter for capturing children's political consciousness.

### 3. Procedure

In our topic-specific pilot study, nine students (five male, four female) were interviewed. For reasons of comparability, children of the same age (9 years old) and of the same grade 4 elementary school ("fourth grade" in German "Grundschule") were interviewed. The interviews took place at school as individual interviews.

In preparation, various picture cards were spread out on a table. To start the interview, the topic of the interview and the three levels, based on Bronfenbrenner's "Ecological Model of Human Development" (1979), were addressed. Three large maps showing a family, a school, and Germany (symbolically in the form of a map of Germany, in the colors of the country's flag) represented the three environmental systems surrounding the children on the micro-, meso-, and macro levels selected for the study. Furthermore, several picture cards were available to the students as possible conversation starters, all related to "environmental protection." The children could choose between illustrated rules, such as waste separation, and between the causes and effects of climate change due to progressive environmental pollution. During the conversation, the respondents were asked to intuitively select picture cards and talk about them. That was to reveal the learners' explicit knowledge regarding the topics that are relevant in the field of education for sustainable development. A total of eleven topics were visualized: (1) Buying regionally and seasonally, (2) Conscious and sustainable nutrition, (3) Renewable energy sources, (4) Saving resources, (5) Minimizing CO<sub>2</sub> consumption, (6) Protecting and preserving forests, (7) Protecting animals and preserving biodiversity, (8) Avoiding environmental and marine pollution, (9) (Plastic) waste avoidance, (10) Recycling as well as (11) Waste separation.

The questions addressed in each interview were left up to the interviewees. They decided what they wanted to talk about by selecting a picture card. The picture cards represented either a rule related to (non-) sustainable or environmentally conscious actions or a consequence of following or not following these rules. The guiding questions were intended to encourage the children to explain which of the rules and consequences they already knew and to whom they applied. In the further course of the survey, by assigning the picture cards to the respective system levels, it was checked whether the children were already aware of environmental topics' rules. Subsequently, the children's justifications were categorized according to Brosow's TRAP-Mind Matrix (2020) and the four characteristic levels of justification, "Thinking," "Reflecting," "Arguing," and "Philosophizing." We tried to design the dialogue in a way that subjects would be encouraged to reason and philosophize by asking follow-up and reflective questions, such as "What do you think about the rules?", "What would happen if these rules did not exist or if no one followed them?", "What would have to happen to stop climate change?" and "Why doesn't everyone follow the rules to protect the environment?" whenever possible.

### 4. Findings

Overall, there was an exciting asymmetry in terms of the breadth of rule awareness and the idea of the origin of the rules. The children were given picture cards and a lead-in to the interview that focused on rules about issues of environmental protection. Eleven themes were presented to the children and visualized through picture cards. These eleven topics were also specified on three social reference levels according to Bronfenbrenner and introduced again in each case: Microsystem Family, Mesosystem School, and Macrosystem Germany. That is, the eleven topics were offered a total of 33 times. In addition, guiding questions were asked to record the children's rule awareness at each system level differentiated according to Bronfenbrenner and to inquire about reasons for a rule conviction according to the TRAP-Mind-Matrix. These questions were answered as follows in table 1 (Tab. 1).

However, evaluating the answers concerning a political awareness of rules is difficult. Which categorization allows us to determine this expression as generally binding rules and decisions? We use a current system from philosophy didactics, the TRAP-Mind Theory. In his theory, Frank Brosow (2020) distinguishes four levels of justification for normative ideas, similar to the social rules we examine. The theory combines two main aspects: First, it is based on current empirical findings in cognitive psychology. Second, it aims at the fundamental ethical criterion of the universalizability of an argument. It aims to make understandable what happens when, in the rational processing of problems, we name increasingly generalizable reasons to plausibilize our preferences or judgments. "The TRAP-Mind-Theory has a functionalistic understanding of reasons. A reason is not a consideration of its kind. Any thought deliberately used to support or attack a consideration is considered a reason by the TRAP-Mind-Theory" (Brosow, 2020, p. 26).

In practical analysis, the TRAP-Mind-Theory offers a matrix of rational argumentation on four levels: "Thinking" remains on the level of description, and "Reflecting" aims at a conception, here of just rule determination. At the "Arguing" level, definitions and contexts of justification are offered.

"Philosophizing," finally, comprises the ability to develop theories and justify them based on theory. For our evaluations, the levels of increasingly generalizing reasoning ("for ourselves, others or all people" (Brosow, 2020, p. 15) of preferences are of particular importance.

Table 1. Guiding questions on the reference levels.

<i>guiding questions</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>given answers</i>
who makes the rules?	Microsystem	parents / children / all together
	Mesosystem	school principal / teacher
	Macrosystem	the society / parliament / politicians / court / police / German Chancellor / unknown
rule origin	Microsystem	parents, idols, role models / media / unknown
	Mesosystem	classroom rules / media / education system
	Macrosystem	education system / media / laws / unknown
consequences from rules	for all three system levels	effects on the interviewee himself / on animals / on all humans / on nature / climate change and global warming

A total of 364 sequences were analyzed from the nine interviews. It was particularly noticeable that the main focus of the sequences was on the macrosystem: in total, 310 of the 364 sequences were located in the macro system. The microsystem was found in 47 sequences, whereas the mesosystem school was found in only seven sequences. Our results are, therefore, initially puzzling: of the 364 sequences, virtually none are found in the mesosystem, although school as an institution of the mesosystem is formative for all students. The distribution of the sequences over the four levels of the TRAP-Mind-Matrix looks as follows (table 2):

Table 2. Number of sequences over the TRAP-Mind level

<i>TRAP-Mind-Level</i>	<i>microsystem</i>	<i>mesosystem</i>	<i>macrosystem</i>
<i>Thinking</i>	11	1	57
<i>Reflecting</i>	6	1	48
<i>Arguing</i>	3	1	28
<i>Philosophizing</i>	0	0	6

## 5. Conclusions

Two aspects, in particular, are interesting for our pilot study: The broad media theme we introduced with Lichtenberger (2012) is reflected in the response sequences: At all three system levels, media (newspapers, television, radio, Internet) are named as sources for rule knowledge, but not books. That shows that media not only determine childhood today as a matter of course but that in the various social systems, these media are also explicitly introduced by the mediating social instances, as a justification instance as well as a source of information. The second relevant aspect is the striking lack of argumentative responses in the mesosystem. The children receive detailed information about the overall social justification (as also shown by naming the originators of rules). We also assume the familial rules to be experienced as valid as a matter of course and can therefore be named. The school mesosystem, on the other hand, is left out. Since the school cannot be neglected as a social instance (especially since education is explicitly mentioned several times), we assume a particular social function of the school mesosystem.

In contrast to the family's direct experience, the macro system society is only present to the students in a mediated way. In addition to the family, it is primarily the school that assumes this mediating function. The school refers to the rule validity, the rule origin, and the rule actors in the

macrosystem and therefore does not come into view as a rule instance in its own right. It will be an essential aspect of our further research to analyze this mediating function of the mesosystem further and thus to make clear the mediating importance of school for the political rule consciousness of the upcoming generation.

## References

- Brosow, F. (2020). TRAP-Mind-Theory. Philosophizing as an Educational Process. *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy, IV* (1), 14-33. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from [https://www.philosophie.ch/attachment/272/download/JDPh\\_2020\\_Volume\\_4\\_Number\\_1](https://www.philosophie.ch/attachment/272/download/JDPh_2020_Volume_4_Number_1).
- Capra, F. (2012). Ecological Literacy. *Resurgence & Ecologist*, 272. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article3659-ecological-literacy.html>
- Flanagan, C. (2013). *Teenage Citizens: The Political Theories of the Young*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hunter, P., & Rack, J. (2016). Advancing young citizens' political literacy through social-sciences curricula. *Research Information for Teachers*, 3, 23-28. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://dx.doi.org/10.18296/set.0053>
- Lichtenberger, D. (2012). Shaping influences – human development. *Blog*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://drewlichtenberger.com/6-shaping-influences-human-development/>
- Marci-Boehncke, B., & Rath, M. (2013). *Kinder – Medien – Bildung. Eine Studie zu Medienkompetenz und vernetzter Educational Governance in der frühen Bildung*. München, Germany: Kopäd.
- Marci-Boehncke, G., Rath, M. O., Goll, T., & Steinbrecher, M. (2022). How to Become Political? Basic Concepts for Exploring Early Childhood Understanding of Politics. In M. Carmo (Ed.), *Education and New Developments 2022* (pp. 179-183). Lissabon: InScience Press.
- Marci-Boehncke, G., Rath, M., Delere, M., & Höfer, H. (2022). Medien – Demokratie – Bildung: Normative Vermittlungsprozesse und Diversität in mediatisierten Gesellschaften. In G. Marci-Boehncke, M. Rath, M. Delere & H. Höfer (Eds.), *Medien – Demokratie – Bildung: Normative Vermittlungsprozesse und Diversität in mediatisierten Gesellschaften* (pp. 1-10). Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
- Rosa, E. M., & Tudge, J. (2013). Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development: Its Evolution from Ecology to Bioecology. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 5, 243-258.
- Rowe, D. (2005). The Development of Political Thinking in School Students: An English Perspective. *International Journal of Citizenship and Teacher Education*, 1 (1), 97-110.
- O'Sullivan, E. V., & Taylor, M. M. (2004). Glimpses of an Ecological Consciousness. In O'Sullivan, E.V. & Taylor, M.M. (Eds.), *Learning Toward an Ecological Consciousness: Selected Transformative Practices* (pp. 5-23). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Doi:10.1007/978-1-4039-8238-4\_2
- Tkotzyk, R., & Marci-Boehncke, G. (2022). Research with young children: Do picture concept maps work as interview tool in early childhood research? *Proceedings of INTED 2022*, 7258-7267. doi:10.21125/inted.2022.1836
- Tkotzyk, R., Lategahn, J., & Marci-Boehncke, G. (2022). Picturizing strategy: Introducing a new participatory interview tool in research with young children. *Proceedings of ICERI 2022*, 2260-2265. doi:10.21125/iceri.2022.0572
- UNESCO (2019). *Futures literacy: anticipation in the 21st Century*. Retrieved August 8, 2022, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372349.locale=en>
- UNESCO (2021). *Future Literacy. An essential competency for the 21st century*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://en.unesco.org/futuresliteracy/about>
- van Deth, J. W., Abendschön, S., Rathke, J., & Vollmer, M. (2007). *Kinder und Politik. Politische Einstellungen von jungen Kindern im ersten Grundschuljahr*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
- Vélez-Agosto, Nicole M., Soto-Crespo, José G., Vizcarrondo-Oppeneimer, Mónica, Vega-Molina, Stephanie, & García Coll, Cynthia (2017). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory Revision: Moving Culture from the Macro into the Micro. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 12(5), 900-910. doi:10.1177/1745691617704397
- Wegemer, C. M., & Vandell, D. L. (2020). Parenting, temperament, and attachment security as antecedents of political orientation: Longitudinal evidence from early childhood to age 26. *Developmental Psychology*, 56, 1360-1371.