EXPLORING EARLY CHILDHOOD UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS AND THE IMPACT OF (DIGITAL) MEDIA EDUCATION

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Abstract

For decades, young children were not considered active members of our society (Butschi & Hedderich 2021). This is a problematic perception considering that, for example, in democratic societies, democracy and democratic behavior must be learned and practiced by each generation anew (Deutscher Bundestag 2020), since we are not born as democratic beings. Furthermore, in today's world children get confronted with aspects such as climate change, gender disparities, health care, or peace at an early age. That is why participation, global citizenship education as well as the 17 SDGs of the United Nations Agenda 2030 are already embedded in early education programs and concepts.

However, research on child-centered and rights-based participation processes in early education is a major gap. Yet the few recent studies suggest that children as young as 5 years old have some political awareness (Berti 2005; Goll 2020; Schauenberg 2014). Thereby, we understand political awareness to be the recognition of and reflection on topics of public interest that are discussed in the media and trigger public interest at the same time. But when do children of pre-K- and elementary school-age develop this awareness? And what role do the different types of (digital) media play in this process? Exactly these questions the interdisciplinary research project PoJoMeC at TU Dortmund University, funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany, seeks to explore.

In this paper, we present preliminary results of 14 qualitative interviews with children aged 4 to 8. The interviews were conducted with the *Picturizing Strategy* (Tkotzyk, Lategahn & Marci-Boehncke 2022), a method developed by us specifically for the work with young children who not yet can read and write. To systematize the results, we applied a refinement of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979) and an argumentation-theoretical model used in philosophy didactics, the so-called *Trap-Mind-Theory* (Brosow 2020). By evaluating the results, conclusions can be drawn not only about the significance of (digital) media and media use regarding the transmission of prior political knowledge, but also about the supposedly negative role of educational institutions in this process, even though research repeatedly shows that digital media and their use are important for children's development and their participation in society (Burnett & Merchant 2018).

Keywords: Digital media literacy, media use, early childhood research, global citizenship education, political awareness.

1. Introduction – Young children, media use and political literacy

In her article "Der politische Dämon" (engl. The political demon), Wenke Husmann states that just a few hundred years ago it was common to enthrone children and there are still countries in which children hold leadership positions today (Husmann 2021). "The idea of childhood as its own stage of life, as special status, is a very Western and by comparison very young concept" (Husmann 2021). This leads to the fact, that for decades, young children were not considered active members of our society (Butschi & Hedderich 2021). This totemization, as Husmann calls it, leads to a political marginalization of children (Husmann 2021), which is problematic because in democratic societies, democracy and democratic behavior must be learned and practiced by each generation anew (Deutscher Bundestag 2020), since we are not born as democratic beings (Negt 2010). In today's world, however, children get confronted with aspects such as climate change, gender disparities, health care, or peace at an early age. That is why participation, global citizenship education as well as the 17 SDGs of the United Nations Agenda 2030 are already embedded in early education programs and concepts. The degree to which the young generation is active in the role of citizen is reflected in their engagement in civil society

discussions (Hasebrink, Lampert & Thiel 2020). However, (inter-)national research shows that political interest and awareness does not start in adolescence, but already at pre-school age (Goll 2020; Tkotzyk, Lategahn & Marci-Boehncke 2022).

Media plays an important role in this, as children grow up in an environment shaped by (digital) media from the very beginning (Kieninger et al. 2021). In Germany and most European countries, 72 percent of zero to six year olds can access digital devices and formats on a daily basis (Jax et al. 2020). Therefore, media must be seen as part of children's culture (MFKJKS 2018) and yet at the same time as worldview generators (Rath 2000). Since politics is primarily delivered through the media (Endeward et al. 2016), civic and political education is closely tied to media education. However, this is not new; neither from the perspective of political education (Oberle 2017) nor from the perspective of media education (Wagner 2013, KMK 2012 & 2016). The ongoing digitization is also accompanied by a strong change in the participation of citizens (Manzel 2017), for which a competent handling of media is extremely important. It is fair to say that the competent use of media is the basis for political literacy (Oberle 2017). However, the interaction between political education and media education has so far received little attention in early education. Furthermore, research on child-centered and rights-based participation processes in early education is a major gap.

But when do children of pre-K- and elementary school-age develop this awareness? And what role do the different types of (digital) media play in this process? Exactly these questions the interdisciplinary research project PoJoMeC at TU Dortmund University, funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany, seeks to explore.

In this paper, we present results of 14 qualitative interviews with children age 4 to 8. The interviews were conducted with the *Picturizing Strategy* (Tkotzyk, Lategahn & Marci-Boehncke 2022), a method developed by us specifically for the work with young children who not yet can read and write. To systematize the results, we applied a refinement of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979) and an argumentation-theoretical model used in philosophy didactics, the so-called *Trap-Mind-Theory* (Brosow 2020).

2. Challenges when working with young children – The picturizing strategy (PS)

As already mentioned, up to now mainly the political knowledge of young people has been subject of research. This is on one hand because younger children have not been the subject of research for long, and on the other hand because working with young children at preschool age holds multiple challenges becauselinguistic, interactive, and cognitive skills are not entirely developed (Butschi & Hedderich 2021; Vogel 2021). The main challenge, however, might be the limited narrative competence. Young children may understand complex words and sentences but they are not able to fully express themselves because their language skills are still developing. Also, the not yet entirely developed cognitive ability hinders young children to provide reflective responses, to reconsider their answers, and to restructure their thoughts. Another aspect that makes this kind of research difficult is the concentration span of 15 minutes maximum (Domsch 2014). Considering these aspects, we develop the Picturizing Strategy, which is based on the concept map strategy according to Novak and Canas (1990). Instead of using nods, connecting references, and arrow labels, which are inherent for concept maps, we created a set of researcher produced visuals (Wuggenig 1990), because visual methods allow a different access to the object of investigation than research methods based on writing and numbers (Lobinger & Mengis 2018). It is known from adult research that pictures are also easier to absorb than words, but also direct attention better (Gilarski 2020). To systematize the results, we applied a refinement of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979) and an argumentation-theoretical model used in philosophy didactics, the so-called *Trap-Mind-Theory* (Brosow 2020).

3. The development of a political awareness through (digital) media use by young children

Before we will discuss the content of our test results in regard to political awareness, we would like to draw attention to the aspect of concentration span in young children, which is according to Domsch (2014) about 15 minutes. However, our interviews showed that with 13:37 minutes only one child fell below this time frame. All the other children exceeded it. The longest single interview (with a 4-year-old) contained a total length of 25:30 minutes. The longest interview overall is a double interview with two 6-year-old girls. Here we record 37:40 minutes. We attribute this fact to the novel interview method we developed especially for this topic and the main test group of young children.

3.1. Results on political awareness and (digital) media use

In terms of content, we relied on the basic idea of rule awareness. This is because primary political socialization is based on experiences that have no explicit content-related reference to the political sphere. It includes learning that is also not explicitly political, but influences a person's behavior, such as following rules. This leads to 4 key questions: (a) What rules exist?, (b) Who determines rules?, (c) How do children know about these rules?, (d) And what happens when rules were broken? To connect with the children and their world, we chose familiar topics from both media and family communication. At the time of our interviews, this was mainly the Corona pandemic and the governmental imposed rules and restrictions.

The interview results show that both preschoolers and elementary school children notice all three levels of society (family, educational institutions, and society itself). Especially the rules concerning Corona but also certain rules of etiquette. However, it was noticeable that the younger children were more oriented to the interviewer's questions, while the elementary school children spoke more freely and on their own initiative. This is a fact that can also be found in the evaluation of the TRAP-Mind-Theory. The results also show that the younger children consider rules to be meaningful, but they are unable to justify their statement. The elementary school children see rules in part as necessary to prevent chaos from breaking out. It is also becoming clear that although rules are perceived as very restrictive, as soon as the meaning of the rules is understood, the children show understanding for the regulations. Elementary school children also already perceive the 3 powers (legislative, judicial and executive) and show partial knowledge of global society issues. Another interesting aspect that emerged from the interviews is the fact that first graders are already able to make connections between their own actions and the effects on society, whereas kindergarten children are not yet able to do so.

When it comes to clarifying the question "Who determines rules?", we have to differentiate between the three levels. All children were able to assign different authorities to the different levels. With regard to the question of how the children know about rules - in other words, the question of media influence - it becomes apparent that there are major differences at the micro and meso levels. It is clear from the interviews that at the micro level, i.e. in the family, children receive their "knowledge" through the primary media. This means that children learn about the rules and how to behave through communication with their parents, grandparents or even siblings. At the same time, however, it is clear that not only primary media are used, but also secondary, tertiary and quaternary media, especially in the family environment. In educational institutions, knowledge is passed on to children mainly via primary and secondary media.

3.2. The TRAP-Mind-Theory

According to Brosow, the TRAP-Mind-Matrix "introduces a problem-oriented technique of philosophizing, based on empirical research in cognitive psychology" (Brosow 2020). It understands philosophizing as an educational process, which is planable and empirically provable (Brosow 2019). As shown in table 1, the matrix contains three areas and four levels. It divides three areas of contemplation that define the kind of problem we are dealing with – "understanding", "evaluating" and "acting" (Brosow 2020). The way in which we are dealing with the problem is divided into the four levels of (1) "thinking", (2) "reflecting", (3) "arguing" and (4) "philosophizing" (see table 1). The thoughts are developed from one level to another by adding reasons to considerations that are already made. Each level contains two stages where the reasons can either be tested or untested. Accordingly, the process of testing and correcting leads from thinking via reflecting and arguing to philosophizing (Brosow 2020). The DNA-matrix of philosophizing enables a clear distinction from approaches in which "philosophizing" is understood as a free association of ideas. On one hand, it identifies the different level between mere ideas, opinions and impulses and on the other hand it shows well-founded concepts, judgments and decisions and emphasizes that 'well-founded' does not always mean 'well-reasoned'. The actual scope of the (good) reasons given in support of a consideration must fit the claim with which the consideration is presented (Brosow 2020). To put it simply: I measure "good reasons" by my own experience (reflection). If I want other people to accept or adopt my thinking, I must give them arguments that they also consider as "good reasons" based on their experience (reasoning). If a consideration claims to be a generally valid theory, it must be based on objective arguments that are accepted by all people, no matter what their individual and group experiences are (philosophizing). (Brosow 2020).

Table 1. Structure of TRAP-Mind-Theory according to Brosow 2020.

Level: / Area:	Thinking	Reflecting	Arguing	Philosophizing
Understanding	Idea (description/association)	Concept (justified idea)	Definition (justified set of concepts)	Theory of Meaning (justified justification)
Evaluating	Opinion (believe/attitude)	Judgment (justified opinion)	Argumentation (justified set of judgments)	Theory of Quality (justified justification)
Acting	Impulse (motive)	Decision (justified impulse)	Stance/Praxis (justified set of decisions)	Theory of Behavior (justified justification)

Regarding philosophizing with children, the focus is not on evaluation because the aim is not to find out how well children can philosophize. Much more than that the TRAP-Mind-Theory should enable the way in which children justify their opinions so that they can be supported in the quality of their justifications. Also the highest level of philosophizing is not always the goal to be reached because there are questions where taking a subjective perspective makes more sense than an objective approach, such as justifying on the reflection level (Brosow 2020). In our case this would be if the interviewed children are asked about their rules at home, because that is where a subjective opinion is wanted.

With the help of the TRAP-Mind-Theory, we were able to determine that all children participating in the study reach the level of "thinking". Argumentations, however, were mainly done by preschool children out of their own situation and positively for their own good. The level of "reflection" did not occur in preschool children.

4. Conclusion

With the help of the Picturizing Strategy, we found that children perceive the social levels and can also make statements about their hierarchical arrangements. With regard to the influence of (digital) media, it is important to stress that already young children have a high rate of television consumption and live in housholds with various digital media. Thus children acquire their conception of the world and a prior political understanding through media use. Therefore, digital media has to be in the focus of educational processes in regard to creating a critical and constructive discurs on educational equity. However, our research showed, that in the family environment children come into contact with all four types of media, while in educational institutions there is no access whatsoever to digital media. Probably due to this fact, the interviewed children, as the research project reveals, do not consider educational institutions as transmitter of political knowledge. This is striking insofar that the states' core curriculum requires teachers to integrate all kinds of media into the learning environment. Considering these results it is of particular urgency to deepen the research on this matter because integrating digital media into the learning environment is a central part of the educational curricula of schools as stated by the standing conference of the ministers of education and cultural affairs in Germany.

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