

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS: A TRAINING MODULE TO PROMOTE CIVIC MEDIA LITERACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

Early Civic Media Literacy as part of literacy education in early childhood education has so far received insufficient attention in educator training in Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz [KMK], 2017). At the same time, educators report limited confidence in their media-pedagogical competencies and assume only partial responsibility for civic-media education (Kutscher & Bischof, 2020; Mertala, 2019). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the development and ongoing pre-test of a practice-oriented professional training module designed to foster educators' competencies in teaching Civic Media Literacy. The module builds on findings from the interdisciplinary research project *PoJoMeC*, founded by the German *Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb)*, which we already presented at the END in 2023 (Tkotzyk, Lategahn, & Marci-Boehncke, 2023). It was demonstrated that children develop early forms of political awareness and that media function as central mediating agents in this process (Goll et al., 2025). Conceptually, the module combines Civic Media Literacy with a socio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and a didactic framework focusing on perception, reflection, and action (Klafki, 1963). Implemented as a digital professional learning environment, the training tool is aligned with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It addresses professional practice across micro-, meso-, and macro-level contexts of early childhood education. The current pilot study explores the platform's usability and how the materials foster reflective and practice-related engagement with civic-media issues in everyday pedagogical contexts. The ongoing evaluation (April–May 2026) follows a mixed qualitative design. Participants include both in-service early childhood educators and pre-service students. Data are collected through a structured questionnaire and semi-structured qualitative interviews, focusing on participants' perceptions of the module's clarity, attractiveness, difficulty level, and the contextual fit of its examples and pedagogical scenarios for early childhood settings. Qualitative data are analyzed using qualitative content analysis, complemented by descriptive analysis of questionnaire responses. As data collection is currently in progress, the study will present initial insights into the module's usability and professional relevance, as well as how educators and students engage with civic-media content in a digitally supported professional learning environment. By providing empirically grounded insights into a practice-oriented approach to professional development, the study addresses a significant research gap in the role and impact of civic media literacy training in early childhood education. It offers transferable perspectives for educator professionalization in increasingly mediatized and socially complex learning environments.

Keywords: *Children's civic (media) literacy, early childhood research, educator training, global citizenship education, political awareness.*

1. Introduction – The key role of early childhood educators in a mediatized world

Early childhood educators play a pivotal role in fostering children's development into socially competent and capable individuals (Endeward, 2019). This requires consideration of social and cultural transformations, including the ongoing digital mediatization (Krotz, 2018), and the necessity for resilience against influences that threaten democracy (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). In Germany, the training of early childhood educators is currently not sufficiently aligned with these requirements and needs to be adapted accordingly (KMK, 2020; Mertala, 2019). For instance, approximately half of early childhood educators report a lack of confidence in their capacity to effectively manage the integration of contemporary media within their practice (Kutscher & Bischof, 2020). Additionally, a significant number of educators do not adequately fulfill their responsibility to implement political media education (Mertala, 2019). The promotion of media literacy is dependent upon implementation in the spirit of “civic education”.

Civic Media Literacy (CML) aims to promote civic engagement, shifting from an emphasis on technical proficiency to a focus on values-based education (Mihailidis, 2019).

In contrast to the numerous debates that have marginalized children as political actors (Osler & Kato, 2022), CML considers their political agency and ontological need for political participation. This article presents a digital professional development module that specifically strengthens and reflects on both the media literacy skills of early childhood educators and their democracy-promoting competencies. To this end, the professional development module is theoretically grounded, and its suitability for the target group, early childhood educators, is examined through a qualitative-empirical study.

2. The development of the training module PoMeZe

The Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb) provided financial support for our interdisciplinary research project PoJoMeC, which initially investigated the political awareness of preschool children. The results of this study have been published since 2022 (Goll et al., 2025; Tkotzyk et al., 2023; Tkotzyk et al., 2024). It has been demonstrated that, while children do exhibit political perceptions, the early childhood education setting does not appear to play a role in this development (Goll et al., 2025). To raise educators' awareness of global challenges and to develop corresponding implementation strategies for their professional practice in early childhood education (UNESCO, n.d.), the professional development module *PoMeZe* was developed. The objective of this module is to enhance educators' professional competencies to facilitate the implementation of political media literacy in accordance with the Civic Media Literacy (CML) framework. The professional development module was developed collaboratively by the departments of political didactics, German language/media didactics, and journalism research, and its content is based on empirically grounded knowledge of media and democratic education in (early) childhood. This chapter presents the theoretical foundations for the design of the professional development module and explains its structure.

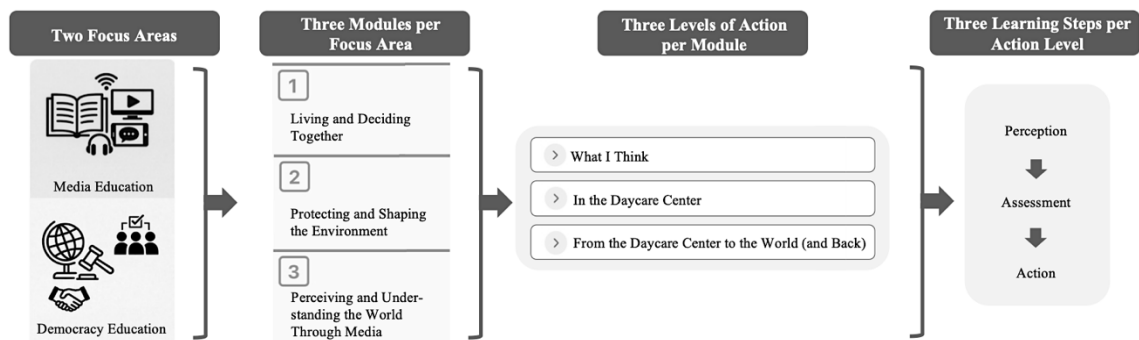
2.1. Theoretical and conceptual foundations

According to Mihailidis (2019), CML emphasizes the need for values-based media literacy promotion. The objective of this initiative is to dismantle hierarchical relationships between educators and children, thereby fostering a culture of participation that is perceived as natural (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Furthermore, educators should empower children to recognize the influence of media on political levels of society and to understand media as tools for positive social change (Mihailidis, 2019). To facilitate the development of an understanding of the political levels of a society, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of lifeworlds is used as a conceptual framework. The reference to micro-, meso-, macro-, and exo-levels in Bronfenbrenner's model highlights the necessity of early childhood education being oriented towards different, interconnected spheres of influence. The teaching staff of early childhood education institutions, operating at the meso-level, exerts a significant influence on child development. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 21) emphasizes the „mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives”. For this reason, Krotz's (2018) mediatization theory is taken into account. Consequently, the professional development program aims to raise awareness that media communication processes permeate all areas of life and influence child development at various levels of the system (Krotz, 2018). Given that children are not merely passive recipients of environmental influences but also actively engage with their media-mediated environment, educators should be encouraged to critically reflect on the role of media in their interactions with the environment at all levels of the system. The promotion of media literacy promotion is normatively oriented in the sense of the CML. The professional development program itself is also based on Klafki's (1963) didactic model. This model understands learning as a reflective engagement with content and as preparation for responsible action. As a thematically integrative element of the professional development module, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are referenced. These principles are also of a strongly normative nature. When constructing a learning scenario according to these principles, educators should be able to independently implement value-oriented media literacy promotion in accordance with the CML, prepare educational content in a media-savvy way, and link it specifically to values such as sustainability, justice, and social participation.

2.2. Didactic design and structure of the training module

The training module was implemented on the Moodle learning platform. Moodle allows for flexible switching between the two focus areas, *Media Education* and *Democracy Education*, each of which is structured into three modules (see figure 1). This structure takes into account the close interrelationship between media and democratic education, while still allowing for different content-related approaches.

Figure 1. Structure of the training module PoMeZe.



Each of these modules must be addressed within one of the two designated focus areas: media literacy or democratic education. In the first module, entitled *Living and Deciding Together*, participants acquire the skills necessary to promote democratic thinking and action in the daycare center. In the module entitled *Protecting and Shaping the Environment*, the primary focus is on educational processes that are in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the goals of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In the third module, educators refine their competencies in *Perceiving and Understanding the World Through Media*. This module emphasizes the cultivation of children's abilities to utilize media in an active, critical, and responsible manner through creative and productive media experiences.

In addition, each of the three modules is subdivided into three distinct levels of action, which are based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of lifeworlds. At the *What I Think* level, educators engage with their personal environment by reflecting on their own attitudes and individual experiences. At the level titled *In the Daycare Center*, the focus will be specifically directed towards the everyday educational activities in the respective daycare center. In *From the Daycare Center to the World (and Back)* educators explore how learning environments, collaborations, and social connections can enrich the educational process. This structure, designed to broaden their perspective, encompassing their own attitudes and daily life in the daycare center as well as the design of learning-conducive spaces within the daycare environment.

Within the three levels of action, learning is structured into consecutive learning steps. The first step, entitled *Perception*, aims to encourage educators to recognize and reflect on media and political references at different system levels. In the subsequent learning step, entitled *Assessment*, participants examine the evaluation of normative dimensions of political and media content and reflect on its pedagogical relevance for their own practice. In the *Action* learning step, they develop concrete and practical ways to implement political media literacy in line with the CML approach in their everyday teaching practice.

Moodle facilitates individualized engagement with tasks in a self-selected order and with a chosen focus, thereby enabling interdisciplinary and cost-effective work. Additionally, the variety of task formats provides a range of methods for information processing and presentation.

3. Qualitative evaluation

To verify the comprehensibility and practicality of the PoMeZe training module, a qualitative evaluation was conducted to capture educators' perspectives and identify opportunities for optimization.

3.1. Research design and methodology

To evaluate the professional development module, a qualitative research design was employed, incorporating open-ended questions and targeted follow-up (Patton, 2002). The objective of this study was to capture the subjective experiences and assessments of several educators regarding the structure, task formats, content suitability, and practical applicability of PoMeZe. This was accomplished through a pre-test administered before the implementation of the professional development module, the purpose of which was to enable adjustments and optimization.

The subjects were selected using purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (2002), because they had completed all three modules during the test phase. A total of four educators were surveyed for this study (AC: 41 years old, with 17 years of professional experience; GM: 26 years old, with 3 years of professional experience; LB: 43 years old, with 1 year of professional experience; CB: 28 years old, who has completed vocational training).

The collected data were documented in tabular form and subsequently categorized (including “structure and organization”, “task formats”, “content”, “overall evaluation”, and “further comments”) and supplemented with information on age, professional experience, and the contextual conditions of the daycare center. The analysis was conducted as an inductive and creative synthesis (Patton, 2002) to develop patterns, assessments, and suggestions for improvement from the data that would support the professional development of the educators.

3.2. Results

The evaluation provided by the participants indicated a largely favorable response. The transparent and recurring structure of the modules and levels was commended. Additionally, the three-stage action steps (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) were found to be comprehensible.

With respect to the task formats, the participants noted the variety, comprehensibility, and practical relevance of the tasks. The utilization of quizzes and tasks that present a model answer upon completion was regarded as an effective method for assessing knowledge and reflecting on one's own work.

Participants confirmed the module's high suitability for everyday life in daycare centers. The findings indicated that the professional development module provides content that is particularly relevant for educators with more experience, as the central importance of media literacy has only recently been more firmly established in early childhood education training. Moreover, even educators who were recently trained reported that PoMeZe deepens their own knowledge. The participants benefited from novel approaches, including the discussion table and methods for participation in small tasks (e.g., mealtimes, free play), while also appreciating elements and examples familiar from their own practice. At the same time, the participants articulated a need for additional practical and problem-oriented case studies, explanatory videos, and a more pronounced emphasis on subjects such as media risks and parental awareness.

Participants identified numerous technical challenges, including the navigation and registration process on the learning platform, which they found to be less intuitive. These challenges persisted despite the presence of a tutorial and digital user manual. Moreover, one participant reported equipment deficiencies and insufficient time, which could hinder the digital implementation of PoMeZe in daycare centers. While the opportunities for exchange in the forums were perceived as enriching, they were also viewed critically due to the lack of anonymity.

In sum, PoMeZe is regarded as an innovative and practically relevant program that distinguishes itself from conventional professional development courses by its contemporary relevance. The findings confirm the program's potential and simultaneously highlight opportunities to optimize educators' professional development.

4. Conclusion

This article underscores the key role of early childhood educators as the first formal interface between children and society. The PoMeZe professional development module is regarded as playing a pivotal supporting role in this regard, helping educators integrate media literacy, democratic education, and values-based skills, and design their own teaching methods independently. Simultaneously, it becomes evident that technical factors, specifically, constitute a significant obstacle to the implementation of such online professional development modules. A critical examination reveals a significant discrepancy between the normative requirements of contemporary digital media literacy and the media technologies currently available in many early childhood education institutions. This discrepancy highlights pressing need for improvement at the political level. Consequently, endeavors to showcase transformative viewpoints are hampered by existing infrastructural and technical deficiencies.

In addition, it is imperative to acknowledge the exacerbating trend of employing inadequately qualified personnel in daycare centers, a phenomenon that is compounded by the prevailing shortage of staff (Klusemann, Rosenkranz, Schütz, & Bock-Famulla, 2023). Concurrently, there has been a perceptible decline in the qualification level of pedagogical staff on a national level (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). This necessitates the widespread implementation of targeted measures to strengthen the media literacy of professionals in initial and continuing education and training, and to facilitate the transfer of CML and the 17 SDGs into early childhood education practice. Consequently, future research should prioritize the investigation of the benefits of digital continuing education formats. Furthermore, it is recommended that larger, more diverse sample sizes be utilized to empirically validate the effectiveness of the PoMeZe continuing education module.

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