

**Teachers' Perception of Children's Agency in Early
Childhood Education**

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ABSTRACT

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The concept of agency is currently brought more and more into the focus of educational research. While professional agency at work is for instance already broadly discussed in adult education, research on children's agency is still in its infancy. Children's agency can be viewed from every aspect of children's life, the focus of this research will be on early childhood education (ECE).

For this study, children's agency is examined from the teachers' point of view. Five open-ended interviews were carried out with ECE teachers working in different kindergartens in Vienna, Austria. Additionally, one interview was held with two regional managers of the largest provider of kindergartens in Vienna. All interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016 and were analysed using content analysis. The results were not only discussed regarding general agency, but also under consideration of the Capability Approach (CA).

The results indicate that children's agency, in general, is supported by kindergarten teachers in kindergartens in Austria. The teachers receive much support in doing so, but they were also naming some hindering framework conditions. The outcomes of practiced agency in an early age are described widely positive, though certain restrictions on children's freedom of choice are seen as necessary.

This study can not only implicate a change in society and other ECE teachers' perception on the importance of promoting children's agency but hopefully will also bring about further research on the issue.

Keywords: children's agency, capability approach, early childhood education, early childhood education institution, kindergarten, teacher, teacher's perception

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1 INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have brought along a re-thinking of early childhood education (ECE). This reassessment can be seen in the changes to different ECE curricula. The curricula are not primarily listing learning goals like mathematics, (pre-)reading skills or natural sciences. Main chapters of the curricula focus on soft skills children will need for their future life inside and outside of their formal education. Many of those skills are important for being independent, a critical thinker and a self-determined person, who can make decisions based on one's own and others' needs and interests. Altogether, these are skills one needs to become an agent. Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss (2009, p. 27) define an agent as someone who brings along change. The view on children as agents is furthermore supported by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (OHCHR, 1989).

The change towards focusing on soft skills can be seen in the Austrian ECE curriculum (Hartmann, 2009) too - this being the country case selected for my study. The aim of this thesis is to take a closer look at children's agency, as part of these soft skills, in ECE institutions. This thesis focus, in particular, on:

- i) the framework conditions of children's agency (whether supportive or hindering),
- ii) how teachers are supported in their work to support children's agency and
- iii) how teachers value the importance of practicing agency for the children's well-being, as well as the current and the future development.

Research on children's agency in ECE institutions is still new, which can be seen when Maryanne Theobald, Susan Danby and Jo Ailwood (2011) write about children's participation:

Child participation, including how participation is understood from observing children's interactions, is relatively unknown (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011, p. 19).

Chapter 2 introduces definitions of agency and children's agency and it presents an understanding of childhood. The view on the child, which underlies this thesis, leads to taking a look at the UNCRC and more detailed, its articles concerning children's agency. Based on this view on the child and the UNCRC, chapter 2 describes the Capability Approach (CA) and its perception of children's agency. Lastly, the chapter discusses a collection of literature and research on children's agency in different contexts. Chapter 3 examines the nationwide curriculum for ECE in Austria – the state where the research took place – in terms of children's agency.

Chapter 4 defines the research aims and objectives and states the research questions. Chapter 5 describes the implementation of the study. The study was conducted in Vienna, Austria, where four kindergarten teachers and two regional managers of the biggest provider of ECE institutions in Vienna were interviewed. Chapter 5 also includes an ethical discussion on the research methods and the researcher's background.

Chapter 6 analyses the interviews with the kindergarten teachers and regional managers of kindergartens in Vienna. Then, chapter 7 discusses the results and gives precise answers to the research questions. Chapter 8 clarifies the limitations of the study. Both chapter 7 and 8 provide proposals for further research.

2 CHILDREN'S AGENCY

Chapter 2 will first of all give an understanding of the term children's agency and how it is used in the context of this thesis. Furthermore, it will give a short overview of the childhood studies and the understanding of childhood, as well as the connection between children's agency and the UNCRC. This is followed by a discussion of the CA, which recently started research on children's agency. As will be described in the end of the chapter about the CA, how children's agency is seen in context of the CA is going hand in hand with how it is seen in the context of this thesis. Different research on children's agency will be presented to give an understanding of this field.

2.1 The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis

In the very beginning of this chapter the use of the term *children's agency* will be explained to give a better understanding of what is meant by that term for the further reading. First of all, *agency* should be defined. The concept of agency is very complex and contested. Because of its briefness, this study is not going into detail of the debate. Instead, some relevant key notions and arguments have been selected.

Agency is seen as a person's power to do something and to take one's own initiatives – it is about actively influencing one's own life, as the definition by Littlejohn and Foss (2009, p. 27) is showing:

Agency is a concept that is generally understood as a capacity to act or cause change. The person who – or thing which – acts or causes change is termed as an *agent*.

Anneli Eteläpelto, Katja Vähäsantanen, Päivi Hökkä, & Susanna Paloniemi (2013) are defying agency in a similar way, but more detailed:

Agency in general, and professional agency in particular, has mostly had very positive connotations for creativity [...] and further for motivation, well-being, and even happiness [...]. Agency is also seen as connected to subjects' autonomy and self-fulfilment, act-

ing as a force for change and for resistance to structural power [...], and manifesting intentional action (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 46).

- Agency, in specific children's agency, is a rather abstract term which has not yet found its way into all languages – German being one of these languages. Therefore, words which were used in different research used for the theoretical framework of this thesis (see chapter 2.3 *Research On Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education*) and the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria (see chapter 3 *Research on Children's Agency: Austria as a Case Study*) were selected to describe children's agency. These terms also go hand in hand with the articles of the UNCRC as mentioned in chapter 2.1.2 *Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Specifically, these terms, which can be seen as indicators of children's agency, are: self-determination, independence/autonomy and participation. In short it can be said, if children experience and make use of these to bring along change, it can be talked of children's agency. The following chapter will take a closer look on how the child has to be seen to be able to talk about the child as an agent.

2.1.1 The View on the Child

To be able to talk about children's agency it is important to start with the division of two views on the child: Firstly, that adults are human beings and children are human becomings. This implies that a child is not a complete human being yet. One consequence of this view is that parents own their children, as children are inadequate and incomplete. This was a common understanding until the 1970s (James, 2009, p. 35) and it

[...] inhabit a 'self-regulating, autonomous world which does not necessarily reflect early development of adult culture' (Hardman, 1973, quoted in James 2009, p. 38)

which means that secondly, childhood is seen as different from adulthood, but not as an earlier, premature stage.

The second view on the child is the one connected to children's agency. Flavio Comim, Jérôme Ballet, Mario Biggeri and Vittorio Iervese are mentioning that

[...] childhood is a historical construction that depends on the way children are treated in society (Biggeri, Ballet & Comim, 2011, p. 9).

This implies that the understanding of childhood can vary from society to society. Comim et al. talk about a distinction between *children's life*, meaning the children's reality and *images of childhood*, meaning (adults') ideas of what children's reality looks like. This distinction points out that as an adult it might never be possible to see and understand a child's point of view completely from a child's perspective and it is an argument for participatory research to gain more insight (as will be described in chapter 5.6 *Ethical Solutions*). Comim et al. stress the importance of studying childhood but are reminding to keep in mind that children's ability to express themselves are limited in comparison to adult experts (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 13).

With the upcoming childhood studies, children's active participation in and interpretation of the (social) world was more and more taken into account. However, even in the 1970s and 1980s in the areas of developmental psychology, social anthropology and sociology, the view on the child was still the one, which saw the child as a human becoming instead of a human being. Just after that the view on the child started to change; it was also the time when the discussion about children as social actors started (James, 2009, p. 38).

A differentiation between an *actor* and an *agent* can be made:

[...] the actor is someone who does something; the agent is someone who does something with other people, and, in so doing, makes things happen, thereby contributing to wider processes of social and cultural reproduction (Mayall, 2002, quoted in James, 2009, p. 41).

Here, seeing children as agents means to see children as persons having an influence on the people and the world around them. It also means that children are able to reflect and make decisions and that they can recognise their actions' consequences (James, 2009, pp. 41-43). Important questions in research on children's agency are for instance the child-adult relationship, children's capacities and rights to agency (James, 2009, pp. 43-44). It has to be positively noticed that

research on childhood focuses more and more on children's self-realisation and agency (Biggeri et al., 2011, pp. 10-11). However, it is also argued that children do not get the attention they deserve, especially as important parts of a human's development are happening during childhood. Identity and worldview are shaped by (early) cognitive and emotional development and substantial for "who we will become" (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 3).

Theobald et al. (2011) sum up from different definitions that children should be seen as active decision makers with the right to influence their lives. In doing so, they can be seen as active participants who make sense of their lives. Childhood becomes a social construct in which children are seen as active members of our society. They see a strong connection to children's rights and argues that their implementation will only be possible if the general view on the child will be changed (Theobald et al., 2011, pp. 20-23).

The definitions of *agency*, in specific *children's agency*, and *childhood* are crucial for an understanding of the topic and the use of these terms in this thesis. Only when seeing the child as a living being which has the possibility to influence and bring along change, a discussion about children's agency can be started. This understanding of childhood also brings along the necessity of attributing certain rights to children. Therefore, the next sub-chapter will discuss the UNCRC.

2.1.2 Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Looking at Children's rights history it is still shocking, but no wonder that the UNCRC was opened for signature just in 1989 (Hevener Kaufman & Rizzini, 2009, p. 422). By signing the convention, a country agrees on the importance on the *Rights of the Child*. The ratification means that the head of the state is willing to imply the *Rights of the Child* to the domestic law (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, n.d.).

It was and is the international treaty signed and ratified by most countries ever. The only two countries which did not ratify the convention are Somalia and the USA (Freeman, 2009, p. 383). South Sudan, which is member of the United Nations just since 2011, is the only state that did not sign at all. Howev-

er, Somalia and South Sudan both stated their willingness to sign and ratify. If they manage to do so, the only country which did not ratify is the USA (Steinke, 2013).

First of all, the UNCRC is giving a definition of a *child*:

For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (OHCHR 1989, Article 1).

It can be seen that the UNCRC defines children by age.

In its further content, the convention wants the states always to act in the best interests of the child. The general requirements for all further rights are the definition of the child (Article 1), the non-discrimination (Article 2), the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and the respect for the views of the child (Article 12) (OHCHR 1989, Article 1, 2, 6,12). It seems to be double-edged: On the one hand they need to have laws because they are fully human. However, as childhood is seen as something different from adulthood, they need "their own" laws.

Children's agency is not explicitly mentioned, but main points are about children's participation and their right to be heard. The following articles of the UNCRC can be seen as relevant concerning children's agency.

First of all, children have the right to be heard and to have their volition considered (OHCHR 1989, Article 12):

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.

This is followed by Article 13, which is stating the child's right to express her or his opinion freely (OHCHR 1989, Article 13):

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Article 13 goes hand in hand with Article 14, which is stating the freedom of thoughts, conscience and religion (OHCHR 1989, Article 14):

States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Finally, also Article 15 is directly connected to agency, as it is about freedom of assembly (OHCHR 1989, Article 15):

States Parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Of course, all articles together are forming the big picture of children's rights, which all together are needed to live a good and healthy life and are further enabling the child to practise her or his agency. The here mentioned articles are the ones which can be seen as directly connected to agency, as they are about recognising children's volition and giving them the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions.

After defining children's agency and childhood and taking a look at children's rights, the following chapter will bring up one specific perception of children's agency, which is based on the latter described view on the child.

2.2 Children's Agency in the Light of the Capability Approach

Agency is an important aspect of the CA. In its latest research (Biggeri et al., 2011) it takes a closer look at children's agency. As the concept of CA is very abstract, its main concept as well as key terms will be elaborated before discussing children's agency from the point of view of the CA.

2.2.1 Main Concept of the Capability Approach

The CA is an economic theory developed by Amartya Sen in the 1980s and some of its content goes back to Aristotle, Adam Smith and Karl Marx (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94). As Sabina Alkire (2005, pp. 116-118) explains, in contrast to traditional approaches to the economics of welfare, the aim of the CA is not to measure welfare only by taking a look on incomes. She is pointing out the clarity about the objective (Alkire, 2005, p. 117):

[...] to expand freedom that deprived people have to enjoy 'valuable being and doings'. They should have access to the necessary positive resources, and they should be able to make choices that matter to them.

Ingrid Robeyns (2005, p. 94) sees the main characteristic of the CA in focusing on what people are able to do and to be and she describes the CA as

[...] a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society.

The CA is a moral framework, through which social arrangements should primarily be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve what they value (Alkire, 2005, pp. 116-118).

At this point it is important to mention that the aim of this study is not to measure children's well-being, but to look at the mentioned access to necessary positive resources and the opportunity for young children to practice making choices in a safe environment like ECE institutions. Robeyns mentioning the evaluation of the design of policies can also be seen in terms of evaluating ECE policies.

For a better understanding of the CA, the next chapters will describe and define the key terms of functionings, capabilities, freedom and agency.

2.2.2 Functionings – Valuable Beings and Doings

Functionings are the elements which make a life more valuable. It is the different things a person values doing or being. Functions can range from being nourished to being part of society, being literate or being able to travel (Alkire, 2005, p. 118; Robeyns, 2005, p. 95). Furthermore, Robeyns (2005, p. 98) describes functionings as the achievements, which can be reached by having the freedom to make use of a set of capabilities. Alkire (2005, 2010) defines functionings as intuitive, intrinsically valuable to the person, avoiding adaptive preferences and putting the focal space on doings and beings. This means that a person values a functioning because it is what she or he really wants, not what she or he "has to want" because the circumstances are restricting the options. Putting the focal space on beings and doings means that the human being is put to the centre of the approach. According to Alkire and Séverine Deneulin (2009, p. 10), functionings can be activities or situations that a person values. An important part of the definition of functionings is that it has to be something that the indi-

vidual has a reason to value. This prevents from including harmful doings as functionings, though of course it can be debated what a “value” can be – even Sen himself does not answer this question.

This means, research on people’s well-being should not only focus on measuring resources. An available resource is not equating with achieved functionings and therefore can not always tell about a person’s well-being. For example, 400 grams of rice per day is not of the same value to everyone. While a small child might need less and a pregnant woman might need much more, it might be the perfect amount for an average adult. So for some people the resource of 400 grams of rice per day might achieve the functioning of being nourished, as for others it might not.

The next chapter will take a closer look at what capabilities and freedom mean.

2.2.3 Capabilities and Freedom

While functionings are achievements, capabilities can be seen as the abilities to achieve (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 7). Furthermore, capabilities can be understood as the set of opportunities that a person can choose from to achieve functionings. It includes having the freedom to be able to choose between different capabilities. Important is that freedom does not mean the theoretical freedom that might be given to someone by policies etc., but the real and in practice available choices a person has in her or his live (Alkire, 2005, p. 121). Sen (2009, p. 232) describes this freedom as follows:

The focus here is on the freedom that a person actually has to do this or be that – things that he or she may value doing or being.

This shows that it is about the real opportunities a person has. It is not a freedom which is written down on paper in some policy document, but the very real option a person has. A “good” or valued life is a life based on genuine choices, and not being forced into a particular life and way to make choices – even if it would be a life full of rich resources. It is about authentic self-direction and the ability to shape one’s own destiny.

An important aspect is that freedom is not merely the maximisation of choices – it is about the to people’s life added quality. So, for instance, having the choice between ten different kinds of rice is not automatically adding more meaning to one’s life. Also, having more choices can end up in a bemused feeling – this might be a reason why some people prefer not to have to make a choice at all (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p 12).

Sen (2002, p. 506) names two aspects of freedom: the opportunity aspect and the process aspect. The former describes the real opportunities we have to achieve the functionings we value. The latter means the process through which things happen. It extends the personal level, as for instance institutions, movements or democratic practice can be involved. Both have to be taken into account.

Sen (1992, p. 40) defines capabilities as

[...] the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that a person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another. Just as the so-called ‘budget set’ in the commodity space represents a person’s freedom to buy commodity bundles, the ‘capability set’ in the functioning space reflects the person’s freedom to choose from possible livings.

An example to explain the *set of vectors of functioning*: Someone finds €10.- and thinks about what to do with it. There is a set of particular options, which are available because of owning these €10.-. This set of options is a set of vectors of functionings – it is the options a person actually has and can choose from.

Robeyns (2005, p. 101) notes that though Sen also uses the term of *basic capabilities*, which are necessary for surviving and avoiding poverty, the CA approach can be used outside of development studies, for instance, to evaluate projects and policies in societies which are not affected by poverty. This is also the case in the research at hand.

- . Even if two persons are equipped with the exact same capability set, they will most likely achieve different types and/or levels of functionings (as described in the rice-example in chapter 2.2.2 *Functionings – Valuable Beings and Doings*). Every person has a different idea of what a good life is, also influenced by family and society. Those influences can be seen as constraints, which may lead to constrained choices (Robeyns, 2005, pp.

101-102). Especially when thinking about young children, their choices might be very limited by their parents or other adults like kindergarten teachers. In these terms, it is interesting to take a look at how many and which kind of choices children can make in ECE institutions.

2.2.4 Agency and Well-Being

Human well-being is what the CA tries to measure on the one hand, but also tries to expand on the other hand. The core approach of the CA is not to measure well-being through financial welfare and per capita income, but by choices, people are able to make and which matter to them. While, according to Sen (1985, p. 203), well-being freedom is tight to achieve something specific – well-being; agency freedom is more general and bound to a person’s values. He says that

A person’s “agency freedom” refers to what the person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important (Sen, 1985, p. 203).

He defines an agent as

[...] someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well (Sen, 1999, p. 19).

An example to distinguish between well-being and agency by Robeyns (2005, pp. 102-103): One of two sisters makes use of her agency and demonstrates against the G8 meeting and gets beaten up by the police during the demonstration. While the sister who stayed at home experiences higher well-being and practiced less agency, the sister who went to the demonstration practiced high agency (according to her values) and increased her physical well-being. This example is showing that agency is about a person’s ability to act on what she values and has reason to value.

2.2.5 Human Development

According to Alkire and Deneulin (2009, pp. 4-5), development should enlarge people’s choices and its objective is to create an enabling environment for a good life. Human development covers a broad range of economic, political and

cultural aspects, reaching from economic growth to basic social and health services – so as in the CA, economic growth is just one of many factors to evaluate human development. The four main pillars of human development are equality, sustainability, productivity and empowerment. Human Development is conceptually founded on the CA and looks for its application. Though the used language might differ, the objectives stayed the same. For instance, while the CA is talking about expanding people's capabilities, human development talks about expanding choices.

Since the year 1990, there is a yearly Human Development Report published, and in the first one human development was defined as

[...] both the process of widening people's choices and the level of their achieved well-being [...] (UNDP, 1990, p. 9).

Taking a look at this definition, it gets obvious that the report uses Sen's core idea of capabilities and agency to define human development (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 5). While the definition focuses on enlarging choices, the main dimensions are life and health, education, living standards, political freedom, self-respect and human rights (Alkire, 2010, p. 9).

In 2010 the Human Development Report gave a more detailed definition:

Human development is the expansion of people's freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human development, as individuals and in groups (UNDP, 2010, p. 2).

Human development has the central goal to enable people to become agents in their own lives, as an important part of development is people's freedom to make decisions and therefore promote the development itself. It has to be noted that often decisions are made by groups and the individual's influence can vary a lot. Different values of different people are also keeping the discussion about human development alive and what is valuable will always be an ongoing conversation (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009, p. 5-6).

It can be concluded that developing agency is essential for human development and bringing along change. This is one main reason why it is important to promote agency from a very young age onwards.

2.2.6 Children in the Focus of the Capability Approach

There is little research using the CA as a child centred approach, but Biggeri et al. (2011) gathered different research to not only take a look at the theoretical perspective on children and the CA but also to understand children's capabilities and to think about policy implications. In all those researches children are seen as agents and therefore (jointly) responsible for their capabilities and well-being. Comim, Ballet, Biggeri and Iervese see a child as a subject of agency:

[...] what matters for children's well-being are their functionings and capabilities. Through the CA we are analysing what children are effectively able to do and to be (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 8).

When conducting research on children's capabilities and well-being, most of the time education plays an important role. It was already mentioned by Sen that education plays a major role in promoting capabilities (Biggeri et al., 2011, pp. 4-9).

Though children are seen as agents, Comim et al. agree with other authors that the level of a child's agency can vary according to age. Mobility is mentioned as one main example, as it is less important to a new-born than to a teenager (Biggeri et al., 2011).

According to Comim et al. (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 14), the CA can provide a useful theoretical framework for studies on children's well-being.

2.2.7 ECE Institutions as a Social Arrangement

When Comim et al. are talking about

The essential idea of the CA is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 7)

it can be seen that social arrangements play an important role. ECE institutions can be considered as such social arrangements. The social and physical environment can play a major role, as they can enhance or limit capabilities (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 8).

The kindergarten as a social arrangement should offer an environment which is supporting children's capabilities and furthermore their agency. As

Participation is the autonomy's expression and the individual expresses itself in autonomous ways by participating (Biggeri et al., 2011, p. 11)

children's participation should be promoted. An important part of the process of participation is communication, as it can be seen as the coordination between action and understanding. As understanding can hardly be measured, participation can only be demonstrated by action (Biggeri et al., 2011, pp. 11-12). Considering this, it is important for ECE teachers to communicate with children and to observe their actions. Without participation in communication, children will be constrained in their participation and as a result of this constrain, they will also be hindered in their agency. When an ECE teacher observes the children in her or his group, she or he will see the level of participation of the different children. Through further communication and arrangement of the physical environment, participation of all children can be advanced.

Similar findings are presented by Sonja Sheridan, Pia Williams and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson (2014) when conducting a research in Swedish preschools. The organisational conditions and the group size were said to have an influence on the pedagogical quality:

The core of pedagogical quality lies in the interplay between different aspects in terms of curriculum goals, staff-child ratio, group size, space, materials, content, pedagogical processes, interaction and communication between teacher and child and how these different aspects influence one another (Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014, p. 381)

Part of the environment and also responsible for the pedagogical quality is the group size and child-teacher ratio. While for younger children, in general, a smaller group size is better, for older children a bigger group can bring about more opportunities for social contacts and interaction with peers, as long as the child-teacher ratio is good. In Sweden, the average staff-child ratio in preschools is 5 children per staff member. Main disadvantages of too big groups and bad staff-child ratio are too little time for the individual child, a higher degree of conflicts between the children, too little time to observe children and listen to them and some children might become "invisible". For qualitative pedagogical work teachers tend to build smaller groups, if the staff-child ratio allows it (Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014, pp. 381-383).

As mentioned above, observing children and communicating with them is necessary for promoting children's participation and agency. If big group sizes and a bad child-staff ratio are hindering the teacher in communicating with the children and observing them, as a conclusion it also has an adverse impact on promoting children's agency.

The same study is stating that children have much free time, which means that they play by themselves and are free to choose between different activities (Sheridan, Williams & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014, pp. 381-383).

2.2.8 Conclusion

The CA gives a definition of children's agency which is a bit more restricted than the definitions given earlier. A child acting out agency does not only bring along change, but a change which is of value for her or him. Later on the results of this thesis' research will show, that the choices children can make in ECE institutions are mainly concerning the here and now-choices which are of value for the child in the very moment the child gets to make the decision. Furthermore, according to the CA, ECE institutions can be interpreted as valuable when it comes to promoting children's agency. It brings up the influencing role of the kindergarten teacher. Considering that the teacher has a big influence on children's development of agency, it is justified to do research on teacher's perception on children's agency in ECE institutions. This can, for instance, give a better understanding of what is needed to support teachers in their future work.

The following chapter will take a look at research which is informed by an understanding of childhood, the child and her or his rights as just described.

2.3 Research on Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions

As already mentioned, research on children's agency in ECE institutions is in its infancy. Nevertheless, there is some research on - especially Nordic - kinder-

gartens and pre-schools, which is about freedom of choice in children's everyday life or at least mentioning aspects of it as part of another research.

Before different research on children's agency or aspects of it will be discussed, ECE and Care will be defined accordingly to the European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice (2015, p. 9):

Provision for children from birth through to compulsory + primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e., it has to comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures.

This goes hand in hand with the definition given by the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria (Hartmann, 2009, p. 1), which is saying that ECE institutions (German: *elementare Bildungseinrichtungen*) are all institutional forms of education and care of children until they enter compulsory education. The nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria is ensuring pedagogical quality in all ECE institutions in Austria and will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 *Research on Children's Agency: Austria as a Case Study*.

Research by Larry Prochner, Ailie Cleghorn and Nicole Green (2008) is taking a look at how space is used in various kindergartens in different cultures. One main aspect is the availability and accessibility of materials. The western approach to quality in ECE is to have flexible space arrangements, opportunities for hands-on experiences and self-directed play. A typical kindergarten room is divided in learning centres – one is for reading, another one for building, another one for art, etc. The role of the teacher is described as supporting children verbally, while the children are handling the material themselves:

The vision of an early childhood classroom in the minority world is of a single, multipurpose room, stocked with materials freely accessible to children, arranged accordingly to themes activity centres. [...] The organisation of space thus presumably supports the educational purpose of the programme (Prochner, Cleghorn and Green, 2008, p. 191).

This means that children are encouraged to access toys, games and materials independently. Rooms are described to have lots of materials and equipment, but limited space for larger gatherings and private play – the latter mainly because of the teachers' supervision obligation. Though this seems to limit children's agency, children's space is described as a room for dialogue, free expres-

sion, critical thinking and being heard, which is clearly supporting children to practice their agency (Prochner, Cleghorn and Green, 2008, pp. 191, 194).

Solveig Nordtømme (2012) is also taking a look at place, space and material – the main aim of her research is to see how those are influencing participation and relationships in kindergarten. As Nordtømme observed children's free play, she also experienced children using their agency to make use of places, spaces and different materials. With reference to Corsaro she is saying that children try to gain control of their own lives and that they want to share this control with their peers. Furthermore, they will use their power to challenge rules and adult's authority (Nordtømme, 2012, p. 321).

In a situation, where various plays were going on in the same room, some girls used yarn to mark their play area. Indeed, this activity kept other children away and allowed them to go on playing without anyone entering their play-space (Nordtømme, 2012, p. 324). In another example, Nordtømme (2012, p. 328) was told by the children, how one of them is able to climb over the plank, which should actually prevent them from climbing on the windowsill. In the same room, they also found a hole in the wall from where they can lick off some white powder, which – according to the children – gives them magic powers and makes them strong.

The first example shows especially how important access to different materials is when it comes to promoting children's agency. The second example shows how children practice their agency to overcome adult's authority.

Similar to the second example, Elizabeth Ann Wood (2013) talks about how children are making use of their agency to avoid rules. Though free play in ECE institutions should enable children to exercise agency, there is no such thing as 100% free choice, as the educational setting is restricting children's agency through the materials offered and how space is arranged (Wood, 2013, pp. 4-5). Wood describes three factors which can promote and hinder children's agency in ECE institutions (Wood, 2013, p. 6):

1. Children's home-based culture can influence how children handle situation of free choice, depending on how familiar they are with it.

2. Gender is influencing children's choice. Their play choices might be depending on their gender and are responsible for constructing their gender identity.
3. Ethnicity, social class and ability or disability can influence their choices and might build boundaries between different social groups.

Agency has a transformative potential, as it includes the ability to make a change. It also includes reflexive processes and metacognitive capacities. These result into the ability to overcome different rules and to use different strategies and techniques of power (Wood, 2013, p. 7). Wood comes up with an example of overcoming rules made by adults, in which children are not allowed to build two layers with large hollow blocks. The rule is that the construction can not be higher than their belly button. The children try to overcome this rule by standing on one of the blocks, which makes their belly button be "higher up" (Wood, 2013, p. 10). This is a good example of children using their agency to overcome a rule, without actually breaking it.

Practicing agency can also be about inclusion and exclusion, especially in social environments like kindergartens. For instance, whispering or complete silence can be used to exclude oneself or others from an activity (Wood, 2013, p. 13). This is also supported by the research of Annika Löfdahl (2006) and Löfdahl and Solveig Hägglund (2006), who are discussing children's play, especially free play. In their research, they observed moments of agency, in which children were demonstrating their power to exclude other children from a game or to discriminate others within a game. A child can, for instance, allow another child to join a game as a baby who can not do anything but sleeping, eating and crying, when everyone else is playing adults with a lot more possibilities to interact within the game. Löfdahl and Hägglund see children as active participants in our society and as human beings who are bringing along cultural production and change (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006, p. 81). Löfdahl (2006, p. 87) is stating:

The fact that children, through their agency, also have potential to contribute to societal change stresses the importance of taking advantage of the possibilities to influence children's peer-cultures.

In this research, adverse effects of practiced agency are detected. This should make kindergarten teachers being aware of peer cultures and their effects – already in kindergarten.

Jyrki Reunamo et al. (2013) are not specifically mentioning agency when talking about children's physical activity in day care and preschool. They state that teachers need to empower children to take responsibility for their own well-being and help them building a sustainable and healthy culture which is shared by everybody (Reunamo et al., 2013, p. 46). As, according to Reunamo et al., gross motor skills are fundamental for developing one's personality and other skills such as social and emotional well-being, it is important to offer children situations to practice and develop their gross motor skills. To do so, children have to have the possibility for physical activity. Their research was showing that 57.1% of high physical activity occurred during free play outdoors and 24,2% during free play indoors (Reunamo et al., 2013, p. 39).

Summarising can be said, children need physical activity for developing skills needed for practicing agency and the best opportunities for high physical activities are given during free play, especially outdoors.

A not so positive view on freedom of choice is reported by Anne Trine Kjørholt and Monica Seland (2012). They took a look at the *Kindergarten as a Bazaar* – a concept, in which different rooms in the institution fulfil different purposes and functions and the children can choose in the morning circle where they want to go. In this case, one room might be only for construction games, one for role play and another one would be a creative workroom. Each teacher takes responsibility and supervision obligation for one of these rooms. This model is

[...] focusing on 'the competent child' and 'modern pedagogical ideas', and emphasizing children's freedom of choice and rights to influence their everyday lives in the kindergarten (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012, p. 169).

While here the metaphor of a bazaar is used, the counterpart is the traditional *kindergarten as a home*, which means each group has its own room, where all different activities can be practiced (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012, pp. 170-171).

Kjørholt and Seland are positively stressing the theoretical concept of the children's meetings, which are held in the morning to choose where each child wants to spend the forenoon. It is promoting children's rights, their ability to make decisions and active participation (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012, pp. 174-175). However, the authors strongly criticise the implementation of the concept: A restricted number of children per room limits the children's freedom of choice and the children could not change the choice they made in the morning later on. Sometimes children are unhappy with the options left when it is their chance to pick a place. Furthermore, whole rooms might stay closed because of lack of staff and it is more complicated for the teachers to get a holistic picture and documentation of one child if the teacher can not watch her or him doing all the different activities (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012, pp. 176-178). Additionally, children have to deal with a much bigger number of other children and adults and teachers have to develop their organisational skills (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012, pp. 179-180).

This research clearly shows that promoting children's freedom of choice and agency needs an excellent organisation and planning, as well as a change in adults' way of thinking. This brings up the question of the adults' or teachers' role when it comes to children's agency in ECE institutions, a topic which is discussed by Maritta Hännikäinen and Helena Rasku-Puttonen (2010), who were taking a look at the teachers' role in promoting participation in preschool and primary school classrooms in Finland. It has to be noted that this is not the same age-group as a group of kindergarteners, which is the main target of this thesis, as pre-schoolers in Finland are usually six to seven years old. Also, the focus is on how teachers are promoting participation in activities.

In doing so, one observed preschool teacher encourages children not only to participate in the offered ongoing activity but also to make use of their agency. Firstly, the teacher encouraged a boy who did not want to take part in a game at the gym to participate but accepted his decision not to join (Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010, pp. 151-152). Secondly, the teacher let the children vote on which game they will play next (Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010, pp. 152-153). Thirdly, the teacher encourages one boy to use his

skills to help other children with some arts and crafts (Hännikäinen & Rasku-
Puttonen, 2010, p. 153).

Even if this research is not directly connected to agency, the given examples are illustrating situations in which a teacher promotes children's agency while encouraging them to participate in ongoing activities.

Another research on teachers' view on children's participation in preschools was conducted by Anette Sandberg and Anette Ericsson (2010) in Sweden, based on the assumption that children, who are heard and seen, will experience participation and feel influential. To make the child feel involved, teachers have to be able to understand the child's perspective (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, p. 620). Sandberg and Ericsson do not talk of agency, but of participation, which they define as

[...] mostly based on availability to influence and decision-making as well as being able to choose [...] (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, p. 626).

Moreover, they are saying that according to the research results

[...] children are participating when they perform an activity or actively take part in decision-making. The preschool's role from this perspective is then to make the ability to influence available to the children (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, p. 626).

The results are showing that children do need a safe environment for being able to develop themselves. Social skills and the ability to express oneself verbally are essential for active participation. It is also mentioned that by mastering the everyday life, children's self-esteem is growing (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, p. 623). The preschool staff is mentioning three aspects of participation: the ability to influence, a sense of belonging (experiencing solidarity, unity and fellowship) and the performance of activity (to actively take part). The teachers are seen as responsible for increasing possibilities for participation, though also the amount of available staff, the children's age, informal structures and organisational structures of the preschool, language skills and the parents' influence play a major role. A way to improve children's participation is high accessibility to materials and activities. Overall, the interviewed teachers shared the opinion that supporting children's participation can still be further developed (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, pp. 623-625). Furthermore, the results are showing that

according to the staff, self-determination and management of everyday life can be seen as indicators of participation. The staff sees communication as a central factor, as it is the biggest possibility for influence. Additionally, self-sufficiency and autonomy are described as important (Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, pp. 625-626).

An important note is that teachers see the overall responsibilities for pedagogical issues and activities in their and the staff's hand and they do not think that children can have a saying when it comes to pedagogical responsibility. This goes hand in hand with what Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan are saying:

[...] children's participation is not a question of listening to children and then letting them decide. It is more about interpreting children's intentions and actions and to have trust, even expectations, that a child can handle and manage things with the right support and guidance from adults (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, quoted in Sandberg & Ericsson, 2010, 629).

- . Though this research is as well conducted in a pre-school setting with six to seven-year-old children, it describes agency in a kindergarten-like setting very well. Sandberg and Ericsson (2010) are talking about participation instead of agency, but as an agent was earlier (see chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*) defined as someone who brings along change, it can be seen that in a community like a pre-school or kindergarten, agency can hardly be practiced in this setting without participating in this community. Using the term of participation also goes hand in hand with the UNCRC as presented in chapter 2.1.2 *Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Therefore, this article gives many terms which can be used to describe or measure children's agency in ECE institutions further, like for example self-determination, self-esteem, autonomy and management of everyday life.

The same issue can be addressed when Theobald et al. (2011) are talking about child participation in the early years. Here the focus is on the age group of children participating in ECE, but the term agency is not used. According to them, the implementation of children's participation in ECE is proceeding just

slowly and is often seen as challenging. One reason therefor is children being seen as too young. Nevertheless, they stress the importance of children being included in decisions concerning themselves. Different from Sandberg and Ericsson (2010), who see communication as a requirement for participation, Theobald et al. (2011, p. 20) are mentioning that participation can enhance communication. Very interesting for this thesis is Theobald et al.'s note that children's participation depends on the teachers' mind-set (Theobald, 2011, 23). This suggests that teachers' perspectives have a significant influence on the children's possibilities to practice their agency in ECE institutions.

The presented research on children's agency is helping to get a better understanding of children's agency and showing the broad spectrum of possible research in this area. Most importantly, the presented research was used as a basis for building the interview questions, which can be found in *Appendices*. The main topics of the mentioned research can be found in the guiding interview questions – for instance the influence of the organizational structure of the kindergarten on children's possibilities to practice agency.

Furthermore, with the concept of the kindergarten as a bazaar (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012), children using their agency to overcome rules (Wood, 2013) and using practicing social exclusion (Löfdahl, 2006; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006) the question on the role of the teacher can be brought up. How do kindergarten teachers perceive children's agency? Are they enabled to support children in their agency? Do they see a connection between children practicing agency and the well-being of children? These questions, brought up by the presented research, are strongly informing the empirical part of this thesis.

3 RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S AGENCY: AUSTRIA AS A CASE STUDY

After defining children's agency and related terms and taking a look at different research, this chapter will examine the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria. As the curriculum is the foundation of a kindergarten teacher's work, it will be discussed from a children's agency point of view.

As will be described further in chapter 5.1 *The Context of the Study*, in Austria the nine federal states are responsible for providing ECE and care. Nevertheless, the importance of a nationwide equally quality of ECE institutions has been under discussion for several years and in 2009 the *Charlotte Bühler Institute*, together with kindergarten superintendents and consultants from all nine federal states, developed a nationwide curriculum (Hartmann, 2009). In the following, the content of this curriculum will be discussed in the matter of children's agency, using the indicators as described in chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*. The nationwide curriculum and the curriculum developed in and for Vienna – where the research for this thesis took place – are congruent (Hartmann, 2009; Cochlar et al., 2006). While Vienna was the first federal state to have a curriculum for ECE, today the aim is to have only one nationwide curriculum. As the extent of this research comes along with some restrictions, for this thesis this future trend will be followed and only the nationwide curriculum will be taken into account.

An interesting first note can be made concerning the foreword (Hartmann, 2009, foreword), in which different politicians of the federal states' governments stress the importance of a nationwide professional ECE system. Things they see as important are first of all learning through play without any pressure to perform and putting the individual child, its well-being and needs in the centre of the pedagogical work. Concrete educational aims they name are language skills and a positive personal development. Terms like children's agency, children's

rights, independence or self-determination are not mentioned once in the foreword. This issue will be further discussed in chapter 7 *Discussion*.

3.1.1 The View on the Child

The view on the child goes hand in hand with the description of the child as an agent as mentioned in chapter 2.1.1 *The View on the Child*. The child is seen as being born as a competent individual and co-constructer of her or his development. Being a co-constructer means that educational processes are designed by both child and adult(s). Children are not only co-constructing their educational processes but also creating their social and cultural environment. Furthermore, play is seen as the essential form of learning for children (Hartmann, 2009, p. 2).

- . The nationwide curriculum mentions the rights children have and considers them as a foundation for the work with children. Specifically mentioned at this point are the right to be respected as an individual, the right to good health and well-being and the right to freedom of expression (Hartmann, 2009, p. 2). As mentioned in chapter 2.1.2 *Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children's rights are essential when talking about children's agency.

Good health and especially well-being are both subjects of research and goal of the CA (see chapter 2.2.4 *Agency and Well-Being*). The nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria does not define good health and well-being any further. The right of freedom of expression could, in terms of the CA, be seen as a capability (as described in chapter 2.2.3 *Capabilities and Freedom*). As the subsequent elaborations will show, main goals of the curriculum are to support children in being able to make use of their freedom of expression.

3.1.2 Kindergarten Teachers' Responsibility

The collected data for this research will show the kindergarten teachers' perspective on children's agency, so it is important also to take a look at what the curriculum is saying about the teacher's responsibilities.

The teachers' responsibility is to fulfil all tasks and matters mentioned in the curriculum, but it is highlighted that the teachers' job is to create a stimulat-

ing environment, which is balancing between children's self-regulated learning process and diverse educational learning opportunities offered by the pedagogical professionals. As basics of a kindergarten teacher's work, individual educational guidance and reflexion of one's own actions and behaviour are mentioned (Hartmann, 2009, p. 2).

As children's self-regulated learning is mentioned as something specific teachers are supposed to support, it is evident that self-determination has to be supported as well, as part of the self-regulated learning. Nevertheless, it has to be brought into balance with teacher-led activities.

3.1.3 Education and Competences

Educational processes are defined as dynamic and to have the goal of enabling humans to be able to act independent and as an individual. Based on that, education should fulfil the aims to enable the human to

- self-determination,
- participate in society and culture and
- take over responsibility (Hartmann, 2009, p. 5).

Education is based on learning processes and it is assumed that children have an intrinsic motivation to explore their environment and learn about it. In doing so, children develop their view of the world and extend their competences. Competencies are defined as a network of knowledge, abilities and skills for being able to act in different situations. Out of the given list of competences, especially self-competence and social competence are important for developing agency. The former is about having a positive self-image, being independent and able to be responsible for oneself. Social competences extend one's ability also to take responsibilities for others and to be able to think critically before acting in a societal setting (Hartmann, 2009, pp. 5-6).

Education – which is supposed to happen in ECE institutions – is responsible for developing knowledge, abilities and skills for being able to act in different situations. There can be a drawn a connection to the CA when thinking of those skills and the mentioned competences as capabilities. This would mean

that education in ECE institutions is supposed to provide children with the capabilities (or tools) for achieving functionings later in life.

In addition to that, there is a list of 12 principles for educational processes in ECE institutions. Two of them correlate directly with children's agency: empowerment and participation. Empowerment means to support each child's strengths and potentials, which will result in more autonomous and self-responsible acting. Participation is mentioned as a contribution to early political education, but also as an essential requirement for being part of social processes. It is important that children learn to take over responsibilities for themselves and others (Hartmann, 2009, pp. 3-4).

An important framework condition for educational processes in ECE institutions is a dynamic environment, which supports self-organisation and self-determination. Such an environment can be reached by offering inspiring facilities, which also give some space for relaxation and through qualitative educational material. Of the same importance is children's freedom of choice when it comes to material, activities and whom they want to play with. Additional factors are time and an atmosphere of trust (Hartmann, 2009, pp. 7-8).

It can be seen that concepts like self-competence, self-determination, freedom of choice and being able to act in different kinds of situations are mentioned in the basic pedagogical concept of ECE in Austria. To take an even closer look, the following chapter will discuss different fields of education mentioned in the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria.

3.1.4 Fields of Education

Educational processes always concern several areas of education. The nationwide curriculum divides its fields of education in

- emotions and social relationships
- ethics and society
- language and communication
- physical exercise and health
- aesthetic and design
- nature and technology

Though some connection to children's agency can be found in all fields of education, especially the first three fields are relevant for promoting self-determination and children's agency (Hartmann, p. 10).

Starting with *emotions and social relationships*, emotional self-regulation is named as the foundation for cooperation and conflict management skills, as well as taking over responsibilities for oneself and others. To do so, children have to be able to express their own emotions and interests (Hartmann, pp. 10-11). For children to act out their agency, they also have to be able to communicate their needs, emotions and interests to others. Furthermore, they have to be able to negotiate, for which they will need cooperation and conflict management skills. The educational field of *emotions and social relationships* can therefore be seen as important for promoting children's agency.

To be able to express anything verbally, the field of *language and communication* must be taken into account. According to the curriculum, language is the most important medium for interaction with the world. It is used for expressing feelings and impressions and to understand oneself and others. The dialog between adults and children in ECE institutions is important to understand the children's interests and needs. Furthermore, language is important for one's identity, so the language spoken at home – most times considered as the mother tongue – has to be taken into account (Hartmann, p. 14).

The curriculum mentions the ability to participate in the field of *ethics and society*. The nationwide curriculum defines participation in ECE as the children's possibility to take part in decisions which concern their own life or their life in the society. In the same context the term of participation goes even further and means to be able to take up a critical attitude (Hartmann, p. 13).

3.1.5 Conclusion

The nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria is traversed by terms connected to (children's) agency like participation, independence, self-organisation and self-determination and is supporting the development of skills which are needed to make use of one's own agency, such as language or social

skills. If agency is seen as the ability to act, the curriculum is supporting many skills which are needed to be able to do so.

Agency is not specifically mentioned, though this could be considered as a language issue. There is no German word yet which literally translates *agency*. Different translations or words are used to talk about children's agency in German. The most common ones, when taking a look at the different research, the curriculum and the interviews conducted for this research are participation, self-determination and independence.

If it is the teacher's task to fulfil what is written in the curriculum and children's agency is indirectly mentioned there, it can be assumed that promoting children's agency is an important task of kindergarten teachers in ECE institutions. Therefore, chapter 6 *Results: Teachers' Perception* will take a closer look at the teachers' perception. Prior, research aims and objectives will be defined and the implementation of the study will be presented.

4 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to examine children's possibilities to develop and perform their agency.

To achieve this aim, this research is specifically taken a look at kindergarten teachers perspective. To gain this point of view, interviews with kindergarten teachers and regional kindergarten managers, who used to work as kindergarten teachers, were conducted in Vienna, Austria. The interviews are based on the following research questions:

- (1) How is children's agency supported by kindergarten teachers and environmental factors in ECE institutions?
- (2) How are kindergarten teachers supported and encouraged to support children's agency in ECE institutions?
- (3) How do kindergarten teachers in ECE institutions in Vienna rate the importance of children's agency for the children's well-being, current and future development?

5 IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

This chapter will define the context of the study – ECE institutions provided by the municipality of Vienna, Austria and the process of choosing research participants will be presented and critically discussed. Research and data analysis methods will be described, before talking about reliability and ethical considerations.

5.1 The Context of the Study

The research was conducted in Vienna, Austria. As described in chapter 3 *Research on Children's Agency: Austria as a Case Study* the responsibility for kindergartens in Austria lies within the federal states and even within the federal state of Vienna, several providers co-exist. For this research the provider *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*¹ was chosen.

With 959 out of 2.969 early childhood institutions in Vienna in 2015 (Statistik Austria, 2016b, p. 1), the provider run by the municipality is the largest one. While in 2009 82.985 children between the age zero and ten² were enrolled in ECE institutions, in 2014 the number raised up to 100.583 (MA 23, 2015, p. 14). In 2014 more than 36.000 children went to a service provided by *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* (MA 23, 2015, p. 16).

In 2002 the European Council agreed on the Barcelona objectives, which set the aim to

[...] provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age (European Commission, 2013, p. 4).

¹ *MA10 - Wiener Kindergärten*: MA 10 means magistracy (German: *Magistratsamt*) number 10, which is the magistracy of the municipality of Vienna responsible for providing kindergartens

² in Vienna also primary school afternoon clubs are organised by kindergartens

In the year of 2012 there were 18.265 children born in Vienna – in 2014 the number raised to 19.260 and in 2015 it was even 19.931 (Statistik Austria, 2016a, p. 1). As can be calculated from the given numbers, this objective is met in Vienna. Furthermore, in Vienna 43% of the children under three years (65% without considering children younger than one year) and 100% of the children between three and the mandatory school age are enrolled in day-care (MA 23, 2015, p. 9).

Considering this, it is evident that ECE plays a significant role in Viennese children's everyday life. As the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* is the biggest provider for ECE in Vienna and the extent of this thesis does not allow to take a look at various providers, it was chosen as the subject of research.

There are three different forms of day-care: *Kindergarten* (English: kindergarten), *Kindergruppe* (English: children group) and *Tageseltern* (English: in home day-care provider) (MA 23, 2015, p. 13).

In kindergartens (German: *Kindergarten*) only qualified kindergarten teachers are allowed to teach and each location has to have a pedagogical head. There are different types of groups offered (MA 23, 2015, p. 13):

- *Kleinkindgruppe* (English: toddlers group): for children until the age of three
- *Kindergartengruppe* (English: kindergarten group): for children from age three until the start of compulsory education
- *Hortgruppe* (English: primary school afternoon club): for kids in compulsory education
- *Familiengruppe* (English: family group): from age 0 until compulsory education or combined with a primary school afternoon club until age ten

All those different kinds of groups can be found in kindergartens provided by *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*, though not every kindergarten is offering all the mentioned types of groups.

Children groups (German: *Kindergruppe*) are not allowed to have more than 14 children present per day and the caregiver can have a qualification as a children group caregiver, which is a much shorter training than the education

for kindergarten teachers. Often children groups are run by parents and they need to be approved by the municipality (MA 23, 2015, pp. 13-14).

Home day-care provider (German: *Tageseltern*) can offer flexible care at their own homes. They also need to be approved by the municipality and have to do a specific training in advance (MA 23, 2015, p. 13).

In 2014 only 1% of the children younger than six years enrolled to day-care in Vienna were visiting in home day-care, 9% were part of a kinder group (MA 23, 2015, p. 34).

ECE institutions in Vienna and especially the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* are trying to meet the compatibility indicator for family and job. This means that the institution offers (MA 23, 2015, p. 30):

- qualified staff
- maximum numbers of workdays the institution is closed not exceeding 24 days
- the institution is open at least 45 hours a week
- the institution is open on working days Monday to Friday
- the institution is open at least 9,5 hours on four days a week and
- offers lunch.

In 2013/14 95,2% of all children enrolled in ECE institutions in Vienna, visited an institution which met these criteria. This differs a lot from the other federal states in Austria; as well as the costs for day-care. In Vienna, most kindergartens are free of charge, except private run kindergartens. The last year of kindergarten is compulsory and free in all federal states of Austria (MA 23, 2015, pp. 30-31).

Taking a look at the opening hours, free of charge service and given numbers, it gets even more obvious how much time children spend in ECE institutions in Vienna. Therefore, kindergarten teachers do have a great impact on their lives and it is eligible to take a look at their possibilities to educate young children to be agents of their own life.

5.2 Participants

Four kindergarten teachers and two regional managers of *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*, who used to work as kindergarten teachers, were chosen as research participants. All research participants were female.

After submitting a research enquiry, the management of *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* chose one regional manager, who again asked four kindergarten teachers working in kindergartens in her region and another regional manager, whom she wanted to do the interview together with. The researcher's request to interview kindergarten teachers teaching in the different environments of

- a group with mainly children whose mother tongue is German
- a group with mainly children who have German as a second language and
- a group including children with disabilities

was considered, but it has to be mentioned that otherwise the researcher had no influence on the choice of research participants. As there is no insight into the reasoning of choosing the participants, it might be questionable if the selection of interviewed kindergarten teachers is representing the totality of kindergarten teachers working in kindergartens of *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*.

5.3 Research Methods

After reviewing possible methods for research in educational contexts, a qualitative approach was chosen. The research was conducted in a relatively new field of education and there is no existing data about children's agency in ECE institutions in Austria or Vienna yet. Luis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, & Keith Morrison (2011, p. 226) state that a significant difference between qualitative and quantitative research is the fact that quantitative research formulates hypotheses in advance. One approach towards qualitative methods they mention is that in qualitative research

[...] it is impossible to predetermine hypothesis, whether one would wish to or not, as prior knowledge cannot be presumed (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison 2011, p. 226).

Referring to Meredith Gall, Joyce Gall & Walter Borg (2003, pp. 24-25) qualitative methods, like case study research, are more suitable for discovering concepts and theories after the data has been collected. Holistic observations can be made and the meanings that individuals create can be studied. As Cohen et al. (2011, p. 414) are saying, qualitative methods are looking for something and are interpreting the data, while quantitative methods are looking at something and the collected data is describing.

These characteristics of qualitative research are more appropriate for studies in a field which has not been researched before.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In general, interviews give the space for spontaneity on the one hand, but can still be controlled by the researcher on the other hand. It is an optimal method to get more complex responses and explore deep issues (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 226).

Semi-structured interviews in specific were chosen to give the interviewee the possibility to give broad and complex answers but to still have a leading thread. In comparison to more open interview styles, semi-structured interviews can be compared more easily, as the central questions will lead all the interviewees thorough the interview in a similar way (Cohen et al., 2011, pp. 412-414).

5.3.1 The Use of the Term *Children's Agency*

As was pointed out already in chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*, the term *children's agency* is not always specifically mentioned. Additionally, there is no literal translation of the term in German language.

To be able to talk about children's agency with the kindergarten teachers in Vienna without using a term, which might not be familiar to them, I focused on indicators which were described already in chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*, when talking about the understanding of the term children's agency. These indicators are self-determination (German: *Selbstbestimmung*), independence/autonomy (German: *Selbststän-*

digkeit, Eigenständigkeit, Autonomie) and participation (German: *Partizipation, Mitbestimmung, Teilhabe*).

5.4 Data Analysis

As a first step, the interviews were transcribed. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 537) mention the provision of relevant details when transcribing interviews for further data analysis on the one hand, but the loss of non-verbal aspects and the issue of transcribing being very time-consuming on the other hand. Regardless of the downside, transcription was chosen to make it easier to compare different answers from different interviews.

The interviews were conducted in German, as the interviews took place in Vienna, Austria. Therefore, also the transcriptions were made in German to make sure that no content will get lost because of translation. Parts which were used as direct citations were translated into English. This is because of a better flow of reading and making the results easier accessible for the international research community.

For analysing, the data, content analysis was chosen. As described by Gall et al. (2007, pp. 282-285) and Michael Quinn Patton (2002, pp. 434-435), content analysis is suitable for analysing interviews with recurring themes.

According to Cohen et al. (2011, p. 464)

Content analysis takes texts and analyses, reduces and interrogates them into summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes in order to generate or test a theory.

It often uses categorisation as one main feature and is especially suitable for analysing large quantities of text, like transcribed interviews. Its focus is on language and linguistics – so the above-mentioned loss of non-verbal aspects when transcribing interviews is not of utmost importance. Its systematic and verifiable approach makes re-analysing possible (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 463).

Citations from the interviews were done by stating the interview (Interview A to E) and the corresponding line numbers. As the names of the research

participants have been anonymised, teachers were labelled as P1 to P4³ and the two regional managers as R1 and R2.

The results will be presented in chapter 6 *Results: Teacher's Perception*. The presentation of the results will be organised accordingly to the interview questions and the topics appearing when answering the questions. This way of organising the results was chosen as the easiest way to compare the answers of the research participants and the most logical way to present the results. Later on in chapter 7 *Discussion* the research questions will be answered and will also go back taking a look at the indicators as described in chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*.

5.5 Reliability

Cohen et al. (2011, pp. 201-203) suggest the term dependability instead of reliability for qualitative research, as the criteria differ from the reliability in quantitative methods. It is often criticised that qualitative research can not generate very high reliability, but on the other hand its strength lies in describing the uniqueness of situations. According to the authors (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 202)

In qualitative research reliability can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched [...].

They (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 412) are stating, interviews have a more limited reliability in comparison to questionnaires, mainly because of the small number of responses.

To raise the dependability, it is important to minimise the amount of bias – the researcher will always have some influence on the interviewee, but by reflection her or his own role, attitudes and understandings, the bias can be kept low (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 204). As mentioned in chapter 5.5 *Reliability*, transcribing the interviews and using content analysis for analysing the data gives the research more dependability, as it makes the analysing process more transparent (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 463).

³ P comes from the German word *Pädagogin*

5.6 Ethical Solutions

During the different phases of this research process, several considerations were taken into account in order to ensure quality and ethical integrity. Consent was asked from the management of *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*, the head of the four kindergartens and the four kindergarten teachers. As the children were not at all directly involved in the research, no consent was requested from them or their parents/legal guardians. Nevertheless, it was promised to the people consent was asked from that no names of children will be published. The names of the research participants were anonymised. Also, consent was asked from all interviewees to record the interviews for the purpose of transcribing them with the promise that all audio files will be deleted after the evaluation process. Additionally, the location of the kindergartens is not published. This way it will be made sure that no staff members, children or their families can be harmed in any way with the given information.

Providing the results of the research was offered to all participants. The full thesis will in the end be sent to the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* and all research participants.

It is also important to note, why research on children's agency is conducted by doing interviews with kindergarten teachers instead of doing participatory research with children, as suggested by Alison Clark & Barry Percy-Smith (2006), Jane Coad & Ruth Evens (2007) or Philip Darbyshire, Colin MacDougall & Wendy Schiller (2005). Participatory research is meaningful, but also much more complex and time-consuming. Because of the briefness of this thesis and the available resources, participatory research with kindergarteners was taken into account in the beginning, but in the end considered as not reasonable. Regardless, chapter 7 *Discussion* and 8 *Limitations of the Study* will give a preview of a possible further research including participatory methods.

5.6.1 Reflection: The Authors Personal Background

I did my two-year-long kindergarten teacher training during the academic years 2008/09 and 2009/10. During this training I got to experience various

kindergartens from different providers while doing my practice weeks. I never got to work in a kindergarten of *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*, but in a private kindergarten, a kindergarten from the second biggest provider of ECE in Vienna, a kindergarten belonging to the University of Vienna and a *Kindergruppe*, as described in chapter 5.1 *The Context of the Study*. After graduating from the kindergarten teacher training school, I used to work part-time in one of the kindergartens in Vienna which are run by the Catholic church.

Both during my training and working in the kindergarten run by the Catholic church, I struggled a lot with working in a classical kindergarten and discovered my passion for the work in the alternative *Kindergruppen*. Main reasons were the far too high child-teacher ratio in classical kindergartens, which restricted possibilities for valuable pedagogical work a lot. My personal feeling was to have to run after 25 children, have all of them in my sight every second and to make sure they would, for instance, all do the same creative work-piece, to be able to present it to the parents. It hardly seemed possible to consider children's individual needs. I heard about similar problems from my classmates from the kindergarten teacher training.

I found my professional home in one of the alternatives to the classical kindergartens - one of the *Kindergruppen*, which are run by parents. Within a highly qualified team, we were always two teachers working with a group of maximum 14 children. I experienced what it means to have the time and possibilities to discuss different issues with the group or individual children, to give them freedom of choice in as many situations as possible, to hear their opinions and to let them develop their self-determination, participation skills and independence in a safe environment. Personally, I experienced a work which brings me joy instead of stress and the support of children's agency and rights became an important aspect of pedagogical work for me.

After three years of studies in Finland and studying more about children's agency, it is a concern of mine to investigate the support of children's agency in ECE in Austria. An overall aim for me is to raise the awareness about the topic, train kindergarten teachers more specifically to be able to support children in

their agency and to make it easily possible for kindergarten teachers to implement this knowledge in their everyday work.

6 RESULTS: TEACHERS' PERCEPTION

In the following, the content of the interviews is analysed as described in the chapters 5.3 *Research Methods* and 5.4 *Data Analysis*. The results are presented in line with the interview questions and the topics which came up when answering the questions.

After talking about seeing the child's identity as a principle for the pedagogical work in ECE institutions, different aspects of the daily routine will be discussed in terms of children's agency. This is followed by chapters which are discussing different factors which support or hinder children in practicing agency. These factors are the age and development of children, framework conditions, pedagogical concepts, the use of room, space and time and the children's background, family and home. Furthermore, the level of decision making in ECE institutions will be discussed as well as the benefits of practiced agency.

6.1 The Child's Identity as a Principle

One fundamental aspect mentioned by all research partners is to enable children to independently access and recognise their personal space and belongings, without any help needed from an adult and to support their independence in doing so. In the toddlers' group the focus is on using photos of the children (Interview A, 56-60), so they can recognise themselves and know for instance where their place in the dressing room is, to find their drawer for personal belongings or to identify their very own diapers.

With the older children, there is a stronger focus on their names. While earlier all kindergartens used signs – for instance, one child had the sign of an apple; another child had the sign of a sun – there is a significant shift going away from this approach. The reason for this shift kindergarten teachers gave is that children identify themselves through their name and not with a sign like an apple or sun. Even if kindergarten children can not read yet, they are very soon

able to recognise the typeface of their written name (Interview B, 190-196; Interview D, 72-75).

Being certain about oneself and one's identity is part of being able to practice agency. To concentrate on photos (mainly for the children younger than three years) and the names instead of some symbols is supporting this. Additionally, it gives the children the opportunity to operate more independently if they are able to recognise their space in the dressing room, their drawer for personal things and so on.

6.2 Daily Routine

Something that was stressed by the regional managers is the fact that children need to have rules, structures and limits. Those rules, structures and limits are building a protected area in which the children can feel secure. Without a certain feeling of security, it is not possible to feel one's own needs and make decisions (Interview D, 59-61, 174-182, 230-234). This can be seen in most of the teachers' descriptions of children's freedom of choice. As will be described in the following (sub)chapters, there are a lot of moments of choice in the daily routine, but they also almost always include some restrictions.

One interview question was about the daily routine and which situations offer opportunities for independence and self-determination. The following situations were mentioned explicitly by all research participants as situations which offer opportunities for independence and self-determination.

6.2.1 Morning Situations

There is a big focus on giving children choices in their daily routine. When the kindergarten teachers talked about the daily routine in their kindergarten group, they stepped from one moment of choice to another.

In the mornings most kindergartens would have just one group open for the early arrivers. In interview E it was told that the first choice of the day chil-

dren could make is to decide, when they want to enter the classroom⁴. Children have the option to stay in the cloakroom for a while, as long as they remain in the teacher's field of view (Interview E, 36-46). The moment all classrooms would open, it is the child's choice to stay still in the early morning group or to go to their own classroom. There was an important note that one teacher from the toddlers' group would always be present in the morning, to give the very young children a more secure feeling (Interview A, 61-63). Having the choice on which group to stay in or go to was also mentioned by the regional managers, though they stressed the importance that the child has to go and put her or his clip or magnet to the right spot, so teachers will know where each child is (Interview D, 66-77).

Something very traditional in Austrian kindergartens is the morning circle time. It is handled differently in various kindergartens and by different teachers. The teacher from interview A (209-217) sees it as important for the toddlers to come together and she tries to support them to make all of them take part. She was also mentioning that in general the children are interested in what is happening there. Another approach is to have one morning circle in the whole kindergarten and all children are free to choose if they want to join or not (Interview B, 601-609). It has to be mentioned that this happens in a quite small kindergarten with only two groups - this makes it easier to have just one morning circle for the whole kindergarten, compared to a kindergarten with five groups.

A good example of child-oriented work was given in interview C (145-148) when it came to talking about the morning situation. Though the morning circle is something that the teacher used to do every morning, during last year the children were so absorbed in their play and other activities that she barely did morning circles. Here the children were apparently not asked to make a choice, but the teacher was changing her behaviour and daily routine according to what the children needed.

A similar description was given by P4 - she was doing a morning circle depending on the children's needs:

⁴ German: *Gruppenraum* - which translated literally would mean *group room*

We did not have a morning circle in the classical sense. Sometimes we had the morning circle at 10:55, if we wanted to go to the garden, sometimes we did not have it at all – depending on the children’s mood and what they were doing. If they were fully engrossed in their play, we just went from room to room and told them to start finishing their play and put the toys away, because we would go to the garden in ten minutes (Interview E, 98-105).

The regional manager R1 summed this slightly different approaches up as well when talking about her vision of a typical morning get together. All children should be notified about their group gathering for a morning circle or meeting, but the children should have the choice to join or not. The children should understand that it would be nice to come together, especially when relevant topics are discussed. However, if one child is, for instance, fidgeting all the time, it does not make sense to force the child to stay, as she or he would only disturb the rest of the group (Interview E, 90-106).

6.2.2 Free Play and Outdoor Play

As was confirmed by the regional managers, all kindergartens managed by them have at least some kind of an outdoor play area. Most times it is a garden, but otherwise there is at least an inner courtyard or rooftop terrace (Interview D, 111-123). Considering the research of Reunamo et al. (2013) as mentioned in chapter 2.3 *Research on Children’s Agency in Early Childhood Institutions*, this can be seen as a great potential for developing motor skills, which are subsequently responsible for developing further skills needed for practicing agency. This is supported by the regional managers, when talking about going outside on a daily basis, no matter what the weather will be like (Interview D, 107-110).

While during free play it is, of course, the children’s choice what, where, with whom and how long to play (Interview E, 105-107), the outdoor play in the garden offers similar moments of choice as well. As far as it is possible, all kindergarten teachers offer the children to choose between going outside or staying inside (Interview A, 110-117; Interview B, 495-502). Though when the weather is good, some kindergarten teachers tend to go outside with the whole group, on other days the children can decide if they want to stay inside or go to the garden (Interview A, 110-117).

P4 had a quite similar attempt. In general, children can choose between staying inside or going to the garden, but she would tell children who tend not to go outside at all if they can choose, she was telling them to go outside, but not without discussing with the child why it is important to her. Her argumentations were the children's health, the curriculum and the parent's wishes. It is crucial to her not to force the child, but to make her or him see the importance of going outside (Interview E, 276-285). This is a good example for several situations in the kindergarten. Children do have a choice, but when it comes to health issues, the teacher is intervening. Even though the child's self-determination gets cut down here, there is a discussion which should make the child understand the importance for her or his well-being. It can be hoped that by this act the child will learn to make decisions which are good for her or his well-being in the future.

In one kindergarten the children even had the option to go outside without an adult coming with them. This is just possible because one classroom has a big glass front towards the garden. There is also a restriction of two to four children per group and it is not possible to play outside during the naptime (Interview C, 137-140). Though the regional managers see the supervision obligation as very important, this is highly supported by them. R1 was mentioning the importance of the kindergarten teacher supporting this – it does not work if the teacher is full of worries and anxiety (Interview D, 124-128).

Additionally, the children can choose the toys which are taken out from the garden shed in some kindergartens. Again restrictions might be made by adults if the selected toys do not fit the season, like sledges during the summer (Interview A, 124-126). Particularly, in this case, it could be critically asked, whose interests are given priority in this case: Is this something connected to the children's safety and well-being? Do the teachers forestall the children's experience that a sledge might not work during the summer?

Going outside also offers practicing independence when it comes to putting on the clothes (Interview A, 118-121).

In interview C it was mentioned that the free play time is shaped by the children's decision. If some of the children do not want to join what the main

group decided to do, the teacher tries to find a solution for the children – like letting them stay inside with another teacher or letting them join going to a playground with another teacher. This team of teachers is currently working on making it possible that each teacher is offering something different and all children from the whole kindergarten can decide which teacher they want to join. Examples were different teachers going to different playgrounds or different trips being offered and the children can choose which one they want to join (Interview C, 167-183).

The afternoon free play was mentioned specifically just once, but it was described as very similar to the morning free play. The snack time is very similar to the breakfast. Most likely it will be followed by a visit to the garden, but the length might depend on the weather. In the late afternoon groups are put together again (Interview E, 237-240). This means that children do not get to decide so much on where exactly they want to play, but they can choose what to play and there is very little teacher-led activity.

6.2.3 Food Situations

Much freedom of choice and possibilities for self-determination is offered during the meals – there are breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack. In all interviewed teachers' groups, all three meals are flexible, meaning, children can go and eat whenever and with whom they want within a certain timeframe (Interview A, 64-65). Children are not forced to eat at all and they can choose what they want to eat. It was also mentioned that even just eating the desert is an option. This is a concept by *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*, which has to be followed and was indeed explained in the same way in all interviews (Interview A, 221-227; Interview B, 633-661; Interview C, 108-118). Compared to earlier, when the child had to eat what was served, this is an entirely different concept, based on trusting the children that they will know what is best for them.

However, in the meal situation can not only be found much self-determination regarding what and when the children want to eat, but also independence in taking dishes and food. It is important that the children are able to do this independently and that they also get to practice using cutlery instead

of having pre-cut food (Interview B, 175-179; Interview C, 106-108, 124-127; Interview D, 81-82; Interview E, 156-160). A method used to help children understand which dishes they have to take is to have a photo of all the dishes they will need for the offered food (Interview B, 180-185). It is not only their task to set the table independently, but also their decision when they want to eat, with whom, what and how much.

Food is offered within a certain time frame, as, for instance, described in interview E. In this kindergarten breakfast is offered from 8:30 to 9:30 (Interview E, 79-82). The staff was trying to make as visible as possible to the children how much time is left to go and eat. They were trying to find a method which does not involve them telling the children personally and to keep it the child's own responsibility to go and eat on time. First, they tried it with a gong – an acoustic signal – to make them know when the breakfast starts. This did not seem to be enough, so they also created some visual material. They crafted an apple which represents the full hour of eating time. After half an hour half of the apple is removed and after 45 minutes another quarter of the apple is removed (Interview E, 47-57).

Nevertheless, there are restrictions, mainly based on framework conditions like the amount of food delivered by the catering company (see chapter 6.4 *Hindering Framework Conditions*), but sometimes also based on the teachers' knowledge about what is good for a child's health, as described in an example given in interview E (179-186):

[...] we had quark dumplings⁵ and we let one child, whom we knew of he can eat a lot, take as much as he wanted. He ate eight dumplings. That is when I thought this could not be good. That is when I said: *Now you can take one more dumpling, but then we will start cleaning up.* I simply had to draw a line, because I can not imagine that it is good for a five-year-old child to eat eight dumplings.

The same teacher also talked about having to intervene when it came to certain disabilities:

[...] we had a child with Prader-Willi's syndrome. The parents asked us not to give any sweet food to the child. Of course, this child only ate what we gave to him. Or children with diabetes – they also can not independently take as much as they want, because we have to weight it. Children with diabetes could eat as much as they want, that is no problem because the insulin is administered afterwards, but anyway we had to make a lot of

⁵ a sweet Austrian dish

decisions for the child. If the blood sugar level was 300, I was not allowed to say: *No problem, eat – I will inject you your insulin anyway*. This does not work; this is about the child's health (Interview E, 142-151).

Altogether there has to be the trust of the teachers that children can feel themselves and know what is best for them. They should trust in the child knowing if she or he is hungry and has to eat or not. Knowing when I am hungry is also seen as an important thing for the child to know and feel (Interview D, 83-85, 192-195).

This concept of a food situation, especially at lunch time, is a rather new approach and the teacher from interview E described the issues with staff at the kindergarten, who are not on the same pedagogical page and tend to try to convince the children to try the food. It is important that these situations are reflected within the team over and over again, to make everyone understand that it is the child's decision (Interview E, 383-386, 394-400).

Also, P2 was mentioning that it naturally happens that teachers try to make food more tempting for the children, like telling them that it tastes good and that they should try – of course with accepting the child's answer in the end. However, P2 was also admitting that even this trying to make it more tempting should actually not be done (Interview B, 659-661). On the other hand, P4 was saying that if new foods are introduced, the teachers do put a little more effort by asking the children to try the food. Again she was mentioning that the child's answer has to be accepted. She thinks if children know that they are not forced to eat anything, they are more likely to try new things (Interview E, 386-391). The regional managers do think that the children should only be animated to eat and try food by the way the food is visually presented and offered. The child can choose from three different courses – soup, main dish, desert – and as an alternative there will also always be food available from the breakfast or snack time. If a child feels hungry, there will be something she or he likes to eat. If the child does not feel like eating, this has to be accepted (Interview D, 197-213).

6.2.4 Naptime

Naptimes are handled very differently, but not rarely all children until a certain age have to sleep or at least rest. Often this brings more frustration and disturbance to the teacher and the children who want to sleep. Therefore, it is interesting to take a look, if children have a choice to choose between sleeping, resting and playing.

In the toddlers' group, it is more usual that all children take a nap after lunch time. Nevertheless, there are options for children who can not or do not want to sleep – they can play silently in the group or the hallway or outside on the terrace (Interview A, 151-157).

In interview E the teacher described the nap time in general, not only specifically for her group. Also in the toddlers' group of this kindergarten, all children are supposed to take a nap. Children should at least try, but if they can not sleep it is ok just to rest for a little while and then go and play. Of course as well for the toddlers, but especially for children older than three years, it depends on the children's needs. Children can sleep up to two hours or even longer (if they are not picked up), they can rest for a bit or they can not sleep at all. An important rule for groups where children are sleeping is that during the nap time all activities have to be calm and quiet ones, to not wake up the others. Children can also make use of the open house concept (see chapter 6.5.2 *The Open House Concept*) and go to another classroom in the kindergarten, where children are not sleeping (Interview E, 196-198, 202-217).

Sometimes parents have wishes which do not go hand in hand with what the children need during their daily routine at the kindergarten. Then some dialogue with the parents is necessary to make a decision based on what is best for the child (Interview E, 219-227):

For instance, if parents are saying their child should rest because she or he is always so tired in the afternoon. We accommodate this wish, but if we, as competent persons, realise that nothing is changing and the child is never falling asleep, we will not let the child lie in bed for two hours. It is pointless. Or the other way around – the parents are saying their child should not sleep because she or he can not fall asleep in the evening. However, in the kindergarten, the child is falling asleep at the table. Of course, this child will get a bed or sofa to rest for half an hour. In this case, you have to make it transparent to the parents and communicate that right now it does not work else wise and that it is the best for the child.

6.2.5 Creative Work and Crafts

Creative work is part of a teacher's pedagogical work in kindergarten. Earlier it used to be like this that the teacher will offer one creative work and all children will have to do it, often using many templates, so they would all look very much alike. In this kind of work, there is neither much creativity – due to the templates, nor a significant potential for independence and self-determination, if every child has to do it and also has to do it the same way (Interview D, 237-240).

In general, there are two types of creative work the kindergarten teachers were talking about. First of all, there is the regular creative work which is happening throughout the year. It is handled differently – some teachers are more often offering materials and discover together with the children what can be done with it. Other teachers are more often offering particular work pieces. Most important is that no child has to do anything. If the teacher is proposing to do some creative work it is up to the children who wants to join (Interviews A, 307-308; Interview C, 352-357; Interview E, 436-441). Another important aspect which was mentioned is that creative work should be template-free. It does not matter if a snowman consists of three differently sized white balls or five pink lines. It is important that the teacher accepts the child's artwork the way the child made it (Interview C, 363-366).

The other type of creative work are things created for events and special occasions. The example given by all of the teachers were the lanterns for the yearly lantern festival⁶. For the lanterns, all kindergartens of the interviewed teachers are offering different techniques or designs. Mostly it was the case that different teachers of different groups would each offer one technique and the children can choose which one they want to do (Interview A, 300-301; Interview B, 72-77; Interview C, 330-332, 343-346; Interview E, 424-431). The children know about this special event and most of them are eager to do their very own lantern, but there are also a few children who do not want to make one. This

⁶ *Martinsfest* or *Laternenfest* is an event in November, based on the Catholic Saint Martin and in kindergartens children do a walk in the darkness with their self-made lanterns

decision is accepted by the teacher and the child has to experience the consequence (Interview A, 301-303; Interview C, 328-330, 346-350). One given option is also that a friend would finish it for the child (Interview E, 431-433). Though this is a nice touch, which is for sure protecting the child from being sad because of not having the artwork for the actual event, the downside of having it done by another child is the fact that the child will not experience the consequences of her or his own decision.

P1 was mentioning that it is the teacher's job to offer different creative works in a kind of way that sooner or later every child gets to practice their creativity and fine motor skills (Interview A, 310-314). This is also the regional managers' point of view. Every child should practice her- or himself in different techniques, as the techniques build the basis for further creative work and crafts. In the end, the result is not that important for the pedagogical process – it does not matter what a child is cutting out, as long as she or he is practicing how to use a scissor. Additionally, the material has to be available and accessible, so that creativity can be practiced at any time (Interview D, 240-262).

6.2.6 Participation in Teacher-Led Activities and Special Events

In interview B the teacher was telling about free choice when it comes to special events. Besides the fact that some children are not allowed to join some festivities because of religious reasons, children can always choose if they want to join or not. If a child decides not to join (or is not allowed to), one adult will stay with the child in some separate room. Also for not discriminating children who are not allowed to join because of religious reasons, this is a quite natural solution without putting any stress on the child. P2 also mentioned that a child, who does not want to participate, will probably only disturb the rest of the children (Interview B, 518-534). This freedom of choice was supported by the regional managers (Interview D, 88-90). It can be seen as a very child-focused approach, as the decision is entirely up to the child and it is not set as an educational goal that the child has to participate for instance at least in one lantern festival during her or his time in kindergarten.

In interview E (265-270) a similar approach was described. Usually, the teacher would tell about her planned activities in the morning circle so that children would know about it. In the end, it would be the child's decision if she or he wants to join this teacher led activity or not. In this kindergarten birthdays and excursions are exceptions, as all children of one kindergarten group are supposed to take part in these events.

6.3 Age and Development of Children as a Crucial Factor

Age and development of the children is mentioned as a key factor for the amount of independence:

The children are setting the table on their own, depending on the age and development of the child with support from our side and the children also clean up. On our food cart, we have photos with plates, cups and so on, to make even the youngest understand: This is where the dishes belong (Interview A, 73-78).

This teacher is working in a toddlers group, but the same fact was also mentioned by other kindergarten teachers, who were working with older children. In this example, a main reason for more support from adults are the motoric skills, as it is about taking and carrying dishes and food.

The regional managers were also referring to the children's age when it comes to the appropriate and possible level of decision making (Interview D, 312-314). This goes hand in hand with Comim et al.'s (Biggeri et al., 2011) opinion (see chapter 2.2.6 *Children in the Focus of the Capability Approach*).

As stated in chapter 2.1.2 *Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, age is also used as the main factor to distinguish between an adult and a child (OHCHR 1989, Article 1) and also Sandberg and Ericsson (2010) described age as an influencing factor (see chapter 2.3 *Research on Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions*). Age seems to be a reoccurring factor when it comes to the admission of rights and possibilities for practicing agency.

6.4 Hindering Framework Conditions

Though in general the teachers felt supported in their work when it comes to children's agency, they were naming some framework conditions which are restricting children's independence and self-determination.

6.4.1 Lunch Situation

One such situation is the lunch, as already mentioned above. The catering company brings a certain amount of food, depending on the number of children. Though children are in general encouraged to take as much as they think they want to eat and to experience themselves how much is too much, there is not always enough food to allow this experience. In interview A the teacher describes this as follows (Interview A, 139-145):

They can decide the amount they want to eat. In the beginning, they tend to put too much on their plate and half of it gets thrown away – but this is a learning process. That is the way it is. Just on some days the amount of food is too small because the size of a portion is small and then we have to say: *Please leave something for the others*. The children do understand this quite early.

The catering company offers three kinds of regular foods: vegetarian, without pork and meals without dietary restrictions. A limitation for the children is that they are only allowed to take the food they are signed up for. How children can know which food they can take is solved in similar ways in all kindergartens and can be described with an example from interview B (163-171):

When the parents sign up their children, they have to tell which food their child is allowed to eat. Because of the different cultures, there are children who can not eat pork. Available is turkey, vegetarian and meat including pork. Each menu has a colour at our kindergarten. The photos of the children are marked with a colour and the child can recognise: *I have a red dot, I can eat the menu with pork meat*. The different main courses are placed on the table and the child can take food from the food with the red clip. Earlier it was like this that the teachers told the child which food he or she can take or they gave it to her or him.

A similar description was given by P4 (Interview E, 161-167). Though there is a restriction and children do not have the free choice, there is a choice for acting independently. It can be seen that the teachers are trying to offer the biggest possible chance for independence within the given framework conditions.

Children's wishes concerning food can hardly be taken into consideration when it comes to lunch, as the food is prepared and delivered to all *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* by the same catering company. Regardless of the downside, the regional managers told that they are encouraging the kindergarten managers and teachers, for instance, to buy additional sausages when they know that a certain lunch does not provide as many sausages as the children would like to eat. Breakfast and afternoon snack are offered by the individual kindergartens, which gives the opportunity to involve the children in the decision-making on which food will be offered (Interview D, 164-167, 223-226).

6.4.2 Language Barrier

All kindergarten teachers, who have many children with German as a second language in their group, were talking about the language barrier. One main task when children start their kindergarten year is to develop their German language in a way which will enable them to make use of their self-determination and independence (Interview B, 65-68, 107-112; Interview E, 16-31).

As the teachers seem to see language as a crucial factor, it can be assumed that they see language skills as a part of social skills – being able to express own wishes and feelings and being able to communicate and negotiate with others – which are needed for acting as one's own agent. This was also mentioned in the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria (Hartmann, 2009).

6.4.3 Supervision Obligation

One main issue, which was described as the first commandment in kindergartens (Interview D, 491), is the supervision obligation. Teachers have to find a compromise between watching all children all the time and letting them being independent. There are different solutions for letting children play without being in the field of view of an adult and still keeping the supervision obligation.

The regional managers were describing a split between supervision obligation and children's needs. General regulations and especially safety rules are getting tighter and tighter (Interview D, 545-552). As an example, they gave climbing on trees. While earlier children were climbing on trees, today already

a cut-down tree, lying on the ground, might be seen as too dangerous to climb. As safety and supervision obligation are high priorities, it would be good if parents offer children those, as dangerous claimed, experiences. Unfortunately, the regional managers feel like this is not the case and so the children lack these important experiences and opportunities to practice their motor skills (Interview D, 575-592). Even the mobile furniture (as described in chapter 6.6.1 *Room and Space*) is sometimes discussed to be too dangerous for the children (Interview D, 595-597).

It seems a bit paradox, but a crucial factor for supporting children's independence and self-determination is the number of available staff members. For instance, P1 was saying that the children can choose fewer toys in the garden, if there is not enough staff outside (Interview A, 279-281; Interview B, 500-502; Interview D, 144-146; Interview E, 40-43, 273-275, 297-298). In stress situations, which are usually caused by being short of staff members, teachers might decide and make their decisions not transparent. It is important to reflect on how to make teachers' decisions more transparent to the children, so children will understand that adults decide based on what they think is best for the children (Interview E, 473-485).

In general, it is not always possible to have all twenty or more children in the view at every moment. This is seen neither possible nor good for the children's development (Interview B, 409-413; Interview D, 512-516). An important aspect of using space without adults are conflict management skills. When children are playing on their own, it is important that they also are able to solve their conflicts on their own (Interview B, 326-335, 503-517; Interview C 156-161). Especially the already mentioned social skills can be seen not only as a crucial factor for letting children play without an adult watching them all the time but also for practicing agency, as it was also mentioned in the curriculum (Hartmann, 2009).

Furthermore, it was mentioned that it is about the trust the teacher has in a child or group of children and their ability to act responsible and independent. However, it is also important to give children new chances, even if playing outside of the teachers' view did not work well previously. It is a learning process

for the children on their way to independence and self-determination (Interview D, 521-528). P2 describes (Interview B, 339-342):

However, we have the trust in the children and the children have the trust in us and they have already achieved a certain level of independence, so we can let them play on their own.

6.4.4 Constructional Factors

Constructional factors can play a role as well, though this is an issue which is more likely to arise in older kindergartens, which were built in a time when children were not supposed to play outside of their classroom. There is an example of an older two-storey kindergarten, in which only the children of the groups on the ground floor (which had a terrace door towards the garden), were allowed to go outside even without a teacher being with them outside. Nowadays this very independent visit to the garden was is not possible anymore, because parents from children, whose groups were on the upper floor and who did not have this opportunity, were complaining about this inequality. Considering this and the supervision obligation, the concept was changed to always having one adult in the garden, if the staff situation allows this (Interview E, 291-308).

A similar description was given by the regional managers. It is possible to let the children use the sports hall without an adult being with them if the room is next to a classroom. If the sports hall is in a basement or several rooms and doors away, this is incompatible with the supervision obligation. The same issue was described regarding the garden. Also, teachers, parents and children have to understand that because of constructional factors, not every kindergarten can offer the same things and possibilities (Interview D, 471-501).

These examples are showing up three different hindering aspects: constructional factors, supervision obligation and parent's wishes. This - and also the previous mentioned hindering framework conditions - goes hand in hand with influencing factors referred to by Sandberg & Ericsson (2010), as described in chapter 2.3 *Research on Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions*.

6.4.5 Compulsory Activities

Compulsory activities like preschool sessions or German as a second language sessions were described as possible hindering framework conditions as well. Children are not always interested and then the teacher is torn between following the given instructions and accepting the child's decision not to join a weekly session (Interview E, 494-507).

6.5 Pedagogical Concepts

First of all, it was mentioned that the curriculum for ECE institutions is fostering children's independence and self-determination a lot. As was also described in chapter 3 *Research on Children's Agency: Austria as a Case Study*, it was mentioned that the curriculum is traversed by those aspects (Interview A, 233-234).

One question coming up was how teachers learn about children's agency and how they are supported in supporting the children to become independent and self-determined. This was answered by the regional managers in the following way (Interview D, 535-541):

Actually through the kindergarten managers on pedagogical days, on which topics are acquired and developed over and over. The standards, die curriculum, the new planning⁷ - those are many tools which the employees are offered from the side of the employer. They can orientate themselves by those things and acquire things together with the team and manager at the kindergarten.

It can be seen that all different levels at the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* collaborate to understand better and develop the importance and support of children's agency in their kindergartens. Documents seem to build the base, which is used for further discussion. Teachers are not left alone with what is written down in documents like to curriculum - they get support from their kindergarten managers, who again get support from their regional managers. The realisation of different concepts is brought to live through reflexion, discussion and input of the whole team.

⁷ (see chapter 6.5.3 *New Planning Approach*)

Different pedagogical concepts used in kindergartens are in favour of promoting independence and self-determination, as P1 described when talking about the kindergarten she is working in (Interview A, 49-53):

We have been a *Montessori* kindergarten for a long time, with a huge focus on *Montessori*, which also supports the independence of the children. For several years we are working with the *Emmi Pikler* pedagogy, which is developed especially for toddlers and which is also supporting the self-determination.

Montessori pedagogy is a very common pedagogical approach in Austria and it is used a lot in kindergartens and primary schools. Also, the *Emmi Pikler* approach is something that becomes more and more common when working with children younger than three years old.

Social skills were mentioned a lot in the nationwide curriculum for ECE institutions in Austria (Hartmann, 2009). The regional managers described social skills as the basis for making co-decisions. To be able to take part in a kids conference, children have to be able to listen to each other, to wait and to solve conflicts. It is one of the kindergarten's main task to teach these skills to the children (Interview D, 380-387).

In general, the regional managers describe having social skills as part of being able to practice agency (Interview D, 619-631):

Making decisions, yes. But also to learn that free choice means having responsibilities for myself and others. (...) That is why it has to be seen in the context of social skills. (...) How do others feel, if I push my decision through? How is the reaction? How do I feel, if someone else is making a decision? (...) It has to be seen in a bigger context, which in my opinion has to do a lot with responsibility and self-discipline, but also with social skills. To live out one's individuality will only work including consideration and awareness of others.

6.5.1 Portfolio Folders

Something rather new in Austrian kindergartens are portfolio folders. It is a personal folder to which every child can add drawings, different artworks, photos, written down experiences, etc. The folder can not be accessed by anyone else but the child without her or his permission (Interview A, 169-170; Interview C, 373-374; Interview E, 338-342).

P1 was mentioning that the younger the children are, the more difficult it is to let them take care of the portfolio folders themselves and especially with the one-year-olds it is probably more the teacher who is choosing the content

(Interview A, 268-270). Again, this restriction is due to the factor of age and development.

Children also have their personal drawer – a space where they can put toys they brought from home, treasures they found and drawings they made. Very much like the portfolio folders, this drawer is a personal space and it should not be accessed by anyone else but the child it belongs to. A concept used by some teachers and also mentioned by P2 is to empty these drawers once a month together with the children and to ask them what they want to take home, what they want to put to their portfolio folder and what should stay in the drawer. Doing so, it is important to accept the child's decision and not to try to convince her or him to put something in the folder. This is also a learning process for the teachers, as they really have to put the child's will first and not think of how to represent themselves or their work in the child's portfolio (Interview B, 207-218).

6.5.2 The Open House Concept

A concept which was described by three out of the four kindergarten teachers, as well as the regional managers, is the open house concept. It means that children have their own kindergarten group and the group has an own classroom, but the children can go and visit other groups most of the time.

To make this possible without neglecting the supervision obligation, the children have magnets or clips with their name or a photo on it. The kindergartens have pictures of all the different rooms, so the children can put their magnet to the room they will go to (Interview B, 40-44, 301-304; Interview C, 93-102; Interview D, 70-79; Interview E, 248-251).

P2 was mentioning two important factors – the size of the kindergarten (amount of kindergarten groups) and the reflexion of the kindergarten teacher on how to set boundaries which combine the open house concept, the supervision obligation and the support of children's agency:

About the independence: It really works very well here. We are a small kindergarten; that is why I think it works faster. In bigger kindergartens, it needs more time. To support independence, you have to be open and able to say: *For me, it is ok until this point but not any further. This is ok, but then it stops.* I think, if you open up and set the boundaries right, one can say that one is ready. The open house concept is not: *Open the door and go and play.* Be-

ing together and learning from each other are important. If there are morning circles in five groups and one child does not want to join the circle in her or his own group, but in another one, the teacher has to accept it. Alternatively, there is only a morning circle in one group and those, who want to join, join it (Interview B, 591-602).

Not only the teachers' ability to reflect is important, but as P3 described, the team and how they cooperate plays an important role. Also, teachers need to learn to let the children of their group go and they have to get away from a "this is my kindergarten group – those are my children"-thinking. This seems to be a difficult task for some teachers (Interview C, 184-193).

An additional benefit was described by P2. It can happen that a child is not sympathising so much with the teacher and if this child always has to stay with the same teacher in the same room, she or he might not have an attachment figure. When children can go and play in other groups' classroom, they can also interact with other teachers and are more likely to find an attachment figure they can really sympathise with (Interview B, 293-301, 690-692).

The teachers were mentioning that the concept of the open house is still developing and changing a lot. A main question was and is, if the different classrooms should still be furnished like traditional kindergarten classrooms or if each room should have one theme. The latter was also described in chapter 2.3 *Research on Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions* as a kindergarten as a bazaar (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012). At the moment the most common approach seems to be to have the rooms furnished as classical kindergarten classroom with some thematic priorities. One room might have a creative area, a household area, board games, books, some space for relaxation but the construction area is offering extraordinary much materials. The room next door is furnished in kind of the same way but might focus on providing a bit more creative materials (Interview E, 260-263). Another mentioned solution is that one classroom offers a lot of LEGO in its construction area, but the other classroom offers much more PLAYMOBIL. This was also supported by the regional managers (Interview B, 612-623; Interview D, 337-338). P2 summed this up:

This is the purpose of the open house that children can go to another room, where for instance the household area offers more material (Interview B, 624-626).

The only downside of the open house concept was mentioned when it comes to children with disabilities. Many of them need their attachment figure and familiar surroundings. A big kindergarten with too many different people and too much openness might be a disadvantage for them (Interview C, 208-215). This was also mentioned by the regional managers. Some children, especially some children with disabilities, need some steady structures. Therefore, it is good if some furniture and structures in a room are not and can not be changed (Interview D, 316-322).

6.5.3 New Planning Approach

Another approach is a new kind of planning, which is more child centred than the old one. The regional managers were describing this new approach as one, which is focusing on the support of acting self-determined. A very crucial task of the teacher is to observe the children, to be able to implement their ideas and interests. Instead of having a planning for a whole kindergarten year, with an overall topic for this year, the new planning approach does not plan so much in advance. Its purpose is to pick up the ideas from the children and develop the planning day by day and week and by week. P3 gives an example of her group getting extremely exciting about playing *Memory* and then implementing a *Memory* project (Interview D, 280-297; Interview C, 398-415).

This approach is not only very child-centred but also gives the children more chances to actively co-create the planning. Here might be space for development, as it was only mentioned to pick up children's ideas and interests through observations. This new type of planning is offering many opportunities to actively let the children decide.

6.6 Concept of Room, Space and Time

6.6.1 Room and Space

During the interview the regional manager R1 was reflecting on what room means and came to the following result (Interview D, 328-336):

What does room mean to me? A room is a whole classroom, but it has to offer a lot of things: Children should have the possibility to retreat, so if I spend the whole day there, I have the opportunity to be only in my small space. [...] It needs space – an area where I can build something on a large area.

Here room is seen as the physical classroom, as it was designed with walls, doors and windows. This room has to offer different kinds of spaces – small and cosy ones for relaxing, hiding and retreat and wide and open spaces which allow play which needs much space.

Something mentioned by all the kindergarten teachers is furniture which suits the children's needs in different ways and which especially promotes their independence. This is something, the teachers were mentioning several times during the interviews, for instance:

Over there we have a very low cupboard on which the breakfast dishes are placed – the napkins, the plates, the cups (Interview A, 72-74).

Pencils and materials for gluing are on a level which suits the children so that the children can take these things themselves. Also, the watercolours⁸ are on a level which suits the children so that the children can paint any time (Interview A, 165-168).

P2 described the second level in her classroom, where children can play without being permanently watched, though there is a possibility to look upstairs from the main room. Depending on the development of the children, they can play more or less independently (Interview B, 307-324).

Also, spaces outside of the classroom are used, even if the teacher can not always see what is going on there. In this case, it is very important to leave the door to the classroom open and to have an adult next door (Interview B, 325-326). Alternatively, children can play in the cloakrooms and entrance hall as soon as the busy arrival time ended and staff members are passing the hall regularly (Interview D, 517-520; Interview E, 84-97). In interview C the teacher was mentioning that additionally to the classrooms also the small sports hall, the hallway, the (entrance) hall and the office can be used for play or finding a quiet space. Even empty storerooms which are attached to the classrooms can be utilised (Interview C, 141-144, 219-226). This goes hand in hand with the open house concept as it was described in chapter 6.5.2 *The Open House Concept*.

⁸ German: *Malfarben* – different kinds of paint which are usually used with a paintbrush

An important place is the garden. All teachers were mentioning going outside – or at least offering the opportunity to go outside – on a daily basis, described in chapter 6.2.2 *Free Play and Outdoor Play*.

In general, there are no restrictions on how many children can play in one room or play area. The teachers see it as important for the children to make their own experiences on how they can interact in different group constellations. The children have to ask independently if they want to join a game or area, which is already in use. Nevertheless, the teachers also talked about not allowing certain constellations of children, if there have been a lot of problems (Interview B, 47-54).

Something that recently changed in some kindergartens is a concept of having fewer tables in the rooms. Instead of many tables, for instance movable platforms, which the children can also use for hiding or a possibility of retreat are used (Interview C, 232-233). Children are not restricted to play games just at the table. As far as possible furniture is made mobile with little wheels, so children have a chance to rearrange things according to their needs (Interview C, 424-438; Interview D, 323-327; Interview E, 445-446). Though this concept is fostering the idea of using different toys and games at various places and making everything accessible to children, some materials can be used only in the designated space. Watercolours are an example – they have to be used in the creative corner and can not be taken to, for instance, the reading area (Interview E, 321-337). Though of course, this rule is restricting the children in their agency, this is also about learning how to use different materials without breaking some other common good.

Though it felt a bit weird to her in the beginning, P3 described getting rid of most tables and furnishing the room with carpets and moveable platforms in different heights as the best thing that could have happened to the kindergarten, as it is giving so many more possibilities to use the room and space (Interview C, 438-441, 472-476).

6.6.2 Time

There were hardly any statements about the concept of time. As can be seen from the description of the daily routine (see chapter 6.2 *Daily Routine*), the daily routine in kindergarten is very packed – morning circle, free play and outdoor play, three meals, napping and resting time, etc. – therefore and for the children’s orienteering it is most times following a certain schedule.

As mentioned when describing the food situation in chapter 6.2.3 *Food Situations*, the times for the different meals are flexible. This gives the children the option to choose when they want to eat. Of course within a certain time frame – for instance lunch might be offered from twelve to one o’clock (Interview B, 159-160).

P2 and P4 were telling about the time children spend with oneself chosen activity during the free play when saying:

It is ok for us if a child is playing upstairs for half an hour, but there are also children who are playing for five minutes and then they are saying: *Stop, I am not interested anymore*. That is ok; that is how it is (Interview B, 54-56).

The children can decide themselves what they want to play, how long they want to play and where they want to play (Interview E, 105-106).

It was mentioned that some things harder to put into practice in a half-day group when children are spending a maximum of four hours a day in the kindergarten. The teacher was telling about a certain pressure of time when it comes to more time-consuming tasks, which have to be done with each child individually, like selecting photos for their portfolio folders (Interview C, 378-384). This is an example of the pressure of time being too big and children being not able to practice as much agency as they might could otherwise.

Many things go hand in hand with what Prochner, Cleghorn and Green (2008) are saying about space and materials (see chapter 2.3 *Research on Children’s Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions*). Only the limited space for larger gatherings and private play space can not be verified by the interviewees’ narrations. The supervision obligation, as also mentioned by Prochner, Cleghorn and Green, is indeed seen as very important, but because of the re-

duction of tables, mobile furniture and different sized platforms, children can arrange larger and smaller or more private spaces themselves.

6.7 Home and Kindergarten: Cooperation and Relationship of Tension

The relationship between the kindergarten teachers and the parents is an important one. According to the curriculum (Hartmann, 2009), they should be partners when it comes to the education of the children.

P2 feels that many children are not used to be independent and practice their self-determination at home and she describes the children's first experiences in practising independence like this (Interview B, 33-36):

In general, making decisions independently is not the case for many of them. At the beginning for some children it is rather like: *I can do whatever I want*. That is why in the beginning they have to learn how things are.

She described it as a process, which lasts usually for about three months – a time in which she has to be strict with the rules. Very soon the children have internalised the rules and the children can be independent in their daily routine in the kindergarten (Interview B, 36-38, 86-101).

As a reason for children being less independent at home, teachers see parents as being too protective of their children and thinking their child would not be capable of certain things (Interview B, 86-88, 249-251). P2 was mentioning that children could develop even more agency if parents would support aspects like independence and self-determination at home as well (Interview B, 369-380). Additionally, two kindergarten teachers were mentioning cultural differences in the understanding of the role of the mother. It was important to the teachers not to generalise it, but their experience and impression are that in some other cultures, the woman is still much more seen as responsible for raising the children and being a good mother. In helping the child with every task as much as they can, they want to proof that they are a good mother (Interview B, 112-123; Interview C, 528-532,553-554).

Based on the following examples, it seems parents can not always see the importance for their children to make their own decisions or to act independently:

Often I am asked: *Did my child eat?* If my answer is no, parents often say: *But he has to eat.* No, he does not. I am always telling the parents, their child is taking what he needs. Sometimes it is more important to play ball with a friend instead of eating (Interview C, 538-542).

Also when the children are dressing themselves after going to the sports hall and they put on their socks the wrong way around. The mother's comment is: *How do you look like?* I am then saying: *He dressed without help. Please praise him for dressing himself and do not scold him for putting on the socks the wrong way around* (Interview C, 543-547).

It can even happen that in some situations, in which the kindergarten is offering freedom of choice to the children, this freedom of choice is more or less taken away by the parents. P4 was telling about the breakfast situation, in which children should be free to decide when they want to have breakfast, but some parents sent their children to eat breakfast when arriving at the kindergarten (Interview E, 57-58). Throughout the interviews, it seemed to be very important to the parents that their children eat at the kindergarten. This is very much in contrast with the pedagogical approach of trusting that the child can feel whenever she or he needs to eat (see chapter 6.9 *Benefits of Practiced Agency*). In this case, the regional managers recommend to talk to the parents and take a look at why the child is not eating – or only eating certain parts of the meal – together (Interview D, 219-222).

It was also mentioned in interview B (683-692) that children, who are not visiting the kindergarten regularly, are missing a lot of input and the teacher can see a difference in their development of agency.

This goes hand in hand with what P3 told about the half-day kindergarten group she is teaching. Though she feels like she can offer the children a lot of opportunities for independence and decision making, for some occasions she has to rely on the parents' support of their children's independence. To make this happen, as much dialogue as possible between the teacher and the parents is needed. One example is how to use cutlery and eat without help, as the children are not having lunch in the kindergarten (Interview C, 243-264, 498-502). Here can be seen that the kindergarten can help to build a foundation of skills

to practice agency, but it is important that children grow up in an environment, in which they can practice those skills in their everyday life.

Communication with parents is not always easy, especially if parents do not speak (much) German. Sometimes it depends on the teachers' creativity to make parents understand at least the crucial information. In some cases visual explanations might not be enough and the children have to take over the responsibility and translate or remind the parents (Interview C, 278-308). This is a big task and something where children clearly get to practice agency.

6.7.1 Presentation of the Teachers' Pedagogical Work

Another issue is how kindergarten teachers represent their pedagogical work. There is a shift from trying to have as much visible work as possible towards, for instance, teaching social skills, which might not be as visible to the parents as a drawing which is hanging in the cloakroom (Interview D, 263-269). As P2 was mentioning (Interview B, 218-225):

Our work is happening together with the children, during the whole year and there is no end product like: *This folder was created by your child*. Something like this does not exist anymore. Die children are benefiting a lot throughout the year and parents can not always see this. They just become aware of it, if it is for instance about putting on clothes, if we are saying: *Let your child do it*. Usually the children are happy and thinking: *Finally, I can show my mum what I am already able to do*.

Certain situations can make parents see the work of the kindergarten teacher and the development of their child in terms of acting independent and being self-determined. As just described, dressing can be such a situation, but also skills and manners when it comes to eating and the dining culture can make children's development visible to parents (Interview B, 236-238).

Unfortunately, some parents still see the kindergarten more as a place of safe-keeping where children play and eat, without seeing the pedagogical aspects. Of course, there are also parents who value the pedagogical work, see their children's development and might even ask for help from the teachers in certain situations (Interview B, 249-252, 391-396; Interview E, 511-516, 524-533). A positive development was also described in interview C (585-590):

However, I think the kindergarten is being more and more appreciated, also by parents and it is seen as an educational institution and not a place where the child is only playing.

There is more and more awareness about the importance of going to kindergarten before going to school and that the child is learning a lot there, even if he is "just playing".

This opinion is also shared by the regional managers, who think that the majority of the parents see the kindergarten as an important educational institution. They also noticed a shift in parents understanding educational processes more and more, not needing to see some physical product the child brings home – meaning parents can see, for instance, their children’s social skills developing (Interview D, 410-432).

To make parents understand the educational value of the kindergarten and to make them see the processes which are connected to practicing agency, it is very important to make the pedagogical work transparent to the parents. When it comes to social skills etc., this is not as easy as presenting some arts and crafts. This is why parents’ evenings are very important. These meetings should not only consist of presentations given by the teachers, but teachers and parents should work together on important topics in discussions and self-experience exercises. Additionally, afternoons, on which the parents are invited to visit the kindergarten, can give a deeper insight into the teacher’s pedagogical work. This could be, for instance, an afternoon to make the lanterns for the lantern festival together with the children and the parents (Interview D, 428-430, 440-465).

Regardless of the downside, it is important that teachers reflect on their work and see the development of children’s independence and self-determination. It is also important that the teachers themselves know what they have achieved with and for the children (Interview B, 404-406).

6.8 Level of Decision Making

In general, it seems as if children are involved in decisions which affect what is happening in the here and now.

The kindergarten teacher working in a toddlers group described the daily morning get together as a "kids conference in a very simple way" (Interview A, 105). Her further description of what is happening in this meetings seems to

rather be a joint discussion of what will happen during the day or week, in case something special is coming up (Interview A, 103-109).

The regional manager 2 was telling about a kindergarten teacher and former work colleague, who was using the kids conference for learning more about the children's interests. This teacher was asking the children about their interests during the morning circle time and was discussing, which ideas should be further developed into some project work. The children had a clear saying when it came to the themes and topics which would be dealt with further. The regional manager was also saying that it is the kindergarten teacher's task to come up with activities according to the discussed themes, as the teacher is still the professional and responsible for offering the right learning content for the right age. (Interview D, 342-263, 373-379).

A kids conference in the classical sense, where children would discuss a certain issue and come to a conclusion and democratic decision was not mentioned by the interviewed kindergarten teachers or it was even said that there is no kids conference taking place (Interview E, 460-461).

Therefore, P4 mentioned that they are sometimes discussing themes and wishes in the morning circle. Not every individual wish can be fulfilled, but it is very important to her to discuss and explain why some things can not be done (Interview E, 461-469). It can, for instance, also be that different options for excursions are offered and the children can choose one in a joint discussion during the morning circle (Interview E, 456-459).

In the toddlers' group children are not so much involved in decisions which concern the whole group or kindergarten. Something they sometimes get to decide on is if they want to go to the garden or stay inside. Other important issues like excursions or changes are discussed with and explained to them, but they are barely involved in the decision-making process. As mentioned in chapter 6.3 *Age and Development of Children as a Crucial Factor*, the main reason given is the age of the children (Interview, 176-185).

Decisions in which children are involved and which are not only concerning the individual child but the whole group are for instance exchanging books or parlour games from the kindergarten's stock. All kindergarten teachers who

mentioned this were also saying that they would only take a small amount of children with them for doing so. Additionally, the teachers are adding material which they think children will interest, based on their observations (Interview B, 486-490; Interview C, 389-402; Interview E, 350-366).

As described in chapter 6.6 *Concept of Room, Space and Time*, some kindergartens are working with a room concept, which among others allows the children to change the position of the furniture. Moving furniture is based on certain rules. Such a rule can be that tables can be moved, but they have to be back for the lunch-time (Interview E, 445-455). Again, restricted agency can be practiced when it comes to furnishing the room. Already existing furniture can not be just replaced with new stuff, but with the existing furniture, children have possibilities for arranging them in a way they want to - while following certain rules.

Furthermore, it is important that children can make their own decisions, uninfluenced by adults. It might be that the teacher knows some things better, but children have to be able to make their own experiences. In interview C (199-203) the following example was given:

I am totally in favour of letting children act self-determined and make them experience how it is, if they want to play there with these three children and it does not work. I might have known that in advance, but they have to make this experience themselves.

In interview C it was also mentioned that the amount of independence depends a lot on the teacher. The teacher has to decide for her- or himself how much freedom she or he wants to offer. This needs a lot of reflection. As P3 was telling:

It depends on the person: Can I give credits to the children for making their own decisions? When I started, I was very insecure. On the playground, I always ran around all the time and counted every five minutes to see, if everyone was still there. By this time, I am thinking: They are not running away. Why should they go away? They know where I am sitting or standing and if they need something, they will come. However, for this, it needs a bit of experience (Interview C, 502-508).

P4 was reflecting on the options children are given and came to the result that teachers often think the children are deciding, even if they are not actively asked. As an example, she was giving the offered fruits for breakfast. Teachers are observing the children and will offer more of the fruits the children tend to

eat most of. Teachers would then argue that the children decide what is served, while children would probably answer that they were not at all involved in this decision. The teacher noted the importance of more actively involving the children in decision-making processes, as the teachers' assumptions on what is the best for the children might not go hand in hand with what the children consider the best for themselves. She sees it as an important step for the near future to focus on this issue – not only in her team and kindergarten but also in research and the nationwide curriculum (Interview E, 70-79, 473-481, 593-565).

Altogether here can be seen what Sandberg and Ericsson (2010) described as the teacher being the main responsible for pedagogical decisions while trying to expand children's participation at the same time (see chapter 2.3 *Research on Children's Agency in Early Childhood Education Institutions*). This can be seen as the tension between letting the children decide and deciding based on the assumed knowledge on what is best for the child.

6.9 Benefits of Practiced Agency

P1 describes children who are independent and self-determined as a positive factor for the pedagogical work in the kindergarten:

The conditions for independence and self-determination are created and therefore you can concentrate more intense on individual support, without having to get up all the time to show everything to the children (Interview A, 291-293).

This was also mentioned in interview B in combination with the fact that children helping each other is an important result of practicing agency (Interview B, 263-269, 346-350, 414-417, 503-517). Focusing on the development of children's independence is described as a necessary foundation for further pedagogical work. As groups are quite big, teachers can concentrate on the important individual support only when the children are independent in their daily routine and do not have to ask for help from an adult all the time.

As mentioned in chapter 6.5 *Pedagogical Concepts*, social skills are part of the skills needed for being able to practice agency. Social skills are required in

very many different aspects of life and can therefore be seen as a big benefit of being able to practice agency (Interview D, 612-634).

P3 was describing her group as very capable. Her description includes a reciprocal relation between trust and children's agency. On the one hand, it needs trust to let the children be independent and self-determined, on the other hand, it is easier to trust them when they are capable of making decisions. She gave an example of being able to trust the children when sending them with the phone to the office, because she knows they are not only capable of delivering the phone but also will not go to another place without telling her (Interview C, 163-166).

Agency also has positive effects on the children and their current and future development. It is important for the children to be able to realise what they want and what they do not want. This also has to do with the fact that they can feel themselves and their bodies' needs. In our society, we often get told what would be best for us, so it is important that we can make a decision based on what we really need. Furthermore, it is crucial to feel when our body and mind needs rest to prevent burnouts and to go and see a doctor before illnesses get too serious (Interview A, 323-325; Interview C, 519-520, 524-526; Interview D, 602-611; Interview E, 568-569). To be able to act independently is important for children's future life, especially in school and later on in the working life (Interview A, 323-235; Interview C, 512-515). To know what I want also goes hand in hand with being able to find own solutions to problems and to use the available resources (Interview D, 639-661). Practicing agency also means to be able to deal with the consequences of a decision, which is a very valuable ability (Interview D, 662-670).

Furthermore, it was mentioned that children have to experience that being critical is ok and will not cause any withdrawal of affection and that they can express thoughts without being afraid (Interview E, 569-582).

Additionally, teachers rate independence and self-determination as important for children's well-being, but they also stress the fact that it has to happen in the right extend. The kindergarten teacher from interview A was telling about an example, where a child's agency is going too far (337-347):

There is one girl, who is allowed to decide everything at home. If the girl is saying on a Sunday that she wants to go to kindergarten, the parents have to go to the kindergarten with her to show her that it is closed. [...] Or if a child wants to wear a short summer dress in the winter, this is for sure not good for the child's health and well-being. For this child it was also difficult, to be part of the group because she is used to something different – at home, everything is just about her.

Also, P2 was mentioning that it is important that children can make their own decisions, but just until a certain extend. It will be important to be able to make decisions later on in life, but there will also always be some rules which have to be followed to avoid negative consequences (Interview B, 701-713). Setting limits was also mentioned to be important by P4 (Interview E, 517-522). Children should have to be able to make a choice, but the available options should all foster their well-being. For instance, when different healthy foods are offered and the child can choose what to eat; rather than letting the child choose what to eat without giving choices and the child would choose sweets all the time (Interview C, 557-566). But whatever the child will choose, there is a great possibility that she or he will value it much more, just because it was the own choice (Interview C, 577-579).

Another example mentioned two times concerning the connection between practiced agency and well-being concerns the gender issue. If a boy likes to dress up as a princess or a girl wants to dress up with a suit and tie, this has to be understood and accepted as the child's interest. If children can act self-determined on this matter at this young age, they will also feel more comfortable when it comes to gender issues later on in their life (Interview B, 721-733; Interview C, 548-552).

7 DISCUSSION

While chapter 6 *Results: Teachers' Perception* presented the results very detailed and hand in hand with the interview questions, in the following the research results will be summed up and discussed with reference to the research questions as stated in chapter 4 *Research Aims and Objectives* and from a CA point of view. Additionally, the research participants' use of the indicators of children's agency, which were described in chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*, will be reviewed. Furthermore, suggestions for further research will be made.

The results of the interviews are showing that children do have much freedom of choice in their daily routine at kindergarten. However, being able to make an own decision mostly means to choose between different given options. It was mentioned several times that these restrictions are needed to offer the children a safe environment. Safe environment firstly means the safety of the children and to make sure the supervision obligation is given. It furthermore means to prevent children from harming options in the first place, which mostly comes down to health issues in the end. Lastly, it is also important not to overstrain the children. As it was said in interview D (174-180), only if children feel safe they are able to make decisions and act independently. This means that framework conditions, which will give children this feeling of safety, have to be created.

It is important to keep in mind that this is the teachers' perception, and as mentioned in interview E (543-549, 559-560), children might have a different impression and feel limited in their freedom of choice. This will also be further discussed in chapter 8 *Limitations of the Study*.

It is evident that children have opportunities to be independent and practice their self-determination in several situations of the kindergarten's daily routine. However, it also seems to mainly concern decisions which are influencing the here and now or decisions which will not have a minor impact on the fu-

ture. Children are for instance able to change the position of some furniture, but they are not involved in the process of deciding which furniture is ordered in the first place. This specific issue was also discussed in chapter 6.8 *Level of Decision Making*. There seems to be a possibility for making use of kids conferences and to further extend the level of decision making for children.

This gives partly an answer to the research question *“How is children’s agency supported by kindergarten teachers and environmental factors in ECE institutions?”*. More concrete it can be said that children’s agency – making decisions, being independent and self-determined – is supported a lot in everyday life, but hardly exceeds the individual level of decision making. Throughout the day children have many moments of choice. These are not only given by the teacher, who is, for instance, offering to go to the garden or stay inside or to take part in a teacher led activity or not, but also by environmental conditions like mobile furniture and pedagogical concepts like the open house concept. There are also hindering framework conditions, like constructional conditions, the amount of available staff or the amount of delivered food. If it is not because of these hindering conditions, in most situations children can choose at least from two different options offered by the teacher.

The second research question was about *how kindergarten teachers are supported and encouraged to support children’s agency in ECE institutions*. First of all, the curriculum is focusing a lot on agency and issues connected to it. As the curriculum is the base for a teacher’s pedagogical work, this document gives much support (Interview E, 537-538). Also, pedagogical concepts like the open house or the new planning concept are supporting the teachers’ work regarding children’s agency. Additionally, regional managers, kindergarten managers and kindergarten teachers are in close dialogue with each other and trying to develop their knowledge on topics like independence, participation or self-determination in their meetings and training. Less supportive seem to be some parents, which are not knowingly suppressing their children’s agency by not giving them enough opportunities to practice being independent and self-determined. If the parents would be more supportive, the children could make even faster progresses. If all parents were able to see the soft skills children

learn in kindergarten, it would be a supportive factor for the kindergarten teacher as well, as she or he would not have to struggle with presenting their work to the parents.

How can the results be seen from the perspective of the CA and human development? It is evident that teachers are trying to equip the children with tools and skills they need to be independent and self-determined. These tools and skills can be seen as capabilities (see chapter 2.2.3 *Capabilities and Freedom*). With those capabilities, children can achieve more participation in the kindergarten, independence and self-determination, which can be seen as functionings, as they make life more valuable (see chapter 2.2.2 *Functionings – Valuable Beings and Doings*). Freedom, regarding the CA (see chapter 2.2.3 *Capabilities and Freedom*), is not about the maximisation of choices, but about the added value to a beings' life (Alkire, 2005, p. 121). Considering this, the restrictions of the children's choices made by the kindergarten are not directly limiting their freedom. As long as the offered options are adding value to the children's life, freedom regarding the CA is given.

Furthermore, kindergartens can be seen as a place where human development (see chapter 2.2.5 *Human Development*) takes place, as it is defined as

[...] the expansions of people's freedoms to live long, healthy and creative lives; [...] (UNDP, 2010, p. 2).

It was described in chapter 6 *Results: Teachers' Perception* that a main concern of the kindergarten teachers is the children's health, physical and physical well-being. For instance, the supervision obligation was stressed a lot. Also, the given choices should make the children understand what is right for them. An example would be offering different fruits instead of one fruit and chocolate. As the choices children are given are supporting their well-being in various aspects and should make them understand what is good and healthy for them, human development, as it is defined by the UNDP, can be found. Well-being is also part of the CA and similar to the human development it expands when people are able to make choices which matter to them. As described above, in kindergartens children are mainly making decisions which concern the here and now.

The here and now is also what matters to the child a lot, so the well-being expands.

This leads to the research question "*How do kindergarten teachers in ECE institutions in Vienna rate the importance of children's agency for the children's well-being, current and future development?*". An answer to this question is mainly given in chapter 6.9 *Benefits of Practiced Agency*. In general, different aspects of agency are described as very valuable for the child's current and future development. Social skills build a base for being able to practice agency (see also chapter 6.5 *Pedagogical Concepts*), but they will also be needed in many aspects of the children's future life. In several contexts it was mentioned that an important aspect is to be able to feel one's own needs. The most mentioned example was about knowing when to eat and how much to eat. This is important for everyone's future development and life, as the influence from outside – media and especially advertisements – is significant. It is an important life skill to know what I want and to be able to deal with the consequences of my decision. It was mentioned that children should make the experience that critical thinking and having a different opinion than someone else will not result in withdrawal of affection. This experience and knowledge will encourage them to be critical and able to stand up for their opinions and choices later on in life. Furthermore, it can be essential for the gender development and development of views on gender issues, if they experience acceptance when practicing agency in gender-related questions early in life. This is a very up to date topic of our society. Nevertheless, there can be a downside of children's agency, if the above-mentioned rules or given options are not given at all. If a child can choose freely and would eat only sweets all the time or would wear summer clothes in winter, it would not be beneficial for the child's well-being and development at all. This shows one more time that children can practice their agency only within certain framework conditions, if their well-being and development should not be harmed.

An interesting point for further research could be to observe, if restricted freedom of choice is always benefitting the individual child's well-being or de-

velopment, or if there are also restrictions which benefit the group as a whole or the teachers.

In the very beginning of this thesis, indicators of children's agency were defined (see chapter 2.1 *The Understanding of Children's Agency in the Context of this Thesis*): self-determination (German: *Selbstbestimmung*), independence/autonomy (German: *Selbstständigkeit, Eigenständigkeit, Autonomie*) and participation (German: *Partizipation, Mitbestimmung, Teilhabe*). All three indicators were used by the research participants. Self-determination and independence were used to describe and to talk about children's agency. Participation was used less often. While self-determination and independence were used interchangeable and seemed to be used to describe children's agency directly, participation seemed to be understood just as a part of it. The question can be raised of the use of these terms was influenced by using them in the guiding interview questions. During the interviews the kindergarten teachers and regional managers seemed to be familiar with these terms and started using them right from the beginning. Therefore, it can be assumed that they interview questions did not have such a big impact.

The question, if politicians' and professional pedagogues' aims go hand in hand can be raised. As mentioned in chapter 3 *Research on Children's Agency: Austria as a Case Study*, terms like children's agency, children's rights, independence or self-determination are not mentioned once in the foreword of the Austrian nationwide curriculum (Hartmann, 2009) written by the politicians, who are all responsible for education in the federal states of Austria. The curriculum itself does stress the importance of the just mentioned terms. Taking a look at the words of those politicians and comparing them with the curricula and the perception of the kindergarten teachers, it could be assumed that they prioritise educational aims differently. Comparing the educational aims of politicians in the sector of education and kindergarten teachers or other pedagogues could be subject of further research.

At the end of this chapter, before talking about the limitations of the study, I want to refer to my personal experiences as described in chapter 5.6.1 *Reflection: The Authors Personal Background*. I am positively surprised about the

results and hope that this will be the future trend of teachers' work in ECE institutions all over Austria and that the ideas and concepts will still be further developed. To me it seems that not only the pedagogical quality regarding the support of children's agency in its different aspects has risen enormously during the last few years but also teachers' working conditions were improved.

8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this last chapter limitations of this study will be discussed. At the same time a proposal for further research will be made.

As mentioned in chapter 5.2 *Participants*, the participants were chosen by the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* and the researcher had very little influence on and insight into this part of the process. As the reasoning for choosing the participants is unknown, it has to be considered that the selected research participants might not represent the totality of kindergarten teachers working at the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*. This assumption can be strengthened by what P3 was saying:

We have been a pilot project house for the new planning⁹. [...] I feel it is good that it is now going to be compulsory for all *MA 10* kindergartens. I have also been training heads of two kindergartens, because they did not understand it the way it was meant and I am afraid, it will still take a bit until it gets through to everyone. But it is a good step into the direction of emphasising the self-determination of children (Interview C, 403-411).

Regardless of this downside, this research is a case study which can not have the aim to represent the totality of kindergarten teachers working at the *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten* or furthermore whole Vienna. Even in the case that the chosen research participants are working in kind of flagship kindergartens, the results can be seen as a future trend for Viennese kindergartens of the provider *MA 10 - Wiener Kindergärten*.

It was already discussed in chapter 5.6 *Ethical Solutions* that this research is representing the teachers' point of view. When talking about children's agency it should also be considered to hear the children's views by doing participatory research with the children. This was not possible due to the briefness of and the time limitation for this study and thesis. The same consideration was brought up by P4 in interview E (543-549, 559-560). The teacher was mentioning that it would be interesting and important to ask the children about their views. She was aware of the fact that in situations in which she thinks children have much freedom of choice and opportunities to be independent, the children themselves

⁹ German: *neue Planung*

might feel more limited. She was also mentioning that what adults think is the best for the child does not mean that it indeed is the best for the child.

Following this teacher's thoughts and my original idea of researching children's agency – and not teachers' perception on it – I want to propose a participatory research including children on the topic of children's agency in ECE institutions in Vienna (or elsewhere) for further research. This would also go conform with the children's rights connected to children's agency as mentioned in chapter 2.1.2 *Children's Agency in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

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APPENDICES

INTERVIEW-LEITFRAGEN GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Gruppengröße:

Group size:

Alter der Kinder:

Children's age:

Besonderheiten der Gruppe:

Special features of the group:

- 1. Bitte beschreiben Sie den Tagesablauf in Ihrer/einer Kindergartengruppe.** Gehen Sie dabei darauf ein, in welchen Situationen die Kinder viel/wenig Entscheidungsfreiheit haben.

Please describe the daily routine in your/a kindergarten group. Focus on situations in which children have a lot or very little freedom of choice.

- 2. Bitte beschreiben Sie, welche Möglichkeiten zum selbstbestimmten Handeln Kinder in den folgenden Situationen haben.**

Please describe which opportunities for self-determined acting children have in the following situations.

- a. Freispiel**
free play
- b. Gartenbesuch/im Gruppenraum bleiben**
going to the garden/staying in the classroom
- c. Essen**
eating
- d. kreatives Gestalten**
creative work and crafts

- 3. In welche Entscheidungsprozesse werden die Kinder aktiv miteinbezogen und auf welche Art und Weise? Haben die Kinder ein demokratisches Mitspracherecht? Wenn ja, wann? (Beispiele: Kinderkonferenz, räumliche Umgestaltung, Materialanschaffung, Erstellen von Regeln, Ausflüge...)**

In which decision-making processes are children actively involved and in which way? Do children have the possibility to be involved in decisions on a democratic basis? If yes, when? (Examples: kids conference, reorganisation of the room, purchase of materials, creating rules, excursions...)

a. Im Falle einer Kinderkonferenz etc. – wie läuft diese ab?

In case of holding a kids conference etc. – how is it proceeding?

4. Welche strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen fördern oder hindern das selbstbestimmte Handeln der Kinder? (Beispiele: Gesetzgebung, Bildungsrahmenplan, Räumlichkeiten, Gruppengröße...)

Which structural framework conditions are supporting or hindering children in their self-determined acting? (Examples: legislation, curriculum, premises, size of groups...)

a. Wie werden PädagogInnen dazu angehalten und gefördert, das selbstbestimmte Handeln der Kinder zu unterstützen?

How are kindergarten teachers coerced to and supported to support the children in their self-determined acting?

5. Wie wichtig sehen Sie die Möglichkeit zum selbstbestimmten Handeln und zur Teilhabe an Entscheidungsprozessen für die Entwicklung der Kinder? Welche Auswirkungen sehen Sie?

How important do you rate opportunities for self-determined acting and participation in decision-making processes for children's development? Which effects do you observe?

6. Welche Verbindung sehen Sie zwischen dem selbstbestimmten Handeln/der Möglichkeit Entscheidungen mitzutreffen und dem Wohlbefinden der Kinder?

What kind of connection do you see between self-determined acting/the opportunity to take part in making decisions and children's well-being?

7. Welche Rolle spielen die Eltern?

Which role do the parents play?

a. Können die Eltern die Arbeit der PädagogInnen (im Bezug auf selbstbestimmtes Handeln) wertschätzen?

Do parents value the kindergarten teachers' work (respectively self-determined acting)?