

The institutionalisation of childhood and the institutionalisation of education. Studying a not so simple relationship.

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Abstract: In social sciences, the notion of institutionalisation of childhood is well established as a concept for theorizing childhood and analysing the social position of children in modern societies. Among scholars, there is broad agreement that the institutionalisation of education, especially scholarisation, makes up a major part of the institutionalisation of childhood and that both processes are interrelated with each other in many ways. Assuming that one process reflects and affects the other, this paper argues, that the interrelatedness of both is worth to be studied more continuously and in detail. This is not least because it can help to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the interrelatedness of both processes shapes the limits and possibilities of institutionalised education, but also the experiences and the agency of children. To explain this further, the paper will refer to the empirical findings of two different research projects, a field study about participation in early childhood education and another one about the changes in children's everyday lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. After discussing the findings of the two projects in the horizon of the interrelatedness of both the institutionalisation of education and childhood the paper will finally underline that distinguishing consequently both processes not least allows to explore in how far children contribute themselves to the institutionalisation of childhood as social actors.

Keywords: institutionalisation, childhood, education, childhood studies, agency

1 Introduction: Some starting points

In public discourse, the institutionalisation of childhood is frequently identified with the expansion of educational institutions accessible and/or mandatory for all children, so especially with scholarization since the late 18th century or, more recently, the expansion of early childhood education in the late 20th and early 21st century (see Honig, 2017). This view is primarily based on an understanding of the institutionalisation of childhood which regards the spatial separation of children from their parental home and in organisations with own time rhythms and operated by non-familial professionals as the central feature of this process. From such a viewpoint both processes appear as being the two congruent 'sides of the same coin'. Then, for example, the closure of schools is likely to appear as a *de-institutionalisation of education*, which finally must completely invalidate the established societal mode of *institutionalising childhood*, that is, the patterns of children's forms of living and all associated, also morally relevant collective expectations towards an appropriate way of living and growing up as a child in a given society. However, the paper in the following is based on the assumption that it would be misleading to treat the institutionalisation of education and the institutionalisation of childhood, especially the scholarization of children, as one and the same thing (see also Eßer & Schröer 2019; Krönig, 2020). There are at least two simple and obvious reasons for the plausibility of such an assumption:

1. The scholarisation of children is not identical with the institutionalisation of childhood because children do not spend their whole day and all their life time *as a child* in schools. There are as well many other organisations such as day care centres, child protection services or child and youth work institutions. And these institutions are not part of the school system. This becomes already clear when taking into account the organisation of *early childhood education* (especially in the very early years) in such countries where it belongs to the system of welfare services for children, young people and families (see for example Germany and many other). This applies even though there are and were always recurrent tendencies of expanding the scholarisation of children, e.g. by starting earlier with mandatory schooling. So, first of all, it should be acknowledged that the institutionalisation of education should not be confused with schooling.
2. Even if it is accepted that children spent most of their time in educational settings and that this amount of time is increasing, past and contemporary experiential spaces of children cannot be reduced to attending educational organisations (such as crèches, kindergartens or schools). This is just because there are (still) many other places and types of organisations, where children spent their time such as family, playgrounds, clubs or other leisure facilities.

In social sciences, especially mass schooling since the late 18th century (see Hendrick, 1997) is often regarded as the main driver of the process of the institutionalisation of childhood and regularly serves as a starting point for its analysis (Zeiber, 2009). This is not least because it is especially school which is regarded as a kind of a prototype of an institution, that is, in the sense of an organisation which has taken over the function of educating the younger generation for the society as a whole, and an organisation operating by its own logic and not least representing a globally universalised model (cf. Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). However, although in social sciences the scholarization of children is regarded as constitutive for the institutionalisation of childhood in modern societies, it is also recognized that the institutionalisation of childhood does not simply merge into scholarization or the attendance of other educational institutions (see also Eßer & Schröer, 2019). In other words, the institutionalisation of childhood and its history is not represented in the institutionalisation of schools and education. The same applies to the broader assumption to be found frequently in public discourses that the institutionalisation of childhood finds its primary expression in children spending more and more time in organisations specialised on (professional) education. This assumption is likely to confuse the institutionalisation of childhood not simply with scholarization but with the institutionalisation of education outside the family in general. In other words, though the “institutionalisation of childhood [...] also takes place as a ‘pedagogicalization of childhood’ (Herrmann, 1986) and within educational settings”, it “goes far beyond at the same time” (Bollig et al., 2018, p. 9, transl. SN, see also Mierendorff, 2010). Consequently, research aiming at historicising and theorising childhood has repeatedly revealed many other indications and arenas of the institutionalisation of childhood beyond the institutionalization of education (Tervooren, 2021). By this, not only the multiple dimensions of the process became visible in different ways but also their interwovenness with institutionalised education, so for example in terms of the “scientification” and “normalisation” of childhood (Kelle & Mierendorff, 2013; Turmel 2008) or the establishment of the modern welfare state (Mierendorff, 2010).

If we take into account that the institutionalisation of childhood and the institutionalisation of education are different but interfere, this opens up the possibility of studying the interference

more closely, not least in order to gain further insights into the both processes themselves. Against this background, the following section (2) of the paper will clarify further, which kind of phenomena and which kind of research perspectives are associated with the term “institutionalisation of childhood” and in how far this again differs from describing or analysing the institutionalisation of education. After that, it will be demonstrated (3), on the one hand side, that the concept of institutionalisation of childhood helps us to understand in which way institutionalised education contributes to or interferes with the institutionalisation of childhood. On the other hand, it will be shown in how far our contemporary ideas of a ‘good childhood’ (Betz et al., 2018a) are intrinsically linked to the institutionalisation of education. This will be done by discussing findings of two of the author’s recent research projects – one on participation in early childhood education and another one on well-being of children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, in some concluding remarks (4), I will discuss the benefits resulting from studying the interference of both institutionalisation processes, especially when it comes to questions about children’s agency, the function of the family and... the impact of social policy on

2 ‘Institutionalisation of childhood’ as an analytical concept

The arguments in the introduction indicate the plausibility of the assumption that childhood can be regarded as an institution without assuming this as being congruent with the institutionalisation of education (see also Krönig 2020). This can as well be taken as an indication for the need of an understanding of institutionalisation of childhood which neither only identifies it with schooling nor only with the emergence of organisational entities mandated to fulfill the function of educating the next generation for the whole society (see Bollig et al. 2018, p. 9). In other words, what is needed is an understanding of the institutionalisation of childhood which does not only refer to schooling or the emergence of educational organisations, but also includes other processes and mechanisms which have an impact on or are contributing to the formation of what we know as ‘childhood’ (regulations, norms and values, orders of age, policies, (educational) practices, scientific knowledge etc.).

For such an understanding we can draw on a concept of the institutionalisation of childhood as it has been established in the interdisciplinary field of the so-called ‘new social studies of childhood’ (see Honig, 2009; Qvortrup, 1993; Ryan, 2008) since several decades. In order to understand the institutionalisation of childhood in a broader sense as it would be possible by just referring to the institutionalisation of education, Helga Zeiher points out that

“Looked upon from a societal viewpoint, childhood shows up a configuration of social processes, discourses and structures which relate to ways of living as a child at a particular time in a particular society, and which gain a certain permanency by being reproduced in social life“ (Zeiher, 2009, p. 127).

Such an understanding does not only allow to distinguish between the *institutionalisation of childhood* and the *institutionalisation of education*. In addition, it also comes with several further object-related, theoretical implications. *First*, it is based on the assumption that institutions are not to be considered as entities but as dynamic outcomes of historically accumulated and relatively stable patterns of social ordering occurring on different levels of social life as for example norms, conventions, discourses, rights, organisations, social policy programs or practices. *Second* and in line with this, institutionalisation is not regarded as a single *historical event*, but as an ongoing process which means that it is constantly emerging and reproduced.

Understanding the ‘institutionalisation of childhood’ in such a broader and more dynamic sense differs from supposing that childhood is just a *natural* fact. It means to use an analytical concept which opens up an alternative perspective on childhood in general. In the context of the ‘new social studies of childhood’, such a perspective is especially linked to the effort of denaturalizing conventional understandings of childhood as an object of scientific interest (see Bollig, 2018 et al., 10). Therefore, studying childhood as ‘institutionalised’ is not least associated with several epistemological shifts offering an alternative view on children and childhood which is central to the paradigm of the ‘new social studies of childhood’. This is the case because

- investigating childhood as ‘institutionalised’ calls for *historicizing* the object of ‘childhood’ as well as the imaginations linked to it. Thus, it demands to understand “childhood as a social construction” (James & Prout, 1997, p. X) as it is proclaimed by the so-called ‘new sociology of childhood’ since the late 1980’s/early 1990’s and was repeated in numerous contributions since then (see Ryan, 2008). If childhood is not taken as a natural fact, the focus is rather on how it is socially constituted (Honig, 2017).
- focusing on institutionalisation allows to *distinguish* ‘children’ or the single ‘child’ (as a concrete person or social actor) *from* ‘childhood’ (see Honig, 2009), e.g. as a symbolic order of knowledge, an element in the institutionalised life course, an age-related position in the social structure of a society as a stage of life or even a form of life (Betz et al., 2018a). In this sense, childhood can be understood as “the institutionalised form of difference between children and adults and, thus, as the historically changing socio-cultural context in which single children spent their lives as children” (Neumann, 2013, p. 141, transl. SN).
- focusing on institutionalisation enables to analyse in a discriminating way the routinized patterns of positioning children (and their position-takings) in contemporary society, especially in relation to adults. For example, childhood can be analysed as the institutionalised distinction between children and adults which is linked to the “*generational order*” (Alanen, 1994) of societies, not least in the sense that the status of being a child is also associated with special obligations, rights, restrictions and opportunities.

Against the background of these epistemological shifts, it becomes clear that investigating the institutionalisation of childhood is not only a question of an object-related premise or of the procedure of gathering empirical data. It is more an issue of using a certain analytical concept in order to construct childhood as an object of research which allows to distinguish between the empirical everyday lives of single children and the conditions under which these children live as children and under which they are socially positioned as members of a current society. In this sense, the epistemological shifts mentioned above illustrate that the so-called ‘new social studies of childhood’ are not simply dealing with the lifeworlds of single children. They rather deal with childhood as a *context in which the (age-related) social order of societies comes into being*. This goes hand in hand with the premise that institutionalisation is best understood as a dynamic process of producing and reproducing this social order. This again allows to avoid narrowing the own focus to organisational entities and, finally, to avoid reifications (or to take them for granted). This is achieved by dynamising and empiricising the object of research. This dynamization can be reinforced by the use of concepts such as “doing generation“ (Alanen, 2001), “generationing” (Kelle, 2005) or “generational ordering”

(Bühler-Niederberger, 2011) which were exactly created in order to underline the dynamic and reproductive character of age-related social ordering in society.

Starting from such an understanding of the ‘institutionalisation of childhood’, in the following section my aim is to problematize further (and this means empirically) the not so simple and entangled relationship between the ‘institutionalisation of education’ and the institutionalisation of childhood’. This will be done on the basis of selected key findings and data of two research projects I participated in recent years.

3 An empirically based view on the relationship I: The example of participation in early childhood education

The first example to be presented and discussed in this paper is not only instructive as it deals with a highly topical issue in early childhood education – *participation of very young children before school age*. It is also instructive as it allows to explore – beyond scholarization – in how far practices of arranging participation of children in ECEC settings, that is, *under the conditions of institutionalised education*, contribute to the *institutionalisation of childhood*. With the following example, I also intend to demonstrate in how far an analytical focus on the institutionalisation of childhood – instead of focusing on the institutionalised character of educational contexts – can help to further clarify the impact of the institutionalisation of education on the social positioning of children and their experiences.

3.1 The research project “Participation in early childhood. An ethnographic study on the agency of children in Swiss day care centres (PINKS)”

The findings presented and discussed in the following are an outcome of an ethnographic field study on participation and agency of children in settings of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which has been conducted between 2015 and 2019 in Swiss day care centres working with children between 0 and 4 years old (Neumann et al., 2019).¹

One of the primary reasons for the implementation of the project was the observation that, in recent years, participation as a topic has been gaining increased attention in the German-speaking professional discourse of early childhood education (before school-age). This was especially the case in Switzerland where the expectation to implement a more participatory way of designing everyday life in early childhood institutions was at the same time linked to a paradigm shift in the primary task of day care centres: from caring and looking after children to educational ambitious practices of supporting children’s learning in the early years (Stamm, 2009). This was not least documented in many programmatic publications and guidelines on the topic of how participation can and should be realised and further enhanced, especially in the orientation framework on early childhood education and care in Switzerland published for the first time in 2012 (Wustmann Seiler & Simoni, 2012). Most of these documents conceptualise the child as a ‘competent actor’ striving for autonomy and self-determination, which, at the same time, is regarded as the basis for effective learning processes to be facilitated by adult educators. In consequence, the agency of children should be taken into account by establishing a participatory orientation and the image of the ‘competent child’ as guiding pedagogical principles. From this point of view, children’s

¹ The project titled “Partizipation in der frühesten Kindheit. Ein ethnographiebasiertes Praxisprojekt zur Akteurschaft von Kindern in schweizerischen Kindertageseinrichtungen (PINKS)” was funded by the Mercator Foundation Switzerland. Members of the research team were: Sascha Neumann (Principal Investigator), Judith Bannwart, Kathrin Brandenburg, Nicole Hekel, Melanie Kuhn and Luzia Tinguely.

agency appears as a precondition of learning processes as well as an outcome of participatory practices. Thus, children's agency, participation and learning are brought in a close relationship to each other: On the one hand, it is the supposed 'nature' of children's learning processes that demands for participatory practices, on the other hand, it is participation through which children's agency and learning is exercised, expressed and increased. In contrast, caring remains associated with a more passive role of children, so that the participation of children is looked at as being the opposite of 'just' caring for them.

Against the backdrop of this imagination about the seemingly well-balanced and complementary relationship between children's agency, participation and learning as it is dominating in the Swiss and German-speaking ECEC discourse, the project PINKS aimed at studying empirically in how far practices identified as 'participatory' by the adult professionals are, in fact, interrelated to children's agency. This meant as well investigating in how far participation actually contributes to increasing or possibly even to limiting children's agency. So, the main research interest of the project was formulated as follows: What happens to children's "situated agency" (Oswell, 2012, p. 51) under the conditions of professionally organised participation in institutionalised ECEC settings? This issue was as well regarded being of relevance for the context of the 'new social studies of childhood' where the question in how far participation strengthens children's agency is still waiting for clarification (see Valentine, 2011; Wyness, 2018).

Empirical investigations in the project were based on ethnographic fieldwork with participant observation as the main method of data collection. Fieldwork was conducted in nine different day care centres in four different Swiss cantons.² The main selection criterion was that day care centres should describe themselves as oriented towards the participation of children (i.e. in their local curricula). Each site was investigated by at least two ethnographers who participated in everyday life of the day care centres between 1 and 2 months and at least three times a week. Data analysis was based on field notes and protocols from participant observation and field interviews with caregivers, audio recordings as well as photographs, documents (e.g. local curricula, annual reports), and artefacts (e.g. pieces of handicrafts by children and adults).³ The research team followed an inductive approach during the analysis of data by applying coding strategies of Grounded Theory (open, axial and selective coding). This was done in order to categorize and discriminate children's different forms of agency in relation to certain pedagogical practices (understood as activity complexes, i.e. standard situations in day care centres like morning circle, lunch time, nap time etc.) (Neumann & Hekel, 2016).

3.2 Findings: Children's agency under the conditions of institutionalised education and the institutionalisation of childhood

Our analysis of the ethnographic data revealed that participatory arrangements in the day care centres can take on multiple forms. These arrangements are not only including formal democratic procedures such as conducting ballots or organising votes. In the institutional everyday life of day care centres, participation is rather ranging from, for example, asking children to join a situation or letting them leave, asking them to do something on the behalf of

² To study day care centres in different cantons was important because pedagogical quality guidelines for day care centres in Switzerland are – if at all – mainly defined on the cantonal level. In addition, the quantity of supply can vary greatly from region to region.

³ For more detailed information about the methodology of the study see Neumann et al. (2019).

all others or allowing them to draw a lot and to choose between given alternatives up to following their own wishes and suggestions (Neumann & Hekel, 2016, p.100). At the same time, children's agency varies in terms of the intensity of children's involvement and in how far their behaviour (as individuals or as a collective) affects the course of a situation. In this sense, the observable forms of children's agency represent a broad spectrum, from just 'being there' or 'taking part in something' to 'taking influence' or 'exercising control' over a situation (ibid., p. 98). This means in principle, that practices considered as 'participatory' are linked to children's agency in several ways as they have children's agency both as a pre-requisite and are as well bringing children's agency to visibility on a performative level. At the same time, children's agency can be limited by these practices. To give an example for the limiting potential of such participatory practices one can refer to the process of collective decision-making about the day course (e.g. in a morning circle): Decision-making is regularly arranged as a choice of the children between alternatives defined by the adults and not least, guided by adult's considerations about organisational requirements (number of children per caregiver, rooms available, toys available, the weather outside and the clothing of children etc.). This means, that the children's opportunities to exercise control over a situation are always restricted, for example by the number of possible alternatives of doing something.

However, the entanglement of organisational considerations and the remarkable efforts to create participatory situations was a typical feature of all those situations we observed during our fieldwork. This again points to one of our main findings in the project which we paraphrased as the 'institutional sense of participation' (Neumann et al., 2019). What we mean by this is that the implementation of participatory arrangements in day care centres serves the need to realise *organisational rationality* and *pedagogical legitimacy* at the same time. In terms of the 'institutional sense of participation', pedagogical legitimacy means creating the impression vis-à-vis a real or imagined social environment that organisational practices are 'desirable', 'correct' or 'appropriate' (Suchman, 1995), that is, they need to correspond both to the educational mission of the organisation and to the expectations linked to this mission (institutionalisation of education). In other words, the legitimacy of such practices is not only based on their organisational character (regularity, predictability etc.), but the day care centres must also prove themselves as a pedagogically operating organisation in the context of an institutionalised normative horizon of expectations referring to collectively shared ideas about contemporary (early childhood) education. Otherwise, it would not be possible to explain why these processes in the day care centers are arranged and performed as participatory with such great effort. In consequence, the participation of young children in day care centers should not simply be confused with a simple increase of their agency. The implementation of participatory practices rather seems to be the solution of the problem that a strong agency of children (e.g. children's self-determination in terms of free choice between self-defined alternatives) would as well threaten the credibility of the representation of a well-organised everyday life in the day care centers (organisational rationality).

These insights into the 'institutional sense of participation' illustrate that participation under the conditions of institutionalised education means representing as well as constraining children's agency for the purpose of both organisational rationality and pedagogical legitimacy. Children themselves contribute to (the daily life of) institutionalised education and to its reproduction on the basis of a both enabled and, at the same time, controlled agency (e.g. by their 'complicity' with caregivers, see Bühler-Niederberger, 2011).

In addition, these insights lead to further conclusions when it comes to the question about the relationship between the 'institutionalisation of education' and the 'institutionalisation of

childhood’. This is because it makes a difference, if the empirical findings of the project are interpreted as an expression of the ‘institutionalisation of education’ or in terms of their relevance for the ‘institutionalisation of childhood’. Interpreting the interaction of organisational rationality and pedagogical legitimacy as conditioned by the institutional constitution of early childhood education in daycare centers means to put emphasis on the function and functionality of participatory practices for the effective performance of the both organisational and educational character of these settings. At the same time, this means to go beyond the idealistic programmatic descriptions linked to participation in the professional discourse. Scientific knowledge about the agency of children, then, is more a kind of a by-product. In turn, the interpretation of the findings in the light of the *institutionalisation of childhood*, means to ask in how far the participatory practices in early childhood education settings produce and reproduce the hierarchical social order of adults and children as well as the social position of children in society which these practices have as a prerequisite. In this sense, participatory practices are not simply enhancing children’s agency towards a kind of ‘transformative agency’ but rather restrict it to a kind of controlled agency and complicity by blending this at the same time (pedagogical legitimacy) (see also Oser & Biedermann 2006). In terms of the institutionalisation of education this means to ask, in which way it both *reflects and affects* the the institutionalisation of childhood and, finally, children’s lives and experiences – without stipulating that it is one and the same. Correspondingly, instead of a congruency the findings of the project rather demonstrate the interference of both the *institutionalisation of education and the institutionalisation of childhood*.

4 An empirically based view on the relationship II: The re-institutionalisation of childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic

The second example of findings from empirical research to be presented and discussed in this paper is based on results of the international research project “Understanding the influence of COVID-19 on children’s and adolescents’ school experience and subjective well-being (COVID-Kids)”. The project was initiated during the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020. Considering the relationship of the institutionalisation of education and the institutionalisation of childhood the data gathered in the project are as well instructive as they, firstly, allow to demonstrate in how far the institutionalised common sense understanding of (a ‘good’) childhood has been irritated by the measures taken to decrease the spread of the virus. Secondly, they shed light on how temporary changes in established routines and organisational patterns of institutionalised education interrelate with the (re-)institutionalisation of childhood, which in the following means the re-organisation of children’s education in the family (as another particular social context).

4.1 The research project “Understanding the influence of COVID-19 on children’s and adolescents’ school experience and subjective well-being (COVID-Kids)”

The project COVID-Kids was carried out by researchers from the University of Luxembourg, the University of Tübingen and partner Universities in Brazil and Switzerland.⁴ It was based on a mixed-method research design and used interviews and an online survey to investigate the well-being and home-schooling experiences of children aged 6 to 16 during the first wave

⁴ The members of the research team were Claudine Kirsch (Principal investigator, University of Luxembourg), Pascale Engel (University of Luxembourg), Sascha Neumann (University of Tübingen), Cyril Wealer (University of Luxembourg) and Kris Brazas (University of Luxembourg). Partners in Brazil and Switzerland were Elizeu Macedo (Mackenzie Presbyterian University, Brazil), Neander Abreu (Federal University of Bahia, UFBA, Brazil) and Emanuela Chiapparini (Bernese Fachhochschule, Switzerland).

of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ The main objective of the study was to get knowledge about the perspectives of children and young people on the pandemic, the experiences they make themselves and about their subjective well-being. Correspondingly, we decided to ask them directly in order to involve them as “experts of their lifeworld” (Andresen & Neumann 2018, p. 35) in gaining scientific knowledge. This was not least done to go beyond other more adult-centered research designs which, for example, used statements of parents as main source of data during the early phase of the pandemic (see e.g. Akin et al., 2021; Langmeyer et al., 2020). By interviewing children and young people directly, we intended to address three areas of questions: What are the experiences and changes in everyday life of children since the pandemic began? How has the well-being of children changed in the context of the pandemic? Which factors have an influence on children’s well-being during the situation of a pandemic (Engel et al., 2021)?

The link to the online questionnaire in six languages (Luxembourgish, German, French, English, European and Brazilian Portuguese) was mainly distributed between May and July 2020 in four countries including Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Brazil. The data were collected via an unrestricted and anonymous web-based survey using nonprobability sampling. Dissemination efforts concentrated on the following countries and regions:

Luxembourg, Germany (federal states of Saarland, Baden-Wuerttemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia), Switzerland (Canton Bern) and Brazil. As schools and other settings for children (for example youth clubs) were mostly closed during the period when the survey was online, the research team made use of traditional print media, websites, social media, broadcast media as well as professional and private networks in order to distribute the information about the ongoing survey and to invite young people to participate. Once children and parents had given informed consent, they were instructed that children should complete the questionnaire on their own in the language of their choice, but that they could also ask for assistance from parents. On average it took the participants between 25 and 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In sum, the online questionnaire contained 68 questions, elaborated to explore the areas of questions mentioned above. The questionnaire has been developed in accordance with proven survey instruments for this age group from studies on children's well-being in the international field of research on childhood (cf. e.g. Rees et al., 2020, World Vision, 2018). In addition, the research team added questions that specifically relate to the children's perspective and assessments with regard to the pandemic (e.g. fear of falling ill because of COVID-19).

The data I will refer to in the following stem from the responses to the questions in the online survey of children and young people living in Germany. After excluding incomplete questionnaires (less than 50% of questions answered), such with a very low completion time (less than 7 minutes) and such with a mismatch between age and school level (see Kirsch et al., 2021), the final sample for Germany consisted of 781 children and young people. The mean chronological age of participants in Germany was 10 years and 6 months, 54% of them indicated that they are female, 87% stated that they have internet at home, 92% that they have constantly access to a computer or a tablet. In the following, I will summarise the data that indicate the most significant changes in children's everyday lives and, after that, I will discuss

⁵ For more detailed information about the methodology of the study see Engel et al. (2021) and Kirsch et al. (2021).

what these data mean in terms of the institutionalisation of childhood and the institutionalisation of education.

4.2 De-Institutionalisation of education or re-institutionalisation of childhood? How children's everyday life changed at the beginning of the pandemic

When the research team of the COVID-Kids project was starting to prepare the online survey in April 2020 there were around 1,5 billion children worldwide unable to attend their educational institutions such as schools, day care centres or universities. This corresponds to 91,3% (UNESCO 2020). During the period when the COVID-Kids survey was online (May to July 2020), schools were still closed for almost 70% of the participants in Germany (Brazil: almost 100%). However, even for the roughly 30% of young people in Germany who reported that their school is already open, their school day must have looked very different than before. This can already be seen from the fact that over 98% of the children living in Germany in our survey indicated that their school day has changed – for example in respect to class composition, timetable, homework or online lessons in case of quarantine etc. Complementary to these school-related data, almost 95% of the 6 to 16 year olds in Germany said they were at home most of the time, over 86% stated they spend more time with their parents, and almost 60% that their parents were currently working from home. 94% said that it is their parents who are providing them help with schoolwork since schools are closed (before: 74%) (Kirsch et al., 2021).

However, it was not only the relation of time spent in schools and at home which has changed quite suddenly, there were as well other areas of children's everyday life which were affected as, for example, contact to peers and children's leisure time activities (including social work offers such as child and youth). While for the period before the pandemic 68% per cent of the children from Germany reported seeing their friends several times a week or daily, it was now – during the pandemic – 45% of the children and young people who indicated that they no longer saw their friends or saw them 'just' online. In addition, 96% of the respondents reported that they were unable to attend clubs, courses or music schools during the survey period, or were not allowed to attend them as usual. In addition, the amount of time the respondents did spend on the internet has multiplied in comparison to before, which was not least also due to digital distant education. For primary school children the average amount of time spent online rose from 0.7 hrs/day to 1,6 hrs/day and for secondary school children from 1,8 hrs/day to 4,5 hrs/day. Furthermore, over 70% indicated that they sometimes, often or very often "do nothing" or "hang around".

Already these few selected data illustrate that there has been a drastic shift in children's usual places and daily structures in the context of the first months of the pandemic. The most significant shift was that while the attendance of usual places and (educational) settings (for example day care centers, schools, structured leisure activities) was suspended, family time increased dramatically (Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020). The huge increase of time spent with family members living in the same household can also be seen from a survey with parents (n=12.628) conducted in the first weeks of the pandemic in Germany: 73% of the interviewed fathers and 87% of the mothers indicated that their children spent more time with mothers, fathers and their siblings than before (Langmeyer et al., 2020).

The correlation between the preventive measures against the spread of the corona virus and the relocation of children's everyday life into the family's own 'four walls' can be further explained by Jürgen Zinnecker's thesis of the "*domestication of childhood*" ("*Verhäuslichung von Kindheit*", Zinnecker, 1990, see also Holloway & Valentine, 2000). According to

Zinnecker, the central feature of the “domestication of childhood” in the context of the “civilisation process” is that children’s spheres of action are “confined” and relocated into closed and, thus, more controllable “protected spaces” (ibid., p. 142). The temporary change in terms of the places where children spend their everyday life caused by the measures against the pandemic goes hand in hand with the dispositive of security dominating the public and political discourse around the measures taken by the German government against the spread of the virus. In a common perspective, the “privatisation” and “domestication of childhood” is often regarded as a civilizational achievement in terms of establishing a sheltered childhood which means growing-up in a well-protected environment (cf. Cieraad, 2013), a privilege that for a long time only the better-off population of a society could afford. In difference to this common perspective, the understanding of the “domestication of childhood” offered by Zinnecker also allows to recognize that, in the context of the measures against the pandemic, ‘protection’ and ‘security’ in respect to children and younger people has been interpreted in a particular sense. The measures like closing schools, day care facilities, playgrounds etc. were not first and foremost aimed at creating safe *places for children*. They were rather implemented in order to help to *protect the older part of the population* from a further spread of the virus caused by personal contacts and meetings of children, young people, caregivers, parents, teachers etc. in public educational settings.

Following the results of a report of the German government, the prevention effect of these measures is not clearly detectable until today (Sachverständigenausschuss nach §5 Abs. 9 Infektionsschutzgesetz 2022). In addition, a meta-analysis of European data has found that more rigorous public health and social measures as well as school closures resulted in a stronger augmentation of depression rates among children and adolescents (Ludwig-Walz et al., 2022). A perspective sensitive to the institutionalisation of childhood and the deeply anchored generational order of society suggests that such political decisions we saw during the pandemic rather can be interpreted as a common sense-based reproduction of this order in terms of a discursively powerful *generational ordering* associated with massive consequences for the everyday lives of children, young people and their families. In respect to the institutionalisation of education this shows, that the generational order of societies is not solely reflected in the way in which education is concretely organised but also grounds decision-making in the field of social, educational and health policy.

However, this is not the only insight we can gain from applying the concept of the institutionalisation of childhood in the context of the changes children’s and young people’s lives have undergone temporarily in the context of the measures taken at the beginning of the pandemic. Another one could be identified against the background, that the changes which were emerging at the level of children’s everyday life, in the public discourse and as well in research at the very beginning of the pandemic have been picked up often in the context of discussing the heavy burdens these changes impose on parents and families (see for example Bonal & Gonzáles, 2020; Kerr et al., 2021; Knauf, 2021). This points to an aspect of the institutionalisation of childhood in modern societies that has been identified as central in childhood studies. This is the division of labour between the “care-specialized family” and the “learning-specialized educational system” (Zeiber, 2009, p. 128), which has been firmly established since the 19th century and which, until now, was usually associated with the tendency that children spend more and more of their lifetime outside their family environment, that is, in formal organisations (with their own timetables, places and membership rules) specialised on educational functions and operated by professionalised staff.

This division of labour can be considered as a historically accumulated hallmark of both the institutionalisation of education *and* the institutionalisation of childhood in modern societies. It is, insofar, a good example of the interference of the two processes. Against this background, it is quite obvious that the situation, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (which was characterised by school closures etc.), must have triggered the impression of a temporary break with established imaginations of institutional education as it should be (e.g. provided by specialised organisations and in co-presence of teachers and children at one place). It must as well have triggered the familiar notions of a ‘good’ childhood. This does neither mean that education was *de-institutionalised nor does it mean that childhood was*. This applies at least under the premise, if de-institutionalisation of education and/or childhood is associated with the dissolution of the boundaries of learning in the sense of a so-called “de-schooled learning” (see Hengst, 2018, p. 100), an understanding which again appeals to the narrowing criticized at the beginning. However, during the first acute phase of the pandemic in Germany educational settings were not abolished and schooling has not been stopped. Schools and day care facilities were ‘only’ temporarily shut down, mainly by restricting physical attendance of their addressees. Instead of talking of a de-institutionalisation of education or childhood, it seems more reasonable to speak of a re-organisation of education on the one hand side and a *re-institutionalisation of childhood* on the other hand side. With a focus on the institutionalisation of education, we could recognize that the functions and everyday tasks of schools and childcare facilities have been transferred to the family or the parents. What we were facing was a re-organisation of institutionalised education in the family context, that is, a *re-familialisation of education*. Correspondingly, what – in terms of the institutionalisation of childhood – can be characterised as ‘domestication’ was – in terms of the institutionalisation of education – associated with its re-familialisation. However, in the conceptual discussion about the institutionalisation of childhood in childhood studies, *familialisation* has been plausibly identified as one important mode of the ongoing process of the institutionalisation of childhood in modern societies (for example in the form of the legal codification of parent’s ultimate responsibility for the children’s upbringing in Germany; see Mierendorff, 2010; Zeiher, 2009).⁶ So, with the concept of the institutionalisation of childhood in mind we can recognize that the familialisation of education does not indicate a break with the process of institutionalisation of education and childhood, but only one of its possible (other) manifestations.

If the institutionalisation of childhood obviously does not fundamentally depend on the availability or accessibility of professionalised organisational entities for education, then this illustrates again, that the institutionalisation of childhood is as well represented in a symbolic order of certainties, which build, at the same time, the ground for socially shared imaginations of what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood (see Betz et al., 2018b). In this sense, Bühler-Niederberger (2011) identified the image of a long lasting, *well protected and educationally-rich childhood* as a dominant “normative pattern”. It includes such living conditions like growing-up in a complete family, a successful career in the educational system and a high level of objective and subjective well-being (cf. *ibid.*, p. 45). This normative pattern is oriented towards the standard of living as well as the organisation of generational relations in Western industrialised nations and is the basis for establishing expectations of a ‘good’ childhood almost worldwide. It is as well influential when it comes to the assessment of

⁶ Instead, it seems more reasonable to interpret the re-familialisation of institutionalised education in the context of the pandemic as a particular episode in a dialectic historic process of the familialisation and de-familialisation of childhood (see Zeiher, 2009).

children's living conditions. It is impacting social policies and practices strongly, and insofar as well children's lives (Betz, 2018). From this, it can be concluded that the *institutionalisation of education* is obviously an integral part of the *institutionalised conceptions of a good childhood*.

With respect to the public controversies in the context of the pandemic about the closure of educational institutions in Germany, this shows in how far detailed knowledge about the institutionalisation of childhood not only allows to understand why such drastic measures had been possible but also why their proportionality was strongly questioned from the very beginning of the pandemic. It is precisely the latter that suggests to understand the *re-institutionalisation of childhood* as an initially *critical process* of transformations in the everyday organisation of children's lives, their conditions of living and growing-up which owns the potential to *irritate* as well as to *change existing expectations towards childhood* in the long run. In contrast, *de-institutionalisation* would mean suspending any expectations at all.

5 Final remarks

This paper was aiming at problematising and further clarifying the complex and more loose coupled relationship between the *institutionalisation of education* and the *institutionalisation of childhood*. Starting from interrogating the widespread assumption in public discourse that the institutionalisation of childhood is mainly driven or based on the institutionalisation of education, the paper went on with contesting this assumption against the background of theoretical as well as epistemological perspectives from the paradigm of the 'new social studies of childhood' and from empirical data and findings that emerged in the context of some of my recent research. This allowed to illustrate more concretely in how far both processes of institutionalisation interfere with each other without being simply congruent. In doing so, the paper also showed that an analytical focus on the *institutionalisation of childhood* can open up special insights to contemporary developments in early pedagogy or institutionalized education which are different in comparison to readings following the path of the institutionalisation of education or through a lens taking a certain mode of institutionalised education for granted. This is not least because focusing on the institutionalisation of childhood means placing the social conditions under which children live in a particular society at the centre of one's research interest. The institutionalisation of education makes up an important part of these conditions, but it is as well itself affected by the institutionalisation of childhood (e.g. in terms of imaginations about a 'good' childhood) what at the same time is the case in reverse.

Taking into account the interrelatedness of institutionalised childhood and institutionalised education means first of all nothing else than to distinguish consistently between childhood institutions, on the one hand, and the *institutionalisation of childhood* on the other hand (Eßer & Schröer 2019, Tervooren 2021). Consequently applying this distinction not only allows to understand in how far the institutionalisation of education is both based on generalised patterns of an institutionalised childhood and reproduces them. It can also help to overcome the 'methodological institutionalism' (Eßer & Schröer 2019, p. 121) of studies on children and childhood in social sciences, education and social work. In Social work research the methodological institutionalism is not least reflected in the fact that children have for a long time been primarily studied with a focus on their status of (potential) addressees of child and youth services (see Honig, 2018; Neumann, 2020).

Distinguishing between childhood institutions and the institutionalisation of childhood would finally allow to open up a wider research perspective on the process of the institutionalisation

of childhood and its practical realisation. Children are not only pupils, addressees or kindergarten children, they are also boys, girls, residents, patients, neighbours, participants refugees, users, consumers or members of socio-cultural milieus etc. (Honig, 2017). Against this background, the institutionalisation of childhood more appears as an *inherently fragmented field* of scattered and diversified social (and age-related) positions *as a child*, a field which comes up with different rules, constraints, affordances, opportunities and various levels of situated agency. Taking this into account, it becomes again apparent that a methodological institutionalism is really in danger of overlooking the diverse contexts and events of the institutionalisation of childhood as it always tends to pay particular attention to society-wide universalized processes or patterns of structuration, standardization and normalization. One of the specific accomplishments of children as social actors can be seen in orienting themselves in the fragmented field of institutionalisations and to connect the individual spheres both horizontally (day course) and vertically (life course) in a way that makes sense to them and others. Such an assumption suggests to link the question of children's agency, which is so fundamental to childhood studies, with the question of the institutionalisation of childhood. This is because from here, here we can, not at least, ask in which way *children themselves* contribute to *the institutionalisation of their own childhood*.

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