

# Participation Opportunities for Children in Group Educational Settings: An Empirical Study of Participation as a Key Element of Inclusive Everyday Organization in Child Day Care Facilities

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## Abstract:

Participation is crucial in implementing inclusive education in daycare centers, as it ensures children's rights to self-determination and social engagement. This video study explores the morning circle as a regular educational group activity and a potential venue for participatory democracy in daycare routines. This study examines children's involvement and co-decision-making in these circles. The analysis reveals limited implementation of children's participation in morning circles, with educators rarely structuring decision-making to accommodate all children. Children often do not play a significant role in the decision-making process when they are involved.

## Keywords:

Participation  
Inclusion  
Daily routine  
Videography  
Morning circle

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## 1. Introduction

The organization of everyday life in daycare centers plays a special role in the implementation of inclusion, as everyday life has a significant and lasting impact on children's experiences. It can currently be stated that inclusion situated in everyday life, i.e. the natural and non-discriminatory participation and participation of all children in everyday upbringing and educational processes, is not yet sufficiently realized in all daycare centers <sup>[1-3]</sup>. In

this context, participation emphasizes that children not only take part in everyday life but can also get involved and help shape it (Schmude & Pioch, 2014, p. 7).

The PIIQUE project — Pro Inclusive Interaction; Developing Quality Cross-Media is dedicated to this research desideratum and examines how inclusion can be lived as a matter of course in everyday daycare and how this knowledge can be made digitally accessible to early childhood education professionals. The project's

videographic study analyzes the interactions between specialist staff and children in the morning circle. The design of morning circles is understood as an opportunity for inclusive pedagogy integrated into everyday life in day-care centers.

The focus of the analysis is on participation in the sense of co-determination<sup>[4-5]</sup>. It examines the extent to which the morning circle is a participatory format and whether all children have the opportunity to participate in decision-making situations.

This article first categorizes participation as an important element for the implementation of inclusion in everyday daycare center life and looks at the morning circle as an everyday group educational setting. Building on this, the study of 22 morning circles shows how children are involved in decision-making situations in the morning circle. Finally, the article discusses the potential and further implications for the implementation of inclusive participation in the morning circle.

## 2. Understanding of inclusion

Inclusion is understood as a reform process for society as a whole, to realize the right of all people to participate in the sense of participation and empowerment, self-determination, and education<sup>[3, 6]</sup>. The PIIQUE project specifically examines the right of all children to inclusive education, care, and upbringing in terms of access, participation, and empowerment. An important element in this process is the participation of children. It enables participation and empowerment in everyday life when children can help shape it and make decisions on areas that affect them personally, their center or group, and the activities that take place here<sup>[7]</sup>. It is therefore about both participation and co-decision-making about life in the community, as well as the self-determination of each child about their own life<sup>[5, 8]</sup>.

Participation in the sense of co-determination in a democratic community is also the goal and method of democratic education, which aims to impart basic democratic principles and values and the acquisition of democratic competencies<sup>[8]</sup>. Participation and co-decision-making are defined as different degrees of participation, which have already been systematized through various level models. These also take into

account the negation of co-determination and thus show the range from heteronomy to self-organization<sup>[5, 9]</sup>. Following the understanding of participation presented above, the subsequent analysis of the implementation of inclusion examines child participation at the interactional level between the professional and all children.

As a basic orientation for pedagogical action, participation implies that pedagogical professionals voluntarily relinquish power and want to involve children, because young children, in particular, can neither demand nor practically enforce the right to participation<sup>[8, 10]</sup>. They are therefore dependent on adults relinquishing decision-making power. Responsive, dialogue- and child-oriented behavior on the part of the educational professionals is important for this, through which they perceive the signals and needs of the children and consciously and responsibly open up decision-making opportunities and shape interactions<sup>[11]</sup>. The implementation of participation therefore takes place in particular in the professional actions of the professionals and can only be described as inclusive in a broad sense if the rights of all children are recognized. Accordingly, it is crucial for the performance of professionals that they consciously and inclusively organize their actions. This is also emphasized by the current results of the BiKA study — Participation in childhood for children under the age of three: So far, educational professionals have not been sufficiently successful in enabling children to experience self-determination and co-determination in their everyday work if they do not initiate decision-making processes on their initiative or react quickly to educational impulses that promote participation<sup>[11]</sup>.

## 3. The morning circle as an inclusive everyday ritual?

In the vast majority of daycare centers, the morning circle is an integral part of the daily routine, in which all children in a group and early childhood educators participate<sup>[13-15]</sup>.

In terms of co-determination, morning circles can represent an open format for participation in child daycare centers and consciously enable democratic co-determination processes if children can present their concerns and insights here, discuss them together, and

make decisions. This understanding of the morning circle can be found in education plans as well as in approaches to democracy education <sup>[8, 16–19]</sup>.

To date, there have been very few empirical studies on the morning circle as a special early education setting, particularly in German-speaking countries <sup>[13]</sup>. The few studies that deal with the morning circle, among other things, only partially reflect an understanding of the morning circle as a format of open participation; the morning circle is predominantly analyzed as a community ritual that provides children with security, structure, and a sense of belonging <sup>[21–23]</sup>.

Concerning children's opportunities for action in the morning circle, a Swiss study identified three central forms of child agency. The first form, being there, describes the children's physical participation in the morning circle. Joining in as the second form refers to the possibility of active participation in the form of playing along, singing, or choosing something, but without changing the course of the morning circle. The third form, influencing, means that children influence the course of the morning circle through their actions <sup>[22]</sup>. The latter emphasizes that the morning circle offers potential for genuine participation, in the sense of involvement and co-decision-making. At the same time, the study notes that in the morning circle format, children's forms of participation are sometimes strongly channeled and restricted so that the professionals can carry out their planned course of action undisturbed <sup>[22]</sup>.

Regarding the participatory everyday culture, the analysis presented here also examines whether the morning circle format is designed in a participatory way by the specialist staff, i.e. whether the children are involved in the design and implementation of the morning circle and can influence it. To this end, the relevant decision-making situations in the morning circle are focused on. On the other hand, decision-making processes are examined that relate to the daily routine and coexistence in the daycare center and characterize the morning circle as a format of open participation.

## 4. Research methodology

### 4.1. Research questions

This study examines how children are involved in

decision-making situations in the morning circle. The focus is on decisions that affect all children present. It analyzes by whom and how decisions are made in the morning circle, which activities take place in the morning circle, how these activities are organized in concrete terms, and how the daily routine, the daily routine, and living together in the community are organized.

### 4.2. Sample and design

The research approach chosen is to analyze the situation using videography of documented, unstaged morning circles. Videography as a method aims to "investigate social situations" <sup>[24]</sup>. By allowing the observed situations to be viewed repeatedly, videography supports the reconstruction of social reality and the detailed analysis of interaction processes <sup>[24–25]</sup>. The data material comprises two morning circles of 11 educational professionals each, in which mainly children aged three to six years participate. The 22 morning circles of ten different groups of children were filmed between 2020 and 2021 in Berlin and Brandenburg.

The videography enables the systematic recording of the decision-making processes in the morning circle and the analysis of the participation of all participating children. On average, eight children took part in a morning circle (minimum = four children, maximum = 14 children). The ecological validity is ensured by a short interview (with the participating professionals <sup>[26–27]</sup>).

### 4.3. Evaluation method

The systematic analysis of the material is carried out using a structuring qualitative content analysis based on Mayring based on a theory-led coding guide <sup>[28–29]</sup>. The use of categories enables a comprehensible interpretation of the video material, allows all observations to be compared, and serves to systematize the findings <sup>[28]</sup>.

The content analysis is computerized and carried out directly on the video material using MAXQDA software. To determine the intercoder agreement, a random sample of 27 percent of the morning circles ( $n = 6$ ) was drawn at the end of the evaluation phase and checked by an external, trained expert. The average intercoder reliability according to Holsti is 0.89 with a range of 0.87 to 1 between the individual categories <sup>[30]</sup>. The other morning circles were coded by at least two researchers

from the project to further ensure the reliability of the data interpretation <sup>[28]</sup>.

The units of analysis of the data material are all decision-making situations that are made for the group or day-care center community. These are differentiated according to whether they relate to the organization of the daily routine or togetherness or a change in the group activities that take place in the morning circle or their organization (**Table 1**). The group activities were determined in a preliminary analysis based on Burghardt and Kluczniok. An average of six activities took place in a morning circle (minimum = two activities, maximum = 13 activities).

For the evaluation of the collected data, a category system was developed deductively to summarize video sequences with similar meanings. To record the children's participation, a main category was developed based on the participation ladder by Wright et al. and the various participation levels for decisions in the morning circle were modified <sup>[9]</sup>. The level model has a hierarchical structure (**Figure 1**)

**Stage model of participation**



**Figure 1.** Children's participation category

Even in the preliminary stages of participation, children are already involved in the decision-making process. The individual sub-stages of the participation ladder correspond to the sub-categories of the coding guide. In the preliminary stages of participation, the stage pre-prepared participation was formed inductively from the material, as a recurring pattern was that the professionals allowed the children to choose between pre-prepared proposals and this could not be mapped directly; it is also recorded here whether the children are only asked for their consent, i.e. only answer yes or no, or can actually choose between two or more proposals.

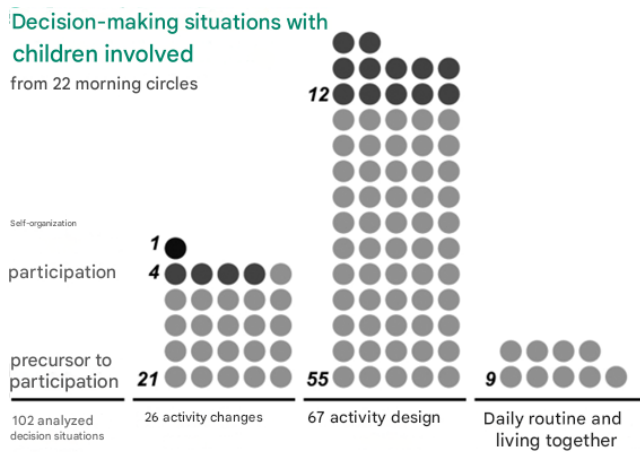
Two formal categories record whether the specialist or a child initiates the decision-making situation or moderates the morning circle. Another formal-scaling category records how many of the children participate in decision-making processes. Finally, two analytical categories of decision-making power are used to analyze how decisions are made, which part of the children participate in the decision-making process, and who is allowed to decide which suggestion is implemented. In addition to individual children and professionals, the subcategories of the latter. According to Hansen et al., consensus and majority decision-making were adopted as common decision-making procedures in child daycare facilities.

## 5. Results

Overall, an average of five decision-making situations with child participation were recorded for a morning circle with a range of zero to 15 decision-making situations. The participation of children in the analyzed decision-making situations is shown in **Figure 2**.

**Table 1.** Analyzed decision-making situations in the morning circle

Decision-making situations	Changing activities	Organizing activities	Daily routine and living together
Definition	Situations that lead to the inclusion of a new group activity within the morning circle.	Situations that lead to group activity in the morning circle being done or changed in a certain way.	Situations in which decisions on the organization of the daily routine, everyday life, and living together in the community are discussed.
Coding example (from the research material)	The teacher asks the children if they want to say the poem from last week again. A few children answer yes or nod. They then read the poem.	The professional chooses a child who decides how all the children and the professional will move next in a game.	The teacher asks the group: Do you have any ideas about what else we can do on the subject of autumn? The children make various suggestions. The teacher makes a note of them.



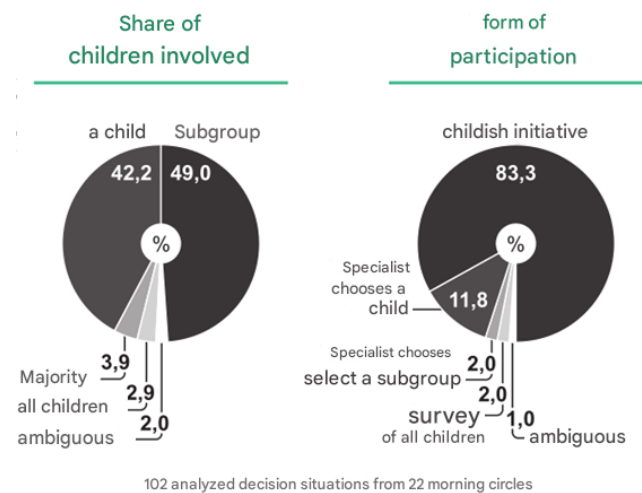
**Figure 2.** Evaluation of 102 analyzed decision-making situations with child participation in 22 morning circles

In 144 analyzed group activities, children were involved in 18.1% ( $n = 26$ ) of the decision-making situations for changing activities. 80.8 % ( $n = 21$ ) of these 26 decision-making situations could be assigned to preliminary stages of participation and 15.4 % ( $n = 4$ ) to stages of participation. In 73.1 % ( $n = 19$ ), the children were predominantly asked for their consent as to whether they wanted to do an activity.

A total of 67 decision-making situations with child participation were analyzed in the 144 group activities analyzed. Of these 67 decision-making situations, 82.1 % ( $n = 55$ ) involved preliminary stages of participation and 17.9 % ( $n = 12$ ) involved stages of participation.

It was only rarely observed that decisions were made about the daily routine and living together in day-care centers. In six morning circles, there were 11 decision-making processes regarding everyday life at the daycare center. Children's participation in preliminary stages of participation was observed in nine of the legs and the children were not involved at all in one.

Overall, for the 102 analyzed decision-making situations with child participation, the proportion of children who participated in the decision-making situations was 42.2% for one child (43 out of 102), 49.0% for a subgroup (50 out of 102) and 2.9% for all children (3 out of 102). When children took part in decision-making situations, 83.3 % of them (85 out of 102) did so, i.e. they initiated decision-making situations on their own initiative or responded to open questions posed to the whole group (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.** Proportion and form of children's participation

When children were involved in binding decision-making, which was the case in 17 decision-making situations, more than half of the decisions were made by one child ( $n = 10$ ), 29.4 % were consensus decisions ( $n = 5$ ) and 5.9 % were majority decisions ( $n = 1$ ).

All morning circles were moderated by the specialist and the decision-making processes were predominantly initiated by them. The children were involved in 24 of the 30 decision-making situations initiated by children. Child participation was recorded here in 50.0% of all situations in the preliminary stages of participation (12 of 24) and 45.9% in stages of participation (11 of 24).

Overall, three forms of participatory decision-making situations were identified in the analyzed morning circles. Firstly, participatory decision-making situations are organized by the specialist. In four morning circles organized by four teachers, an average of one decision-making situation was specifically designed in a participatory way for all children. The children were mainly allowed to choose between suggestions made by the specialist. Two of the professionals paid attention to whether all children wanted to participate. Secondly, an openness to decision-making situations initiated by children was observed. For five professionals, decision-making situations initiated by children led exclusively to children's participation in the decision-making situations. In two morning circles organized by two teachers, the children were also able to initiate and (co-)determine at least three decision-making situations. Thirdly, there was a tendency to organize participation by asking the children for their consent to a decision; in nine morning



circles run by six teachers, the children were asked at least three times.

Overall, mainly preliminary stages of participation were identified in the decision-making situations with child participation; in addition, there were fewer than three decision-making situations with child participation in five morning groups of five professionals, i.e. overall few opportunities for children to participate.

## 6. Discussion

The morning circle as an everyday group educational ritual can offer the opportunity, regardless of the chosen topic, to consciously organize it as a place for exchange and democracy education and thus enable children to participate in and give back to the daycare center. It would also be possible for children to participate in the selection and organization of activities at any time. In particular, recurring processes in a familiar setting would allow children to draw on existing contextual knowledge when making decisions and develop this further based on experience.

The present study shows that the morning circle tends to be a ritual moderated and led by the specialist with only partial opportunities for the children to have a say. The morning circle does not represent a format for open participation, as it is not primarily used to discuss everyday life at the daycare center with the children and to make decisions together. Instead, various group activities take place, most of which are planned and organized by the specialist. The results thus tie in with the current state of research on morning circles in German-speaking countries<sup>[13, 31]</sup>. The gap in the realization of the claim of inclusive participation visible in this study is reinforced by the fact that all children are rarely specifically enabled to participate if they want to, to make access to participation as barrier-free as possible.

From the perspective of a participation-oriented, inclusive everyday organization, the question of children's opportunities for co-determination is also relevant if group educational settings in daycare centers are not a format for open participation, as decisions on joint activities are also made in morning circles that focus on joint group activities, such as in this study. This raises the further question of discussion.

The morning circle as an everyday group pedagogical ritual can offer the opportunity, regardless of the chosen topic, to consciously organize it as a place of exchange and democracy education and thus enable children to participate and give back in the day-to-day life of the daycare center. It would also be possible for children to participate in the selection and organization of activities at any time. In particular, recurring processes in a familiar setting would allow children to draw on existing contextual knowledge when making decisions and develop this further based on experience.

The present study shows that the morning circle tends to be a ritual moderated and led by the specialist with only partial opportunities for the children to have a say. The morning circle does not represent a format for open participation, as it is not primarily used to discuss everyday life at the daycare center with the children and to make decisions together. Instead, various group activities take place, most of which are planned and organized by the specialist. The results thus tie in with the current state of research on morning circles in German-speaking countries<sup>[13, 31]</sup>. The gap in the realization of the claim of inclusive participation visible in this study is reinforced by the fact that rarely are all children specifically enabled to participate if they want to, to make access to participation as barrier-free as possible.

From the perspective of a participation-oriented, inclusive daily routine, the question of children's opportunities for co-determination is also relevant if group educational settings in daycare centers are not a format for open participation, as decisions on joint activities are also made in morning circles that focus on joint group activities, such as in this study. This raises the further question of which and how these decision-making situations in the morning circle are organized in such a way that children can participate in them. In this respect, the form of organizing children's participation by asking for their consent can tend to be assessed as an ambivalent participation practice. It can be assumed that the inquiry is linked to the expectation of the professionals that the children will affirm it. This assumption was confirmed by observed decision-making situations in which the children expressed that they did not want to do it by saying no, but the professional ignored this and continued

with the planned procedure. This form of participation can therefore be interpreted as a method of mobilizing and activating the children for the planned process rather than as genuine participation.

Concerning the inclusive organization of participation, the results are similar to those of the BiKA study for the crèche sector. This means that children who do not initiate decision-making situations of their own accord or respond immediately to open questions from the professional also tend not to be able to participate in the elementary sector analyzed here. The research shows a difference between self-confident children who can take the initiative and others who cannot. The former often applies to children who are socially advantaged and can articulate their interests at an early age <sup>[32]</sup>. It is therefore important to counteract the one-sided influence of only some of the children so that social inequalities are not already reflected in the conditions of participation in everyday daycare center life <sup>[12]</sup>.

On the other hand, decision-making situations initiated by children often lead to children participating in decisions. This indicates that professionals are quite willing to relinquish power and involve children and are open to signals from children, but that professionals are less likely to organize decision-making situations in a participatory manner on their initiative. It also emphasizes, just like the decision-making situations that professionals specifically designed in a participatory way for all children, that it is possible to open up space for

child participation and giving in the morning circle.

However, the theory-led evaluation based on the participation ladder by Wright et al. allows the researchers to summarize that the children's influence on the decision-making situation is rarely binding and that there are few situations in which the children and the professional can agree together or decide what to do together. Given the demand for an inclusive and participation-oriented organization of everyday daycare and the requirements of educational programs and democracy education, there is a difference between normative expectations of professional action and actual action in everyday daycare.

Against the background of the results, a need for sensitization about a participation-oriented, inclusive everyday design of recurring group educational settings becomes clear at this stage of the evaluation. Regarding the theoretically postulated importance of the morning circle as a possible place for democracy education and a format for open participation in everyday daycare center life, however, there are also possible

points of departure for the professional development of the morning circle format. In addition to the consciously participatory organization of decision-making processes in the day-care center routine on the part of the educational staff, the promotion, and encouragement of all children to participate, regardless of whether children initiate the decision-making situations themselves, appears to be particularly important.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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