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## **The mediatisation of professional pedagogical practice. Social networks in early childhood education and care**

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## The Mediatisation of Professional Pedagogical Practice

### Social Networks in Early Childhood Education and Care

Helen Knauf

#### Abstract

*Early childhood education centres in Germany today are increasingly using social networks to present their work. This article puts this development into the context of a comprehensive process of mediatisation. Using two group discussions with teachers in early childhood education and care centres, I will show that the route via a social network is not just a new communication channel, but that the content communicated, the relationships between the actors, and the identity of the institution are also changed by it. Legal ambiguities, technical infrastructure and a lack of experience are identified as crucial barriers to the use of social networks. From the perspective of the users, social networks primarily create opportunities for a higher level of feedback for the pedagogical practitioners, more transparency and information for parents, and various points of reference for conversations between adults and children about learning processes.*

#### Soziale Netzwerke in der Kita – Mediatisierung professionellen pädagogischen Handelns

#### Zusammenfassung

*Kindertageseinrichtungen in Deutschland nutzen heute vermehrt Soziale Netzwerke, um die eigene Arbeit zu zeigen. Der vorliegende Artikel stellt diese Entwicklung in den Kontext eines umfassenden Mediatisierungsprozesses. Anhand von zwei Gruppendiskussionen mit Erzieherinnen in Kindertageseinrichtungen wird gezeigt, dass der Weg über ein Soziales Netzwerk nicht nur ein neuer Kommunikationskanal ist, sondern dass sich dadurch auch die kommunizierten Inhalte, die Beziehungen zwischen den Akteuren und die Identität der Einrichtung verändern. Juristische Unklarheiten, technische Ausstattung und mangelnde eigene Erfahrungen werden als entscheidende Barrieren für die Nutzung Sozialer Netzwerke identifiziert. Chancen Sozialer Netzwerke ergeben sich aus Sicht der Nutzer vor allem in einer höheren Resonanz für die pädagogischen Fachkräfte, mehr Transparenz und Information für Eltern sowie den vielfältigen Gesprächsanlässen zwischen Erwachsenen und Kindern über Bildungsprozesse.*

## Introduction

### *Early childhood education and care 2.0: a new phenomenon*

Nee naw, here comes the fire engine! Today we had a fire drill in the centre. The fire alarm was set off and all the children and teachers went in a quiet and orderly manner to the assembly point. Then, the voluntary fire brigade came and explained everything to the children [...] The children were allowed to ask questions and have a go on everything! (Facebook posting of a ECEC)

Posts like this, or similar, can be found on *Facebook* together with a few photos. They are uploaded by early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, and they provide insight into daily life in the institution. The use of a publicly available social network by ECEC centres is a recent, thus far relatively uncommon in Germany and barely researched development (Knauf 2015b, 59). It can be seen in the context of two more profound developments: first, the professionalization of ECEC, and second, the mediatisation of society as a whole, as it is shown below.

### *Making education visible*

Early childhood education has undergone a major expansion over the past few decades. This development is initially becoming visible mainly in a quantitative expansion, i. e. the proportion of 4-year-olds in ECEC centres in OECD countries increased from 72% to 88% between 2005 and 2013 (OECD 2015a, 324). At the same time, there are various efforts on a national and international level to increase the quality of ECEC, for example by improving the general regulations (e.g. practitioner's qualifications, adult-to-child ratios) and defining guidelines and standards (OECD 2015b, 75). One aspect of this qualitative development is the comprehensive professionalization of pedagogical practice with the aim of delivering systematic educational work.

Pedagogical work is to a large extent characterised by invisibility. This applies to the work of pedagogical practitioners as well as to the activities of the children: reflection and learning processes themselves, but also the impulses behind these, are elusive and difficult to measure. This invisibility leads to ignorance, giving rise to an uncertainty which then pervades all pedagogical situations (Bormann 2015, 152). Parents experience one dimension of this uncertainty as soon as their child starts attending an ECEC centre. Mostly, they know very little about what their child is doing, thinking and experiencing during the day. One way of dealing with this uncertainty is to use pedagogical documentation. This makes educational processes visible in different ways (Krechevsky et al. 2013; Project Zero and Reggio

Children, 2011): learning stories, portfolios, documentation panels, or displays of artefacts the children have produced are visible traces of what is happening in the institution (Helm et al. 2007; Knauf 2015c; Southcott 2015). Pedagogical documentation also helps to reassure parents that their child is being well looked after and is receiving an optimal education. Empirical studies show that pedagogical practitioners in particular see the parents as important addressees of the pedagogical documentation (Knauf 2015c, 246). Pedagogical documentation is therefore an important component in the cooperation between the ECEC centre and parents. This is, however, only one function of pedagogical documentation. Documentation is also a stimulus for children's (self-)reflection and for pedagogical practitioners' exploration of the way children think (Rinaldi 2006, 98). Although pedagogical documentation is that important, its implementation is often inadequate. Lack of time in the working day, lack of awareness of the importance of documentation, and, last but not least, insufficiently qualified staff prevent the comprehensive and systematic implementation of pedagogical documentation (Knauf 2015c, 245). The importance of cooperation with parents has received more attention in recent years. The context for this is the growing awareness of, on the one hand, the importance of the family as a source of education, and, on the other, the increased amount of time children spend outside of the family (Friedrich 2011, 12; Fröhlich-Gildhoff 2013, 12). That is why ECEC centres are increasingly striving to improve the educational competence of parents and, at the same time, involve parents in the organisation of the ECEC centre (Kämpfe/Westphal 2013, 153). In addition to these social functions, however, there is also an economic one: in almost all industrial countries, ECEC centres are both state funded and (in part) privately funded (OECD 2015a, 248). Parents as 'addressees' are therefore not only 'service users' but also have a role to play as 'clients'. In this context, the cooperation between ECEC centres and parents is characterised by various tensions (Betz 2015, 29): both actors complain of each other's high expectations and desire more appreciation and transparency.

### ***ECEC centres in the process of mediatisation***

Mediatisation is a fundamental social process whereby various different social areas are permeated by media-based communication (Krotz 2013, 44). Media are seen here as representations of meanings produced by humans.

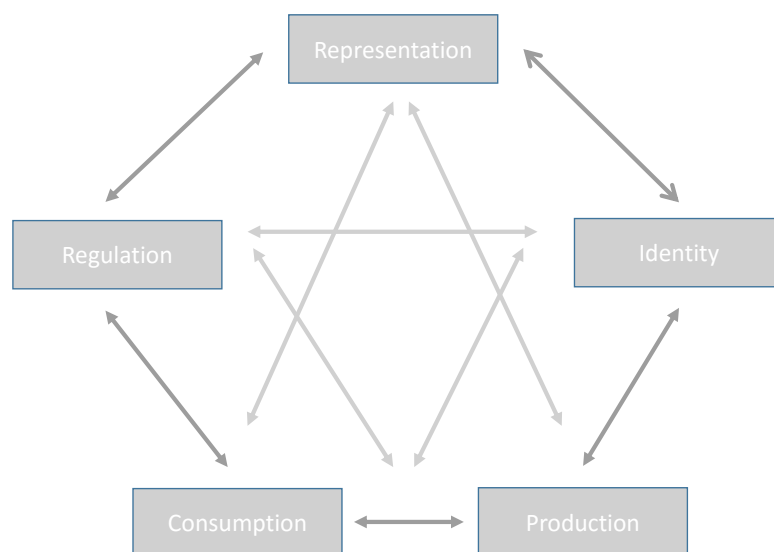
Social networks are internet services that enable all users not only to consume but also to produce news (Neuberger 2011, 34). ECEC centres primarily need networks that are easy to operate, as they can be integrated into the daily routine without much additional effort. Public networks, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and blogs on blogging platforms are potentially very suitable. There are also networks with

limited access, such as *Kidblog* and *Seesaw*, as well as strictly closed digital networks that are set up specifically for ECEC centres or schools by software providers, e. g. *Stepfolio* or *Snyga*.

Postings on social networks have three functions (Knauf 2015b, 63): informing, documenting, and liasing between people. Informative posts contain news from the institution, event information, or links to pedagogical issues. Posts for the purpose of documentation provide insight into daily pedagogical work, e. g. posts about the children's trips, projects or games. Liasing posts ultimately consist of expressions of thanks, quotations concerning children and childhood, or good wishes (e. g. at Christmas). The use of social networks by ECEC centres is, however, very different from country to country. Whereas, for instance, many institutions in the USA are represented on *Facebook*, *Twitter* or in blogs, these barely have a role to play in Germany (Knauf 2015b, 67).

The use of social media is just one aspect of the advancing mediatisation in ECEC centres. Digital media have for a long time played a role in daily pedagogical work: in the first instance, for the children themselves, who in many institutions use computers or work productively with media themselves as part of media projects. Mainly, however, digital photography and videos are used almost nationwide for pedagogical documentation. Fast availability and ease of operation make these technologies an indispensable tool in pedagogical work (Knauf 2015a, 122).

A fundamental model of mediatisation is the «circuit of culture» (Hall 1997a, 3). Culture is understood here as the production of meaning. This is precisely what happens in the use of social networks by ECEC centres: they construct meaning. The «circuit of culture» describes which elements contribute to the construction of meaning and illustrates the reciprocal connections between these elements.



**Fig. 1.:** Circuit of culture according to Hall (1997a, 33).

The different forms of presenting pedagogical work are understood here as «representations». This perception makes clear that the photos, videos, commentaries, posts, etc. have a constructed character and are not objective, neutral reproductions of what happens in the ECEC centre. Representations must be understood as meanings shaped and constructed by humans and assigned to particular content. However, it is not only the makers of the «representation» who participate in the construction of this meaning («production»), but also the recipients. Their interpretations and connotations influence this process of meaning-making in the same way («consumption»). These representations are filtered by both those who produce and those who receive them; the filter connects them to particular contexts and values. This connective process can also be called «regulation». These processes of production of meaning stand in close reciprocal relation to the «identity» of the participants, for «production», «consumption» and «regulation» can only come from the context of identity, which, however, they also influence in turn.

### ***The present study***

The basic approach underlying this article is to interpret participation in social networks as a process of meaning-making. This raises the research question of whether and in what way the communication, relationships and identity of the participants are changed by the use of social networks. Precisely because the visibility of pedagogical work is significantly increased through its representation in social media, we should expect fundamental changes on these levels. The present study asks how pedagogical practitioners in ECEC centres evaluate this development.

## **Material and Methods**

### ***Group discussions***

The study is based on group discussions with colleagues from two ECEC centres in Germany. The institutions were selected on the basis of a theoretical sampling, where as many different framework requirements as possible were factored into the selection. Group Discussion 1 (GD 1) was conducted in an ECEC centre that has existed for 40 years. The institution is funded and run by the municipality. The team consists of a group of older and a group of younger practitioners, the average age being 39,5. Altogether, 8 colleagues participated in the discussion. The institution strives to produce comprehensive pedagogical documentation, aligning its pedagogical work with the principles of the Reggio Emilia pedagogical

approach. On the institutional side there is no internet experience, neither with an own home page nor on social networks. Group Discussion 2 (GD 2) took place in a newly established ECEC centre funded and run by a private foundation. The average age of the staff is 32, the youngest practitioner being 23 and the oldest being 43. 6 members of staff participated in the group discussion. As early as the opening of the institution, the building phase was documented on its home page and on *Facebook*. Staff also regularly posted details of their daily pedagogical work over a longer period on *Facebook*. However, this was effectively stopped due to legal ambiguities.

The selection therefore includes both an ECEC centre with network experience and one that is rather more distanced.

#### ***Data collection and analysis***

The group discussion method follows the qualitative paradigm. The aim of the group discussion is to explore the discourses present in the group, as well as to identify the concordant and conflicting facets of an issue. Group discussions have several advantages over qualitative interviews: if a topic is discussed in a larger group, a discussion emerges that is often more lively and more authentic than in a one-to-one conversation (Flick 2014, 244). It is the group discussion that gives rise to a natural conversation situation in which real convictions are expressed and the distortive factor of social acceptability is reduced (Krueger/Casey 2015, 47). As regards the issue of using social networks in ECEC centres, group discussions are also very suitable because daily implementation can only happen on the basis of discussions among the team of staff. In this respect, there were good foundations for understanding the different points of view within the group of ECEC teachers and defining them in relation to one another.

At the beginning of the group discussions, by way of introduction, the different forms of social networks and their modes of operation were explained. Even though a number of the participants in the discussion already had this basic knowledge, this guaranteed that all participants came up to the same level of knowledge. As a stimulus, the participants were shown examples of posts on social networks by ECEC centres. The discussion was further structured with the aid of a guide (Krueger/Casey 2015, 41). The moderation of the discussions was low-key, so as to avoid compromising the authentic character of the conversational situations, but it was, at the same time, process-oriented, so as to ensure the discussion remained focused on the issue (Kühn/Koschel 2011, 151).

The discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. In addition, important impressions were immediately recorded. The subsequent analysis was focused on qualitative content analysis. This involved analysing both the individual

group discussions (within-case) and the discussions between these (cross-case). In several reading processes, statements on the same or similar aspects of the issue were grouped into clusters. This involved first summarising passages then further condensing them through the process of explication (Mayring 2003, 70). In this way, various content clusters were formed:

- Functions: posts as advertising, attracting parents' interest, new parent groups/inclusion, media education, contact with parents/information, strengthening parents' identification.
- Target groups: parents, colleagues, employers, potential colleagues.
- Character: contemporary, impersonal, visual medium, transparent.
- Fears: photos of children/right to privacy, time and effort required, time/effort/cost for funding organizations, exclusion of individual groups of parents, technical problems, older colleagues.
- Opportunities: immediacy, up-to-date information, time savings, feedback and recognition for educators.
- Experiences: practical implementation.

These content clusters were connected with the five elements of the «circuit of culture» (see p 23) and used as main categories. Further differentiation was made via sub-categories. This made it possible to identify different perspectives and experiences in the use of social networks. Because of the small sample, the results can only be generalized to a limited extent. The findings identified can instead be understood as solid evidence of the approach taken by practitioners in ECEC centres towards social networks.

## **Results**

### ***Production***

«Production» is the process by which a cultural product comes into existence. A cultural product can take many different forms: a song, a chair, or even just a post on a social network. In the process of production, creators charge this with meaning (Hall 1997b, 13).

The question of how posts are produced on social networks is a key issue among discussion participants. There are three important dimensions: firstly, the legal framework requirements, secondly, the technical prerequisites, and thirdly, the integration of this activity into daily pedagogical work.



– ***Legal framework requirements***

The question of legally correct behaviour worries participants in both discussion groups, as they can see many ambiguities: «Many security questions still need to be resolved» (GD 1). Above all, what concerns the practitioners is the question of whether posting information on daily life in the ECEC centre is allowed at all. One participant makes the case that only institutions funded and run privately are allowed to be active on the internet, whereas municipal institutions are not allowed to be (GD 1). Whereas group 1 has so far acquired no knowledge at all on this subject, group 2 has already made enquiries: the institution has asked its funding body for clarification of the question of who is legally responsible for the posts. The ECEC centre managers felt it would be inappropriate for private individuals to be responsible. As well as legal responsibility, the posting of photos is seen as a particularly sensitive area (see p 31). There are particular concerns around the issue of whether children may be photographed at all. The funding body does not seem to have tried to clarify these legal concerns; the discussion participants suspect the individuals responsible have too much workload and do not attach much importance to the issue.

– ***Technical prerequisites***

While the question of the technical prerequisites is not an issue for the group without network experience, the other group has already identified a significant hurdle in this area. The problem is not that there are no devices or internet in the ECEC centre, rather that there is another legal ambiguity: according to the funding body's stipulations, the private internet-enabled smartphones that would allow users to post something quickly and simply may not be used for professional purposes. In particular, no photos may be taken of children with private mobile phones. The tablets in the ECEC centre that could be used for mobile photographs and posts, however, may not be connected to the internet for security reasons. Without mobile, internet-enabled devices, posting becomes laborious, as one participant in the discussion reports:

I personally find it too much if I always have to use a device and then have to transfer everything to a laptop with a cable [...] If I have my private mobile in my hand, then I also have the internet. Then I can also post it directly. That takes two minutes and is no effort at all, in fact you can do it while you're doing something else. But if you have a device that doesn't connect to the internet, it's difficult. That's how it is with our digital cameras at the moment.  
(GD 2)

The technical prerequisites associated with the use of social networks also pose new challenges to the competencies of pedagogical practitioners. In both rounds

of discussion, the participants address the fact that the use of social networks is closely connected with whether or not staff have private experience with them. One of the participants says: «I wouldn't [...] do it, because I don't have anything to do with social networks and that kind of thing.» (GD 1)

Older practitioners in particular are considered to be potentially less experienced in this area, and potentially in need of training if the use of social networks is to be implemented on a daily basis.

– ***Integration into the daily routine***

There were significant differences between the two groups in terms of how they thought posting on social networks could be integrated into the daily routine. In the group of those who so far do not have any network experience, there is a prevailing fear that these activities will create additional work, as the following quotations indicate: «Above all, I wonder how something like this is maintained. Once you start it, you set a standard» (GD 1), «I see it as additional workload. Not because I'm against it in principle; you have to keep up with what is going on. But it's just another thing on the list» (GD 1). That is also how the idea arises that an individual person should carry out this additional task:

In my opinion, it would be good if we had someone responsible for media work. We could delegate it to someone who knew what they were doing and who would then simply be responsible for presenting everything we do through media. (GD 1)

This group consistently sees the use of social networks as a further demand on them. In clear contrast to this, the other (network-experienced) group sees the particular advantage of social network use precisely in its time-saving nature, as the following quote shows:

And it just really saves time, because when I phone up and say, «I just wanted to let you know that everything is fine», which is sometimes what we do [...], I have to find the number, get the phone, have the conversation. At that point, I'm not in the position to watch children or to attend to my work with the children. And in the worst case scenario, I might even be held up by the parent because perhaps there are suddenly other pressing issues. And Facebook and Twitter – whichever – are just brief, concise and to the point. This has an enormous effect, I think. (GD 2)

Posting replaces other forms of contact with parents here, for it is felt to be quicker and simpler than the telephone. Moreover, people see it as having significantly more advantages: «That took no time at all. The photo was there [...] It was sent, and done. It took less than five minutes. But there is a huge benefit to it. That's the nice thing» (GD 2). In fact, it can be assumed that the information would not

have been conveyed via other communication channels at all. Implementing this on a daily basis involves not only the process of posting itself but also getting the agreement of the team prior to this. The following quote describes how this was handled in the institution: «The way we handled it was of course by having a brief chat about it beforehand to make sure. [Then I said,] «I'd like to post this. Is that OK? What do you think?» » (GD 2). The purpose of this exchange is not only for staff to pass on information to one another but also to seek reassurance that they are acting appropriately.

### **Consumption**

«Consumption» means an audience deciphering the meaning of a message. In terms of the context of social network use in ECEC centres, this raises the question of how the posted content is received, and by whom. The present study focuses on the pedagogical practitioners' point of view. The participants in both group discussions see the parents of children currently attending the ECEC centre as their most important addressees. Social networks can be used as a way of keeping parents comprehensively informed. This is otherwise often difficult because the working hours of the practitioners and the centre hours of the children are not synchronised. Some of this information can be filled in via posts on social networks:

Parents do often get here late [...], and the ECEC centre staff from the morning are usually not there anymore. Then the person the parents meet is someone who hasn't seen the child at all that morning [...]. And that person does not have much information to pass on. I have the feeling it was the parents who always came so late who were the ones looking on *Facebook*. (GD 2)

The participants also want to stimulate the parent's interest and give them a starting point for a conversation with their children:

It's also nice for the parents if they have seen a tweet on *Twitter* or a post on *Facebook* in the morning, as then they've immediately got something they can talk about with their child: «I saw that this morning [...] Did you make the green leaf soup, too? And what did you do with it then?» You've immediately got a way into a conversation with the child; it's a way of taking the child seriously [...] It somehow gives you a really good springboard for talking with the child after the ECEC centre day. (GD 2)

Participants in group discussion 1 also express their hope of reaching parents through social networks, and perhaps also those parents they have not managed to reach through their existing communication channels: «It reaches more parents than a folder does, and I can well imagine they sometimes take a look on the sofa in the evenings» (GD 1).

The digital channel makes it possible to see what is happening at the ECEC centre without being there in the ECEC centre. In this way, the pedagogical practitioners hope to reach groups of parents they either cannot or can barely reach in other ways. At the same time, however, this can also introduce new exclusion mechanisms, something the practitioners are very aware of: «But not everyone will have a computer.» (GD 1), «Some groups will also be excluded.» (GD 1), «But not everyone has *Facebook*, either» (GD 2).

In addition to the increased transparency for parents, the feedback the practitioners receive through their social network activities also plays an important role. The participants in group discussion 2 keep returning to this point:

And then parents who perhaps can't come have the opportunity to click «Like». (GD 2)

Or they just write: «Great!» Which perhaps isn't that easy to do during the day face-to-face. (GD 2)

Some people are also better at writing than talking. (GD 2)

It's perhaps easier to click on a thumbs-up than to say «thank you» face-to-face. (GD 2)

Now the *Facebook* activities have ended, the participants in this group are really feeling the lack of parental response. For them, feedback via social networks was an important incentive.

The participants in the group without social network experience show they are mainly focused on the parents who are looking for a place in an ECEC centre for their child (see p 31); they cannot conceive of possible addressees other than parents. For the group with network experience, however, using social networks initiates exchanges within the team, and this has an important role to play. One participant, for example, describes how colleagues from other groups approached her regarding postings:

[...] in fact, colleagues also came up to me, saying, «Hey, I've got a really great picture. Can you post it as soon as possible?» You also feel appreciated [...] and other people said,] «Hey, that's cool; you really did that?» (GD 2)

Here, too, the desire for recognition plays a very important role. Because people tend to work in groups in ECEC centre, practitioners often gain new and interesting ideas by sharing via the channel of social networks. Making their own pedagogical work visible proves to be a key issue for practitioners. This means that even superiors or employers are perceived as potential addressees:

I always thought the employer was important. They are all on *Facebook*, too, of course. Mr [Name of department manager within the funding body] will see it, whether he wants to or not [...] But I also think he would say: «Gosh, I'm getting a lot of information from the individual ECEC centres.» And it is also important for us to think along these lines and to say, «Look what we've

achieved!› [...] Because people rarely say, ‹Wow, you've done a great job there!› (GD 2)

The unanimous view among participants in group discussion 2 is that external recognition, perceived as deficient, can be increased through social network activities.

### **Regulation**

«Regulation» means the mechanisms which adapt the communicated content to what is permitted, common and expected in a cultural context (Hall 1997b, 45). The representation (see p 32) is filtered, whereby content perceived as inappropriate is reduced or removed. In group discussion 2 it becomes clear that the postings are also deliberately used to present a particular image of the institution's work. One discussion participant says directly that it is not just about presenting their own work but also about ‹justifying› themselves (GD 2). As an example, she describes how parents often have the impression that the children have not been out in the fresh air enough during the day. This concern was able to be easily dispelled by posts about walks and other outdoor activities, and parents were clearly more satisfied with this. This description shows that postings were certainly used strategically. In the example, postings on a particular theme are used specifically to defuse a smouldering conflict.

It was mainly group discussion 1 which very clearly addressed this strategic use of social networks, discussing them in the context of public relations. There were no perceived functions of posts other than the acquisition of new parents.

From this perspective, two discussion participants dismissed social network activities as superfluous, as the following quotes show: «But we don't need to do any more advertising. Our application numbers are always so high that we don't need to acquire more parents» (GD 1), «It's just not necessary for acquiring new clients» (GD 1).

Another dimension of regulation is concerned with protecting children's privacy. This is not about strategic questions but about implementing filters which protect children, in photos in particular. This issue is addressed in both group discussions. The first group rejects the idea of publishing photos of children outright, as these two quotes show: «You could also see the children; that's just not right» (GD 1), «I think that [photos] is crossing the line; it's just not protecting their privacy» (GD 1). The participants in group discussion 2, however, are aware that photos are an essential channel for representing their work on social networks, so they take the photos in such a way that the children cannot be identified:

[...] we made it quite clear that when we post photos, they definitely only show children from behind, or they only show legs or hands. So the child can't be recognised. At least never from the front. And never ever naked

children. So, one day we ran a kind of finger painting activity outside in the garden, but they were all wearing nappies or pants. So we only showed their legs in the photos. And so that was quite safe. (GD 2)

This kind of regulation likewise leads to a filtered perception of daily life in the ECEC centre and an adherence to established norms regarding personal rights, privacy, and dealing with nudity.

### **Representation**

The presentation of meanings through signs and symbols is called «representation». Meaning is generated by the way in which we represent things (Hall 1997b, 16). Central to this are the characteristics of representation via *Facebook* or *Twitter* as they are perceived by the group discussion participants. The characteristic of social networks as visual media is seen as particularly prominent. In contrast to letters to parents, which mostly consist exclusively of text, participants in group discussion 2 use lots of photos in their posts, and the role of text is, rather, to accompany these. This creates a sense of immediacy and currency, as one discussion participant illustrates:

I think it's good to approach parents directly [...] It's also good for them, for instance, if dropping the child off in the ECEC centre was difficult and in the meantime they see a post that makes them think, «Wow, look, everyone is outside at the moment. And that's my child I can see there. Totally happy.» It's just good to be able to reach someone directly and not have to wait until a conversation in passing in the afternoon. (GD 2)

The discussion participants repeatedly identify the speed factor in particular as an important characteristic. The pace is fast because, on the one hand, posts reach addressees quickly, and, on the other, posts can be written quickly, so the work involved can easily be integrated into the daily routine. The participants in group discussion 2 believe this also leads to increased transparency. One practitioner says:

We always try here to put across to the parents that their child is safe and that they can trust us. And it is not easy to do this if they leave their child here and then don't see us anymore. But they have to. And they always have to trust what we have said. But if parents can see what we have done during the day, it's easier to trust us. (GD 2)

This quote shows that posts on social networks are seen as ways of building trust because they make the children's daily lives in the ECEC centre transparent. Authentic and continuous insight into the ECEC centre's work with the children, made possible through speed and immediacy, are therefore a basis for good cooperation between practitioners and parents.

In contrast to this, the practitioners in group discussion 1 perceive communication through media as impersonal and distanced, as the following quotes show: «To me, it does seem quite impersonal» (GD 1), «Well, I would rather be on site in person» (GD 1).

These practitioners think contact with parents without seeing them face-to-face is inappropriate. This is, however, an essential characteristic of the medium of the social network, which is why this group takes a critical view of its use.

It becomes apparent that the form of representation via a social network has particular characteristics which differentiate it from other communication formats traditionally used in the ECEC context. Its advantages and disadvantages are evaluated very differently by the groups.

### **Identity**

«Identity» is a particular meaning ascribed to individuals, an organisation, or even nations. Identity is therefore not a firmly defined entity but something that is constantly shifting. The meanings constructed by language and media contribute to the development of identity in a particular way (Hall 1997b, 52). The very fact that an ECEC centre uses a social network means it is presenting itself in a particular light. In the opinion of both participating groups, if the ECEC centre uses social networks it is seen as contemporary and active. Two quotes from group discussion 1 illustrate how the use of digital media is seen as appropriate and necessary: «This is simply the age of technology» (GD 1), «If we look at it from the children's perspective, then this is their future» (GD 1). However, the group with no network experience is unable to progress beyond these vague objectives. The other group primarily sees parent's identification with the ECEC centre as the important element: «It's really great when parents identify like that with the ECEC centre. When they click «Like», they're saying, «Yeah, that's our ECEC centre!»» (GD 2).

This again illustrates the ECEC centre's goal of building up a positive relationship with parents via social networks. However, the question of how the identity and self-perception of the practitioners themselves is changed by the use of social networks is not explicitly addressed in the group discussions. The very contrast between the two group discussions, though, illustrates how the use of social networks is certainly connected with identity. Practitioners from group discussion 1 see themselves as an ECEC centre which fosters personal relationships, cooperates with parents on a continual basis, and is not reliant on public relations work. In group discussion 2, however, the focus is more on the idea of being a modern ECEC centre, confidently demonstrating its high-quality work to the outside world, and as far as possible supporting the – very current – concept of combining parenting and employment.

## Discussion

The group discussions show to what extent the use of social network sites can change the work in ECEC centres. This becomes particularly clear in the comparison between the two groups, one of which already has social network experience (group 2), while the other is considering the implications of social network use for the first time in the discussion (group 1). The group that does not yet have experience of social networks sees the use of these as an additional task which complements the ECEC centre's work so far but does not change it in essence. In contrast to this, the assertions of the group with network experience show they believe that a presence on *Facebook* is a core part of their work: it is essential for working together with parents, creating visibility for the funding body, collaborating within the team, and for self-perception. Regularly documenting its own work on social network sites in a way that is easily integrated into the working day represents a particular image that the institution wishes to create both externally and internally. The transformation inherent in the use of social networks takes place on all levels of the «circuit of culture»: when making postings («production»), activities are emphasised within the ECEC centre which would otherwise not have been recorded. In this sense, the new channel of communication creates new content. At the same time, available methods of communication are replaced by the new channel – from the discussion participant's point of view, this either saves time (e.g. if otherwise there would have been a telephone call) or ensures content is seen in the first place (because notices and posters are often missed). This is precisely what worries the group without network experience: they suspect that using social networks will take up significantly more time, depriving them of time for traditional communication (conversations in person). Both groups perceive particular hurdles in the competencies necessary for producing posts – not because the demands associated with these are so high but because a certain familiarisation and willingness are required to be able to engage with the new media. Furthermore, in the experience of group 2, the behaviour of colleagues themselves changes, for they decide together what they post and how they post it. The group discussions can offer no insight into the extent to which the work with the children is changed (e.g. by deliberately creating settings for the camera). Further research, perhaps in the form of observations, could contribute interesting results here. The choice of themes and content in posts is a decisive element in the communication process («regulation») consciously conducted by group 2. The inside views of the ECEC centre that are published are very deliberately chosen in order to give the addressees a particular impression (Hogan 2010, 380): this process is known as «impression management» from other contexts (Goffman 1999). The informal and spontaneous character of the posts creates the impression that authentic insight is being given into daily life in the ECEC centre, even though this authenticity turns out to



be merely ostensible. Nonetheless, the posts provide an insight into daily life in the ECEC centre, making the practitioner's work and the children's daily activities more transparent. The reception of posts («consumption») can stimulate conversations between parents and children, reinforce parent's trust in the institution, and increase their identification with it. In addition, the participating practitioners say that their presence on social networks has increased awareness and appreciation of their work. The practitioners acquire feedback through their social network activities, whereby feedback is understood, following Rosa (2014, 63), as perceiving part of the world and appropriating it. Other social spheres become more closely connected to the institution, such as the parent's places of work, the family home, but also the professional environment of the ECEC centre. The low-threshold exchange with parents in particular has led here to significantly more positive feedback than would have been the case without the social networks. Whereas group 2 cited, above all, the strengthening of relationships with parents who are otherwise difficult to reach, group 1 fears that many parents are excluded by this channel of communication. Presumably, mechanisms of both exclusion and inclusion are inherent in the use of social media. The perceptions of the medium itself («representation») differ between the groups: group 1 foregrounds the impersonality of social networks; group 2 foregrounds their immediacy and currency. Another important characteristic they describe is the importance of visual elements and the de-emphasising of verbally communicated content. All these elements in the process of the production of meaning (production, regulation, consumption and representation) are the result of a particular identity which, in turn, they also affect. Posts on *Facebook* create a particular image of the institution and its actors (children as well as practitioners).

The use of social networks involves much more than just sending familiar messages via a new channel. The content of the messages changes, other things are communicated about, and other individuals are reached. Stronger public visibility connects the ECEC centre more closely to other social spheres, increasing the transparency of its activities. This boosts the mediatization of ECEC centre further.

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