Abstract

The qualitative Early Childhood research project analyzes, how children, aged three to six years, talk about dimensions of diversity they recognize in their kindergarten and how two kindergartens in Austria handle diversity. The children talk about age, gender, size, language, religion, different countries of origin and colors of skin. With regard to the kindergarten organisation, there is a tendency towards normativity in dealing with some dimensions of diversity. Religious Education may contribute to develop safe and brave spaces where differences are allowed and discrimination against children is avoided.

1. Preface

Childhood in Europe is increasingly characterized by children growing up in diverse contexts. Kindergartens are often the first institutions where children are confronted with people who have different backgrounds, other cultures and other values. Promoting the ability to deal with diversity and working towards an inclusive society are objectives of education in the kindergarten. Children have the right to "be prepared for a responsible life in a free society in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and indigenous peoples," as stated in Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Especially Early Childhood Education has an influence on the development of children and their sense of “normativity”. What is considered as “normal” in kindergartens may be considered as normal by the children. Children may be discriminated against or excluded because of different characteristics, they may deal with social discrimination and biases. To support the development of kindergartens to spaces where discrimination wants to be avoided and where children have equal possibilities to develop their individuality, it is necessary to know about the differences children recognize, their thoughts about these differences and how kindergartens deal with diversity.

2. Early Childhood research project

The Early Childhood research project presented here is intended to provide an insight into how children talk about the dimensions of diversity that they recognize in kindergarten. The research question is: What dimensions of difference do children talk about in kindergarten and how do they talk about them? In order to understand the context, in the study that was carried out, the handling of difference in the respective kindergartens is also presented.

The tendencies described are related to the contexts of two kindergartens, a Catholic kindergarten and a Muslim kindergarten in Vienna, Austria.

3. Description of methodology
The qualitative empirical research project had an ethnographic and a multi-method approach. The research took place in one Catholic and one Muslim kindergarten in Vienna, Austria. Children with different backgrounds attend the kindergarten. Participant observations are conducted during one kindergarten year from September until June. These are supplemented by group discussions with children and the teachers as well as interviews with the heads of the kindergartens. The researcher tries to influence the environment as little as possible, so the children had the opportunity to talk about what really concerned them. The data was coded and interpreted following the fundamentals of Grounded Theory\(^4\) combined with Thematic Coding\(^5\). Results of development psychology\(^6\) and of Childhood Research\(^7\) were considered.

4. Context und description of kindergartens
In Austria usually children from the age of three until the age of six attend a kindergarten. In the two selected kindergartens the children should be three years old to be enrolled in the kindergarten, with exceptions. So the children whose voices are heard in this research project are children between the ages of three and six.

The two kindergartens welcome children from all religious and cultural traditions and with different languages. The heads assume that embracing diversity is positive. In the Catholic kindergarten, 45.7 percent of pupils are Catholic, 17.4 percent are Muslim, 17.4 percent have no religious denomination; there are also Orthodox, Sikh and Hindu children attending. 24.2 percent of the children are from Poland, 17.8 percent from Serbia, 13.3 percent from Turkey, 11.1 percent from Austria, Serbia and Croatia is the country of origin of 8.9 percent each and also children from Slovakia, India, Egypt, Kosovo, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Nepal attend the kindergarten.

In the Muslim kindergarten, 91.9 percent are Muslim and 8.1 percent are Christian. 69.9 percent came from Turkey, 10.2 percent from Egypt, 4.1 percent from Libya, 2.9 percent from Poland, 2.2 from Chechnya and there were also children from Albania, Austria, Romania, Serbia, Ghana, Jordan, Pakistan, Russia, Syria and Tunisia.

All the teachers in the Catholic kindergarten are themselves Catholic, while there are both Muslim and Christian teachers in the Muslim kindergarten.

In order to take a closer look at the context in which the child’s statements were made, the following section takes a look at everyday kindergarten life, whereby the most concise points being listed. Some differences are emphasized in kindergartens, whereas other differences receive little attention. In particular, gender, age and language, and the countries of origin are dimensions of difference that play an important role in both kindergartens.

Age / Seize: The teachers often speak about the small ones and the big ones in the two kindergartens. Because of their age children in the Catholic kindergarten are divided into different groups after lunch: into the group of the big ones, the middle ones or the smaller ones and


depending on it different offers were made to them to arrange the time after lunch. On a wall in the group room in the Muslim kindergarten, a line is drawn for each child depending on its size.

Gender: In the Muslim kindergarten, the gender of the children plays an important role, also on the part of the teachers. Thus, the teachers often initiate games in which a competition between the two genders was led. In the reading corner there are two books to distinguish between boys and girls.

Language: Language is a dimension of difference that is often mentioned in both kindergartens. In the Muslim kindergarten, the emphasis is on speaking German in the kindergarten, with the exception of the daily Koran or religious education, in which the teacher speaks Arabic with the children for the most part and the children practiced the Suras in Arabic. Linguistically, the dominance of the German language in the Muslim kindergarten is evident, which is also due to the fact that the kindergarten wants to be a bridge to society and that German plays an important role in this context.

In the Catholic kindergarten the children in the kindergarten are allowed to speak different languages, so that situations arise in which the children speak to each other in their mother tongue and other children or teachers cannot take part in the conversations due to a lack of language skills. Teachers sometimes ask the children for words in their own language.

Country of origin: In the Koran lessons the origin of the children is thematized. Each Koran lesson begins with a round in which the Koran teacher asks each child a question, very often asking the question "From where are you?" and the children name their country of origin.

Religions: In the Catholic kindergarten, children can notice that some children eat different food, that people wear different garments (e.g. the headscarf worn by some Muslim women) and that some children are absent during the celebrations. In the Muslim kindergarten there is a room reserved exclusively for Koran education, and in the building there is also a mosque. In the Muslim kindergarten, only Muslim children attend Koran lessons.

In the kindergarten there are several forms of religious education, whereby the main religion always dominates. Although religious diversity is considered important, the forms of religious education do not take religious diversity into account. The contents of religious education are available to all children in kindergarten, but are only offered in the dominant religion.

5. Results on how children talk about difference

In the following the most important findings of the research project will be described. The quotations are intended to illustrate the statements of the children. All the original quotations were in German and were translated into English. The children’s statements were anonymized. The first letter represents the first letter of the child's name. The second letter stands for the gender of the child: m for male, f for female.

The results show that children recognize different dimensions of diversity and that they talk about them. The dimensions children talk about in the contexts of the two kindergartens include age, gender, size, language, religion, different countries of origin and colors of skin and they have different explanations for these differences. Some children have biases against children that are different in some aspects. The dimension of difference that were mentioned several times by the children are listed.
5.1 Gender

Children talk about gender in everyday kindergarten life and often classify children according to their gender. In the morning of the day, the kindergarten teacher and the children sing a song in which they greet boys and girls separately. The classification of the children's gender is also evident from the fact that the children are irritated when they cannot identify the gender of a doll. In the Muslim kindergarten, the children often talk about gender. They have ideas about what is right for boys and what is right for girls, e.g. what a boy or a girl should draw or which colors are right for boys and which for girls. A boy says that only pictures of boys are beautiful. In the kindergarten there are competitions between the boys' and girls' groups. In one situation Dm sits at the table, has some cards in different colors and shapes in front of him and counts them, separating the cards into boys and girls. He decides for himself which card is a girl and which card is a boy. As he counts, he constantly changes his decision as to which card has which gender. His activity attracts two more children who discuss with him which card is a boy and which is a girl. The girls are of the opinion that the blue heart is a girl, whereas Dm thinks that blue is not for girls, but finally gives the blue heart to the girls and counts another card as a boy. At the end of the game Dm calls out loudly that today the boys win because the boys are more and goes to the building corner, where some boys play and reports also there pleased that the boys win today.

1 Dm: Are there more girls or more boys? One two three three four five six. Six boys.
2 Rw(5): This is girl (points to the blue heart)
3 Dm: One two three three four five six
4 Rw: One two three three four five
5 Dm: one two three three four five six
6 Rw points to blue heart: This is girl
7 Sw (5): This is girl
8 Dm: One two three three four five six. Blue is not for girls, is for boys. BOYS ARE MORE
9 Dm gives the blue heart to the two girls.
10 Dm: Boys have won.
11 He clears away the toys and goes into the building corner and announces loudly there: TODAY THE BOYS WIN.

Children know gender stereotypes and sometimes question them. The children talk about gender and mention whether someone is a boy or a girl and what boys or girls are allowed to do or draw. In this context, a child says that boys can also paint fairies. In another discussion, two girls talk about colors that belong to boys or girls. When Rw wears her red shoes, Ew tells her that only boys are allowed to wear this color, where Rw insists that girls also wear it.

5.2 Size and age

Size and age are often used synonymously. When children talk about the small and large, they sometimes refer to size and sometimes to age, and it has not always been possible to determine what they are referring to.

In a conversation, a name is mentioned that occurs twice in kindergarten. As a distinction between which person is spoken of, Mw explains that there is a small and a large one, with the same name. The small one means a child, the large one a kindergarten teacher.

In Catholic kindergarten, lunch breaks are arranged according to the age of the children, so they are classified by their age. The little ones should sleep, the middle ones can decide whether they
want to sleep or play a quiet game and a story is read to the big ones. The children know which group they belong to and classify themselves after lunch.

When comparing their age, it becomes clear that they assume that older is better. To get older and taller is seen very positively by the children. In the children's speech about age it becomes clear that children are proud of their age, very happy when they get older and higher age is considered more positive than lower age.

4 Lm: I am six years, but M is seven.
5 Bm: M is so (shows the age with the fingers)
6 Lm: This is seven
7 Bm: D is now so (shows seven fingers)
8 Bm: D is very big now.
9 Lm: And M is five or six, isn’t he.

1 R(6): You are seven and you are small.
2 K(6): I am six and I am grown up.

The older children understand the younger ones, so they mention that some games are too difficult for the younger children. They also understand that smaller children are sometimes unable to speak in a way that other children can understand.

So one girl explains:

Lw (5): She is not able to talk very well, because she is a bit small.

Another girl explains that the rules of the game are different for small children:

Bw (5): With the small children you have to do like this.

The children sometimes compare their size and tell the other children or the kindergarten teacher that they are taller than another child. The children mention that there are big and small people. In the song that is sung every day in the morning, they greet young and old. In the Muslim kindergarten children often compare their size. A young boy who is the smallest of the group mentions that he is as tall as his friend. His optically taller friend proves him right, to which another child replies that one boy is bigger, to which Ym finds an explanation for the different size.

Ym: We are both tall.
Dm: Yes, we are both tall.
Pw: But he is a bit taller.
Ym: He grows a little bit faster, and I grow a little bit slower.

5.3 Appearance, especially skin color
In terms of appearance, during the participatory observation the children discuss their own eye color in contrast to other eye colors, the wearing of glasses, the robe and the number of black teeth.

The children notice different skin colors and try to find explanations for them. A group of children asks why a boy has black skin. A boy makes a statement that is accepted by everyone and that concludes the discussion. The boy concerned is present during the conversation and does not comment on it.
5 Km(5): Why is he black?
6 Lm(5): I know why he is black.
7 Km(5): Why?
8 Lm (5) Because he got sunburnt and now he is black.

Children notice that children have a different skin color than themselves and talk about the different skin color and some mention *discomfort with a different skin color*. In a group discussion, the researcher brought along a doll that had a darker skin color. This was noticed by some children and they did not like the doll.

8 Mw: GO AWAY, go away (the two girls quickly move away from the doll with the darker skin color)
9 Mw: He is so black.
10 P: L He is so black.
11 Mw: WHY have you bought a black doll?

Shortly afterwards they compare the color of the doll with the skin color of a boy in the group.

26 Pw: We celebrated the birthday of Dm
29 Mw: Dm is as black as the doll.

5.4 Languages
Children are *aware of the different languages* and many know the names of the different languages. In Catholic kindergarten, children tend to speak in their mother tongue and translate some German words into their mother tongue. They sometimes mix different languages. Some children explain that other children speak other languages.

Mw (5): He speaks Turkish, I speak Serbian.

The children know that some children speak different languages and that they do not understand every language.

Ym: I do not understand Turkish. I understand a bit, but I do not understand.
Fw: I understand Turkish.
Yw: But my grandmother speaks Turkish. I have two grandmother, one of my father and one of my mother. But my mother`s grandmother is far away.

One girl mentions that her name is spelled differently in different languages.

1Yw (5): My name is Yasmin and Yesmin. Yesim in Chechen. I am able to write Yasmin and the teacher is able to write Yesmin.

The observed sensitivity of the children to the fact that other children speak other languages is particularly well expressed in one situation when an Arabic speaking boy cried. A Turkish speaking girl told another Arabic speaking girl that she should talk to the crying boy and that she should comfort the boy. The Arabic speaking girl started to talk Arabic to the boy and the boy stopped crying. The girl who had the idea was pleased and said that Arabic had to be spoken to the boy. Those children who could speak Arabic are particularly admired among the children.

Children sometimes *mix the country and the language*, for example:

1 Nw: I still learn Arabic. I am able to speak Arabic and Jordan.
Especially children in the Muslim kindergarten think that it is *normal to speak several languages*. Children often talk about the languages they speak or languages their friends speak. It is normal for them that children speak different languages.

Yw (5): They speak Turkish. And I don’t understand Turkish.
Yw: Which languages do you speak?
Rw (5): German
Yw: And which languages else? Chechen, Bosnian, Turkish, English?

The child’s answer to speak German was not enough for the other child, and she wanted to know which other languages her friend could speak. In several situations it became clear that especially in Muslim kindergarten multilingualism is a matter of course for the children. Sometimes children mention that they know a word in Turkish, but that they do not know it in German. In kindergarten, children sing songs in different languages.

Children and kindergarten teachers sometimes teach each other languages.

37 Fw (5): I teach the teacher Turkish. And the teacher teaches me German.

In the Muslim kindergarten children were especially proud when they were able to speak Arab.

1 Bw: I know Turkish, not Polish.
2 Dw: I know Arabic better than you do.
3 Ew: SAY
4 Dw says nothing.
5 Ew: Then you can’t.

5.5 Country of origin

Especially in the Muslim kindergarten children *talk about their different countries of origin* and are interested in where the other children and the teachers come from. Most of the children in the kindergarten were born in Austria, but they name their parents’ place of origin as the country they come from.

3 Mm(5): Are you Arabic?
4 I: No
5 Mm(5): Are you English or German?
6 I: German
7 Mm(5): German. You are Austria.

The topic caught the interest of the children sitting at the table.
8 Yw(5): The teacher is also Austria. Austria is also German.
9 Mw(5): I am Chechen and this is my sister.
10 Rw(5): I am five and I am Turkish.

Children often *establish a link between their language and their country of origin*. This becomes clear as they address their origin from Turkey when asked about their language.

5 I: Do you understand Arabic?
6 Ew (5): No, I am from Turkey.
7 Rw (5): Where are you from?
8 I: From Austria.
9 Rw (5): From Austria or Germany?
10 I: From Austria.
5.6 Religions

Some children mention religion and religious diversity and they are curious about different religions. Especially in the Muslim kindergarten the children often mention their religious denomination, they talk about the Qu’ran, the mosque, the washing before prayer, the celebrations, and moral rules, Muslims should follow. They mention Christian celebrations and they ask the kindergarten teacher about them. The children understand that there are different religions. They try to combine their own religion with the Christian religion to understand Christian festivals. So they mention the Easterbeiram. The Muslim children in the Muslim kindergarten tend to ask about one’s religious denomination and about different religious habits and they seem to be curious about that. For example, they want to know if the researcher is a Muslim and why she goes to the mosque, although she is not a Muslim. They mention that Muslims are wearing headscarves and that non Muslims are not wearing one. They also mention the absence of some children during religious education lessons.

In the Catholic kindergarten the children talk about the church or about celebrations that take place in the kindergarten.

When children in the Catholic kindergarten notice religious diversity, they do not have any explanation why this is the case. The children do not know, why some children should not make the sign of a cross. They do not know the reason for the absence of some pupils during celebrations.

When children do not take part in celebrations other children ask why these children haven’t taken part. The children who were not at the celebration prefer to tell untruths about their presence at celebrations instead of telling the truth that they were absent at some celebrations.

The children of the non majority group in the Muslim kindergarten mention that they are no Muslims as the reason why they do not attend the Religious education lesson. But they do not mention their own religion or any religious expressions.

6 Jw: we are not a mosque. The other are mosques.
7 I: What are you?
8 Jw: Romanian and Dw is Poland.

The question that arose during a discussion about the Advent wreath in the Catholic kindergarten shows that children try to explain religious difference on the basis of other dimensions of difference. Religious differences are not addressed by the children in this context.

51 Which people do not have an Advent wreath?
52 FM: The poor
53 Lm: The blacks
54 I: You say the poor?
55 Qm: The poor and the blacks?
56 I: Why have they none?
57 Qm: Because they are poor
58 I: Why are they poor?
59 Fm: Because they have nothing.
60 I: Who else does not have an Advent wreath?
61 Lm: The old ones

---

I: The old ones. Why do the old ones not have an Advent wreath?
Fm: because they are also poor.
I: Are there other people who do not have an Advent wreath?
Cm: The poor

5.7 Tendencies in the kindergartens
Children notice differences and talk about them

The results show that difference is an issue for children in kindergarten and that children talk about differences in kindergarten. The children in both kindergartens talk about differences as a matter of course. In conversations among themselves, the children often refer to difference, the most frequently observed difference being gender, size, age, skin color, language and country of origin. Sometimes religious differences are also mentioned, especially in Muslim kindergartens. How often and which differences are mentioned is different in the kindergartens. In conversations it becomes clear that children connect different dimensions of difference, as can be seen in different conversations, for example in conversations about language and nationality, which are always closely linked, as well as in conversations about age and size.

Parallels between the dealing with diversity in kindergartens and children’s talk

The differences children talk about can also be found in everyday kindergarten life, either in the form of statements by the kindergarten teachers and/or in the design of the group room. Dealing with differences in the kindergarten also shows that some differences are strongly emphasised, while other differences are tried to avoid. Some of the children's statements reflect how the kindergarten deals with the difference in the kindergarten. The respective context of the kindergarten, the openness for difference lived in the kindergarten and how children deal with difference are related.

Children have different attitudes about differences

The way they talk about differences and whether they see the differences positively or negatively differs between the children and between the dimensions of difference. Children can be irritated by differences and look for explanations, but they can also be proud of differences.

In some of the children's conversations it becomes clear that differences stand next to each other value-free, in other conversations an interpretation and evaluation by the children becomes clear. This is especially apparent in the age/size of the children (older and taller is better), the language (German and Arabic), the religion (belonging to the majority group) and the skin color, as the frightening cry of a child "Why have you bought a black doll" illustrates.

Dominant attitudes

The results show that children compare each other. If there is a dominant attitude in kindergarten, they compare on the basis of that attitude. This is particularly evident in the difference between skin color and religious difference. For children, a light skin color is the normal case, as is the majority religion in the respective kindergarten. A different skin color is perceived by the children with discomfort and an explanation is mentioned which could injure the child concerned. Children absent from the festival are asked by other children about their absence. The skin color of the majority, the celebration of the majority is considered normal, while other appearances and other habits irritate the children. Without wanting this, some children’s statements can hurt or dominate other children.
6. Development of safe and brave spaces

Educational efforts in kindergartens can be “directed to challenging different forms of discrimination and intolerance.”9 Children can be discriminated against because of different characteristics. It might happen that children have biases against a group of children. These biases may lead to exclusion or discrimination. The older children get the more people have influence on the moralic development and identity building of the children.10 The understanding that ignoring of differences may result in the production of inequality and confirms them, promotes the sensitivity for difference.11 As difference is often silenced, replaced, excluded, devaluated and exploited, different modes of life have to be discovered, broached and recognised in their value.12

An essential goal of religious education is to contribute to the best possible development of children by taking their individuality seriously and accepting their difference and by contributing to a respectful living in difference. Research projects agree that children are able to recognize and talk about differences. So Religious Education that is close to what affects people13 should also take diversity into consideration. Thus it is an essential goal of religious education with children to contribute to a sensitive dealing with religious diversity. Kindergartens should find ways of acknowledging all the children and they should develop structures that do not discriminate against the minority as it is also codified in the children’s rights.14 It seems important to consider the kindergarten as a learning organization and to develop a culture of recognition which can be guided by the metaphor of safe spaces in which (religious) differences are sensitively recognized and talked about. Children “will always need safe places for learning. They will always need launching pads from which to follow their curiosity into the larger world. And they will always need places to make the transition from their childhood homes to the larger society of peers and adults.”15 The significance of a safe learning environment in which children can experience the basic principles of living together is highlighted.16 “The psychological safety research reiterates the tight links among people taking risks, creating knowledge, trusting colleagues, and exploring differences. It is through conversations that people learn whether they can trust each other and whether they feel psychologically safe.”17 Safe space is a popular metaphor for describing a climate in the classroom that allows students to feel safe, take risks, openly discuss their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Especially the possibility to risk statements, actions, to get involved in conflicts, to work on and with difference is made clear by

---

the metaphor of brave spaces. The use of a metaphor is one way of giving a perspective a condensed expression. As a metaphor, the term describes an ideal image that serves as orientation but cannot be completely achieved.

Safe and brave spaces can metaphorically stand for spaces of learning, spaces of belonging and spaces of recognition of difference. Due to the different understandings, the term safe space, as it is to be understood here, must be clearly distinguished from other uses: It is not based on an understanding of safe spaces, where spaces are required in which disadvantaged people are separated from other people. This understanding of safe spaces is demanded by different organizations and wants to help people to be among themselves and not to be discriminated against. However, in such spaces, fears and a clear demarcation from others often determine behaviour. Such a separation makes it difficult for educators in educational contexts to respond appropriately and constructively to cases of discrimination and insults.\footnote{Stengel, Barbara S.: The Complex case of Fear and Safe Space, in: Studies in Philosophy and Education 29/6 (2010) 523–540, 524-528.}

In contrast to this, the concept of safe spaces, as used here, wants to be a metaphor for spaces in which difference is permitted and in which this openness and appreciation is met. In order to enable learning with and from each other, spaces are necessary in which difference is permitted, sensitively perceived and thematized. Conflict theories have shown that it is necessary to develop places and an atmosphere of security if a constructive dialogue is to take place between people who differ from one another. The concept of safe space ‘can create an atmosphere where differences can be expressed without hurting ‘the Other’. It means to provide space for equal participation, to foster self-expression, for sharing stories and for mediating conflicts.’\footnote{Schreiner, Peter (2007): A “safe space” to foster self-expression. In: Keast, John (Hg.): Religious diversity and intercultural education: a reference book for schools. Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe Publishing, 57-66, 58.} In safe spaces, children feel that their differences belong to and are recognised, they are encouraged to address issues that concern them and there is a sensitive confrontation with difference.


Communication is a key factor in organisational development\footnote{Doppler, Klaus (2000): Kommunikation als Schlüsselfaktor der Organisationsentwicklung. In: Trebesch, Karsten (Hg.): Organisationsentwicklung. Konzepte, Strategien, Fallstudien. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 281-307.} and plays a key role in dealing with difference. Only differences that are recognizable in kindergarten or that are thematized can be recognized. The development of the organisation kindergarten can be supported by supervision. One important instrument can be self-evaluation\footnote{Keast, John/Leganger-Krogstad, Heid (2007): Religious dimension of intercultural education: a whole school approach. In: Keast, John (Hg.): Religious diversity and intercultural education: a reference book for schools. Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe 2007, 119-121.} of each kindergarten in order to identify important fields for further development. Concepts for dealing with diversity could be drafted by the organizing institution. Personnel development should consider the reasons why teachers focus on some dimensions of differences whereas they try to avoid other dimensions of difference. Education and teacher training should integrate diversity training and focus on interreligious and intercultural aspects. Dealing with diversity should become a key competence of teachers and heads of kindergartens, including the competence of reflection. When developing content for education, account should be taken of the fact that there are situations in kindergartens that offer learning opportunities. These chances should be sensitively recognized by kindergarten teachers. Children notice differences, but sometimes they need explanations of adults to
understand them. Children should have the possibility to talk about their thoughts about diversity and these should be heard by teachers, researchers and society.

Orientation towards the metaphor of *safe and brave spaces* can contribute to more educational justice and support learning that contributes to a difference-sensitive and respectful coexistence.

7. **Bibliography**


