Children’s use of playgrounds. Limiting children’s agency by parental choices

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Abstract
Children and their families often use free and public playgrounds as a means and a tool for outdoor play, social interaction and a safe place and space for experiences. The mostly and widely shared assumption that the use and visit of a (particular) playground is up to the respective child cannot be confirmed by this study’s results. The results of this study show that parents in Italy and Germany intervene where the social experience of their children is concerned, in particular, where different cultures are tangled. Parental intervention occurred as ethnic and/or national segregation by time and space in Italy and Germany. Austrian parents showed a different behaviour pattern.

Key words: Playground, children’s agency, parental choices, ethnic and national segregation

Introduction
The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understudied field in the area of education and outdoor play on playgrounds. Education, learning experience and play opportunities on playgrounds influence children’s lives in several ways: being provided with a frame for social interaction (Jørgensen, 2017; Kemple, Oh, Kenney, & Smith-Bonahue, 2016), children might learn to play or play to learn (Brooker, 2017). Accordingly, quite recently the importance of children’s play has been rediscovered and children’s agency has been emphasized, yet playgrounds are designed by adults not children (Brett, Moore, & Provenzo, 1993). Playgrounds are tailored to different needs according to age, abilities etc. (Boonzajer Flaes, Chinapaw, Koolhaas, Mechelen, & Verhagen, 2016). Beyond this, playgrounds as a public and no-cost civil space provide diverse opportunities and possibilities for doing and undoing pedagogy (Fritzsche, 2015). Within this area, there is a lack of knowledge as to what extent children’s agency can be discovered on public playgrounds.

Context and research question
Several overlapping and interwoven areas could be taken into consideration. First, political changes in Austria, Italy and Germany due to migration movements and migration waves might have had effects on education and on education systems with Italy having been severely affected by migration waves for years and Austria’s and Germany’s political leaders reacting to the migration events since 2015. Secondly, changes in family lives might have taken place while resulting changes in children’s public socialization
remained largely understudied. Following Ciabattari (2017), the term family refers theoretically to four approaches: family can be seen as a structure with a common focus on marriage, legally adoptive relationships etc. or family as household with a focus on family members living in a single household, or an emphasis on family roles with a focus on family roles and their associated scripts and, finally, family as interaction where in the latter family creation takes place through interaction and relationship (Ciabattari, 2017). From a critical point of view, these approaches see family as a concept, as an idea but it might also have shifted over time, place and situation not only for different but for the same persons. Implying, that families should meet all four criteria (and thus this might result in excluding diversity in families) a concept of family beyond nuclear families could be applied. That’s why the term “family” is thus applied to all forms of displayed relations between children and adults (non-related adults had to reject their children’s participation in this study). Additionally, various forms of orientation (gender and sexual orientation), various patterns of the socioeconomic status (SES), and various generations beyond parents and children (including step-parents, grandparents, other relatives), patchwork-families etc. could be taken into consideration. As the video-study presented here deals mainly with children’s agency displayed and carried out on playgrounds, all forms of family might have been present on playgrounds.

Another aspect concerns diversity. Many European societies can be characterized as getting more and more diverse. Particular in cultural and/or educational settings, diversity refers to heterogeneity (of society/societies) in different aspects such as inequalities (income status, social stratification), origin of the societal members, ethnicities of the societal members and so on.

Applying Acker’s theory of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) might prove fruitful for further consideration. Beyond his emphasis on institutional components of inequality, Acker identified various aspects constituting inequality like social differences, emanated practices and processes, and (hidden) legitimacy considerations (Acker, 2006) which all need to be further investigated where children’s and parental decisions of choosing a playground are concerned. Furthermore, the social dilemma of the scarcity of goods appear as a parental strategy of coping with the allocation of goods (Edney, 1981). The chosen allocation strategy of selective distribution decision functions as a means of second order determination (Edney, 1981) and in doing so, parents’ choices appear more rational. However, from a macro-level point of view, following selective distribution might challenge a society’s moral ideal (in education, in politics etc.) of values. Hence, this might contradict democratic ideals (Edney, 1981; Schroeder, Jensen, Reed, Sullivan, & Schwab, 1983) both in Italy and in Germany. Is the intended participation of all society’s members as a social collusion both in Germany and in Italy politically upheld but undermined by individual choices?

Diversity as a construct and as a phenomenon refers to social structures of societies as a whole as well as to varying individual differences formed by time and space and in interaction with each other (Wenning, 2007). Both might collide on playgrounds as socially constructed educational spaces. Hence, children’s play and playgrounds have received profound research attention over the past years, particularly in childhood studies. In many recent publications children are seen as autonomous, independent human beings interested in building and maintaining relationships with other children (Jorgensen, 2017; Kemple et al., 2016; Olsen & Smith, 2017), while families seemed less important. So, parental and/or families’ contribution to children’s ways of learning / playing on playgrounds has been studied less extensively. It seems rather impossible to conclude which form of family is present on a playground so the term family used here includes all possible forms of diverse families (Knowles, 2011). Increased attention on migrating parents and children with an (often underlying) focus on problems, differences etc. can
be seen and conceptualized as a way of doing difference. This doing difference might result in educational discrimination. Doing difference is of particular importance for schools, teachers etc. as it could be argued that phenomena of migration can be accompanied with educational problems.

At the interplay of language, education and (possible) postcolonial perspectives in combination with views on migration along dimensions like language, literacy, power and gender, colonial cultural hegemony might take over, in particular, where both private and public spheres of interaction occur. Here the concept of cultural scripts could be considered. Cultural scripts can be understood as shared assumptions about social interactions and communication, using the concept of scripts (Bowleg, Lucas, & Tschann, 2004), where scripts are neither seen as stereotypes nor fixed presentation of a culture but rather as reflecting (possibly) hybrid and fluid cultures and identities which nevertheless refer to social norms shared by members of a specific group. Cultural scripts are seen and referred to as patterns of interaction which are rather unique to a specific culture guiding social action (Schank & Abelson, 1977) and mainly exist in given cultures to deal with arising conflicts but also to pre-structure possible resolutions. This way, cultural scripts are assumptions about what is good or bad to do. Not everyone is required to agree with these assumptions, nevertheless, in a given culture (like Austria, Germany or Italy) everyone is familiar with them (Rakic, 2013; Wierzbicka, 2002).

Another aspect has to be kept in mind. Tully (1995) argues for strange multiplicity when and where certain identities claim over others. Following Benhabib (1999), these identity / difference claims posit the contingency of proposed identity definitions arguing for their essential character. Several questions might arise from this point: how can discrete groups be identified and sustained over time? Are there such discrete identities at all (Benhabib, 1999)?

Furthermore, although the notion of (children’s and childhood) agency has received more research attention in the past years, children’s time of childhood remains being a time dominated by adults (Knowles, 2011). This can be recognized and identified by e.g. time patterns (parental work time and the respective time coordination of child care during their work time; school time when children do have to go to school (school visits are compulsory in South Tyrol and Germany etc.) but it is also reflected in time patterns of playground visits when parents decide which and when a playground is going to be attended. The concept of children as voice-agents reflects a view where children are entitled to choices but are also willing to take them (Komulainen, 2013). Agency as a concept and children’s agency in particular constitutes a theme which emerged in the 1990s following the ratification of the UN convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of most states in the world. Children’s agency refers to activity, e.g. when children’s view transforms into actions like decision-making. However, adults’ domination is reflected in the parental decisions when choosing a playground as can be seen by the study’s results. Another aspect of children’s agency might be seen in enabling children to acquire social experience, which might include encountering other children from and with different heterogeneous backgrounds. Comparing observations on playgrounds in different European countries might offer specific insights into parental influences on children encountering diverse others.

Thus, the overarching research question deals with the question of how children’s agency is realized by children when they visit a playground. In particular, several sub-questions arise: who decides which playground is going to be visited? Who enters the playground first? Which item and which area can children choose to play at /with? Who decides to leave the playground? Who decides with whom children can play? Important aspects of children’s agency are reflected in all of these questions.
The study starts with observations on playgrounds in Italy, Austria and Germany. There, children do have more potential possibilities to interact and engage with play activities with children from different cultures since 2015. This can be attributed to a growing diverse population in all three countries due to the migration wave, which occurred in 2015. It could be expected that 2 years later, in 2017, many migrant families (and most probably not all of them were refugees) were familiar with public goods such as free playgrounds and that migrant families would use those playgrounds as often as the inhabitants.

The research question aims at identifying children’s and parental influences since children and parents as decision makers remain largely understudied. It is mostly the parents who decide which playground is to be chosen (see section 4 Results). Are the decisions more or less the same where different families on different playgrounds in different areas in different countries are concerned? Families on playgrounds in German-speaking parts of Italy (South Tyrol), Austria (Tyrol) and Germany (Thuringia) were thus observed and videoed.

Furthermore, following a praxeological approach differences might be considered as socially constructed thus being (re-)produced or, more precisely, located within conjunctive forms of “doing difference”. Differences like similarities can be viewed as forms of daily living experience, which is shared by members of the particular setting. When individuals belong to multiple settings this can be referred to as diversity and/or heterogeneity. However, the concept of heterogeneity has varied according to theoretical perspectives as well as respective empirical research for several years (Sturm, 2016).

In this context, the notion of social traps appears relevant. Social traps are seen when individuals pursue their goals for individual advantage but collectively damage the group as a whole. Countertraps are seen rather as a social fence where individuals prevent an action while the action nevertheless might be beneficial for the group as a whole (Platt, 1973). Social traps in this study could be identified in parental decisions where social homogeneity on playgrounds seemed to be preferred by parents (see section 4). Social traps might emerge where dynamics of scarcity of (public) goods begin. The social dynamics of scarcity involve (maybe emanate from) conflicts of individual and group interest. Playgrounds function as a jointly used resource which can be used freely while free access is granted (Edney, 1981).

**Methods and methodology**

As ethnographic methods are widely used within the field of childhood studies (Friebertshaeuser & Panagiotopoulo, 2013), a qualitative ethnographic approach for this study was chosen. The primary task (of ethnology) can be considered as getting to know the unknown (Amann & Hirschauer, 1997; Friebertshaeuser & Panagiotopoulo, 2013). This is far more the case where children are involved (Behnkken & Zinnecker, 2001). Furthermore, Stanley’s argument that “good” research might be considered as one which accounts for the conditions of its own production. This would result in unalienated knowledge. However, producing a kind of unalienated knowledge will require a certain degree of conscious self-awareness (Ackers, 1993). As Ackers (1993) points out this again requires some abilities in recognizing conditions under which a body of knowledge has been produced. While these abilities might develop within the research process (or, rather following Ackers in saying throughout and beyond the research process) the researcher once being extracted from the ethnographic process might be in the position to reflect with deepened circumspection (Ackers, 1993). Putting into context, unalienated knowledge can be seen as a necessary precondition of a way of being in the
world (Ackers, 1993). My position/role/standing as a female white German (and German-speaking) person might have influenced in several ways parental contribution (some parents from apparently non-white contexts / cultures refer to possible complex positions of white women in relation to people with different skin colours (in a non-racist way of defining people as being non-white): both, observer and observed are within this web of power relations and the mechanisms through which the dominant groups construct the parameters of acceptable social behaviour (Ackers, 1993) - at the interplay between power, critical race theories and gender and at the interplay between theoretical and empirical backgrounds when Arab and / or Asian families were asked to participate by a white woman where, if present, mostly men responded.

For this study, the approach of videography was chosen in order to investigate children’s social interactions / social situations in their natural environment (Tuma & Knoblauch, 2018). Accordingly, film sequences of children’s communicative interaction were recorded and later analysed. Beyond the sequential analysis wider forms and patterns of the observed interactions and their localization within this ethnographic context were aimed at, according to the methodic approach.

Formally, the following approach had been followed: after selecting the countries according to theoretical considerations on the respective country’s educational system, public authorities of some cities had been contacted in order to get permission for the video observation study. Table 1 shows the time procedure for the formal preparation of the observation study. All city councils received a formal written request (in German) to get a permission for a video observation study on some free and publicly usable play-grounds in the respective region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Public Authority</th>
<th>Important details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria (county of Tyrol)</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>City Council of Innsbruck</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid Austrian and research data protection rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Jenbach</td>
<td>Refused due to data protection concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Kufstein</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Woergl</td>
<td>Refused due to data protection concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (county of Thuringia)</td>
<td>May-June</td>
<td>City council of Gera</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid German and research data protection rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Koelleda</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid German and research data protection rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Suhl</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid German and research data protection rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>City Council of Weimar</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid German and research data protection rules, additionally, personal information meetings with members of the city council took</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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During the meeting with members of the city council of Weimar, information was exchanged on the purpose and duration of the study. The members handed out a brochure in German containing an overview of usable playgrounds in Weimar and gave hints which playgrounds could be observed due to the theoretical sample model. Following the information, the respective playgrounds were picked randomly: first the playgrounds were sorted into categories of the theoretical sample model and then a playground was chosen by chance within the respective quarter).

During the meeting with members of the city council of Bressanone information on the purpose and duration of the study was exchanged. One of the participating members handed me a list of observationable playgrounds containing information on size of the playgrounds in square meters and the respective address. The members placed particular value on visits on some playgrounds (following the introduced theoretical sampling they were interested in observations on playgrounds within quarters of low socioeconomic status and a high proportion of immigrant inhabitants. During this time, I had some academic duties at an Italian University based in Bressanone and Bolzano and had thus some knowledge on both cities but I lacked this in-depth-knowledge of both cities at that time and accepted the suggestions of playgrounds. It might be the case that their suggestions were biased but as I followed the same procedure (i.e. sorting playgrounds into categories and then randomly picking some) the potential bias might have been lessened.

All countries were chosen following some theoretical considerations: I followed the idea of a playground video observation study for some years and in 2017 I had the opportunity to work in Italy and in Germany. Both countries provide some unique features in their educational system (e.g. a different school system) and being in both countries from time to time working in academia I used some additional time to conduct the observation study. Later on, Austria was chosen as a country being in between and with an educational system similar to Germany, yet with county Tyrol located next to South Tyrol (Italy) it could be expected that the neighborhood might have some influence. Besides, some practical consideration had contributed: on my way to Italy and back to Germany I usually crossed Tyrol by train so geographically there had been opportunities which could easily be used.

All selected cities were rather unknown to me (with Weimar being the exception). After having selected the playgrounds following the theoretical sample model of contrasting different high and low socioeconomic area, rural / suburb area, and inner city area every selected playground had been visited before the observation started to get familiar with it. These visits were conducted in June and July. Playgrounds in Italy were chosen from the region South Tyrol, in particular Bolzano and Bressanone. Playgrounds in Germany were chosen within the region of Thuringia, in particular from the cities of Gera, Suhl, Koelleda and Weimar following the theoretical sample model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>City Council of Bolzano</th>
<th>Accepted in accordance with valid Italian and research data protection rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy (Autonomous region of South Tyrol – Alto Adige) May - June</td>
<td>City Council of Bressanone</td>
<td>Accepted in accordance with valid Italian and research data protection rules, additionally, personal information meetings with members of the city council took part</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55
For the observation visits in all three countries the school holidays were chosen in order to limit potential limitations (e.g. school regulations, school visits, school hours). The observation took place in summer 2017 (July-September/October). The visits were planned as follows: every playground was to be visited in the morning between 9am to 12.30am, from 2.30-8/9pm. It turned out that in the morning and during lunch time almost no families went to a playground thus the observation visits spanned from 2.30 pm to 8/9 pm in the evening in Italy and from 2.30 pm to 7 pm in Austria and Germany (after 7pm families seem to retreat from playgrounds at the latest). Every playground was observed from Monday to Sunday. Due to some local conditions (sometimes one of the selected playgrounds were empty, families left the playground etc.), the 6.5 observation hours were sometimes split. Up to 7 playgrounds in Bressanone were visited and recordings were taken from 4 playgrounds. In Bolzano, 6 playgrounds were visited and recordings from 4 playgrounds were taken. In Innsbruck, 4 playgrounds were visited while recordings were taken from 3 playgrounds. In Weimar, 6 playgrounds were visited and interactions were recorded of 3 playgrounds. In Gera, 2 playgrounds were visited and recordings were taken from 1 playground. In Koellda and Suhl, no recordings could be taken as all families either denied being recorded or the visited playground was empty. Table 2 shows an overview of the recording.

Table 2. Overview of the video-recordings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country and City</th>
<th>Playground inner-city</th>
<th>rural</th>
<th>suburban</th>
<th>Low SES</th>
<th>High SES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria / Innsbruck</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany/ Weimar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany / Gera</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy / Bressanone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy / Bolzano</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is, however, noteworthy that the socioeconomic status (SES) of one quarter in which a playground (in Bressanone) was located remained unknown. As for Bolzano details of the socioeconomic status of all quarters in which recordings from playgrounds were taken remained unknown. A model of participating, non-reactive observation was chosen and the camera was displayed openly. All participating parents, regardless of race/ethnicity/income status, were asked to sign a written consent form (in German and/or in Italian language) before video recording. Participating families could withdraw their agreement anytime. The video recordings concerned the play behavior of the children (with whom did they play, which items did they bring to the playground (if any), with whom did they chose to interact e.g. with their parents, with other children, with the parents of the other children etc. and who decided to enter the playground and when and who decided to leave the playground and when). Additionally, field notes were taken where possible. Some parents decided to talk with the observer about the study, some wanted to talk about the playground, some talked about the neighbourhood etc. All talks were noted afterwards.

After video data collection, the analysis was conducted following these steps: an overview of the data was gained, relevant sequences were determined where children’s agency has been expressed (e.g. entering the playground: whose decision was it, who entered first – children or parents etc.; children’s play interaction: did the observed child / children chose a person to interact with, if so, whom, who was it etc.: leaving the play-
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ground (on whose decision, who left first etc.). All sequences (begin and end) were marked by the children / the families. Selected sequences (sorted by relevance) were compared.

Results

Due to the nature of a playground, families come and go. Thus, the exact number of families could not be determined nor could the number of children at the specific playground be determined. All observed children ranged from approximately 1.5 years up to 10 in general but this is rather a rough estimate. Most children were approximately between 5-8 years old. As children’s agency, can be attributed to children from the early onset on (according to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child) the exact age of the respective children was of rather low importance.

Italy

At all playgrounds in Bressanone (and most observed playgrounds in Bolzano) all German-speaking parents left the playgrounds with their kids between 5 pm and 6 pm. Italian-speaking parents followed, spending less time with their children on playgrounds (about 1-2 hours compared with the 2-3 hours of the German-speaking parents) and left the playground around 7 pm. The third group of families on playgrounds mainly belonged to Arab ethnicities and spent mostly between 30 and 60 minutes on the respective playgrounds. Whether members of different arab group mixed could not be determined. It could not be determined how many families spoke German as some families preferred to speak Italian while others preferred talking in different languages. Non-Italian migrants coming to the Autonomous region of South Tyrol must decide to which language group they want to belong to (irrespective of their specific language command) and I was told by a German-speaking informant that most (if not all) vote for Italian language. Thus, linguistic barriers might well exist although politically the region of South Tyrol is a three-language-region (German, Italian, Ladinian). The last group on the playgrounds belonged to Asian communities. This time pattern appeared to be the case similarly in Bolzano. Short time-overlapping periods occurred between the leaving of German-speaking families and the arrival of Italian-speaking families as well as between the leaving of the Italian-speaking families and the Arab families. According to the data, parents actively contributed to a disparate use of the respective playgrounds, separating the different ethnic families (and the different ethnic children) from each other. This could be recognized by several behavior patterns: parents hollered after their children when they approached other children, parents going straight to the playground, looking around, turning away and coming back after the different ethnic group parents left the playground (this particular behaviour was shown most often) and parents holding their children back as long as ethnically different children with their families were present on the playground.

This trend could be recognized as a social trap on a micro-level (Platt, 1973).

Germany

Similar trends of ethnic separation occurred on German playgrounds. Two spatial segregation patterns between the German families seemed to take place: Either the German families retreated to a place at a greater distance when children of migrant families (recognizable by their different language) appeared or inner city playgrounds were used exclusively (at least during the observation period) by German parents or exclusively used by Non-German-parents. In particular, the ethnic separation was defended by all parents: some German parents declared that they felt this specific playground is not for
foreigners. Additionally, they showed some specific behaviour pattern: turning away whenever non-white families walked by, building some kind of barriers when non-white families tried to enter a playground. Other behaviour patterns shown by parents included blocking their children from entering other playground areas. Ethnic segregation at German playgrounds could also be observed due to the following behavior: the parents went ahead to the various areas of the playground containing specific equipment (slide, monkeybar etc.) leaving no choice to the children regarding the place to play at and the apparatus to use, thus minimizing children’s agency. Afterwards, each ethnic group (German-speaking families, families using other languages) kept themselves to themselves. Only when a group, or in particular cases, a family left the playground, the migrant families took over. From the point of observation, it was impossible to find out whether the families knew each other. In most cases the migrant families refused being recorded. That might have been due to language barriers.

A specific time pattern when visiting a playground could not be observed in Germany: most parents entered the playground with their children, the parents mostly watched their children and usually left the playground after around 90 minutes. This was true for German and non-German families alike.

**Austria**

Contrary to parental behavior model on playgrounds in Italy and Germany, Austrian parents showed (almost) no pattern of ethnic segregation when attending a playground. However, this general pattern of non-segregation might not be valid when casting a closer look: first, parents seemed to choose a playground next to their living place or next to their workplace. This, however, might account for ethnic segregation due to the chosen playground. One playground was located in a quarter being characterized by low socioeconomic status and a high number of migrant parents. The parents on that particular playground appeared very mistrusting, many of them rejected to participate in the study and many of them declared not to be able to understand /to talk in German but as a second language. No Austrian parents attended the playground for the time when the study was carried out. On the other hand, on an inner-city urban playground, Austrian and Non-Austrian parents shared the playgrounds but their children appeared to segregate. Their children chose certain devices such as monkeybars to play with but seemed unwilling to share the use of the monkeybar with other children when being visibly different from them. This was true for all children observed either way. This observation could account for children’s limiting agency by themselves not by parents but further research is needed here.

**Discussion**

The results seem to indicate parents’ decision of providing a homogeneous environment for their children. This might undermine not only political efforts of diversifying a society but could be seen as a social trap or countertrap (Platt, 1973). On the observed playgrounds in Italy and Germany, the parents seemed to prevent their children from being provided with heterogeneous and diverse learning opportunities (as is highlighted by the results, see section 4) although their kids actively encounter the avoided children and their families in educational institutions such as kindergarten or school. This parental avoidance of diversity is contradictory in itself: parents’ beliefs of the individual benefit lead them to act as social fence against what is the everyday experience elsewhere for
their children: a diverse environment. The parental choice of acting as a social fence also highlights some of the paradoxes of the social dilemmas (Edney, 1981). Parental choices shared by all parental users of the observed playgrounds in Italy and Germany in defending and maintaining a homogeneous environment can be seen as the equality problem at the core of the social dilemma: all users of the respective playgrounds are to be regarded as being socially equal hence, touching on issues of social hierarchy.

Yet, it might be that the observed parents rather followed their acquired cultural scripts (cultural scripts (Bowleg et al.; 2004, Holvino, 2010). On playgrounds in Italy and Germany this social norm of ethnic separation was shared by different ethnic groups. Following the observation that the filmed parents belonged to different ethnic groups, further investigation is necessary whether norms of ethnic separation are shared likewise in those different ethnic groups. Individual agency of both, parents and children seems limited, then.

Highlighting another dimension of the social problem is the fact that children on the respective playgrounds had to accept their parents’ choice: Children’s rights to participate actively in the social community lives appear denied deliberately. Maybe those parents seemed to quit the social contract. This acting might not be in the best interest of the children since it exerts a kind of blocking the further development of a certain set of cultural competencies. Yet, (cross-)cultural competencies are considered a core competence (Lee, 2010; Kolivosky, Weaver, & Constance-Huggins, 2014). Apart from this, children’s agency was widely denied where parents chose a playground according to time and/or place. Although children in general are encouraged to make choices they appeared subjugated: in this study, they were encouraged when it was appropriate in terms of adults’ frameworks (e.g. timetables – some parents revealed that they had chosen this particular playground due to spatial closeness to their workplace but on the surface they “asked” their children for visiting this specific playground). In some cases, children received somewhat mixed responses, e.g. the parents held them back until everyone else had left the playground).

At least, children’s possibilities to learn from and with others appear limited. Their social ways of building up, interacting and negotiating within a peer group are important factors influencing education as well (Jorgensen, 2017). Limiting these learning / playing opportunities might mean limiting a way of children’s self-organization and limiting their voices, too (Garrick, 2009). Time and spatial segregation through parental decisions limit children’s ways of learning and playing and might contradict the motives of parents for attending a playground.

Limitations

At the interplay between theoretical consideration and empirical research some limitations might be seen when using ethnographic methods (as realist method) and giving reflexive accounts of the data (Coffey, 2002; Komulainen, 2013). It might remain questionable whether educational / philosophical ideals (such as valuing diversity) appear relevant only to the cultures in which they are acknowledged and embraced or can their legitimacy extend beyond the bounds of those cultures (Siegel, 2017).
Outlook and Conclusion

Understanding diversity in a broader sense as a global process and accordingly, valorizing diversity (Ramirez, Bromley, & Garnett Russell, 2017), parental decisions on a playground appear as their putting great value on ethnic separation. While parents in Italy prefer ethnic separation by time, parents in Germany prefer spatial ethnic separation. Yet, parental reasons for their individual choices might be located in areas of conflict of multicultural education, civic education and educational policies and politics of inclusion and exclusion not jointly shared by all parents. This, however, touches on issues of education as a social right (Marshall, 1964) or education in the view of human capital (Becker, 1993). Considering the emancipatory potential of parents, their separation tendencies might mean more than social traps for they might establish certain cultural conditions on a given playground. Yet, it might prevent their children from exploring their respective emancipatory potential when being on a playground. Further research is necessary on these aspects, too.

Coming back to the interplay of language, education and postcolonial perspectives, the observed behavior patterns might reflect and/or might lead to minority experiences in an increasingly globalized world in which teachers at school have to take into consideration that they and their students will encounter people being linguistically and culturally different from themselves. Beyond questions leading to possible homogenization of diverse populations, several implications for teachers arise and have to be addressed adequately in further studies.

Widening the perspectives, an underlying idea of controllability of difference might be concluded: cultural cloning of preferred types to inhabit segregated spaces as an everyday practice in forms of preference for sameness can be assumed. This preference for sameness can be seen as a rather normative preference, whether as a result of explicit choice or of hegemonic consensus (Essed & Goldberg, 2006). The underlying assumption that the values of sameness represent the prevailing social norm might result in a certain taken-for-granted desirability of certain types, the tendency of complying with normative standards, the easiness which comes along with the familiar and the subsequent rejection of the perceived unfamiliar and “not-the-same” (Essed & Goldberg, 2006). Summing up, the homogenization of diverse populations seems to take a form of ethnic segregation by families in Italy and Germany. Why Austrian parents / families showed distinctive patterns might stipulate further research.

The results of the study are of high importance for school teachers as well: within the school system in Italy, Germany and Austria where political values of diversity are emphasized. However, this might collide with the parental behavior patterns observed on playgrounds. The inevitable conflicts arising here might limit children’s agency as well due to possible conflicts of loyalty. On the other hand, the respective teachers might experience loyalty conflicts: teachers themselves might privately opine that their child / children should rather be with children like them (representing values of sameness) but being required to stand for values of diversity /cultural heterogeneity when acting professionally. This conflict would need further research.

References


