

“I Don’t Know” Analysis of a Powerful Interaction Strategy of Children Dealing With Adult-Determined Interactions

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Abstract

Interactions between children and adults are always shaped by the generational order, in which children position themselves as children and adults as adults. This assumption applies particularly to interview situations—even when children are perceived as experts and their perspectives are valued, a risk remains that children in interviews may submit to and adapt to the ideas of adults. Adults, who, on one hand, aim to allow space for children’s independent expressions but, on the other hand, face the necessity of conducting ‘good’ research in the context of research criteria or publication strategies, run the risk of unintentionally dominating children despite their best intentions and, in the worst case, behaving in an adultistic manner. In our re-analysis of interview data with children, we examine sequences in which children evade this dominance with the response “I don’t know.” For deciphering such statements, we present two possible interpretations. An engagement with these patterns in interviews with children can enhance the professionalism of adult researchers, improve the quality of data analysis, and make a substantial contribution to the development of ethical principles for researching with children. Beyond specific research processes, the re-analysis can stimulate a better understanding of children and their actions in the generational order.

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Introduction

Children as Experts of Their Life World: Challenges in Interviews

Asking children about the phenomena that affect them, involving them and including them in research not only as data providers, but also as experts on their lifeworld, is a current norm in so-called Western societies (Honig, 2009; Kellet, 2010). The researchers pursue the goal of working against adultism on two levels: fundamentally, it is about preventing or avoiding discrimination by adults through the capture and consideration of children's perspectives, especially in areas or on topics that are relevant to them. On an advanced level, inclusive, and participatory research settings should ensure that children can openly express their perspectives, feel recognized and valued in this setting and not dominated by adults. Accordingly, numerous studies have emerged in recent years in the fields of childhood and primary school research that capture children's perspectives and include them in research in various ways. This increase in studies is also accompanied by a debate on ethical issues that focuses on the relationship between children and adults in research situations (e.g., Christensen & Proud, 2002; Alderson & Morrow, 2020). Beyond general ethical guidelines, we take a critical look at the micro interactions that arise in such research projects, especially in interviews with children. The following interview excerpt with Marie, 5 years 6 months, is from one of these research projects, specifically from one that aimed to explore the perspectives of children on their participation opportunities in a German kindergarten through material- and photo-supported interviews:

I: Today I want to ask you a few questions, I already said in the morning circle that I'd come again and I brought a few photos that I took here in the kindergarten, look, this is the first photo I brought to you. [...] Would you like to take a look at it, do you know what's on it? What is it?

Marie: I don't know exactly.

I: You don't know? I think I have seen a poster like this at the back of your room where there are the little building blocks and the reading corner.

Marie: I don't know.

I: "Meeting" is written on it. Do you have meetings here sometimes?

Marie: [nods]

I: And who takes part in the meetings?

Marie: I don't know.

I: Are you there too? You are, aren't you?

Marie: I think so.

(Study I, Marie, K7)

Against the background of the claim to collect the child’s perspective and to address the interviewed child in her expert status, the quoted interview excerpt is thought-provoking. A preschool-aged girl is interviewed by an adult interviewer about her everyday life in the daycare centre and her experiences with the everyday organization of the discussion group. She is taken seriously as an expert on her living environment and is asked to describe her experiences. The interview is supported by photos taken by the interviewer in the daycare centre prior to the interview. However, Marie responds to the interviewer’s questions with “I don’t know,” she does not reveal her perspective. She kept to this response format throughout the entire interview: out of 27 verbal statements, 11 were “I don’t know.” Against the background of the image of the child as an expert, the interpretation suggests that Marie’s statement “I don’t know” is her lack of knowledge about the phenomenon being interviewed, perhaps because she is new to the institution, has been ill for a longer period of time or has not (yet) taken part in the services mentioned. While conducting the interview, an unexpected situation unfolds from the researcher’s perspective, challenging the assumption that Marie is incapable of providing any information about the phenomenon in question. Asked about the role and task of the chosen group spokesperson, the child reports in the same interview sequence:

I: And do you have to know something to be a group spokesperson? Or is it just like that?

Marie: Just like that.

I: Just like that.

Marie: But I don’t know.

I: Would you also like to be a group spokesperson?

Marie: [nods].

I: Mmh [agreeing], but it’s [girl’s name] and [boy’s name] who were elected. [.] And why would you also like to be the group spokesperson?

Marie: I don’t know.

I: Is it quite nice to be the group spokesperson? Do you go there-

Marie: I was before.

I: Mh?

Marie: Group spokesperson.

I: You have been a group spokesperson before?

Marie: For the grasshoppers.

I: Oh, you were already the group spokesperson for the grasshoppers. And what did you have to do there? What did you do as a group spokesperson?

Marie: I don't know.

(Study I, Marie, K7)

From this statement, the original assumption that the answer “I don’t know” is related to/can be justified by not knowing or not being aware of the phenomenon of group discussion no longer appears to be the only plausible interpretation of the statement “I don’t know”: Marie has certainly had her own experience, at least about the role of the group spokesperson. However, she does not elaborate with the interviewer on the specific details of this and the extent to which her experience may be relevant to the phenomenon under discussion. Instead, she persists in using the response format “I don’t know.” Thus, Marie restricts the interviewer’s scope for action by withholding information about the meeting time and the role of the group spokesperson. This occurs despite repeated inquiries and prompts, the diversity, and objectives of which we have previously outlined in a publication discussing the reflection of adulthood in adult-child research situations (Velten & Höke, 2023). Based on the experience described, we address the following questions in this paper:

What significance do answers such as “I don’t know” and similar forms have, if not as expressions of a lack of knowledge?

How can these responses be classified in light of the assumptions of children as experts/ the sociological concept of the agency of children and the equally crucial concept of the generational order, particularly when articulated by children in conversations with adults?

We concentrate on interviews with children, intending to investigate them as experts in their lifeworld. In previous studies, we employed a re-analytical approach to scrutinize our research projects, aiming to identify interaction patterns among adults that encourage children to generate narrative passages and sustain the interview context (Velten & Höke, 2023; 2021). It became apparent that, despite the normative assertion to avoid adultistic behaviour when interacting with children and to critically evaluate one’s authority as an adult during interviews, critical interaction practices of adults emerged. From the perspective of adultism, these practices suggest that, despite well-intentioned efforts, children may not be taken seriously in their interests and needs. Additionally, they highlight that interpretive control over the design of the interaction, whether goal-oriented or not, remains with the adults.

This article delves into a central interaction pattern of children responding with “I don’t know,” an element we interpret as wielding a substantial influence on subsequent developments and the scope for action of the adult researcher. Our objective is to uncover insights into how this interaction pattern of children can be understood from an adult perspective in relation to the claim of participation and the risk of adultism. Furthermore, we aim to explore its potential contribution

to the ongoing professionalization of adult researchers concerning their research skills.

Theoretical Framework

The normative image of the child as an expert and the standardizing interpretative sovereignty of adults

In Western societies, over the past two decades, a conceptualization of children has emerged. This conceptualization shifts the understanding of children away from a perspective of being passive recipients undergoing predetermined educational programs imposed by adults for developmental purposes. Instead, it embraces the notion of ‘children as competent actors’ who actively influence relationships, shape their surroundings, and contribute to their own developmental and educational narratives right from the outset. Informed by insights from cognitive and developmental psychology, neuroscience, and infant research, which reveal the early demonstrable cognitive processes and learning capabilities of young children, and drawing on the principles of the new sociology of childhood (Honig et al., 1999; Heinzl et al., 2012) that underscores the political and social dimensions of children and childhood, the prevailing notion in educational contexts is that children engage in constructive and co-constructive learning within environments tailored specifically for them. This leads to the claim that children should/must be able to participate in decisions that are important to them and, thus, in everyday educational life (e.g., UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This not only applies to the public sphere, but since the 1970s there also has been a shift away from the ‘hierarchical family’ towards the ‘negotiating family’ in the private sphere regarding the organization of family life. In research with and about children, too, an image of the ‘child as the expert’ is increasingly gaining ground (Eßer et al., 2016; Wöhrer et al., 2017, p. 7). Based on the assumption that children themselves are agents of their educational biography and are therefore capable and empowered to act, they are not only seen as data providers, but also as experts of their lifeworld (Wöhrer et al., 2017, p. 7). Capturing their perspective, but also involving them beyond the respondent status in all research phases, is a central concern of numerous studies in the context of participatory research with children (Hüpping & Velten, 2022).

The social relationship between children and adults, on the other hand, is characterized by the basic assumption that adults have the power of interpretation, e.g., of what is appropriate and right for children. This sovereignty of interpretation is also exemplified in the formulation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which is intended to enable children to participate. Under the formulation of the legal right to participation, both children’s ability to participate and the identification of phenomena that affect them and in the context of which they must be involved are described as tasks assigned to other individuals,

possibly adults (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, § 12 My opinion). Children's participation is dependent on the decisions of adults as to whether and to what extent the child fulfils the requirements for participation regarding his or her age and stage of development, and which matters affect the child. To address this dependency, Lundy identifies four key concepts that must be considered to realize the inclusion of children in decisions: space, voice, influence, and audience (Lundy 2007, 2018). The core of the Lundy model is therefore to create space for the design of interactions between adults and children that serve to provide children with the information they need to form their own opinions on the one hand and to give them the opportunity to express their opinions on the other. This voice must be acknowledged, considering ethical aspects in terms of influence, and finally made accessible to decision-makers in the context of the audience. Following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the participation of children is now explicitly enshrined in national legislation in most Western countries, e.g. in Germany in the Child and Youth Welfare Act "(1) Children and young people shall be involved in all public youth welfare decisions affecting them in accordance with their stage of development" (Germany, Social Code (SGB), Eighth Book (VIII) Child and Youth Welfare, Section 8). This passage underscores that participation is not unconditional. The expression "in all decisions affecting them" prompts the consideration of who determines which decisions impact the child and which ones do not. Moreover, adults retain the authority to determine at what developmental stage a child can participate in specific decisions. This poses a significant risk of communicating and behaving in an adult-centric manner, thereby engaging in discrimination against children based on their age and developmental stage.

The interpretative sovereignty of adults is also discussed in childhood research. On the one hand, the aim is to consider and critically reflect on the roles of adults in research and, on the other, the connection between children's ability and possibilities to act against the background of the 'concept of generational order' (Velten & Höke, 2023). From the perspective that it is not enough to "merely concentrate on 'giving children a voice' in a methodologically reliable way" (Honig et al., 1999, p. 13, English translation [Höke & Velten]), not only adults and their practices of action are considered, but also how children participate in the processes of shaping social contexts and in their standardization and structuring (Betz & Eßer, 2016; Heinzl et al., 2012; Zeiher, 1996). In the often more politically than methodologically conducted debate on capturing children's perspectives, an "advocation" (Bühler-Niederberger, 2019, p. 158) for children's agency can be noted. This is based on the normatively charged paradigm of "giving children a voice," which tends to construct children as individuals to whom a voice can/should/must be given. This often accompanies the stylization of researchers as spokespersons for children, rather than serving the purpose of a reflective analysis of the actual agency and possibilities in many research projects (Betz & Eßer, 2016; Velten,

Alexi & Höke, 2018). Following Hunleth (2011), “Child-oriented” methods are also oriented towards adults and dominant assumptions of childhood. As such, the use of child-oriented methods without critical reflection may actually reinforce adult representations of children” (Hunleth, 2011, p. 92).

Adult-child interactions as reproductions of generational order

When examining interactions between adults and children, these interactions inevitably reflect the underlying generational order, which neither children nor adults can escape. Both children and adults function as social actors, with children inherently reliant on adults. In this context, Bühler-Niederberger (2020) introduces the concept of “competent compliance” into the German-speaking sociological discourse on childhood. This concept emphasizes that children consistently act in alignment with desired behaviours, whether implicitly or explicitly expressed. Within these behaviours, children exhibit a capacity for being “social all-rounders,” demonstrating an ability to perceive rules, comprehend (divergent) expectations, and operate within them (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, p. 237ff.).

Against this background, questions arise regarding the feasibility of entirely avoiding adult dominance in interactions with children (Höke & Velten, 2021). Interactions between children and adults unveil typical, ritualized, and habitualized patterns of engagement employed by both parties to jointly establish the interaction and the inherent positioning as a child or an adult (Kelle & Schweda-Möller, 2017; Velten & Höke, 2023). Drawing on interviews with children, our research on interaction practices in research settings (Velten & Höke, 2023) reveals that adult researchers strategically implement interaction patterns to facilitate the integration of children into the respective research situation and sustain it throughout the interaction (see Table 1).

These interaction patterns can also be related to educational interactions, e.g. when children are praised (and thus evaluated) for their work (“You did a great job!”), their interest is directed back to the educational subject (“It’s interesting

Table 1
Adult Practics in Interview Settings
(see Velten & Höke, 2023)

<i>Practices of...</i>	<i>Subtypes</i>
Affirmation	Emotionally charging the situation/ information Forge an alliance or bond Summarising or paraphrasing Praising
Ordering and structuring	Citing the research setting’s anticipated duration Transferring responsibility to the research setting Redirect the interaction to the research interest

what you're saying, but now look at your book again", consideration of their current needs and interests is rejected with reference to the educational setting ("But this is school!") or their loyalty to the person or thing is demanded ("But we want to do math right now").

Suboptimal or critical interaction patterns on the part of adults occur when children refuse to fit in with the interaction patterns intended or expected (by the adults). In our re-analysis of interviews, we were able to determine that two interaction patterns stand out here in particular because they not only reveal insights into the course of the interaction expected/desired from the adult perspective, but also because—especially against the background of a different course of the interaction—they reveal the adult's power to act in the conversation and thus disregard the declared goal of ascertaining the child's perspective and their interests in the content and course of the conversation: the continuous follow-up questions, although the child has already clearly signalled that he or she no longer wants to answer, and the "if - then" constellation that occurs when the interview situation is about to be terminated, which we refer to as a "turning point" (Velten & Höke, 2021).

Methodological structure of the re-analysis

Building on our previous research, we now turn our attention to the expressions made by children. During the analysis of diverse data sets, we frequently observed the recurring use of phrases such as "I don't know" in response to questions posed by adults. What significance do answers such as "I don't know" and similar forms have, if not as expressions of a lack of knowledge? We are exploring the functions of these statements for children in the context of organizing interaction within the generational order. Additionally, we aim to examine how these responses can be approached from an adult perspective concerning the assertion of participation and the risk of adultism. The following specific questions arise in the analysis of the data material:

1. How do expressions like "I don't know" manifest in interactions between adults and children, and are there discernible patterns in the occurrence of such responses based on the age, gender, and conversational setting of the children?
2. To what extent do these statements function as interaction strategies or practices employed by children, and what roles can be identified in their usage?

Our data material stems from three distinct studies, each involving individual and group interviews conducted with children.

The entire dataset was analysed as follows: Initially, the interview transcripts were examined for instances of children saying "Ich weiß (es) nicht" ("I don't know"). Additionally, expressions like "Keine Ahnung" ("No idea") and the interviewer's questions such as "Weißt du noch" ("Do you remember") were included when negated by the children. In Study I, there was also one instance of a child

Table 2
Survey of the Studies Employed

<i>Study I (Höke, 2016)</i>	<i>Study II (Höke, 2020)</i>	<i>Study III (Velten, 2021)</i>
Period May to June 2015	Period June to July 2016	Period March to November 2013
Sample n = 13 (four to six years)	Sample n = 11 (first graders)	Sample n = 22 (age at first Interview five to seven years)
Sequential interviews based on children's photos (adapted from life-world interviews, Fuhs, 2012, Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at "children's experiences with formal participatory structures"	7 School visits (adapted from life-world interviews, Fuhs, 2012, Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at "places that are meaningful from the children's point of view" Children chose not to participate, to participate alone, in pairs, or in a group	Sequential Interviews (at two times) based on the children's photos (adapted from the Mosaic Approach, Fuhs, 2012; Clark & Moss, 2011) looking at children's self-efficacy experiences in both kindergarten (t1) and primary school (t2) Children were usually interviewed individually

saying "Das kann ich nicht wissen" ("I cannot know that"), and in Study III, the statement "(Habe ich) vergessen" ("I forgot") occurred frequently within an interview. This resulted in a total of 32 interviews (12 from Study I, 3 from Study II, 17 from Study III), from which sequences were filtered using sequential analysis (Schütz et al., 2012). The individual interaction sequences were then organized regarding their distribution based on age, gender, and specific interview settings for Research Question 1. Subsequently, all sequences were evaluated in an inductively conducted qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) to identify functions related to the statements.

Results

Research question 1: Occurrence of "I don't know"

Across the entire data material, it can be determined that "I don't know" is an answer that the children seem to use frequently in the interview. However, there are differences between the different interview settings.

In Study I, the children were interviewed individually in a 1:1 interaction between child and adult. In addition, the participants in the interview sat together at a table and looked at photos together. In the 13 interviews conducted here, the statement "I don't know" can be found in 12 interviews. Similarly, the statements "I don't know" and "no idea" can also be found in 29 of 44 interviews in Study III, which were also set up in a comparable 1:1 setting between child and adult interviewer (with photos and at a table).

Study II was methodologically designed differently to Study I and III. Out of the 11 participating children, six opted for an interview situation involving two children. Five children were interviewed individually, although in each solo interview, another child joined twice during the interview, resulting in a group situation. Additionally, the questioning was not structured as a traditional interview setting. The involved children moved through the school with the interviewer, deciding themselves which rooms and places they should visit. In these locations, beyond the children's narratives, activities naturally emerged. For example, the children not only talked about the climbing frame but also actively climbed it. They didn't just discuss the sandbox but demonstrated its use—during one interview, a boy climbed into a large cardboard tube and rolled across the floor while conversing. In Study II, the expression “weiß ich nicht” (“I don't know”) is much less common. It appears in a total of 5 sequences, occurring once each in a group discussion and an individual interview, and three times in another individual interview.

The differences between Study I, Study III and Study II suggest that the design of the interview situation has an influence on whether and in what way a child says “I don't know” or not. While in a 1:1 constellation between child and adult, the generational order is reproduced much more strongly about the pattern “adult asks—child answers.” This appears to be less dominant in group constellations with more than one child. In addition, the situation design in Study II opened more scope for the children to concentrate on their current activity instead of responding verbally to the questions asked. However, and as our re-analyses reveal, merely increasing the number of children in the research situation or opening up presumed alternative approaches to the interview setting does not lead automatically to a reduction in generational order processes. In previous publications, especially in Velten and Höke (2023), we have demonstrated that the interaction patterns of adults in the interviews across all three studies do not differ. This holds true, particularly when facing the potential abandonment of the interview situation, a scenario that also arises in the interviews of Study II. Therefore, in our view, addressing generational order and preventing adultistic actions involves more than just planning the interview; the interaction patterns of adults appear to be a crucial key in this regard (Velten & Höke, 2023).

Regarding a possible gender-specific difference in the use of the statements, Study III shows that “I don't know” appears to be a statement used equally by girls and boys. The children also used this statement at both survey times. In some cases, there are changes in the frequency of children's use, but not a systematic decrease from T1 to T2 or vice versa. However, it is striking that the phrase “no idea” is used by one girl in Study III, and here only three times in one interview, but in comparison by three boys a total of 11 times on average (from 7 to 18 times) in a total of five interviews. This could indicate a gender-specific difference in the use of “no idea.”

Research question 2: Functions of “I don’t know”

I don’t know: Expression of not (yet) knowing

Within the “I don’t know” sequences, the function of actually documenting not-knowing via this utterance plays a central role. We assume that the question asked was basically understood by the children. The five sequences in Study II that have already been extracted can all be classified in this category. During the visit to the outdoor area, for example, a child and the interviewer look together at the flower bed created by the children. When asked which flower it was, Alina replied *“I don’t know. They grow like that at my friend’s too”* (Study II, Alina, K11). In another interview, the interviewer asks about the use of a particular material for painting *“And when do you do that?”* Thea states *“I don’t know either”* (Study II, Thea, K9). These interview sequences can be assigned to the function that the children here actually do not know something. This function is also found in the interviews analysed in Study I and III.

A differentiated analysis reveals that this lack of knowledge relates to different areas. In addition to the lack of factual knowledge, as in the examples above, there is also a lack of recall details of certain situations. For example, some children said that they could not remember both a specific excursion plan and the planning of a party at the daycare centre (Study I, Manuel, K3; Study I, Diana, K4; Study I, Nico, K8). These are in particular the sequences that were selected in advance according to the criterion that the interviewer asks, “Do you remember”. In addition, statements of “I don’t know” refer to the fact that the children cannot recognize what is visible in the photos (*“A pond, um, a forest [.] What is that supposed to mean? I don’t know”* (Study I, Nico, K8)).

Furthermore, children also use “I don’t know” as a way of evasion when they cannot immediately come up with an answer to the posed question, even if something does come to mind later. This is particularly evident in one sequence concerning the election of the group spokesperson, where the interviewer asks, *“Who gave you the points there?”* Initially, Andy responds, *“I don’t know”*, but then clarifies in response to the follow-up question, *“Was it [educator] and [educator]?”* *“I think so”*, and adds, looking at the other children, *“We too”* (Study I, Andy, K1). Similarly, the use of “I don’t know” also appears as a means of qualifying one’s own response, for example, in Study III, when Sami discusses his perspective on his prospective areas of participation in school (*“I don’t know, um, maybe (I) climbing?”*) or talks about the role of the educators and their actions or interactions during an experience he deems significant for participation (*“I don’t know, actually, they don’t really say anything”*).

However, the expression of not knowing also reveals sequences that point to the children’s lack of access to certain information. For example, two children in Study I say “I don’t know” when asked what the group spokespersons discuss with the teachers in their group spokesperson meetings (Study I, Diana, K4; Study I,

Helena, K13), as they have never been to these meetings. Even though they should be informed about the results of these meetings by the group spokespersons, at least conceptually, they do not put this into context. A lack of access can also be due to the fact that the child was not present on a particular day (*"I don't know, I wasn't there"*, (Study I, Diana, K4)), but also due to the fact that educational professionals do not make their decisions transparent to the children: *"The educators preferred to have the small Lego bricks there and the large Duplo bricks here? Do you have any idea why? You could also say you make a big building corner"*. Pia: *"But I don't know why"* (Study I, Pia, K12).

"I don't know": Expression of Non-Understanding

The phrase "I don't know" is utilized by children as an utterance in sequences where they are unable to provide an answer to the posed question. This inability arises from either the question itself being ambiguous, the direction of inquiry being unclear, or the cognitive interest not being comprehensible to the interviewed child. In a sequence from Study III, for instance, Christian responds to the interviewer's question about what he can determine in kindergarten with, *"I don't know because I don't know what that means."* When the interviewer inquires further, *"Ah okay, should I explain to you what that means? Being the determiner?"* Christian affirms this (Study III, Christian, t1 Kita, lines 34-47). The assumption of the interviewer, having chosen a formulation for autonomy or self-determination that is common and understandable for children, is falsified here. In another example, Simon, a child in Study I, responds to the question of when the clown visited the daycare with, *"Um, I don't know yet,"* and then adds, *"At half past fifty maybe?"* (Study I, Simon, K6). This sequence clearly demonstrates that Simon associates the question of "when," meant by the interviewer in relation to a specific event (at the daycare festival), with a time, which he cannot answer. In another sequence in the same interview, a similar structure is evident. The interviewer has extensively discussed with Simon the role of the soccer coach in negotiating rules during soccer play, and now draws an analogy to the daycare centre, which Simon cannot comprehend (Simon: *"No, there's no coach here."* I: *"Is there someone else for that? Someone similar to a coach?"* Simon: *"Umm, I don't know yet"* (Study I, Simon, K6)). The difficulty in establishing analogies is also evident in the interview with Andy, also from Study I, where the interviewer, using a photo of a conversation protocol, inquires whether they *"sometimes discuss such things"* in his daycare group. Andy initially responds, *"Hmm, I don't know,"* and upon the repetition of the question, *"Don't you have discussions like that at all?"* he then responds, *"Well, actually yes, but not like those,"* referring to the documentation of the discussion about the conversation protocol (Study I, Andy, K1).

The expression "I don't know" is further employed by children when confronted with complex questions regarding reasons, explanations, or processes.

This is particularly evident in the interviews of Study III, which inquire about self-efficacy experiences and, consequently, objectively complex intrapsychic processes. For instance, there is repeated use of the response pattern when the interviewer asks “why” or “how”:

I: But why did you still continue to attempt that [a high shot in football, KV]?

Toni: Because I believed I could do it.

I: You believed that. Why did you believe that? Tell me, I find it hard to imagine.

Toni: Uh, I don’t know anymore.

I: Mhm, how do you know for sure that you can do it? Why do you believe that?

Toni: (3) No idea

(Study III, Toni, t1 Kita, lines 181-188)

In this sequence, Toni articulates in an elaborate manner that he recognizes a belief (= a broadly defined concept of general self-efficacy) that motivates him to overcome a subjectively significant challenge in playing football. However, he also expresses that he cannot further differentiate this process/general belief and thus marks the limits of his response to this question in the interview. Similarly, in Study III, there are sequences where the response “I don’t know” is given, and it can be inferred over the course of the interview that children may doubt or at least question the seriousness/truthfulness of the adult interviewer’s claim to acknowledge the perspectives and ideas of children as expert knowledge:

I: How do you go about it when you want to play something then?

Adriana: (Laughing) I don’t know.

I: Is it strange that I ask so much [Adriana nods and laughs], but you know, I want to tell you why I ask so much. I was a child too, it’s been a long time, and I’m not always here in kindergarten and can grasp everything, that’s why I ask such things in detail and want to know exactly how it was. (2) Can you tell me how you did it this morning when you had the idea [to play something, KV]?

Adriana: No, I don’t know.

I: You don’t know?

Adriana1: Mm [shaking her head]

(Study III, Adriana, t1 Kita, lines 69-74)

Here, for example, Adriana seems to hesitate in response to the interviewer’s inquiry, laughing. Even after the interviewer’s explanation and the reaffirmation of her claim to learn about Adriana’s perspective, she still maintains her response and does not share the inquired experience.

“I don’t know”: Expression of No (longer) Wanting

Examining the interaction patterns between children and adults in the context of generational order, the use of “I don’t know” becomes apparent in sequences where children do not mark either a lack of knowledge or understanding of a question but rather withdraw from the conversation/intended course of conversation by the adult interviewer. The “I don’t know” instances used at the beginning to illustrate the phenomenon also fall into this interpretation. Furthermore, more sequences in the data material indicate this function of the response pattern. This is evident, for example, in the following excerpt from the interview with Nico, where his willingness to actively participate in the interview seems to be absent:

I: Do you know who the group representatives are in your group?

Nico: No.

I: No, you don’t know at all?

Nico: Nope.

I: And do you know what their task is?

Nico: No.

I: Do you always discuss everything together with everyone?

Nico: Yeah, I forgot.

(Study I, Nico, K8)

Especially relevant for the expression of no (longer) wanting are interview passages in which “I don’t know” is frequently used by the children in succession. A similar sequence can also be found in the interview with Manuel (Study I, Manuel, K3). However, even the single “I don’t know” from Lena in response to the question about the role of the group representatives can be interpreted in this way:

I: And what do group representatives do? (...) Why are they that?

Lena: I don’t know.

I: Mhm, so you don’t know what the group representatives do? Just that they are [Girl’s name] and [Girl’s name]?

Lena: Mhm (affirmative).

I: Mhm, and why are they [Girl’s name] and [Girl’s name]?

Lena: Mh because they had more circles.

I: Mhm [.] Did you choose them? [.] Mhm, and why do you think they had so many circles?

Lena: Mh [.] I’m bored.

I: You're bored?

Lena: Yes.

(Study I, Lena, K2)

After the interviewer continues with her questions despite Lena's "I don't know" and Lena answers them briefly, Lena then signals clearly that she is no longer interested in continuing the interview. This is also evident in Study III in the interview with Serkan, where the "I don't know" responses appear in the last third of the interviews, which could additionally indicate a state of fatigue:

I: Yes ((Laughter)) What do you think, how do you imagine it in school? Tell me (3) what do you do there all day?

Serkan: Uh? I don't know.

I: What do you do first?

Serkan: I don't know. Oh, I don't want to anymore.

I: Okay, then I thank you

(Serkan, t1 Kita, lines 186-190)

In addition to the frequent occurrence of the response pattern, Serkan explicitly states here that he is withdrawing his consent to participate in the interview.

Conclusions

In our re-analysis regarding the occurrence and functions of the use of the interaction pattern "I don't know" and similar statements, it becomes evident that children use this response to express a lack of knowledge, recollection, or experience. At times, they also employ "I don't know" to initially defer a substantive response or to relativize their subjective perspective on a phenomenon. Thus, the interaction pattern appears as one that children utilize against the background of their experiences, knowledge, skills, and reflection on the subjectivity of their own perspectives. It can be evaluated as an interaction pattern through which children interact competently and effectively, aligning with the expectations associated with incorporating children's perspectives and even making them the primary purpose of the interaction.

Furthermore, the re-analysis also reveals that there is more to the response "I don't know" than the initially apparent assumption that the child lacks the knowledge to answer the question or express themselves on the relevant phenomenon. We have developed two interpretative perspectives, which we articulate below:

(1) "I don't know" seems to be a strategy through which children signal that they do not understand the question/impulse from the interviewer or the associated interest in knowledge. This could have both a linguistic dimension, involving

the clarity and formulation of questions/impulses, and a generational dimension if we assume that the response pattern “I don’t know” is used by children when, as Bühler-Niederberger (2020) suggests, they cannot sense what answer is expected of them. Despite the claim and assurance that they are being questioned as experts in their own lives and that there is no right or wrong answer to the questions asked, children remain uncertain about what they “should say” in response to the posed question. The space promised/opened up for children by the adult interviewers, where they, in Lundy’s (2018) terms (at least in the interview), have the space to raise their voices, and the perspectives they disclose are meaningful in terms of audience and influence, does not seem to lead children to recognize it as a real space for action for themselves. They seem to “distrust the situation,” and rightly so, as in their everyday lives, but also in the specific interview situation, they usually have experiences of action and interaction that contradict the promise of appreciation and recognition of their opinion, the intention to provide them with space for participation, and the claim to audience and influence (Velten & Höke, 2023). From this perspective, ethical responsibilities for researchers capturing children’s perspectives entail the obligation to critically reflect on these micro interactions, posing questions such as: What signs within interviews with children indicate that their consent is no longer given? How can this be managed professionally and ethically responsibly?

(2) It becomes clear that children use “I don’t know” as an expression of no longer wanting to mark that their interest or willingness to continue participating in the interview has diminished. “I don’t know” appears here as a powerful strategy for children, leading the interviewer to either introduce a new topic into the interview or actually terminate the interview. The ad hoc practices we previously identified, such as reinforcing the child through praise or ordering and structuring through summarizing statements, no longer apply at these points. Similarly, with this interaction pattern, there are no “if... then” statements, which we consider critical turning points in interview situations when children more or less overtly refuse to engage in the conversation (Velten & Höke, 2021). Instead, the response “I don’t know” leads to an involuntary acceptance by the adult researcher to admit the child’s apparent lack of knowledge and to comply with the child’s marked withdrawal from the interaction. In terms of children’s agency, the response “I don’t know” appears here as a powerful functional strategy for children to resist an adult-dominated conversational situation and simultaneously avoid conflict. Children once again appear as “social all-rounders” (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020), highly competent in ensuring their own interests in these situations.

Outlook

It can be assumed that the interaction strategy “I don’t know,” which we have elaborated on, is not a spontaneous strategy that emerges only in the interview

situation. Instead, it seems to suggest that children have already assessed and evaluated this interaction strategy in other interactions between them and adult individuals before, to withdraw from certain conversations that are uninteresting, irrelevant, or unpleasant for the child. It would be remarkably interesting for further research projects to analyse interaction patterns between children and adults both in the pedagogical practice of childcare facilities or primary schools and in the family context. This would help to precisely elaborate on how children establish agency in these contexts. Building on these insights, an awareness of power structures in interaction patterns can be developed, which is essential for avoiding adultism.

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