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Caring for and Protecting each Other: Peers and Gender-related Participation in and outside School

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Abstract. This article explores the participation experiences of 12- to 16-year-olds both in and outside of school, with a focus on how young people engage with gender-related topics in peer interactions. We present data from our longitudinal study which investigates peer relationships and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, working with qualitative interviews, which are analyzed using the documentary method. By adopting a broad understanding of participation the study emphasizes the importance of empirical research on youth participation beyond formal political contexts. This framework enables a detailed analysis of the contexts, actors, and practices of youth participation, highlighting the role of peer relationships in gender discussions. In the school setting, the article examines practices such as student representation, complaints, and the expression of opinions on gender and LGBTQ* topics. Outside of school, it focuses on extracurricular activities and the negotiation of gender identity within personal contexts, such as family and romantic relationships. The findings demonstrate how young people assert and defend gender-related claims relevant to their social participation, showing the crucial role of peer support in navigating gender struggles both privately and publicly. Ultimately, the article illustrates how peer groups provide emotional and discursive support as adolescents navigate their gender identities across different environments.

Keywords: Peers, Youth, Participation, LGBTQ*, Care.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the experiences and practices of participation among 12- to 16-year-olds in and outside of school, focusing on how respondents grapple with gender-related topics with their peers. Drawing on a broad concept (Pitti *et al.* 2023: 145; McMahon *et al.* 2019: 161; Walther *et al.* 2019: 15), the article addresses the need for empirical studies exploring youth participation beyond political institutions. This broad understanding of participation allows for a detailed examination of with whom, in what, and how young adolescents participate (Köhler and Zschach 2025), emphasizing the significance of peer relationships in the context of gender.

In the school context, this includes participation practices such as student representation, complaints, and the desire to express opinions and dis-

cuss gender and LGBTQ* topics in class. Outside school, the focus is on extracurricular activities and how young people negotiate gender identity in personal contexts like family and partnerships. Young people assert and defend personal gender-related claims relevant to social participation in these settings. This article illustrates how gender-related struggles in the private sphere are significant for social participation and supported by peers. Ultimately, it illuminates how peers discursively and emotionally support young people as they navigate their gender identities in different contexts.

This article begins with an overview of research on youth participation practices and how young people navigate gender in school and everyday life. This overview focuses on qualitative studies of youth, participation, and peers, particularly those addressing the importance of helping, caring, and worrying in peer relationships, such as friendships, and the role of friends in dealing with gender and sexuality. After outlining related research and desiderata, the third section introduces the study's research design. The following section presents early empirical findings, spotlighting five cases that differ in peer integration and engagement with gender and sexuality. This section reconstructs how participation is practiced in school and out-of-school contexts and the importance of peer relationships in both settings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings in reference to existing research on peers, participation, and gender.

2. PEERS, PARTICIPATION AND CONCERNS – A RESEARCH OVERVIEW

What, where, and how young people deal with the meaning of sexuality and gender in their everyday lives is relevant for social participation and is linked to explicit political socialization. However, little is known about the interactions in and between various settings and forms of peer relationships in and outside of school, especially for younger adolescents under 16 years of age who have been largely neglected in participation research (Bock and Braches-Chyrek 2021: 25). For this research, we follow studies that use the term "peers" as a generic term (Krüger *et al.* 2022, 2010) for various relationship forms (Köhler, Krüger and Pfaff 2016), including constructive and friendly relationships alongside more destructively violent ones, such as cliques (Adler and Adler 2003). Additionally, it recognizes that school and out-of-school peer relationships are not necessarily mutually exclusive but often overlap, with school peers often being close in age and externally determined to be "peers." As Parsons (2012/1981) describes in detail and Adler and Adler (2003) empirically examine, young people encounter an inescapable peer public at school. Accordingly, a school provides a continuously reliable context for meeting friends but also for conflicts, such as bullying. In contrast to youth recreation centers and public spaces, young people cannot simply stay away. Similarly, Helsper *et al.* (2006) show that co-determined participation forms can be established and implemented in school settings. In addition to classic forms of student participation, such as student representation, students feel their views are considered when they can exchange ideas in class and express their opinions on various topics, including gender-based discrimination (Köhler and Mengilli 2024; Calmbach *et al.* 2024). By contrast, activities outside of school depend on a young person's voluntary commitment.

Qualitative studies by Pitti *et al.* (2023) and McMahon *et al.* (2019) provide valuable insights into participation spaces and practices, underscoring the fundamental importance of latent political socialization in the overall biographical experience of collective negotiation and decision-making processes. Studies on digital participation practices also adopt a broad concept of participation, distinguishing obtaining and procuring information online as a low-threshold form of participation (Grunert 2022; Ekström and Shehata 2018). In this context, peers can be important sources of inspiration for engaging with political and social issues around sexuality (Zschach and Sauermann 2024: 139; Krüger *et al.* 2023: 66; Hillebrandt *et al.* 2015: 130) or even in casual digital exchanges via social media (Kheredmand 2022: 8), which can also increase young people's exposure to hate speech and disinformation on the internet (*Ibidem*). Importantly, research finds that friends are more likely to act as a point of contact for the stress caused by hate speech than parents or teachers (Ivi: 35). Furthermore, fake news is a recurring theme in peer conversations, especially in the context of its steady increase. Individual studies that survey transgender and queer individuals reconstruct the essential role that bullying and destructive online communication or hate speech have as hurtful facets of peer worlds (Angoff and Barnhart 2021), while also underscoring that the support close friends provide in such contexts should not be underestimated (Rivas-Koehl *et al.* 2021).

To reconstruct the state of research on experiences and practices of helping, caring, and worrying among peers in the context of participation, it is important to first look at how scholars have approached care as a research object. Drawing on the fruitful field of care ethics research (Stützel and Scholz 2022; Tronto 1993;

Noddings 2010), we understand care as a reciprocal relationship practice that reinforces the social fabric. Tronto (1993) proposes a particularly broad understanding: «[I]n the most general sense, care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web» (*Ibidem*: 103). In such an understanding, care takes place in the context of relational relationships and is associated with moral responsibility. People relate to themselves, to others, and to the world. As such, social coexistence is «only possible against the background of fundamental mutual reliance and dependency in human relationships» (Korn and Scholz 2022: 14)[1]. This understanding is captured by the German concept of *Sorge,* which can be further differentiated by distinctions between *caring about, caring for, caregiving*, and *care receiving* (see Tronto 1993: 106-107). Caring about denotes the attitude of recognizing another person's needs while caring for encompasses the assumption of responsibility for addressing these identified needs. Caregiving describes the practical implementation of caring for another person, while care receiving refers to how another person's needs are being addressed. In this context, the generalized term "care" is appropriate because it refers to specific practices.

The present article recognizes the embeddedness of concern and caring practices as they represent two sides of the same coin. Similarly, Noddings (2010) also distinguishes caring-for and caring-about: Caring-for is the direct, face-to-face encounter that establishes and sustains caring relations. It is a form of caring in which a carer listens, attends to expressed needs, and responds as positively as she can. In caring-about, we are moved by the needs of people (*Ibidem*: 22). A distinction is made here between direct caring (caring-for) and caring behaviour (caring-about). Recognizing the needs of others (caring about) can be the starting point for practices (caring for) realized through participation. Participatory processes reposition needs as a shared responsibility, thereby rendering them visible. In this article, we understand care as a «relational and interactive mode of relating» (Korn and Scholz 2022: 14), which recognizes the needs of other persons or groups and also includes practical or caring actions.

Research on adolescent peer relationships reconstructs caring practices (Mengilli 2022; Mengilli and Lütgens 2024; Korn and Scholz 2022; Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022; Lütgens 2021) in peer groups' youth cultural practices, birthday parties, and everyday life exchanges (see Mengilli 2022). Young people discuss and work through overwhelming situations; such experiences bring them relief and are seen as caring. Among friends in particular, young people are able to carefully address their struggles and vulnerabilities (see Mengilli and Lütgens 2024). Drawing on such research, we reconstruct caring interactions and processes as part of young people's everyday peer practices and see the «possibility of dealing with matters of concern» (Mengilli 2022: 159) as a central role of the peer group, which shows that the group cares. Importantly, supposedly «shameful topics of sexuality» (*Ibidem*) are discussed with friends, meaning that gender diversity and sexual orientation also emerge as spaces of caring.

This article addresses the central need for all aspects of young people's lives to be open for discussion. Accordingly, peers are an important resource that young people can draw on to deal with and discuss questions of gender and sexuality. Thus, such issues must also be seen as supporting and caring for participatory practices. Caring relationships also enable practices of participation as they draw on activist communities to recognize the issues that peers face and establish caring relationships in the first place (Lütgens 2021). In this understanding, care practices are linked to processes of community-building that create intimacy and trust through shared interactions (see Mengilli and Lütgens 2024).

Additionally, research on friendship is relevant for this article, including the longstanding line of research that focuses on dyadic friendships, primarily same-sex friendships between girls and boys (Breitenbach 2000; Jösting 2005). At the same time, studies on boys rarely analyze their worries, how they seek help, and the role caring plays in their lives (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022; Korn and Scholz 2022). Nonetheless, research to date has largely overlooked the topics of peers and care in relation to mixed-gender friendships. Building on Mengilli's (2022) study, a pronounced caring attitude is associated with increased intimacy in friendships, and this exists in relationships between boys and girls as well as dyadic friendships.

In sum, the literature shows that although caring practices can be clearly traced in adolescent peer relationships (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022; Korn and Scholz 2022), care remains marginalized as a research topic, especially in the context of participation. This article addresses this desideratum by reconstructing how peers provide discursive support for the process of coming to terms with gender identity and the provision of emotional support.

[1] Own translation. German original: «nur vor dem Hintergrund einer grundsätzlichen gegenseitigen Angewiesenheit und Abhängigkeit in menschlichen Beziehungen möglich».

3. THE PEERPARTICO LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Thematically, this article is situated at the interface of youth, participation, and peer research. Socialization theory is closely linked to studies examining experiences and practices of helping, caring, and worrying among peers, with a focus on gender and sexuality. Moreover, the article depicts the extent to which young people practice various forms of participation beyond conventional political spheres.

The empirical findings presented here were obtained by the research project Peer Relationships and Participation in Transition during the Covid-19 Pandemic (PeerPartiCo)[2]. This project investigates the significance of close peer groups and friendships for how young people deal with participation in and outside of school. Open interviews and group discussions were used to collect young adolescents' narratives, which were then evaluated using the documentary method (Bohnsack *et al*. 2010; Nohl 2010). The study focuses on 20 cases of young adolescents aged 12 to 16, with narrative biographical interviews conducted at two time points (t1: 2021; t2: 2022). The broad sample includes adolescents with many and diverse close peer relationships and those with few or no peers. It also includes young people with different participation practices and political interests, as well as those who face social barriers and must navigate exclusion mechanisms related to disability, gender, and inequitable educational opportunities. Geographically, the sample is diverse, assuming that urban and rural areas offer different opportunities for participation and stimulate political interest in various ways. Seven respondents live in large cities, eleven in medium-sized towns, and two in rural areas. Group discussions were conducted with the young adolescents' peers to obtain more specific information about their relationships and participation practices. Background information was collected through a standardized sociometric survey completed by the participants and a standardized sociodemographic survey completed by their parents.

From a socialization theory perspective, a broad understanding of participation is connected to experiences and practices (Pitti *et al*. 2023; McMahon *et al*. 2019). Similarly, the project works with a broad understanding of politics. In line with the premises of praxeological sociology of knowledge, interviews and group discussions, as communicatively generated data, can be used to reconstruct practices as well as explicit and implicit knowledge. Our broad understanding of politics mirrors Nassehi's (2003) concept of political communication. The wide-ranging political is understood as political communication, which, through the production of collectively binding decisions based on power, as well as the production of collectives and the public, gives the political its form (*Ibidem*: 164). Drawing on this, political socialization can be defined in the sense of the documentary method with a particular focus on participation: «All aspects of socialization in which interactions, shared spaces of experience, and role orientations are connected to decisions that are binding on a collective level and enforceable by power should be understood as political»[3] (Nohl 2022: 47). Taken together, the political consists of actions (thinking, communication, agency) that refer to binding regulations in a public context. The public sphere exists whenever it is possible for members of society (generalized others) to communicate, whether indirectly (via the media) or directly (via political actors). The documentary method is then used to reconstruct implicit and explicit knowledge and conjunctive realms of experience, focusing on young people's experiences with their peers and common participation practices inside and outside school. This process involves the steps of formulating and reflective interpretation. Through continuous comparative analysis and the sequential reconstruction of the transcribed data, the orientation frameworks are worked out as habitus: «Orientation frameworks that result from the collective socialization history of the actors, more precisely: in the context of conjunctive experiential spaces» (Bohnsack 2018: 183). Thus, the study examines the orientations that have emerged in the socialization process, which meaningfully structure current actions and, consequently, the approach to gender topics.

This article details the findings about gender, reconstructed from data obtained during the interviews and group discussions. For illustrative purposes, it provides an in-depth exploration of five cases where the topic of gender emerged[4]. We selected these five cases because the young people independently brought up the topic of gender in their interviews and group discussions, marking it as a relevant issue for themselves. The analysis is conducted at the level of contrastive comparison and is not yet complete.

[2] The PeerPartiCo project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation).

[3] Own translation. German original: «Als politisch sollen all jene Komponenten von Sozialisation verstanden werden, bei denen Interaktionen, konjunktive Erfahrungsräume und Rollenorientierungen einen Bezug zu ein Kollektiv bindenden, durch Macht durchsetzbaren Entscheidungen haben»

[4] The young people's relationships with participation experiences and practices are quite diverse overall and, in addition to topics related to sexuality, also relate to current political events, how to deal with the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, and other global crises.

4. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF PEER PARTICIPATION AND GENDER IN SCHOOL AND NON-SCHOOL LIFE CONTEXTS

4.1 The case of John – The concerned and caring student council president

John was 16 years old at the time of the interview. His case shows how young people at school, especially those who take on the role of student council representative, can actively advocate for the acceptance of diverse gender identities:

> *Well, I personally, um, very much support, um, yes, the, um, LGBTQ community (Y: mhm) um, that's something that I also, um, very clearly, um, stand up for at school (Y: mhm) um, and I also clearly express at school that it just is that way and you just have to accept it* [...] *you have to at least accept the people who stand for this and represent this orientation, I'll put it that way, um, like that* (842-848).

John describes his personal attitude towards the topic as fundamentally supportive, although he communicates this particularly clearly in a school setting. The imperative he formulates, that it is necessary to accept people who feel connected to this topic, implies an orientation towards openness and acceptance of different sexual orientations and gender identities.

His in-school commitment and participation are also framed by his own personal gender identity, which he does not share in public and keeps hidden: «Yes exactly, so that's the classmate I just mentioned, um, he's against everything that deviates from his ideas, um, it's :@totally terrifying:@, well, I'll put it like this, if he knew me better, he would know this thing about me (Y: mhm), and then he probably wouldn't like me anymore either» (863-867). In his reference to how his classmate does not know "this thing" about him, John indicates a particular tension between his gender identity and his social environment. This reveals an implicit secrecy logic and a desire to protect his own identity, as John fears he will be rejected or disliked because of his views or his own possible personal identification with LGBTQ* issues.

During the interviews, John expressed a basic orientation towards social inclusion, especially in terms of peer rejection and degradation. John feels that such repercussions must be avoided.

However, John finds the acceptance of the LGBTQ* community so important that he enters into a direct discussion with his classmate: «I discussed it with him, I said why don't you just accept it, you don't have to like it, but you can just accept it and don't say insulting things to such people, and he always insults such people right away and it's just stupid to them, to people like that» (867-871). This passage illustrates John's proactive efforts to encourage his classmate to at least provide minimal recognition and acceptance of LGBTQ* people. Instead of just taking a passive attitude toward his intolerance, John actively joins the discussion and promotes a dialogue based on the value of acceptance.

However, John considers his fight with his classmate hopeless and thus a failure: «You can't talk to him. That's just how it is. It's like you are talking to a brick wall» (871-872). For his orientation towards inclusion, John's commitment to the LGBTQ* community's recognition also reveals itself to be a separate arena in which he no longer has to keep his personal gender identity secret. Accordingly, school presents itself as a discursive space in which John, in his role as a student representative in school politics, is allowed to introduce and defend topics of socio-political relevance – in particular, gender- and sexuality-based discrimination – and thus to participate.

He only discusses his gender identity with his closest friend Marie and together they support the LGBTQ* community: «And also, um, my best friend Marie is extremely committed to the issue and she's also involved in the CSD and stuff like that, and she thinks it's totally awesome, of course» (872-875). John emphasizes how Marie is not only engaged with the issue but is actively involved, particularly through her participation in Christopher Street Day (CSD). The expression «is extremely committed to the issue» indicates a strong personal conviction and a high level of engagement. With Marie, John can work on issues that are important to him, develop resilience, and participate in this context at school and in society. Marie helps him deal with gender-related vulnerability in a caring and supportive way. This includes doing things together, such as attending the CSD, enabling John to experience his own gender-related orientation with support from a friend, far removed from the discrimination he has experienced at school.

However, peers were not the only ones responsible for John's experiences of gender-related discrimination at school. He also discusses how teachers engage in gender-based discrimination:

> *There are also many schools where you get bullied* [for your gender identity]. *You can see that at my school, too. There's a girl or a – well now a boy – who is um, transgender, so, um, from woman to man (Y: mhm) wants to become a man and, um, for four years now, and the teachers haven't accepted him. Really, some teachers still deliberately call him by his female name* (926-930).

John notes how the teacher's intentional use of the student's dead name is not only highly offensive but also

deliberately discriminatory. He uses his position as student representative to advocate for the student body's concerns, particularly those of the trans student who was directly being discriminated against: «I've been thinking about that, but unfortunately the student is not here right now (Y: okay), because I would still like to talk to the student, uh, A, and then maybe we could do something together, a project» (937-939).

John's position as a student representative implies that he is responsible for recognizing grievances, addressing them in his official role, and potentially intervening. By acting as an advocate, he can implicitly establish and demand a protected space without having to reveal his own gender identity.

John's search for social integration is rooted in his biographical experience of being an outsider. Even as a kindergartener and elementary school student, John constantly experienced rejection and exclusion. Marie is his first real friend, and this helps him feel socially integrated and accepted. Being elected student representative also allows him to be included and accepted. His friendship with Marie and his role as student representative give John the strength, recognition, and care he needs to stand up for his beliefs, defend himself, and participate.

4.2 The case of Bianca – between seeking protection and self-empowerment in peer conflicts at school

At the time of the interview, Bianca is 15 years old. Her case also depicts how young people address gender-related injustices in the school context: «Well, physical education was often sexist or so, um (.) where whenever any (.) of the girls (.) wanted to do exercises it wasn't so good» (218-220). While Bianca's description is vague, it nonetheless suggests that she has experienced actions she perceives as sexist and problematic. Like John, Bianca is sensitive to problematic gendered statements and actions at school: «Of course, we complained about that too» (224-225). The use of "we" indicates that Bianca and her peers complained to the school together.

She describes in detail a situation when students insulted her friend sexually because of the clothes she wore. She considers the actions highly discriminatory. Most of all, she found the teachers' lack of intervention emotionally distressing:

> *And the teachers didn't intervene at all – they couldn't care less if the boys from a different grade are just awfully (.) sexist, or a friend of mine, she just wore a normal skirt and some boys from the ninth grade came up to her and said, 'You're really walking around like a slut,' and she had just worn a skirt, just a skirt, and the boys didn't even know her, and since then she doesn't dare to wear skirts anymore because she doesn't want to be called that anymore (.) Hello, (.) what's going on there? And oh what a shock, the teacher says :: oh, they probably didn't mean it that way:: (.) I said, :°Wait° (.) obviously they did when you say it like that: yes, I don't know, this sort of thing really upsets me* (1040-1049).

Bianca uses emotional formulations which document her distress and emotional investment, while also labelling the boys as being actively engaged in practicing sexist "slut-shaming" behaviour, which means that other people have to engage in (self-)restraint. Bianca appears caring and outraged by describing how her friend no longer dares to wear skirts because she is worried it will lead to more sexist comments.

Bianca's protective orientation is evident here, which can be reconstructed from the teachers' non-intervention and Bianca's associated outrage and emotional language. Bianca positions herself as a critical observer who questions the teachers' dismissive attitude. At the same time, however, she also expresses her resignation regarding the effectiveness of her criticism. Bianca is outraged and worried but has yet to find a way to protest. While John can use his position as a student representative, Bianca remains an observer and struggles for self-empowerment. She can recognize and clearly name discrimination and thus raises the topic in the school context in the sense of very low-threshold participation. However, it is not taken up further. This puts her under a great deal of emotional strain. Feelings of a lack of protection and the struggle for self-empowerment can activate the search for agency, change and thus participation practices.

4.3 The case of Hugo – drawing inspiration from a supportive class

Hugo is 16 years old at the time of the interview. In terms of school participation and his education in general, he offers an interesting contrast to John and Bianca. Like John, his primary school years were marked by difficulties with classmates and arguments with teachers, which he attributes to a lack of understanding of what it means to be on the autism spectrum. However, he recounts a positive experience with school support during his primary schooling. His academic performance improved when he went to high school, and he only reports conflicts with individual teachers. As he got to know his classmates better, he received more support from his friends, and his school support was discontinued.

In general, Hugo's peers seem to have influenced his increased participation. Unlike John and Bianca, poli-

tics is one of Hugo's central biographical topics. This is evident in his interviews, which include long, self-contained passages on foreign policy and individual politicians. Moreover, he has already joined a party and wants to become a politician. Although conventional politics is highly relevant to his biography, he does not reference political action and decision-making at school or other formal forms of school participation in the interviews. He does, however, recall how being able to discuss political topics in class is very important to him. He criticizes teachers who do not provide space for political discussions in their teaching. In this context, one teacher stands out as his so-called «archnemesis» (GD: 128), which he justifies with references to the teacher's behaviour: «Hugo: [there have been] a few scandals because his chauvinistic comments on abortions make no sense at all, and he just tries to divide us» (GD: 134-136).

Hugo's fundamental orientation towards exchange and creativity is also influenced by some of his classmates who encourage him to participate in artistic and aesthetic endeavours: «Hugo: she raised her feminist voice for the first time when she joined our class and she also inspired me somewhat at the time. I wrote a poem that spoke out against our teacher» (I: 302-304). The high importance Hugo places on his class community for participation is dramatized in his interviews, especially in how he rejects the chauvinistic teacher and discusses socio-political topics, which he describes as gender-related discrimination.

As the previous cases show, young people spend time together at school daily, which offers a space for developing caring friendships and support. At the same time, it is also a space where young people encounter harmful interactions and must navigate tough disputes. This is particularly the case when it comes to gendered grievances, which young people must defend themselves against as much as they can. Anna and Melina's case reconstructions depict how different peers are relevant in out-of-school contexts and how young people negotiate gender and make claims to participation outside the school setting.

4.4 The case of Anna – self-empowerment and social connectedness through demonstration

Anna is twelve years old. She is close friends with 18-year-old Tina, whom she meets after school. Together, they regularly visit a youth center, go to the city center, or spend time with their best friends and/or partners. Anna represents a case where her closest friend experiences gender-based discrimination and defends herself against it. A large part of Anna's interview and the group discussion with Anna and Tina focused on experiences with boys. This is particularly true for Tina:

> *Anna: he's always taking the piss out of you"* (GD: 295). *Tina is emotionally attached to a boy she cannot detach from: "Anna: up to now she loves him, she knows it's a mistake (.) but she still carries on and fights for him, although that doesn't really help"* (I: 65-66). *Anna comforts her lovesick friend and hopes she herself will not be hurt in such a way: "Anna: I hope that I don't get involved with a guy like that, that I'll wait for the right one"* (I: 357-358).

The construction of a male-dominant relationship is clearly documented here. This can even be reconstructed on a linguistically performative level. When Anna speaks of her friend Tina, she expresses her amazement related to masculinity: «Anna: then she tells me everything. I think, brother, why are you doing that?» (GD: 259). This is echoed throughout the interview. However, the girls' resistance and a fundamental orientation towards assertion and autonomy can also be reconstructed. In case of doubt, Anna, in particular, goes on the offensive: «Anna: she gave me a look and nothing more, and then the guy got really aggressive, like, 'Why are you looking at me like that?' So I argued with him, like, 'Hey, what's your problem?' 'Why are you being so rude?' I didn't even care how old he was» (GD: 490-493). She is also protective of Tina in a way she describes as «cheeky» (GD: 492).

Overall, Anna's case is characterized by an oscillating relationship between male domination and female assertion. On the one hand, she expresses her opposition and engages in discussions, but on the other hand, she also describes experiences of emotional dependency and the need for protection: «Anna: then I shouted at him and she was like, hey that's not right, we are here alone with you, we are girls, you should actually want to be here with us» (552-554).

In sum, Anna and Tina are constantly preoccupied with their relationships with boys and the need to stand up for themselves. Accordingly, the youth center already has real-life resonance as its offers are geared towards girls, including a demonstration for women's rights on Girls' Day: «Tina: Women also have rights and not just men, and women can also do everything that men do and just (.) we are all the same» (GD: 384-386). Prompted by Tina's reference to democratic universalism and the claim to equality, Anna brings up the topics of sexuality and diversity:

> *Anna: Of course, men can become like women, so if a man somehow dresses like a woman, I mean, if he dresses like a woman or something, I don't have a problem with it, or if a woman becomes like a man, it's just stuff like that, like, I don't know, I don't know, uh (.) sexuality or how you look,*

it's not really important to me now, so if Tina somehow becomes a man in the future, @(.)@ I wouldn't really care, as long as she feels comfortable with it, then that's the way it is, and she's still the same person anyway (GD: 387-394).

Her reference that she «wouldn't have a problem with it» indicates that there would be people for whom this would be problematic since she takes a clear position here. Anna and Tina use the youth center offers aimed at girls so that they can participate unconventionally through demonstration, and, although it is rather implicit, they thematically connect their participation to the LGBTQ* movement.

In Anna's case, her ability to stand up for herself and resist her immediate environment is important for her participation. However, she does not construct a generalized abstract Other responsible for the abolition of gender-based discrimination in the sense of established politics. She admits that she has a lack of knowledge and interest in politics when it is mentioned during the group discussion. Nevertheless, Anna sees herself in a dependent relationship with politics while she has no opportunities for participation: «Anna: [I have] no idea about these people, who are there [in politics], our lives are like that, our lives are in their hands» (I: 419-420).

4.5 The case of Melina – between self-assertion and family tradition

At the time of the interview, Melina is 14 years old. She represents a case where the family deals with LGBTQ* issues and discusses them, sometimes to the point of arguing: «But when we're all at grandma's on Sundays and we all eat together at the table and discuss things, it's usually the case that my sister and my father don't agree with me, so it's kind of like nobody agrees with me and that's sometimes pretty awful because I just would say that I am a pretty open person, yeah (.)» (626-630). Melina documents eating together at grandma's on Sundays as a ritualized family practice. At the same time, eating together provides a setting for discussions and conflicts, especially between Melina and her other family members. The statement «nobody agrees with me» emphasizes how she feels excluded within her family's discussion culture, an experience she describes as «awful». Melina takes on an outsider position by describing herself as an open person and marking her family as different from her. She expresses both a sense of connection to her family's Sunday tradition and frustration with the recurring discussions and her family's convictions. In particular, she references racism and LGBTQ* issues as key discourses: «so something like racism and LGBTQ* and it's mostly critical, it's actually a shame, it's rather critical» (635-636).

Melina is oriented towards familial connectedness as well as autonomy and self-assertion. It is important for Melina to represent her values and beliefs independently of her family's beliefs, even if this means being an outsider and causing conflict. In this way, racism and LGBTQ* issues are introduced as central and contentious points of discussion that make familial conflicts visible. Melina cares about these issues, and her orientation towards autonomy and self-assertion activates participation practices that can unfold both within and outside of family contexts.

4.6 Comparisons and conclusions

The reconstructed cases of John, Bianca, and Hugo underscore how different opportunities for participation present themselves at school. At the same time, they also experience limitations. As a student representative, John can introduce and defend topics of socio-political relevance, thus participating and perceiving school as a discursive place. Conversely, Hugo participates through art, writing a poem that critically engages with a teacher. Bianca holds teachers strongly accountable and therefore sees her opportunities for participation as limited. However, her recognition of how sexist discrimination emerges at school can activate the search for agency and change, leading to participation practices.

Furthermore, this article depicts how family contexts, not usually understood as part of the classical concept of political participation, are also relevant for political socialization. This becomes particularly clear in Melina's case. She stands up for her convictions within her family, even if this means taking on an outsider position. Racism and LGBTQ* issues emerge as relevant fields of discourse that Melina consistently defends.

Participation also takes place in the immediate social environment. Anna's case illustrates this, as she actively advocates for her concerns, resists, and stands her ground in discussions. By going on the offensive, she actively influences her environment, illustrating how closely participation is linked to standing up for personal convictions.

The young people described in this article participate in various ways, underscoring the different possibilities for opening up and dealing with gender identity in the peer public and in close friendships. Close friendships offer support, including in the sense of concern. In John's case, for example, his best friend mirrors and reinforces his values. Together, they deal with gender-related vulnerabilities through practices of care,

opening up opportunities for joint participation. Anna and Tina also stand up for themselves in their immediate environment and join forces. Support from close friends proves to be a trailblazer and an important source of encouragement for gender-related participation in and outside of school. A close-knit class community can also encourage young people to participate, and, as Hugo's case shows, inspire them to participate artistically and aesthetically.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

To address the research desiderata, studies that broadly examine participation as a research object and adopt a differentiated concept of participation to show the complex interactions of different socialization contexts (Walther 2024; Nohl 2022) offer good opportunities for follow-up. It could be especially fruitful, e.g., to examine gender identity in the context of school (Dietrich and Budde 2022), participation in public debates and social movements around sexuality (Hunklinger 2024), or low-threshold digital participation as «connective action» (Grunert 2022: 78) or possible variants of wild and liminal participation (Pitti *et al*. 2021: 16).

In addition to these compelling studies, related research also reconstructs the (in)appropriateness of various socio-political arenas as spaces for participation, drawing on habitus theory (Calmbach *et al*. 2024; Bock and Braches-Chyrek 2021; Helsper *et al*. 2006). Praxeologically, it is possible to reconstruct how experiences in the school system, for example, are linked to participation practices at the level of tacit knowledge and how they are interwoven with recognition issues and experiences of difference (Zschach and Sauermann 2024, Krüger *et al*. 2023; Nohl 2022; Köhler 2023; Helsper *et al*. 2006). Furthermore, according to the current SINUS Youth Study, how young people experience integration through the cultural scene together with their peers is particularly relevant as connected spaces of experience for social participation, especially volunteering (Calmbach *et al*. 2024: 266; Pfaff 2006). According to the SINUS youth study, participation opportunities at school are considered marginal (Calmbach *et al*. 2024: 351,414). Even opportunities for participation and school discussions are seen as participation and are considered very important for young people (*Ibidem*: 352).

This article shows that many young people become involved in gender-related topics in particular when they find like-minded friends who support, encourage, and care for them, thus encouraging them to participate. However, peers not only act as supportive gateways into participation, but also as challenging opponents who initiate processes of self-assertion and active engagement. Fellow students or family members' discriminatory and sexist behaviour, in particular, can act as catalysts for gender-related participation by motivating affected young people to take a stand against inequalities and disadvantages. Accordingly, the article shows that peer relationships in and out of school can serve a dual function – as both a supportive, protective, and caring influence and as an occasion for critical reflection and resistance. As such, empirical findings that provide differentiated insights into the various forms of peer relationships like those depicted in this article are essential for reconstructing the specific relevance of constructive as well as destructive peers.

Social dynamics within peer relationships significantly shape young people's gender-related participation in and outside school. Such dynamics can be supportive, caring as well as challenging, opening a wide range of opportunities for self-assertion, care, and shared engagement. The article thus illustrates how central peers are for promoting gender-sensitive participation – whether through mutual support, practices of solidarity or confrontation with discriminatory structures that mobilize resistance and engagement.

This article also depicts how boys fear their vulnerability to harm, which can present itself as a barrier to caregiving practices (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022). Practices that are close to the body, such as hugs, are thus excluded from caring practices because they are not read as masculine (*Ibidem*: 10). By contrast, Dietrich and Budde (2022) find a wide range of physical contact among boys in their ethnographic study on boys and school education, which they interpret as being caring, close, and affectionate and thus as caring practices. Young people's personal gender-related demands, which are the focus of this article, can be understood as intimate and potentially harmful and could thus hinder boys, particularly when it comes to caring practices. Following Köhler, Winkler and Autenrieth (2023) it can also be examined how (or if) young people use media to publicly engage with the topic of gender, defend it, form communities, and thereby develop resilience.

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