

# International research: challenges, limitations and conditions for success

## Reflections on a participatory international project with children

*Corinne Butschi, Guillermina Chabrillon and Ingeborg Hedderich*

**Abstract:** International research is common practice in many fields of science and a variety of international projects from the most diverse fields of research can be found through the major academic search engines. However, expanding the search in the direction of metaperspectival reflection on international participatory research might be unsuccessful, as there is scarce literature on the topic. This article is based on experiences with children in the international participatory research project called “Learning Together, Living Diversity”, which was carried out using the photovoice method to involve the children in the process as co-researchers. As international research differs considerably from national research, many challenges may be encountered, especially in field research and mainly in regards to getting in touch and interacting with the foreign country, its people and culture. The aim of this paper is to put into writing the reflexive processing of the cross-border research experience of the two cooperation partners Guillermina Chabrillon (Argentina) and Corinne Butschi (Switzerland), who planned and organised the field work in two Argentinian kindergartens together. The challenges which they faced and the role of both language and cultural background will be described in a practical way. It will be shown that reliable and good cooperation partnerships become even more important when the logistics of international research projects is not only complicated by distance, but also by language and cultural barriers. Examples of the major challenges and the role of culture and other contextual factors in project planning and logistics when crossing linguistic and cross-cultural boundaries will be included, with the purpose of contributing to stimulating further research and a greater number of successful international cooperation partnerships.

**Keywords:** International participatory research, intercultural co-operation and understanding, photovoice.

### **Investigación internacional : desafíos, limitaciones y condiciones para el éxito. Reflecciones sobre un project internacional participativo con niños**

**Resumen:** La investigación a nivel internacional es una práctica muy extendida en una variedad de campos disciplinares y, a través de los principales buscadores académicos en Internet, se pueden encontrar numerosos proyectos internacionales de las más diversas áreas de investigación. Sin embargo, la búsqueda de trabajos que provean una reflexión metaperspectiva sobre métodos de investigación participativa podría no ser exitosa ya que es muy escasa la literatura sobre este tema. Este artículo se basa en las experiencias con niños y niñas en el marco de un proyecto internacional de investigación participativa llamado “Learning Together, Living Diversity” (“Aprendiendo juntos, viviendo la diver-

sidad”), que se llevó a cabo utilizando el método Fotovoz para involucrar a los niños en el proceso como coinvestigadores. Como el proceso de investigación a nivel internacional difiere notablemente de uno llevado a cabo en un contexto nacional, pueden surgir numerosos desafíos, principalmente en la investigación de campo y, en particular, al ponerse en contacto e interactuar con el país extranjero – con su gente y cultura. El objetivo de este trabajo es describir el proceso reflexivo de la experiencia de investigación transnacional de dos investigadoras asociadas en un trabajo cooperativo: Guillermina Chabrillon (Argentina) and Corinne Butschi (Switzerland), quienes planificaron y organizaron en conjunto el trabajo de campo en dos jardines de infantes argentinos. Se detallarán los desafíos que enfrentaron y el rol tanto de los sustratos lingüísticos como culturales. Se mostrará la gran relevancia que cobra un trabajo cooperativo bueno y confiable cuando la logística de un proyecto de investigación internacional se complica no sólo por distancias sino también por barreras lingüísticas y culturales. Se presentarán ejemplos de los principales desafíos y el rol de la cultura y otros factores contextuales en la planificación y logística de un proyecto cuando se cruzan fronteras lingüísticas y culturales con el objetivo de intentar estimular nuevas investigaciones y un mayor número de exitosos trabajos cooperativos internacionales.

**Palabras clave:** investigación participativa internacional, cooperación y entendimiento intercultural, Fotovoz.

## 1. Introduction

This contribution is based on a practical example, namely the project “Learning Together, Living Diversity”, which was carried out from July 2016 to July 2019 by the University of Zurich (Institute for Educational Science, Chair of Special Education: Society, Participation and Disability) and financially supported by the Stifterverband der deutschen Wissenschaft (Leopold Klinge Foundation).

This international participatory project aimed at researching on the topic of diversity from a child’s perspective, by working with children of kindergarten age (4 to 6). Two kindergartens with a total of 32 children in Switzerland and two others with a total of 52 children in Argentina took part. It was carried out using photovoice, a method which attempts to engage community participants: here, children, “as active research participants by giving them cameras and inviting them to take pictures dealing with various aspects of their lives” (Jorgenson & Sullivan, 2010, p. 1). Later, the photos were used in the interview process to explore the subjective meaning of the images, and children were asked to explain their photographs in little groups.

Discussions about research with children as central informants of their own life worlds has been uncommon for a relatively a long time (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 1).

“Traditionally, childhood and children’s lives have been explored solely through the views and understandings of their adult caretakers who claim to speak for children. This rendered the child as object and excluded him/her from the research process. In part, this perspective has been challenged by the perspective in which children have different cognitive and social developmental traits that the researcher who wishes to use children as informants needs to consider in their research design and research methodology” (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 2f).

In recent years, however, this view has changed, so that the focus is now more on research *with* children rather than on research *on* children. The photovoice method is considered a

possibility to include other forms of expression in research in addition to verbal expression. Therefore it is seen as having potential when it comes to including groups for which verbal communication could be rather difficult (e.g., young children or people with disabilities).

Primarily, the project “Learning Together. Living Diversity” aimed at visually capturing the world’s view of young children from their own subjective perspectives, in order to find out which aspects of the child’s life world are of particular importance in his/her point of view. A second goal of the project was to further involve children of pre-school age in the process of research in a participatory way, by giving them a voice. The collected findings should serve as an aid in developing a didactic medium for early childhood education in the field of sensitisation in dealing with diversity.

Participation here has a dual meaning: firstly, kindergarten children took part in this research project, produced photos and talked to their classmates and the researchers about their pictures. Secondly, two different countries took part in the project, which made the organization very exciting and enriching, although, unfortunately, the children of the two countries could not come into contact with each other. This text is not about the actual field research with the children, but about the whole process of organising and implementing it in an international environment.

This article focuses mainly on the international part of the project, and aims at illuminating the practice of international participatory research from a metaperspective. What does it mean to carry out international participatory research? The article is structured into five sections including a final concluding section. In section 2, the question of how international research can be understood and defined, and types of international research will be discussed, although, as there is a research gap in reflecting on international participatory research, it is virtually impossible to draw on a pool of literature. In section 3 participatory research, especially the photovoice-method, will be shortly described. In section 4 the role of language and intercultural understanding is addressed. The question which is posed is to what extent communication across linguistic boundaries and national borders is possible. Based on the experiences gained in “Learning Together. Living Diversity”, special features in the process of cross-cultural understanding and the relevance of good co-operation partnerships are discussed. A general consideration of international field research and, in particular, of moments potentially susceptible to failure is also included. Experiences will be critically reflected on and supported by a dialogical exchange between the Argentinian co-operation partner Guillermina Chabrillon, who made a major organisational contribution on site beforehand, and Corinne Butschi, who later conducted the field research in Argentina. On the grounds of their first-hand experience and their critical analysis, the factors which are most relevant for international field research are exemplified and explained. In the concluding 5th section, the key points are summarised and a conclusion is formulated.

## 2. International research: an overview

International research can take different forms, so central questions are what kind of research is involved, and what methods are used. The homepage of the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) provides information on the concepts of international research and innovation work:

“By their very nature, education, research and science have an international dimension. In all its variety, quality and constant need to develop further, knowledge thrives on global exchange“  
(sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home/research-and-innovation/international-cooperation-r-and-i.html).

This rather general statement nevertheless illustrates the relevance of international research and cooperation in today's globalised societies. The international exchange and development of knowledge is essential for a global world, since it does not not only involve networking, but it also enables sharing and developing innovations, experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, through different thought structures and views, it opens up paths that might otherwise remain hidden. When people carry out research together, it always entails getting to know others and sharing views and ideas, understanding and enthusiasm for something new and unknown. This process presents a constant confrontation. And if this confrontation takes place in an international setting, it may be even more intense because people are shaped by cultural context and the country in which they grow up (e.g., due to its political or economic structure). However, there are always two sides to a research process: it is a passage to new knowledge, but also a journey to oneself, as experiences become formative parts of one's own biography. The following definition of international research and development can be found in the Springer Gabler online business dictionary:

“International research and development is characterised by the fact that the project actors come from different countries and/or project activities are carried out across borders with a division of labour using resources from several countries”<sup>1</sup> (translation of the author according to  
<https://wirtschaftslexikon.gabler.de/definition/internationale-forschung-und-entwicklung-40825/version-264201>).

This definition is also very general and formulated from a metaperspective, which is why it also fits various disciplines. If one wants to go into international research in more detail, it becomes more difficult, as there is very little specific literature on that subject. If the key-word «international research» is entered into the major academic search engines, countless literature suggestions for international research projects from a wide range of disciplines appear: apparently independent of the combination and variation of the input. Nevertheless, there is not, to our knowledge, an article which takes up and reflects the topic of international research as its starting point and main theme. International research apparently just ‘happens’ within the framework of an internationally-oriented project. And yet it is obvious that it cannot merely occur, since research, in general, and international research, in particular, requires a great deal of organisation, and researchers are often confronted with challenges and aggravating conditions. Even more so when it comes to participatory international research, in which actors from specific groups and cultural backgrounds (e.g., children here) actively participate in the research process as co-researchers. It is clear that the requirements and challenges will be very different depending on the discipline, research question and project. A distinction can also be made between international research which takes place on a purely university level (e.g., in laboratories), and research which involves

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1 Original quote in German: „Internationale Forschung und Entwicklung zeichnet sich dadurch aus, dass die Projektakteure aus verschiedenen Ländern stammen und/oder Projektaktivitäten grenzüberschreitend arbeitsteilig unter Einsatz von Ressourcen aus mehreren Ländern durchgeführt werden“  
(<https://wirtschaftslexikon.gabler.de/definition/internationale-forschung-und-entwicklung-40825>).

other actors outside the university framework in a participatory way (e.g., children in field research).

The countries participating in the research also play a major role. Thus, political, socio-economic, technical, environmental, religious, cultural, and other factors should be taken into account as conditions may vary greatly. Moreover, the research project's design, hypotheses, etc., have an equally relevant influence on the overall situation. For instance, is it a project that has already been developed in international cooperation or is it a centrally, nationally implemented project that is being conducted in different countries? Furthermore, questions of clarification arise, which may be quite different depending on whether one wants to carry out research with animals, humans or (inanimate) materials. Also, as soon as aspects of ethics become part of the research, the issue becomes more complex, therefore, clarification and agreement are required. Country-specific differences need to be taken into account and the whole process becomes more susceptible to interference 'from outside', as researchers have no direct influence on many planning and logistics variables. Consequently, cooperative relationships play a key role as processes of communication and interaction gain greater importance.

And finally, what kind of project is this paper based on? As the world becomes more and more interconnected in the course of processes of 'globalisation', and societies move closer together, the interest in comparing social developments, and the demand for internationally comparable data, is becoming more and more central (Pfau-Effinger, Magdaleni? & Wolf, 2009). Thus, many studies of international social research have a comparative character. This assumption also had to be combated within the framework of this project. Initially, it was assumed that the study aimed at comparing the growing up conditions of children in Argentina and Switzerland. However, "Learning Together. Living Diversity" does not have a comparative character at all and instead – as the name already indicates – it is about diversity, which is perceived as richness, and should not serve as a basis for comparison. Consequently, the data generated together with the children were not analysed comparatively, they represent diversity from a child's perspective and are used in this way: ultimately as images of a memory game, which portray the world from a child's perspective and enable international education.

International education is often discussed in connection with the related field of comparative education, but a different understanding of the term has also developed in connection with the theory and practice of education for internationality. Comparative education emerges from a strong theoretical tradition of academic studies that make comparisons between national systems. International education, in contrast, is "more explicitly applied and action-oriented" (Crossley, 1999, p. 255). Similarly, Watson (1999) identifies comparative education with theoretical studies on the one hand, and international education with application and practice on the other. International education should make it possible to "develop an understanding of different countries and good relations with people of different nationalities and languages" (Crossley & Watson, 2003, p. 14). Accordingly, "Learning Together. Living Diversity" sees itself as a project that focuses on international education, with the aim of contributing to the understanding mentioned by Crossley and Watson (2003) through participatory research. "*Participatory*" research therefore refers mainly to the act of children exploring their lives and communicating this to other children. The term

*“international”* refers to the participation of two countries. Finally, the aim of this article is to reflect on the act of international research from a metaperspective, since an international project involves a great deal of organisation and challenges.

Since the examples illustrated in this article are based on the experience of a participatory project, a brief overview of participatory research follows in the next section.

### 3. Participatory Research & Photovoice with children

Participatory research is a generic term for a research approach. It explores social reality on a partnership basis. Thereby it influences and changes social reality (von Unger, 2012). Participatory research is therefore not a method in itself, but it encompasses a broad spectrum of different methods, and it is used in various fields of research. The following small selection of different projects is intended to show how versatilely the approach can be used and to illustrate why language and local knowledge in particular play a central role. For example, Riecken, Strong-Wilson, Conibear, Michel and Riecken (2004) give an insight into a project conducted using the participatory action research (PAR) method with aboriginal teachers and youth in Canada. von Unger (2012) writes about participatory health research and Pfeiffer (2013) reports about a participatory video project conducted with young people aged 15 to 19 in Tanzania. Participatory research with active involvement is also used in the field of school development, as the work of Wöhrer (2017) and Feichter (2015) shows. This approach is also discussed in a handful of prestigious publications and reviews in respected journals. The introductory article written by Bergold and Thomas (2012) in the FQS focus issue “Participatory qualitative research” provides an excellent overview of participatory research. Thiollent (2011) also provides a good description of the emergence and development of action research and participatory research. The author describes the different origins of the two approaches, whereby participatory research “comes [...] from consciousness raising practices and the liberation theory developed especially in Latin America, from the 1950 and 60’s, in social, religious and educational contexts and, in particular, under the impulse of Paulo Freire” (Thiollent, 2011, p. 161). Participatory research (as well as action research) has found applications in several sectors (social science, rural extension, organisation, communication, political practices, collective health, etc.) and has a political component because the method contributes to nourishing the hopes of change (Thiollent, 2011). A central point, which the author names, and is also of great importance in this article, is the cross-border nature of the approach: “It is not a matter of demanding a single body of knowledge, with closed borders, because we are dealing with a family of proposals and procedures that have a common democratic will, with participation and co-operation between the parties involved, sharing a vision of social transformation” (Thiollent, 2011, p. 161). In participatory research in general, and in international participatory research in particular, it is therefore extremely important to always take the ‘the other’s’ view, to engage with other ways of thinking and cultures and to be aware of linguistic differences. As the preceding explanations show, participatory research is often conducted together by groups that have a different cultural background or dissimilar ways of thinking or exhibit both characteristics. In our case, for example, they are children from Argentina, with another

er way of thinking than that of an adult, and having a differing cultural background from that of a researcher from Switzerland. In order to understand how these children think, it is important to get involved with their way of thinking, slowly and without any time pressure, but also to know about certain cultural backgrounds in order to be able to classify statements. The authors Streck, Eggert, Sobottka, Adams and Zanini Moretti (2011) describe participatory research based on reflections of their research experience at the same time as a social, a political and a pedagogical practice: “It is a social practice, since it is part of the movement of society, and as such is marked by the provisional character of human action. It is a political practice, since the production of knowledge occurs within a context of power disputes, which require taking sides. Participatory research is a pedagogical practice, in as much as it is based on interpersonal relations of persons who, together, intend to understand and transform their reality” (Streck et al., 2011, p. 193). This statement also illustrates the complexity of participatory research, and if the international component is also present, it makes the situation even more complex. They describe the process of research as a “collective production of knowledge” that requires “mobilised subjects” (Streck et al., 2011, p. 176). It is therefore also a pedagogical and formative process (see *ibid.*). The role of mutual understanding is essential in such processes.

Photovoice is one of several qualitative and participatory methods. It enables researchers to have a greater understanding of the issue under study (see also Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon & Foster-Fishman, 2006; Wang, 2006) and its “utilisation in conjunction with both community knowledge and best practice evidence can lead to the development of effective and comprehensive strategies to address complex [...] issues in a way that is also meaningful for the community involved” (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos & Nieuwendyk, 2011, p. 104). Wang and Burris proposed the term “photovoice” originally in the early 1990s (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997). Their methods included a number of distinct steps, outlining participant and policy-maker recruitment and data collection (see also *ibid.*; Wang 1999). There is a desire to position children as social actors who are subjects, rather than objects of investigation (Christensen and James 2008). In this approach, participants take photographs of things which are meaningful for them and then the key photographs selected by themselves are shared and discussed in a group setting through a facilitator-guide (for details, see Von Unger, 2014; Wang, 1999). The method can be adapted depending on the research question, time and cost factors, special characteristics of the research group or the research context, etc. Usually a photovoice process consists of seven phases (Picture 1: von Unger, 2014, p. 71):

*Figure 1:* von Unger, 2014, p. 71, optically modified by Butschi, Chabrilion & Hedderich



Research with children has not only grown in volume, in doing so it has also generated a more engaged discussion of the particular methodological and ethical issues that this raises for social researchers” (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 1). The reflection about these issues brings some new conceptual and theoretical problems into the methodological debate. In re-

lation to the methods, the authors argue that “what is important is that the particular methods chosen for a piece of research should be appropriate for the kind of research study, for its social and cultural context and for the kind of research questions that are being posed” (Christensen & James, 2008, p. 3). When researching with children, the reality they themselves experience and the position of the child within society is in the centre of interest (Heinzel, 2012, p. 23). The author noted that in research with children it should never be forgotten that adult researchers can only articulate the experiences and interests of children on this basis, even though the children themselves are involved in the research (Heinzel, 2012, p. 24). Fuhs (1999) goes a little further in saying that even a child-appropriate research is based on those images of childhood that adults have from the child. Davis et al. argue that it is important to form relationships in which children feel comfortable and to give them a feeling of control (Davis, Watson & Cunningham-Burle, 2008).

There are already some methods that are successfully used in research with children. Methods such as qualitative interviews (Vogl, 2019), including puppet interviews (Weise, 2008; 2019) or picture based interviews (which are also part of the Photovoice method), but also a number of participatory approaches such as the Photovoice method (von Unger, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997), the mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011; Schütz & Böhm, 2019) and the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) (Emde, Wolf & Oppenheim, 2003; Mögel, 2019).

From a methodological point of view, the use of photos as well as the self-production of them offers some advantages. By allowing participants to photograph their surroundings themselves, researchers can gain a context-sensitive, comprehensive and authentic insight into a field of investigation. This insight might not be possible with other methods or from a researcher’s position. Photographs are well suited to the study of emotional processes because they facilitate access to cognitively less filtered information (Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, Cooper & Damasio, 2000; Paivio, 1986). The data quality of photographs is high: photographs are a rich source of interpretation. The information on photographs is characterised by implicit assumptions and ideas, which are often not verbalised (Moser, 2005). A further advantage is that photography is not language-bound and different language groups can be reached simultaneously. This is a fundamental reason why this method has considerable potential in involving groups for whom exclusive verbal and written communication poses difficulties, such as young children but also people with disabilities. Photographs are rather associated with automatic processes like low abstraction, psychological proximity and primary emotions. Verbalisation, on the other hand, is more related to controlled processes such as high abstraction, high psychological distance and secondary emotions (Amit, Wakslak & Trope, 2013). Therefore, the combination of photography and verbalisation is expected to result in deep individual psychological exploration processes. Also, when researching with children, it may be assumed that the observation of one’s own images promotes verbal processes. On the level of narrative and discussion, implicit knowledge can be made accessible through effects of form-closure, condensation, and detailing. Thus, a narrative can take on a life of its own and reveal latent structures of meaning (Flick, 2011). Although Photovoice is a time- and resource-intensive method that requires flexibility and empathy, its openness to the views of children can provide important information for the production of didactic media tailored to the target group or – depending on the interests at



stake – for planning measures appropriate to the particular interests of the target group. In addition, the creation of a symbolic object such as a photograph and a high level of participation can be accompanied by the experience of pride, social influence and authenticity (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Malafouris, 2013; Wegner & Sparrow, 2004).

Adults seeking to understand the lives and experiences of children are frequently confronted by the asymmetries of age, height and verbal skills between them and their interlocutors. Bridging these social and communicative distances, investigators have increasingly adopted innovative approaches such as drawing, mapping, diary keeping, photography and video documentation (Jorgenson & Sullivan, 2010). Task-based activities of this kind, involving young children as active participants in the research process, are not only more enjoyable for them than traditional methods, but are also assumed to enhance their ability to communicate his or her perspectives to the adult researcher. Furthermore, children's rights have become a significant field of study during the past decades, largely due to the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 (Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie & Vandeveld, 2009). Participation is one of the key children's rights, and this methodology could facilitate reaching younger children, who are often ignored because they are not able to participate in written and verbal research.

Even if there is already a certain repertoire of methods for studies with young children, there is still the need for a broader testing of different (participatory) methods, taking into account the child's peculiarities and capturing the experiences, environments, perceptions and positioning of the children.

In this project, the photos made by the participating children were talked about in groups of between four and six of them. With the key-photographs as well as their statements, a memory game which is intended to stimulate speaking and philosophizing about the theme of diversity will be developed. The topic *diversity* is very abstract for children and it may be difficult to discuss it with words alone. So the photovoice process provided an opportunity for the children to present this topic visually and to describe experiences. After all, diversity was obvious in the many photos taken by the children's perspective. Therefore it was possible to jointly explore the subjective meaning of the images.

The method can be used and adapted in various fields and under very different conditions. Kolb (2008) reflects on the use of the photovoice interview as a tool for inviting local residents to participate in a study within the framework of inter- and transdisciplinary research. Jorgenson and Sullivan (2010) researched how children's competence with information and communication technologies is constructed within the family and Woodgate, Zubra and Tennet (2017) explore the advantages, challenges and opportunities in working with the Photovoice method in qualitative research. Mark and Boulton (2017) explain an adapted photovoice methodology used in their research investigating Maori (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand) patients' perspectives on rongo? Maori (traditional Maori healing method) and primary health care, while Mata Codesal, Pereira, Maiztegui-Oñate, Ulloa Chevez, Esesumaga and López del Molino (2018) report on a project aimed at giving a voice to women who, with their migration processes completed to varying degrees, shared a precarious reality of labour integration challenges, and developed a process of reflection on their daily practice, views and contributions to the society in which they newly live.

These examples demonstrate the possible scope of the field of application of photovoice. However, there is still the need to conduct more research on other possible areas of application using participatory research methods. More complete and accurate understanding of the perspectives of the child is of enormous importance for the development and design of didactic materials of the future.

As it has been shown, participatory research can take many different forms, but in an international project, planning and logistics and effective communication in the foreign language in the field are always of central importance, which is why the following section is devoted to crossing linguistic and cultural borders in an international research context.

## 4. Language and Culture in International Participatory Research

In international participatory research, communication between the researchers and with the participants is not only dependent on the language used, but it is also “shaped by the underlying values of the cultures involved” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 24). Communication and culture mutually influence one another, therefore it is essential to address the question of intercultural communication in this kind of research.

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) define intercultural communication as: “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system” (ibid., p. 24). The authors also list the major concepts included in that definition: “symbolic exchange, process, different cultural communities, negotiate shared meaning, an interactive situation and an embedded societal system” (ibid., p. 24).

Language, communication and culture are dynamic elastic concepts. Some examples of their importance in the project “Learning Together. Living Diversity” are described below.

### 4.1 Linguistic and cultural sensitivity and awareness

In international participatory research with children, the question of understanding is essential. Hülst (2000) poses the question of whether and how scientific understanding of children by others is even possible. Mead (1973) emphasises the ability to put oneself in the perspective of the other person as a prerequisite for cooperative behavior. This fact applies to both children and adults, although it can be assumed that the prerequisites are different in each case (e.g., due to older age, adults may have more knowledge/experience, competencies, etc., which can facilitate the adoption of a perspective).

Particularly across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the question arises as to whether it is possible to thoroughly understand meaning in diverse environmental conditions. It is important in an international context to understand the emergence and characteristics of meaning as a social category, and to consider it methodically, especially when planning a participatory research project, which requires various arrangements with cooperation partners in advance. Full sensitivity and awareness that meaning is not static, but is constructed in many different ways and under the influence of contextual factors (e.g., social, political,

geographical, economic, environmental, cultural factors, among others) should be present on all sides. The real meaning and/or connotation of words and phrases can vary significantly from one language to another or in different cultural contexts, which can lead to misunderstandings. Therefore, all communication must always be considered and interpreted in regards to its context of origin. If both co-operation parties share this awareness, it may be easier to identify and foresee misunderstandings in advance, or to clarify them rapidly.

Moreover, in the case of this project, the researchers deal with an overlap, namely, understanding the children on the one hand, and understanding a foreign language on the other (as the children speak a different language from that of the researchers in this case). This process is made even more difficult by the fact that this question is posed not only in terms of reciprocity of perspectives, but also in relation to the other mother tongue and the meaning of words. According to international research, linguistic and cultural factors play a highly relevant role in communicative processes when it comes to understanding one another. In addition, depending on the kind of research cooperation, other challenging factors can influence the communicative process. In participatory research with children, for example, developmental psychological factors play another important role.

The role of language and local knowledge is crucial, especially when research is conducted in a participatory manner. Tiollent's statement also shows this:

"I think that, from the perspective of [...] participatory research, one should focus on the work that constitutes the research, creation or production of local knowledge. It is clear that in times of globalisation, we cannot confine ourselves to our own islands of conviviality, speaking only the local dialect. However, there is undoubtedly an effort to be made so that we may have a dialogue in tune with our [...] Participatory Research interlocutors. In order to work with indigenous people, for instance, I think that we must know the languages they use in their own cultural background. This principle must be extended to all linguistic communities, in the name of a respect for cultural diversity" (Tiollent, 2011, p.172f.).

Within the framework of "Learning Together. Living Diversity" the linguistic issue was central. The field researcher had a very good command of Spanish, in particular of "Río de la Plata" Spanish, and was totally familiar with Argentinian culture, as she had lived a couple of intercultural educational and family experiences in the city where the research was to be carried out for a year each. Those experiences were of great value for the project's planning and accomplishment in regard to linguistic and cultural approximation to the foreign participants. Nevertheless, even if the researcher has a good command of Spanish, for example, as in this case, it will always be a foreign language to him/her. Experience has shown that, paradoxly, sometimes it can be particularly tricky when a foreign language is well mastered. Namely, if someone speaks it without practically any grammatical mistakes, it is obviously a great advantage, but it is easy for the local native speaker to relax and forget, or miss the fact, that it is still a foreign language for the non-native speaker. Therefore, when the foreign language speaker makes a "use of language" or non-grammatical mistake the native speaker may take things literally, which might lead to misunderstandings. Phrases or metaphors that are appropriate in one's own language / culture may not be so in the other, they might sound impolite or offensive, for instance. In such a case there may be less understanding on the part of the participants if something is formulated incorrectly or inappropriately. On the other hand, if a person speaks a foreign language with obvious mistakes, that will usually hinder mutual understanding, but as the native speaker is totally

aware of that fact, he / she will probably show more empathy or forgiveness for inappropriate remarks. This is an issue that C. Butschi and G. Chabrilion have often discussed as G. Chabrilion, from her foreign language and intercultural teaching experience, has always pointed out this fact when working in an international or bilingual context. Therefore, a certain sensitivity towards foreign languages should be present between cooperation partners, which ideally will make an international research project a truly engaging cultural mediation experience.

## 4.2 The role of culture and other contextual factors in project planning and logistics

Planning an international research project requires various arrangements with co-operation partners in advance. Sharing views and goals is as important as mutual trust and reliability. Moreover, the factibility and success of participatory research in a foreign country are shaped by culture and other contextual factors.

The preliminary work for the international deployment in the project “Learning Together, Living Diversity” already brought cultural differences to light. A considerable part of the preparatory work took place in the form of ‘distance coaching’. G. Chabrilion was asked to establish contact with institutions and organize meetings with the teachers and parents, where she would present the project, and try to convince all of them to participate and the parents to sign the consent forms. Those signed forms had to be in the hands of the researcher by the time she travelled to the country.

Country-specific differences were already apparent at this stage of the planning, and made the priceless value of a good cooperation partnership for the first time. In international projects, the first stumbling blocks can be found, for instance, in the way a form is formulated or designed. What is common or polite in one country may not be appropriate in another. For example, the declaration of consent was translated 1:1 from German into Spanish and e-mailed to Argentina in the same format. G. Chabrilion immediately drew our attention to the fact that with this form we would be ignoring both informally and formally a few relevant issues. Firstly, it is common practice in Argentina to always display the logo of the institution on important school forms. This gives a more academic or professional impression, and makes the form and process more trustworthy to parents. Secondly, while in Switzerland the consent of one parent is sufficient, in Argentina, shared parenting or co-parenting of minors was established by a federal law in 1985<sup>2</sup> in Argentina, which means that both guardians must sign forms for most activities involving minors. Therefore, as the local partner pointed out, it was better to have both parents sign the consent form as is customary, and also as this was a new kind of project for them and the school. Otherwise it may not be valid and cause inconveniences to the researchers and the school.

This example is intended to show how, due to multiple factors, things can be handled, understood or apprehended differently and that there are different ways of looking at things. It always requires an understanding of meaning and culture in the given setting, also taking into account the time axis. From this perspective, cooperation partners in both countries also function as gatekeepers or cultural mediators- regarding cultural mediation in the sense

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of monitoring what is exchanged in the form of (written / spoken) language so that it will be appropriate and / or it will not be misinterpreted. On site in Argentina, it was precisely this cultural mediating role of G. Chabrilion between the headmistresses and C. Butschi that was very valuable. As far as the selection of institutions was concerned, besides her familiarity with the schools, the local cooperation partner was also able to consider several practical aspects that proved to be beneficial and of great relevance for the project implementation. This is illustrated by the following statement by G. Chabrilion:

G.Ch: *“Apart from the fact that I had already been in contact with both institutions that first came to my mind before the project, I thought that it could be exciting, especially in terms of diversity, that is to say, for the project to capture the most diverse perspectives of children, to have as different institutions as possible. So I decided to look for familiar contacts and present the project [...]. It was kindergarten A, which is part of a semi-private catholic school, and kindergarten B, which belongs to a public non-fee paying school. The second thought that confirmed this choice was the logistical aspect; the fact that the children would be taught in the morning in one kindergarten and in the afternoon in the other would make things easier. And this was confirmed at the implementation of the project, as it gave you the opportunity to visit both kindergartens on the same day, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. So you did not have to struggle with any overlapping of the study plans”* (translation of the authors according to Butschi & Chabrilion, 2019, p.266).

The fact that in Argentinian kindergartens and schools teaching is often done on a morning or afternoon rotation, would have been completely missed, if G. Chabrilion had not pointed this out. If the institutions which participated delivered morning classes, it would not have been realistic to implement the project in such a short time. It is often seemingly small unimportant things, e.g. structural differences, that are hardly noticeable at first glance and from a distance, which can complicate or simplify everything. Apart from that, it inspires confidence among parents and institutions if their contact person lives in the same city and speaks the same language. The cooperation partner pointed out that it was easy for her to convince the local institutions to participate, as they knew her and her long involvement in intercultural activities and projects. However, even though the parents were ‘flattered’ to have been chosen to participate in a project carried out by a Swiss university and with Swiss kids, they were curious and wondered why they had been invited to be part of it, and what relationship the researchers / university had with the local partner and Concordia and/or Argentina. To present the project to teachers and parents, with the help of information material translated into Spanish by the researcher, the local partner had prepared a Power-Point presentation which was shown in the meetings (one per school involved). In the presentation she also included personal photos of the Swiss researcher and herself together in Switzerland and Argentina, and she told anecdotes to illustrate their relationship and their mutual interest in children’s education and interculturality. She believes that was very helpful as 100 % of the parents in one school, and all parents present at the meeting in the other one, agreed for their children to take part in the project at the end of the meetings.

There have been numerous situations in which the value of this intercultural networking has been recognised. The following quotation also clearly shows how decisions can be made differently on the basis of dissimilar views. The fact that foreigners are often not aware of country-specific (or location-specific) issues in advance makes it impossible to take them into account when planning an international project:

G.Ch: *“So basically I can say that the reaction of the headmistresses as well as the kindergarten teachers was very similar to that of the parents. They also felt the whole thing as an ‘honour’ as it was precisely the*

*children of their institution who were chosen to participate. It even seemed to me that they felt important. It should also be mentioned that Switzerland is perceived worldwide and also here as the 'first world' where 'everything is perfect' etc. So, the fact that the children could participate in a project from Switzerland was a big plus. [...] Everyone liked it when I told them that the project would also be carried out with children from Switzerland and that the project would be funded by a German foundation in addition to the University of Zurich. It also seemed serious to them that I explained and distributed the declaration of consent to them so that they could think it over and then sign it. What surprised me at first was that the consent form only required the signature of one parent. In Argentina parental authority is shared and forms regarding children's participation in events always require the signature of both parents, except for something unimportant. Therefore it seemed important to me to request the signature of both parents and I completed that on the consent form"* (translation of the authors according to Butschi & Chabrilion, 2019, pp. 271f ).

The excerpt illustrates the cooperation partner's views, which did not always coincide with the researcher's pre-conceived ideas or plans. This is why it is also very enriching to reflect on an international research process in retrospect.

Another factor that can have a central (positive or negative) influence on the logistics and implementation of the field work is the *unpredictability of events*. Clearly, this is an issue which is present in all kinds of research, but in international research it manifests itself in two ways: it often goes hand in hand with lack of information or the factor of ignorance, since one is often not fully aware of country-specific characteristics such as holidays and local customs. To give a clear example of things unaccounted for beforehand, the fact that in Concordia and other places in Argentina, little children often do not attend school when it rains heavily – mainly in public schools – mostly due to transport complications, or that whenever there are provincial or national elections they always take place in public schools on Sunday and on the following day the schools are closed for cleaning. Obviously, such unforeseen occurrences are not taken into account in the planning stage as 'extra time'. Precisely, the *unpredictability* factor concurs with a *time component* that could, in the worst case, endanger the project. This is because time pressure is often even greater for field operations abroad than at home. Therefore, the *unpredictability of events* must be taken into account in particular in the preparations regarding time calculation, for instance ("How many extra days do I have or do I want to plan for").

In order for the project to be successful, the dialogue partners must thoroughly understand each other, which, according to Stegbauer, is possible if they have similar experience:

"The reciprocity of perspective is a prerequisite for successful direct reciprocity. At the centre of the concept of perspective reciprocity is the question of which circumstances must come together in order for understanding to become possible in the first place. Understanding is dependent on knowledge in many ways. For knowledge, which is central to understanding, is of no use as long as only one of at least two communication partners has it"<sup>3</sup> (translation of the authors according to Stegbauer, 2011, p.100).

Evidently, the fact that the cooperation person is familiar with the local conditions means that certain factors can already be taken into account in preliminary planning, for example, with regard to specific school schedules, procedures or holidays. Also, in the field work, particularly in the case of limited time, which is often the case with assignments abroad, it

3 Original quote in German: „Die Reziprozität der Perspektive ist eine Voraussetzung für gelungene direkte Reziprozität. Im Mittelpunkt des Perspektivenreziprozitätsbegriffes steht die Frage, welche Umstände zusammenkommen müssen, damit Verständigung überhaupt erst möglich wird. Verständigung ist in vielfältiger Weise von Wissen abhängig. Denn das für Verständigung zentrale Wissen nutzt nichts, solange nur einer der mindestens zwei Kommunikationspartner darüber verfügt“ (Stegbauer, 2011, p.100).

is extremely helpful to be able to benefit from a local person's acquaintance with practical essential information, such as 'Where can printing be done?', 'Where can we produce a photo booklet?', 'Where can we get Internet access?'. They might seem minor details or banal questions, but when one is under time pressure on the spot, it is really valuable to be informed about such things first-hand and not to have to do all the local logistics oneself. Clearly, little unforeseen things can endanger the end result of a project on site, this is one of the reasons why effective intercultural networking is of utmost importance.

In the following section, the main points are summarised and a conclusion is formulated.

## 5. Conclusion

International research can vary significantly, depending on the field of study, research question, type of project, etc. The fact that "Learning Together. Living Diversity" is a participatory project which specifically used the photovoice method means that it entailed engaging people (children in particular, in this case) closely and actively in the research. As we have seen, participatory research in particular has a social, a political and a pedagogical dimension with a collective production of knowledge (Streck et al., 2011). Mutual personal understanding and comprehension of the respective language are essential in such a process of collective knowledge building. When it comes to close research collaboration, not only thinking styles and views, but also structures and formalities differ between countries. Contextual factors (historical, political, economic, socio-economic factors, among others) must be analysed and considered beforehand. All actors involved in the project should also share the same motivation, commitment and reliability to ensure successful collaborative work.

In international cooperation, establishing contact with potential institutions which may be willing to participate is not an easy undertaking, especially from a distance. Having a reliable local cooperation partner who speaks the same language, and shares the same culture, inspires confidence in the institutions and/or those involved in the research (parents, children, school principals, etc.). The participants feel better understood and the project has a face, which would not be the case if the project was exclusively done by e-mail and telephone from abroad. Good cooperation partnerships also have a culturally mediating aspect: the local co-researcher acts as a kind of cross-cultural mediator in the exchange between institutions and researchers, bridging any possible intercultural communication gap so that misunderstandings could be anticipated and avoided or cleared up at an early stage.

The whole process is marked by many challenging moments. Research can often be overshadowed by the *unpredictability of events*. In the international setting, this factor manifests itself in two ways: 1) The risk that an unforeseeable event will occur is greater, because the researcher is unaware of certain things (e.g. class cancellation due to rain), 2) *When unpredictable events occur, they usually have a time component*. Since field missions abroad are often subject to relatively high time pressure, this *unpredictability of events* must be taken into account, in particular in initial planning with regard to time calculation and project schedule. Counting on a reliable informational contact person is of central importance to ease the process and prevent the emergence of inconveniences and stumbling blocks in the logistics of the field work.

The fact that in “Learning Together. Living Diversity” – even over a distance of 12,000 km! the researcher and the cooperation partner shared the same views and goals, and had experience in intercultural communication and education besides their mutual reliability and trust, was essential for a successful international partnership.

No research is the same as any other and therefore the experiences in the international setting are likely to be very diverse. The fact that apparently little is reflected and written about this process makes it impossible to draw on existing literature and compare whether others have had similar experiences. Therefore, this article has attempted to put into writing the reflexive processing of this enriching international research experience, and to encourage international social research to increasingly reflect and write about this process and the role of co-operation partnerships. Further research work will probably contribute to a greater number of successful international cooperation partnerships.

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## About the authors

*Corinne Butschi*, MA, studied educational psychology and special education at the University of Zurich. She is a research assistant at the Institute for Educational Science at the University of Zurich at the Chair of Special Education with the main focus on Society, Participation and Disability. Her research interests include early childhood and participatory research.

Associate Professor *Guillermina Chabrilion* is a researcher/ lecturer at the School of Food Science, National University of Entre Ríos, Argentina. Studied Translation, English Language & Linguistics with Master's in Cross-Cultural Communication in process. Head of the Language Department and Coordinator of International Relations. Her main research interests in international cooperation are Teaching and Learning Foreign languages, Intercultural Communication and Education. She has also given Intercultural Relations & Communication seminars and workshops (Karlsruhe University, Germany and UNER) and worked as a volunteer in Intercultural Education for over 15 years ("AFS Experiencias Interculturales Argentina").

Professor Dr. *Ingeborg Hedderich* studied educational science and special needs education. Since 2011 she holds the chair of special needs education with the main focus on Society, Participation and Disability at the University of Zurich. Her research focuses on early childhood, inclusion, migration, and participatory research, which she realizes in international cooperation with South American countries. Current publication on the topic (in German): "Perspektiven auf Vielfalt in der frühen Kindheit. Mit Kindern Diversität erforschen" (Perspectives on Diversity in Early Childhood. Exploring Diversity with Children) (edited with Reppin/Butschi; Klinkhardt: Bad Heilbrunn 2019).

*Authors's addresses*

Corinne Butschi, MA  
Universität Zürich  
Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft  
Lehrstuhl Sonderpädagogik: Gesellschaft, Partizipation und Behinderung  
Freiestrasse 36  
CH-8032 Zürich  
corinne.butschi@ife.uzh.ch

Guillermina Chabrillon  
Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos  
Facultad de Ciencias de la Alimentación (<https://www.fc.al.uner.edu.ar/>)  
Avda. Monseñor Tavella 1450, Concordia, Entre Ríos, Argentina  
guillermina.chabrillon@uner.edu.ar; internacionales@fc.al.uner.edu.ar

Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Hedderich  
Universität Zürich  
Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft ([www.ife.uzh.ch](http://www.ife.uzh.ch))  
Lehrstuhl Sonderpädagogik: Gesellschaft, Partizipation und Behinderung  
Freiestrasse 36  
CH-8032 Zürich  
ihedderich@ife.uzh.ch