Capabilities and ableism in early childhood education

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Abstract

In this article, the authors discuss capabilities and ableism in early childhood education by drawing from the capabilities approach and ableism-critical perspectives. Both capabilities and ableism are relevant concepts for inclusive early childhood education but hold different analytical potentials as they differ in their genealogy and conceptualisation. While the exposure of ableism is a mode of criticism against ableist structures and oppression, the capabilities approach serves as a framework for a good life and opportunities for enablement. So far, these approaches have rarely been brought together. Based on a review of the literature and an exploratory analysis of selected early childhood education policy in Austria, the authors show that the capabilities approach and ableism offer complementary perspectives to the field. They first introduce the capabilities approach and ableism, highlighting their conceptual differences and parallels. Second, they focus on inclusive early childhood education as part of the broader field of inclusive education. Based on the existing literature, they illustrate how the capabilities approach and ableism offer analytical perspectives for early childhood education. Third, the authors contextualise early childhood education in an Austrian context and then present their analysis of cap/abilities in pivotal early childhood education policy documents. The findings are then clustered around the aspects of *competences through early childhood education* and the *competences of early childhood educators*, highlighting both enabling and excluding dimensions of cap/abilities. They conclude that by considering the capabilities approach and ableism together in the form of a cap/abilities continuum, it becomes possible to uncover the narrow ability expectations inherent in early childhood education and simultaneously explore the potentials of early childhood education for the development of capabilities from an ableism-critical perspective.

Keywords

ability, ableism, capabilities, early childhood education, inclusive education

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Introduction

The capabilities approach and an approach that is critical of ableism are very different in terms of their genealogy and conceptualisation, and they have different analytical potentials and implications in the field of (inclusive) education, including early childhood education (ECE). ECE services vary between countries, and this is reflected by the existing literature. Inclusive ECE may consist of a variety of different mainstream and specialised services such as early intervention, which is not free from controversy as the latter are often separate from general ECE institutions (Underwood et al., 2012). We consider the broad range of ECE services in the first part of our article before focusing more closely on ECE provided by educational institutions in the second part, where we present our exploratory analysis of Austrian ECE policy.

The capabilities approach is based on a universal understanding of human rights and offers a framework for addressing fundamental questions of social injustice. It stimulates reflection on what every person can be or become under equitable circumstances – in other words, what someone is capable of doing and being (Nussbaum, 2011). Capabilities differ from abilities in that they represent specific freedoms that a person *can* realise. Thus, capabilities are embedded in relationships and the environment, and the capabilities approach acknowledges human vulnerability instead of essentialising and individualising abilities (Vandekinderen et al., 2018). The capabilities approach is often drawn on as a justice framework because it highlights capabilities (or a lack thereof) and can be used as a basis for claiming human rights, such as the right to education (Terzi, 2005); it cannot, however, be the only information basis for social justice or human rights (Sen, 2005).

In contrast, ableism is a concept that was coined by the disability movement to criticise individualistic ability and body norms, which are viewed as the cause of the oppression of disabled people. By naming and exposing ableism, a position of criticism is already assumed. It is, however, more precise to talk about an approach that is critical of ableism, or an ableism-critical approach (More, 2025). Ableism is understood as a system of oppression and power imbalances in terms of the hierarchisation of abilities based on binary logics of differentiation and social sorting (Campbell, 2009; Wolbring, 2008). Ableism is relational in that its practices are based on the de/valuing of abilities, which shapes understandings of the self and of relationships with others (Wolbring, 2008). The growing scholarship on ableism is not primarily focused on (the realisation of) capabilities but on processes and practices that produce exclusionary ability expectations and ableist constraints (Wolbring and Yumakulov, 2015). Thus, the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach offer quite different perspectives on inclusive education in general and, as we will show, ECE in particular. So far, these approaches have rarely been brought together. Our argument is that, in combination, they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of inequalities in ECE.

Debates on inclusive education, including aspects of ECE, have been politically mainstreamed following policy milestones such as the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (United Nations, 2006), as well as the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). In the Salamanca Statement, ECE is viewed as an area of priority 'to enhance the educability of all children' (UNESCO, 1994: 15). There is a focus on the early screening and identification of so-called special educational needs with the aim of making children ready for school and preventing debilitating conditions. It is stated that ECE should recognise the principle of inclusion and that many countries have adopted ECE policy focused on education inside and outside of the family. While ECE is viewed as a priority for inclusion, it seems that its value is primarily seen in early intervention and prevention, as well as enhancing children's 'educability' to fit the premises of the school system. Inclusion is a general principle of the Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities, and the right to education, as stated in Article 24, refers to 'an inclusive education system at all levels' (United Nations, 2016: art. 24) that is aimed at disabled people reaching their fullest potential and enabling them to fully participate in society. There is a focus on state parties' obligation to provide individualised support measures at all levels of education, yet no explicit mention of ECE. In the 2030 Agenda, there is a clear commitment to inclusive education, including inclusive ECE, for all people, irrespective of disability, gender, age and race. It explicitly states the aim to support young people in realising their rights and capabilities. Goal 4 of the Agenda includes ensuring 'that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education' (United Nations, 2015: n.p.). As in the Salamanca Statement, (inclusive) ECE is constructed as a means to make children ready for the school system.

While there has been a policy focus on inclusive ECE for decades, research data points to a policy–practice gap in overall inclusive education, with reports from some countries exposing set-backs rather than progress towards an inclusive education system for all learners (Haug, 2017). In this article, we draw from the general human-rights-oriented understanding of inclusive education, which encompasses the equal right to education for all students, while considering systemic barriers to inclusion and acknowledging that inclusion as a practice varies between countries, regions, schools and sometimes even classrooms. Both ableism and the capabilities approach have the potential to address inclusion in a multifaceted manner (Haug, 2017). An ableism-critical analysis uncovers normalised and naturalised ability expectations within the education system that include or exclude students (and teachers) on the basis of dis/ability.[1] The capabilities approach, with its focus on opportunities for realisation and a good life, provides a framework for analysing coherence in inclusive ECE. The mutual insights from both approaches in the field of education are at the core of our argument for analysing capabilities and ableism in ECE.

First, we introduce the capabilities approach and ableism, highlighting their conceptual differences and parallels. Second, we focus on inclusive ECE as (an often marginalised) part of the broader field of inclusive education. Based on the existing literature, we illustrate how the capabilities approach and ableism offer analytical perspectives for ECE. Third, we contextualise ECE in the Austrian context and then present our analysis of cap/abilities in pivotal ECE policy documents. Our findings are then clustered around the aspects of *competences through ECE* and the *competences of early childhood educators*, highlighting both enabling and excluding dimensions of cap/abilities. We conclude that by considering the capabilities approach and ableism together in the form of a cap/abilities continuum, it becomes possible to uncover the narrow ability expectations inherent to ECE and simultaneously explore the potentials of ECE for the development of capabilities from an ableism-critical perspective.

The capabilities approach and ableism in the field of (early childhood) education

The capabilities approach (with reference to both Sen's and Nussbaum's works), along with ableism, has been applied to research at different levels of education, although a school focus is predominant. The capabilities approach has been utilised to analyse, for instance, classroom practices (Okkolin et al., 2018), literacy (Maddox, 2008), assessment practices (Buzzelli, 2015) and vocational education (Vandekinderen et al., 2018), leading to the conclusion that educational reforms should focus on enabling people's capabilities, functioning and agency by providing support structures. Terzi (2005) was one of the first to apply the capabilities approach to inclusive education, and has argued for it as a tool to counteract categorisation dilemmas, as categorisation

always holds the risk of individualising difference (e.g. in the form of dis/ability). Drawing from the capabilities approach, Terzi argues for the normalisation of disability as human diversity. Difference is, of course, not limited to disability, and the capabilities approach has the potential to emphasise a broad understanding of inclusion beyond a sole focus on disability (Haug, 2017). While the normalisation of difference as capability diversity may contribute to a positive recognition of human difference, it remains unclear to what extent such a normalisation of disability can respond appropriately to the specific and ongoing oppression and exclusion of disabled people (Taylor, 2012). The capabilities approach applied to education can be seen in its strength as a justice framework, attending to human difference and capability diversity and thus directing an enabling perspective towards self-determination and empowerment. A comprehensive approach to human capabilities is necessary to name and demand positive rights in (inclusive) educational contexts, yet it may overlook the exclusionary ability expectations inherent to education systems. An ableism-critical approach serves better to address these often unquestioned notions of abilities.

The existing research on ableism in (inclusive) education at different levels covers aspects such as teacher education and preparation (Alfrey and Jeanes, 2023; Broderick and Lalvani, 2017; Siuty and Beneke, 2020), the curriculum (Mihajlovic, 2019), teaching and pedagogy (Braun et al., 2021), and policy (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012). The findings support an understanding of an ableism-critical approach to education that involves pedagogic attention to unquestioned and internalised ableist assumptions (e.g. about performance in physical education).[2] Ableism as a concept has also been used to criticise neo-liberal policies in inclusive education – for instance, in the United Kingdom (Runswick-Cole, 2011). (Early childhood) education is a relevant field to analyse from an ableism-critical perspective because ableist preferences are particularly apparent in education and child development norms. This includes the unquestioned favouring of walking as opposed to rolling, speaking rather than signing, or playing with non-disabled peers rather than other disabled children (Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Hehir, 2002). In many ways, education systems work to assimilate disabled students to non-disabled norms and lead to micro-exclusion under the misguided label of 'inclusion' (Cologon, 2022).

While the fulfilling of certain ability expectations, such as speaking verbally, may have advantages in environments created with able-bodied children in mind, the ableist strategies of overcoming or compensating for disability become dysfunctional when disability overshadows other aspects that may be relevant to a child's education and the services provided for children. In other words, not every aspect of privilege or disadvantage in education is related to disability, yet disabled children are often denied educational opportunities because the focus is solely on their disability (Hehir, 2002). In viewing inclusion as a process rather than a realised goal, achieving educational equity is understood as a continuous endeavour. The ongoing process towards equity then requires recognising and supporting diversity (as proposed by the perspective of a capabilities approach), as well as challenging narrow ideas of normality (through an ableism-critical approach).

The capabilities approach as an analytical perspective for ECE

ECE (as well as other fields and forms of education beyond school) is often marginalised in the field of inclusive education due to an overt focus on formal education in the school system. Considering that ECE is organised quite differently around the world (see Biggeri et al., 2011), from education systems that lack any formalised ECE at all to contexts where enrolment is mandatory, there are huge imbalances in accessing educational as well as other services in early childhood. Early childhood services mostly focus on select groups of children and regions (Underwood et al., 2012), which leads to unequally distributed capabilities for enablement in early childhood. One of the

main factors that is considered relevant with respect to developmental and educational questions is the impact that high-quality ECE and intervention can have on later educational opportunities and sustainable societal change, as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). With a clear focus on enabling children's rights to a good life, applying the capabilities approach to inclusive ECE therefore offers valuable perspectives on the importance of high-quality and thereby inclusive educational settings that resonate with the main directives of the 2030 Agenda. Frameworks related to the 2030 Agenda that track early childhood development with country- and region-specific measures can offer great potential in terms of identifying the impacts that ECE can have on societal imbalances (Gove and Black, 2016).

Dowd et al. (2016) explicate this in the Ethiopian context and argue that investment in early childhood is central to expanding the resources and functionings that children can use to make self-determined decisions as they grow up. This is in line with a prevention focus in poverty research drawing from the capabilities approach, which emphasises the value of early intervention to avoid material deprivation (Dayioğlu and Şeker, 2016). A good proportion of the literature seems to focus on ECE as primarily relevant to enabling children for a later point in time and to a lesser extent on children's capabilities *in* early childhood. In contrast, from a children's rights perspective, as emphasised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the voice and agency of the child is central in childhood – not merely a future project.

A broader capabilities-approach-informed perspective, as taken by Dayioğlu and Şeker (2016), acknowledges the impact that the socio-economic, including educational, background of families can have on children's capabilities and their often limited opportunities to develop their potential. This underlines the importance of improving support structures with regard to ECE; however, such policy demands often imply spatial and professional resources that are not made available in many contexts (Underwood et al., 2012). On a global scale, ECE in Austria – the context to which we will apply our theoretical considerations in this article – is quite well resourced, yet inclusive ECE remains a challenge, as we will discuss below.

An ableism-critical perspective for ECE

Research on ableism in ECE points to the ways in which (special) ECE functions to monitor, categorise and normalise disabled children (Sharma, 2023; Sharma and Hamilton, 2019). Ableism seems to inform teachers' values (e.g. a focus on overcoming disability or underestimating disabled children's ability to participate) and results in segregating interactional practices. However, if engaged in ableism-critical reflection, teachers can revisit their beliefs and practices, leading some to question able-bodied privilege and/or change their practice and the ECE environment (Sharma, 2023). The intersections of dis/ability with other aspects in children's lives are also highly relevant to ECE, as Amirpur and Doğmuş (2022) show in their study of constructions of the inability of children labelled as migrants. Practices of normalisation, in particular, naturalise difference and affirm hegemonic ECE practices, such as attributing special educational needs.

Acknowledging the intersections of marginalisation and privilege, several authors (e.g. Beneke and Love, 2022; Hancock et al., 2021; Love and Beneke, 2021) argue for the implementation of disability critical race theory (DisCrit) in ECE research and practice. Love and Beneke (2021) argue for DisCrit to be a foundation for justice-driven inclusive education research in early childhood. They stress that institutions judge children's bodyminds based on ableist ideas of development that reflect the social norms that are predominant for white, middle-class families and children, leading to educational, medical and social labelling. In their normalising function, early childhood programmes implicitly and explicitly aim to assimilate children to developmental and

educational norms (Love and Beneke, 2021). To counter ableism in ECE through DisCrit, Hancock et al. (2021) suggest fieldwork activities in the domains of the curriculum (to observe how class-room documents and materials uphold whiteness and ability), pedagogy (to practise identifying and resisting racism and ableism) and solidarity (to practise engaging multiply marginalised children as decision-makers).

The existing literature indicates, however, that even social-justice-oriented ECE often does not involve an ableism-critical and/or dis/ability focus. Contrary to common misconceptions, young children notice bodymind differences and classify them, for instance, in terms of gender or race, and begin to notice social hierarchisation (Lalvani and Bacon, 2019). ECE therefore presents the potential for social justice education and ableism-critical pedagogy, which could also be relevant for the development of capabilities. However, as we will show through our exploratory analysis based on the case study of Austria, ECE policy indicates – sometimes contradictorily – constructions of (inclusive) education that involve elements of both capabilities and ableism.

Parallels and differences between the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach

As noted above, the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach differ conceptually and regarding what each approach stimulates (see Table 1). At the centre of the capabilities approach are (different types of) capabilities and their realisation, known as 'functionings' (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2005), while at the centre of ableism there are processes and practices that produce exclusion-ary ability expectations and ableist constraints. It is therefore important to highlight that capabilities are not the same as narrow ideas of ability or ability expectations as criticised from an ableism-critical perspective. Nussbaum (2011) distinguishes between combined, internal and basic capabil-ities, indicating the relevance of interacting political, socio-economic and personal factors for cap-ability, understood as a kind of freedom or opportunity to do or to be something. Ability expectations are different to capabilities, although expecting and/or valuing certain abilities does not automatically constitute ableism (Wolbring, 2012). When certain abilities are, however, viewed as essential and this is used to exclude or oppress people or groups – for instance, by restricting the access of disabled children to mainstream ECE or by segregating learners based on them fulfilling narrow ability criteria – this has been described as ableism.

Despite their differences, there are also parallels in the conceptualisation of capabilities and ableism, particularly regarding a relational understanding of cap/abilities. Both capabilities, as they are developed in relationships with and the dependence on others (Nussbaum, 2011), and ability expectations and preferences, as they shape relationships between humans as well as with animals and the environment (Wolbring, 2008), are relational.

While the capabilities approach is focused on individual liberty and agency, it is not individu-alistic in the sense of essentialising ability through the neo-liberal individualisation of productivity (Vandekinderen et al., 2018). From a capabilities-approach perspective, justice is aimed at individ-ual human dignity and the unique individual person in the context of inclusive education. An indi-vidual, person-centred perspective based on the capabilities approach can contribute to a shift from normalisation to children as individuals who need to be educated (Reindal, 2016). As already men-tioned, the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach expose different things: capabil-ities and capability diversity in the former case, and ability hierarchisation and ableist preferences in the latter.

Applied to ECE, the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach each offer specific ana-lytical perspectives and address positive rights and assimilation to non-disabled norms, respectively.

Table 1. Parallels and differences between the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach.

Capabilities approach	Ableism
The capabilities approach is:	*Ableism is:*
A framework for addressing fundamental questions of social injustice	An activist-theoretical concept coined by the disability movement and disability studies
Used as a basis for claiming human rights (e.g. the right to education at all levels of the educational system)	Used to criticise individualistic ability and body norms (e.g. the presumption of able-bodiedness in education)
The capabilities approach stimulates:	*An ableism-critical approach stimulates:*
Reflections about what every person can be or become under equitable circumstances	A focus on ableism as a system of oppression and power imbalances
At the centre of the capabilities approach:	*At the centre of ableism:*
Are (different types of) capabilities and their realisation (functionings)	Are processes and practices that produce exclusionary ability expectations
Is the understanding that capabilities are relational because of universal human dependency	Is the understanding that ability expectations are relational because the de/valuing of abilities shapes relationships
Is the individual person and human dignity	Is the structural environment and practices of micro-exclusion
The capabilities approach exposes:	*An ableism-critical approach exposes:*
(The lack of) specific capabilities to be able to reach the minimum threshold of a good life	The hierarchisation of abilities based on binary logics of differentiation and social sorting
Human difference as capability diversity in educational contexts	Ableist preferences that are particularly apparent in education and child development
The capabilities approach applied to ECE:	*An ableism-critical approach applied to ECE:*
Offers a framework for analysing coherence in inclusive ECE	Offers an analytical perspective to normalised and naturalised ability expectations in ECE
Directs an enabling perspective towards ECE in terms of self-determination and empowerment	Directs a critical perspective towards micro-exclusion in ECE under the misguided labels of inclusion
Addresses (positive) rights (e.g. support structures) in ECE to enable children's capabilities, functionings and agency	Addresses how ECE works to assimilate disabled children to non-disabled norms with the aim of making them ready for school
Acknowledges the impact of the socio-economic, including educational, backgrounds of families on children's capabilities	Shows that ableist strategies become dysfunctional when disability overshadows any other aspects that may be relevant to a child's educational opportunities
Possible shortcoming of the capabilities approach from an ableism-critical perspective:	*Possible shortcoming of an ableism-critical approach from a capabilities-approach perspective:*
The capabilities approach may overlook exclusionary ability expectations inherent to ECE	An ableism-critical approach applied to ECE may lead to an excessive focus on dividing and discriminatory practices, in turn neglecting positive rights

The focus of the capabilities approach on agency means that children are viewed as core agents of their own learning and assessment (Buzzelli, 2015). This does not, however, imply endless freedom of choice, as the capabilities approach can also serve to justify the restriction of children's agency based on their 'inability' to estimate the negative long-term consequences for developing capabilities that an immediate choice may have (Brando, 2020). This line of argument is not free from ableism and adultism, but the relational understanding of capabilities in the capabilities approach can help to deconstruct narrow notions of ability. By exposing processes of enablement where a person

perceived to be unable becomes able to exercise a specific function (Brando, 2020), the capabilities approach may actually challenge ableist assumptions. Another parallel between the two approaches is the awareness of intersectional privilege and disadvantage that shapes children's capabilities and educational opportunities, and the limitations in focusing on one dimension only, such as disability.

A possible shortcoming of an ableism-critical approach from a capabilities-approach perspective, which is more focused on the enabling dimensions of education, could be that an overt focus on dividing and discriminatory practices may neglect positive educational rights.

Cap/abilities in Austrian ECE policy

For the following exploratory analysis of inclusive education on a spectrum between capabilities and ableism in early childhood, we draw from ECE policy and frameworks in the Austrian context because this is where we are/were situated as researchers. What we consider as ECE in our analysis is mainly the level of Kindergarten in the Austrian system, which children attend from the ages of three to six before they enter primary school. In addition, there are day-care centres called KiTa (short for *Kindertagesbetreuung*) for children under the age of three, which we also consider as ECE institutions, although the political focus on them has been primarily directed at their role in childcare and to a lesser extent at their educational relevance.

The Austrian education system is a stratified one, as children are separated into different tracks from an early age, within both the mainstream system and segregated special schools (for a comprehensive overview, see Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation, n.d.). This separation is highly classed and especially affects disabled and migrant children (Buchner, 2021; Buchner and Proyer, 2020). In early childhood, there is a right to specific intervention and support for disabled children, and to a certain extent for children from families with low formal educational qualifications (Pretis, 2009). On the one hand, this has enabling effects for some children; on the other, it manifests difference from the onset. Educational inequality persists, despite a set of reforms (e.g. mandatory ECE attendance and language support measures), as Salchegger et al. (2021) showed for children from migrant families. Their study disconfirmed earlier findings that reported improved learning outcomes for children from more privileged backgrounds and instead showed a lack of improvement for both more privileged and socio-economically disadvantaged children. Educational inequalities then accumulate over time through the social sorting into different tracks and school types, which occurs no later than at the transition to secondary school at the age of 10.

In Austria, there has been political inconsistency in providing childcare and education for all children, especially in rural areas. However, the number of young children under the age of four in ECE institutions is increasing, with the numbers for children aged four and five remaining steady for the last 10 years, at around 95% and 97%, respectively (Statistics Austria, 2024). ECE in general has long been framed as childcare rather than education, and the academisation of early and pre-primary childhood educators remains politically controversial (Hover-Reisner et al., 2020; Smidt, 2019). Only recently, in light of an increasing shortage of trained ECE professionals, have their working conditions received broader attention (UNICEF, 2023). Additionally, an extension of children's mandatory attendance to two years before school has been brought back onto the political agenda.

A challenge in the provision of (inclusive) ECE has also been the inconsistency of policy, as Austria is divided into nine federal states, each with its own ECE and childcare policy (Pretis, 2009). In the context of this specific situation, the (former) Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research (n.d.) has published and listed a number of documents and guidelines to

impact and improve ECE. Of these documents, we chose two that we consider pivotal because of their national relevance and focused on them in our exploratory analysis of cap/abilities in ECE: the 'National ECE Framework' (Austrian Ministry, 2020; our translation) and the 'Competence Framework for Early Childhood Educators' (Bäck et al., 2024; our translation). We analysed the documents by closely reading and discussing them with the theoretical parallels and differences of the capabilities approach and ableism-critical perspectives in mind. Hereafter, we discuss our findings, which are organised around the aspects of *competences through ECE* and the *competences of early childhood educators* based on the respective documents.

Competences through ECE

The National ECE Framework (Austrian Ministry, 2020) was initially published in 2009, focusing on children's early development of competences while recognising play as a central mode of learning in early childhood. In the framework, the child is viewed as competent in co-constructing their own development, which may translate as agency from a capabilities-approach perspective on childhood (Brando, 2020; Buzzelli, 2015). The framework outlines principles for ECE, including empowerment, inclusion, diversity, gender sensitivity and participation. Inclusion is clearly referenced as being more than integration (which would focus more on children's assimilation) in that it involves reacting to the different needs of all humans. Diversity is understood in relation to individual characteristics such as gender, race, physical abilities, ethnicity and social origin, and is explicitly viewed as a resource for learning, while critical engagement with prejudice is also mentioned. The promoted sensitivity towards gender is based on a binary understanding of gender, as it refers to (in line with the 2030 Agenda, as stated above) supporting 'girls and boy regardless of their gender' (Austrian Ministry, 2020: 7) in unfolding the different potentials of their personality. With regard to participation, the ability to participate is considered central, and ECE is viewed in terms of its potential to contribute to early political education through offering children a variety of possibilities to co-create. This can be viewed as an emphasis on developing capabilities and agency, and in the document is considered as a learning opportunity for shouldering responsibility for oneself.

The ECE Framework contains a section on competences, understood as a network of knowledge, abilities, skills, strategies and routines, which suggests a broad and flexible approach to competence that is more towards the capabilities end of the cap/abilities continuum. The development of competences is viewed as a process involving the child and the environment, indicating a relational understanding that can be connected to the capabilities approach as well as to an ableism-critical approach. In the document, child competences are divided into different competence domains and, in the description of these domains, competences are to some extent framed individualistic. This is evident, for instance, in the focus on *individual* resilience under the domain of competence in relation to the self. Regarding social competence, however, there are indicators of a capabilities orientation in that the experience of belonging is viewed as the basis for social competence. At the same time, the ability to cooperate and 'constructively engage with rules' (Austrian Ministry, 2020: 11) is highlighted, again implying a more individualistic approach, which may lead to the micro-exclusion of (disabled) children who do not meet such behavioural ability expectations. Other aspects of competences in the document include children's judgement and agency, imagination and divergent thinking, reflexivity towards oneself, and one's learning processes and progress. However, the ability expectation of reflexivity supposes that all individuals have the capacity to engage in such self-reflexivity, which may lead to the exclusion of, or attribution of inability to, some (disabled) children who are not able to reflect on themselves and their learning progress in such an abstract manner (Giese and Ruin, 2018; Mihajlovic, 2019).

The circumstances of educational processes are addressed in the ECE Framework, including spatial, material and temporal aspects. Then, areas of education are laid out and, within them, we find much potential regarding what is proposed in the literature on ableism-critical ECE – for instance, in terms of strengthening identity, diversity, inclusion and participation (Lalvani and Bacon, 2019). This is particularly relevant in relation to considering the multiple dimensions of marginalisation and privilege, as proposed by a DisCrit framework (Love and Beneke, 2021). References to social justice education are rather general in the ECE Framework (such as a focus on participation as an element of democracy education). However, there are more specific references to ECE practices that foster identity-strengthening approaches, such as valuing children's first language/family language, including regional dialects and sign language. Again, this indicates a person- and dignity-centred capabilities orientation. As promising as this all may sound in ECE policy, research indicates a policy–practice gap in the Austrian context (e.g. Salchegger et al., 2021).

Competences of early childhood educators

The Competence Framework for Early Childhood Educators (Bäck et al., 2024) is the result of a recent focus on the qualifications of ECE professionals. The document was prepared based on the recommendations of a European Union project that aimed to improve the working conditions of staff for better quality in ECE in Austria, and was published by the (then) Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research in 2024. The document outlines fields of practice and responsibility in working with children from the age of one to six, and serves as a basis for, amongst other things, the further development of ECE professionalisation and possibly also future academisation. On one of the first pages of this document we can see a clear distinction between early childhood educators and inclusive early childhood educators when it is stated that this particular document only covers educators who are legally permitted to lead groups within ECE, and that frameworks for 'other professional groups' (Bäck et al., 2024: 6) in the field of ECE (inclusive early childhood educators being named as an example) will need to be developed additionally. This implies that inclusive early childhood educators need different competences than general early childhood educators, which could be translated as a call for specialised knowledge to be better equipped to support all children in ECE in a multiprofessional manner. However, this may also be read as a demarcation of the role of general ECE professionals from assuming equal responsibility for the education of all children, regardless of children's dis/ability.

The authors of the Competence Framework follow an individualistic understanding of competences, framing them, for instance, as individual problem-solving abilities. In the domains of professional attitudes, self-regulation and reflexivity, according to the framework, early childhood educators should possess 29 specific competences to be able to work professionally with individual children and their families, as well as within their organisation. These include aspects such as flexibility, observation, interaction, diversity, inclusion, participation, pedagogic diagnostics and the law, to name a few. Many of them have parallels with what is considered important for ableism-critical ECE in the literature, such as participation and reflexivity (e.g. Beneke and Love, 2022; Hancock et al., 2021), while others mirror the ableism inherent to some underpinnings of ECE (see Love and Beneke, 2021). This is particularly evident in the competence of pedagogic diagnostics, where it says that ECE educators should be able to, amongst other things, evaluate the developmental status and learning of children. However, there is also a clear capabilities orientation to be found in the description of pedagogic diagnostic competence, as the conditions and prerequisites of learning are highlighted (Bäck et al., 2024). This can be translated as a focus on the requirements for supporting children's individual processes of forming capabilities (Brando, 2020) in early childhood.

With regard to inclusive ECE, it is of particular interest to look at the competences that are listed concerning diversity, inclusion and participation in the Competence Framework. 'Diversity competence' is framed as being able to sensitively consider gender, culture/ethnicity, dis/ability and socio-economic status in ECE pedagogy. 'Inclusion competence' means being able to recognise diversity and heterogeneity, as well as to change pedagogic and institutional circumstances in a way that enables the participation of all. 'Participation competence' involves being able to facilitate the inclusion of children in decision-making processes (Bäck et al., 2024). Particularly what is understood as inclusion and participation competence strongly leans towards the capabilities approach, as there is a focus on enabling conditions and possibilities for social justice through ECE – something that scholarship from different regions has emphasised (e.g. Dayioğlu and Şeker, 2016; Dowd et al., 2016). It is also interesting that while inclusive early childhood educators are viewed as a separate profession in the Austrian Competence Framework, inclusion is simultaneously seen as a competence that is relevant for *all* early childhood educators. On the one hand, from an ableism-critical perspective, this points to a contradictory understanding of inclusion that may disguise practices of micro-exclusion, such as constructing disabled children in ECE as different or special and therefore in need of specialised professionals ('inclusive' early childhood educators) to work with them. On the other hand, with reference to the capabilities approach, individual children with individual needs have a right to support measures that contribute to them reaching their fullest potential in ECE. For high-quality ECE, standards in the professionalisation of early childhood educators are crucial, including the acquisition of specific competences or, in other words, the ability expectations they must fulfil. This may, however, exclude potential early childhood educators on the basis of dis/ability.

Conclusion: a cap/abilities continuum in ECE

In this article, we have discussed capabilities and ableism in ECE. Through our review of literature on the capabilities approach, as well as ableism-critical perspectives relevant to the field of (inclusive) ECE, we have provided an overview of their parallels and differences. We have stressed that the two approaches complement each other and have supported our argument by presenting findings from our exploratory analysis of Austrian ECE policy. Our results indicate a cap/abilities continuum in the two pivotal documents we have selected for our analysis, meaning that we have found person-centred constructions of competences that are focused on the formation of capabilities as well as narrower, potentially exclusionary notions of competences as individualistic abilities. While we located the former towards the capabilities end of the continuum (representing a capabilities-approach perspective), the latter were located towards the ableist end.

By considering the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach together, it becomes possible to uncover the dysconscious ableism inherent to ECE without losing the focus on positive educational rights that serve the individual enablement of young children. Drawing from the complementary aspects of the concepts of capabilities and ableism allows us, in turn, to explore the potentials of ECE for the development of capabilities without neglecting normalised and naturalised ability expectations. A focus on the relationality of cap/abilities, which we consider the main parallel between the capabilities approach and an ableism-critical approach, should be a central aspect of future research in ECE. This may include aspects such as a rigorous focus on (local, global or multiprofessional) communities of practice (Okkolin et al., 2018) and partnerships for learning (Alfrey and Jeanes, 2023). A relational approach to cap/abilities could further open new possibilities for studying social education and social learning in ECE, thereby adding to the often missing knowledge about education outside of the immediate school context. In addition, this would contribute to a focus on ECE in its own right and with an educational legitimation beyond making children ready for the school system.

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Notes

1. Following Goodley (2014), we write 'dis/ability' with a slash to indicate that ideas of disability and ability – for instance, in the form of able-bodiedness – are mutually constitutive.
2. Drawing from critical race theory, Broderick and Lalvalni (2017: 895) have coined the term 'dysconscious ableism' for thinking in a way about dis/ability that readily accepts dominant ideas about ability norms.

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