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2009, 7 S.

Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:
Hübenthal, Maksim; Ifland, Anna Maria: Focusing on Children? Recent Developments in Early Childcare in Germany. 2009, 7 S. - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-6886

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Focusing on Children?
Recent Developments in Early Childcare in Germany

1 Starting point and central questions

Starting point of our analysis is the assumption that for several years a ‚chid-centred social investment strategy' (cf. Esping-Andersen 2002) is gaining more and more influence in modern welfare states. Under the concept of a ‚sustainable family policy' this paradigm of ‚investing in children' also becomes relevant in the German welfare state since 2002. In this context we are witnessing an increasing functional expansion of early childcare institutions (for children under the age of six) since some years. From our point of view there are at least two major developments within childcare policy that emerge from this new child-centred-paradigm. In accordance with the analyses of the German researcher Magdalena Joos (cf. 2002) we point out one of those two developments as a shift within the institutional childcare system ‚from care to care and education'. We understand the other – more or less parallel – development as a shift ‚from the child to the child and its family'.

In this paper we will give a short overview on these two developments via looking at political documents and legal regulations. Based upon this we intend to answer the following two child-oriented questions:

- To what extent and in what manner are the needs of children considered in these recent developments of institutional early childcare in Germany?
- How are children and childhood socially constructed in this process?

2 ‚From care to care and education'

Taking the German re-unification in 1990 as starting point of analysis it becomes clear that the connection of care and education always was a central mark of childcare policy in Germany and is constitutive for the arrangement of early childcare institutions. However, the relation between the two motives of care and education always was and still is characterized by changes and societal debates. Both motives respectively both functions are explicitly mentioned in the current legal regulation of early childcare: The child- and youth service act of 1990/91 (Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz) says: "the mandate for support contains upbringing (Erziehung), education (Bildung) and care (Betreuung) of the child […]" (SGB VIII, §22, 3).

Despite the fact that also the educational motive is mentioned and elaborated in the legal regulation, education initially did not play an important role in early childcare policy in Germany and the care motive was dominating. Early

childcare policy during the 1990's primarily aimed at solving the problem of combining gainful work and family. The German welfare state started to focus more and more on a broad inclusion of mothers into the labour market. This necessitated a larger public infrastructure of care that relieves mothers temporarily from their task of parenting; extending public responsibility for education of small children was less part of this thinking. By improving the opportunities of mothers with young children to participate in the labour market, the German welfare state – as many other modern welfare states – was and still is trying to face challenges like family and child poverty, demographic change and gender equality. This emphasis of the care motive against the education motive first of all brought the interests of parents and society into the foreground of the German childcare policy. The specific needs of children were playing at maximum only a secondary role (cf. also Joos 2002).

In the middle of the 1990s early childhood education stepwise started to gain more acceptance within political discourses. An important driver for increasing the value of education within childcare policy came from the results of the PISA-studies and the so-called ‚PISA-shock' in 2001. German pupils did not only rank very low in this international school achievement test; furthermore a strong connection between the family background and the educational success became evident. Even if the widespread public reception of the PISA-studies can lead to this impression, debates on the influence of the social background on the school success of children are not unknown in Germany. The special about the reaction on the ‚PISA-shock' is the demand to improve the educational access of children as early as possible and not to stick only to the school system. In 2002 Notburga Ott describes this development as follows: "There is an increasing number of statements, that the early contributions of the family to the education system are not sufficient due to societal changes; that is why the state has to relieve the parents of this responsibility earlier and to a wider extent" (Ott 2002: 23).

The new importance of education in institutional early childcare is not only a result of the reception of the PISA-studies; it is rather the expression of a new importance of children and early childhood in the German welfare state. At latest, with the beginning of the second legislative period of the red-green Federal Government in 2002, policy for children and families was more and more oriented on a ‚child-centred social investment-strategy' and labeled as ‚sustainable family policy'. Protagonists of the social investment approach assume that under the circumstances of a globalised knowledge-based economy no modern national state can afford not to use all potentially available human capital. The new importance of children derives from the assumption that the ability to build up human capital is especially influenced during the first years of life. Strategies for improving the educational chances of children that focus solely on changing the school system are regarded to come too late and to be not enough. In the strategy of social investment the partial de-familialisation of children by including them into early childcare institutions as early as possible is regarded as the silver bullet to compensate possible deficits of the cultural capital within the family. Esping-Andersen and his colleagues express this idea in their scientific report for the EU-presidency in 2001 with the following short formula: "We cannot pass laws that force parents to read to their children, but we can compensate" (Esping-Andersen 2002: 49).

Implementing this new strategy of investing in children the German Government is confronted with the challenge that the provision rate – especially for the under 3's – was (and still is) extremely low and as mentioned above institutional early childcare was not really oriented on children's education. In 2002, when the new ‚sustainable family policy' was initiated, the provision rate for children under the age of 3 was less than 5% in the western part of Germany; in the eastern part it was one third. So, the challenge faced by the German Government was the quantitative expansion (especially in the western part) as well as the functional enlargement of early childcare institutions ‚from care to care and education' in whole Germany.

One of the consequences of this shift within the double function of care and education was that the conference of youth-ministers and the conference of education ministers passed a "common structure of the federal states for early education in early childcare institutions" in 2004. Herein, early childcare institutions are declared as "indispensable part of the public education system" (Jugendministerkonferenz/Kultusministerkonferenz 2004: 2). Furthermore, it was postulated to systematically connect early education in early childcare institutions and education in primary school. Associated with this resolution is the demand to concretise this general principle within the single federal states (Bundesländer) in specific educational plans. Until now, this was realized in all 16 federal states, whereby the grade of quality of these plans differs significantly.

Changes in legal regulations at federal level (Bundesebene) that derive from this new balance of care and education in institutional early childcare can be identified in two new laws: the "Tagesbetreuungsausbaugesetz" (daycare expansion law), which came into effort in January 2005, and the "Kinderförderungsgesetz" (child support law) – into effort since January 2009. Both laws focus on quantitative expansion and qualitative improvements. With these laws it is intended to develop orientation marks for early childhood education and to increase the provision rate especially for the under-3's from currently 14% to 35% in 2013.

To sum up: This part of the recent development of early childcare institutions in Germany is characterized by the main assumption that more and more parents are not able to invest properly in the creation of human capital of their children. In combination with the second main idea that human capital becomes more and more important for nation states in a globalized-knowledgebased economy from the perspective of the German Government institutional early childcare has to fulfil a double role. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affaires expresses this with the following formulation: "Early education and care has an important meaning on two levels: for parents to combine work and parenthood and for the children themselves, especially when they come from socially disadvantaged families" (BMAS 2008: 201-202).

3 ‚From the child to the child and its family'

In addition to the shift of the double motive ‚from care to care and education', for several years there are increasing efforts to include parents actively into the educational work of institutional early childcare. Childcare policy is not only aiming at the parents in order to relieve them temporarily from parenting with the goal to enable their participation in the labour market. Parents are increasingly conceptualized as direct addressees and users of social services within childcare policy. Renate Schmidt, the Federal Minister of Family Affairs of the last legislative period (2002-2005), expresses this as follows: "In our country with less and less children we must not and do not want allow ourselves to leave behind even one single child. We do need a wide net of low-threshold social services which combine early support for children with counselling for parents" (BMFSFJ 2005a).

Comparable to the problem-conceptualisation within the shift ‚from care to care and education' also within this developmental step the German Government argues that more and more parents are not able to raise and educate their children in accordance to the current societal demands and needs. In addition to the quantitative and qualitative expansion of early childcare institutions, the Federal Government propagates the intention to: "focus first of all on parents to improve the support, education (Bildung) and development (Erziehung) of children [...]" (BMFSFJ 2005b: XXVII). This intention is based on the assumption, that children "evolve the best, if they grow up in a family in which parents are able to give them the possibilities to build up close and trustful relations" (BMFSFJ 2005b: XXVII). In order to strengthen the educational competencies of the parents the Federal Government is aiming at reaching more parents with low-threshold social services from one hand that are close to the life world of these families – such as educational counselling, parental education, health counselling, nutrition counselling, housekeeping classes as well as language classes etc. (cf. (BMFSFJ 2005b: XXVIII; cf. also BMFSFJ 2006: 13-14). Besides educational competencies these services also include support for integration respectively re-integration of parents into the labour market – for example computer courses and job application training (cf. CDU/CSU/SPD 2005: 114; cf. also Rauschenbach 2008: 153). Linking social services for families to institutional early childcare seems to be an attractive way for reaching a high number of parents due to the parallel intention of a huge expansion of early childcare in Germany. The other reason is that early childcare institutions are considered to be institutions that enjoy enormous trust among parents.

Yet, these debates are not manifested in laws; but since 2006 pilot projects of the Federal Government and of single federal states can be observed. Despite a current conceptual pluralism and confusion in this development ‚from the child to the child and its family' two main concepts can be identified: generational houses (Mehrgenerationenhäuser) and parent-child-centres respectively family centres. Both concepts share the intention to embed social services for families into institutional early childcare. Herein, for example North Rhine-Westphalia plays a significant role by trying to rebuild one third of all early childcare institutions into family centres until 2012 (cf. MGFFI 2008).

To sum up: With the shift ‚from the child to the child and its family' in combination with the development ‚from care to care and education' the German welfare state seems to move closer to a double strategy of a de-familialisation of children by institutionalising them into early childcare facilities on the one hand and a parallel re-familialisation of childcare-responsibility of parents on the other hand. In doing so, the German welfare state seems to leave more and more the path of a comparably limited intervention into the private sphere of the family. Going back to the quotation of Esping-Andersen at the beginning this short formula could be rearranged in the following manner: "We cannot pass laws that force parents to read to their children, but we can compensate" and in addition we can hope that parents start reading to their children when we give a book into the family.

However, in these two developmental steps we do not only see potential for more inclusion via childcare policy, but also the risk of more exclusion: To make a long story short: The child and the parents who are not included into institutional childcare live more and more in the risk of moving to the edge of society. In addition to this, the child and its parents who are included may face more and more social control via public intervention.

4 Conclusion: Focusing on Children?

As mentioned at the beginning, from our point of view two child-oriented questions seem to be relevant:

- To what extent and in what manner are the needs of children considered in these recent developments of institutional early childcare in Germany?
- How are children and childhood socially constructed in this process?

To answer these questions: In the recent developments of the childcare policy in Germany the needs of children are included as one element among a growing variety of needs and interests of other agents and institutions. Additionally, it becomes clear that within the recent developments in childcare policy in Germany it is above all developmental needs of children, which are in the centre of political action – such as the need for development, education and also protection. Hereby two changes are special for Germany:

- First, it is new to acknowledge or construct the need for education (Bildung) of small children and to react on this need institutionally, whereby herein education is understood first of all only instrumentally with the aim of improving school-readiness to create human capital.
- Second, trying to reach parents via the access through children in childcare institutions is new as well. Hereby, it is not only intended to fulfil the needs of children in a more efficient way by strengthening parents' competencies. The Federal Government is aiming more and more at political and economical goals, which at maximum display only indirectly a connection to the needs of children – for example reacting on the demographic change and preparing the national economy for the assumed challenges of a knowledgebased-globalised economy.

From our point of view these developmental steps lead to a further instrumentalisation of children and childhood. In the context of the broad and primarily economic expectations towards early childcare policy children are first of all constructed as ‚citizen workers of the future' (cf. Olk 2007) and childhood is limited to a preparation stage. Addressing developmental needs, without any doubt, can have the potential to make valuable contributions to the quality of live for children in the present. However, childhood research has to ask from a child-oriented perspective if constructing children primarily within the economical and neoliberal paradigm of ‚social investment' leaves any space for broader constructions of children and childhood that do not limit children to a 'homo laborandus' but conceptualise children as active subjects with own interests and own rights in the ‚here and now' as demanded by the UN-Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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"Focusing on Children? Recent Developments in Early Childcare in Germany". Paper presented at the international conference in Trondheim/Norway (April 2009, 29-30): The Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market: Exploring Early Childhood Education and Care.