

Ernst, Thilo; Mierendorff, Johanna; Mader, Marius

## **Commercial provision and transformations of the German childcare system**

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im deutschen Bildungssystem“**

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# **Exklusive Bildung und neue Ungleichheit**

**Ergebnisse der DFG-Forschergruppe  
„Mechanismen der Elitebildung  
im deutschen Bildungssystem“**

Herausgegeben von  
Werner Helsper, Heinz-Hermann Krüger  
und Jasmin Lüdemann

**BELTZ** JUVENTA

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# Entwicklungen vom Elementarbereich bis zur Hochschule

*Thilo Ernst/Johanna Mierendorff/Marius Mader*

## Commercial Provision and Transformations of the German Childcare System

**Abstract:** This article reports selected findings of a six-year qualitative in-depth study of both high-priced commercial and not-for-profit childcare centres in Germany. Against the backdrop of a vastly differentiated childcare system that is basically state-funded, tightly regulated and made up of state and private not-for-profit organisations, commercial providers started proliferating and gaining a high public profile in the mid-2000s. In this article, we argue that high-priced providers that rely on parents' fees as their only source of revenue add to the German system in several ways: (1) the individualisation of care arrangements in the context of collective care settings; (2) the commodification of childcare as an alternative mode of distribution; (3) shifting patterns of recognition, which are linked to mother's subjectivities and (moral) selves. Correspondingly, we propose to understand the high-priced providers as part of an infrastructure that, for a price, aids parents in better conforming to the demands put upon contemporary subjects.

**Keywords:** ECEC, Marketisation, Welfare State, Childcare Centre, Recognition

### 1. Introduction

The German sector of care and education in childcare centres almost entirely consists of state-funded centres, which are run either by the state itself or by state-funded private not-for-profit organisations. Against this backdrop and starting around 2005, a small but rising number of expensive private for-profit-centres gained a high public profile. They operate without state funding and rely on parents' fees as their only source of revenue. The fees can be as high as 1,600 Euros a month, which is about four times the maximum fee due in state-funded centres. In academia and the media, the high-priced centres were met with a broad range of suspicions, including the alleged indulgence in unnecessary luxury, putting representation above pedagogy, being a tool for overambitious parents who would like to equip their child with an educational advantage, or delivering inferior quality because cost-cutting would be the only way to increase profits, and others (Ernst, Mader & Mierendorff, 2014).

In our research project<sup>1</sup> (Mierendorff, Ernst & Mader, 2014), we set out to explore the significance of the high-priced centres' emergence. Our research consists of qualitative in-depth case studies of both high-priced and conventional not-for-profit childcare centres. As some initial assumptions – derived from the debates outlined above as well as from the notion that developments in the school and university sectors may 'trickle down' the system (Krüger et al., 2012) – soon proved unsuited to capture the complexity of our field, the project's overall character and our research questions became mainly exploratory: What, if anything, do the high-priced providers add to the German childcare system? As this system has long been vastly differentiated along several dimensions, it is necessary to explore in detail the possible effects of this new kind of provision. How does a centre's mode of operation affect its operation and organisation? How are the centres being used by families? What do the arrangements mean to those involved, that is, the professionals and the families?

As the state sector has been transforming and, importantly, has been heavily expanding in the last twenty years, the whole field is in a kind of flux. Accordingly, we soon learned that clear-cut divisions between the types of centres were hard to pin down (Mader, Ernst & Mierendorff, 2014); especially those divisions indicated in the debate referred to above. The shine of the facilities, for example, depended more on whether a centre opened recently, not on whether it was a commercial or a nonprofit operation. Also, we hardly encountered parents who seemed to pursue an educational fast track for their children; more significantly, this was an idea the centres themselves tended to reject.

The complexities of researching a vastly differentiated system may become clearer in the next step, in which we will give some background on the German system of centre-based care and education. After outlining our study's design and methodology, we will then elaborate on three phenomena that do set – to different degrees – our commercial centres apart from the nonprofit ones. These phenomena are

- the individualisation of collective settings of education and care,
- different modes of distribution, that is, the commodification of childcare, and
- shifting patterns of recognition, which are linked to mothers' subjectivities and (moral) selves.

We arrived at these results through carefully and extensively analysing our data, stepping through several layers of abstraction and trying a variety of connections to our discipline's theoretical discourses (see the texts posted on our Project Website, footnote below). For this reason, and because in this article we want to discuss broader implications of our findings, we will refer to our mode of analysis only passingly and not cite any of our interview data.

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1 For further information see our project homepage: [https://paedagogik.uni-halle.de/arbeitsbereich/paedagogik\\_der\\_fruhen\\_kindheit/forschungsprojekte/dfg-projekt\\_elementare\\_bildung\\_/2521636\\_2565302/](https://paedagogik.uni-halle.de/arbeitsbereich/paedagogik_der_fruhen_kindheit/forschungsprojekte/dfg-projekt_elementare_bildung_/2521636_2565302/) [28. 11. 2018]

In the conclusion, we will summarize the findings and re-contextualise the high-priced providers as part of an infrastructure aiding in the realisation of contemporary selves, thus opening analytical connections to a broad range of phenomena of contemporary transformations of the labour market and the German welfare state.

## 2. Centre-based Childcare in Germany

To contextualize our research as well as the general German astonishment at high-priced childcare, it is necessary to broadly outline the German system of Early Childhood Education and Care. It is important to note that on the administrative and legislative levels, ECEC is not part of the education system, but of the system of social security. The tasks of care and education are, nevertheless, conceptually integrated in German childcare centres (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neumann, 2010, p. 168–169). This sets Germany apart from many other countries that assign care and education at preschool ages to separate types of organisations.

The German system of Early Childhood Education and Care is state-organised in a multi-tiered structure. National legislation sets the framework on which the federal states base their own legislation. Funds are provided by both the federal states and the municipalities. Actual provision is in the hands of either state entities or state-funded, private not-for-profit organisations (see Oliver & Mätzke, 2014, p. 176 for details on the underlying principle of subsidiarity). In this model, childcare provision remains a state responsibility, despite two thirds of all childcare centres being operated by private organisations. The system is to a large part financed by the state from general taxation. Generally, families contribute a fraction of the total costs through income-dependent fees; in our sample, these municipal fees ranged from 0 to 400 Euros a month. Fees can vary significantly between federal states and municipalities. The last year of kindergarten, for example, is free in several federal states and there is an ongoing discussion about abolishing parents' fees altogether (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, p. 3).

Childcare centres differ in so far as they implement a broad variety of philosophical and pedagogical approaches. This variety as well as the parents' right to choose from it are central features of the German system (Franke-Meyer, 2014, p. 241, 247–249). Accordingly, certain lines of segregation have always been present in and facilitated by the system's design. The multitude of philosophical and pedagogical approaches is meant to accommodate the parents' intentions about their child's upbringing – for example, parents often can choose between a centre run by a church's charity organisation or by a secular provider, or they can try to find a centre implementing a specific pedagogy. Thus, in any given centre, it is quite likely that at least a portion of the parents is, on some level, like-minded. In addition, the composition of a centre's clientele often reflects residential segregation, as childcare is a very local affair (Hogrebe, 2016; Mierendorff, Ernst, Krüger & Roch, 2015, p. 29–32).

Starting in 1996, every child from the age of three was guaranteed a childcare place. In 2013, in the midst of substantial efforts to increase the system's capacity, the state

extended this guarantee to every child from the age of 1. In practice, however, this does not necessarily mean that families are provided with a childcare place that meets the extent of childcare they need (BMFSFJ, 2017, p. 10–11, 20–21), or that the centre is conveniently accessible. As of March 2017, there were roughly 55 300 childcare centres in Germany. Three per cent of them are for-profit operations (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 11–12), and only a subset of these – our high priced centres – operate without state funding. Compulsory schooling starts with primary school around the age of six, so attending a childcare centre is voluntary. Nonetheless, attendance between the ages of 4 to 6 it is nearly universal nationwide. For children under the age of three (under threes), attendance varies greatly between federal states. Attendance rates are generally higher in the eastern federal states – this still reflects the different history of childcare provision and culture in the FRG and the former GDR (BMFSFJ, 2017, p. 6–7).

Overall, providing and regulating childcare services is the state's responsibility; the framework consists of national and derived state legislation. Its decentral implementation, however, means that many small details of this implementation differ between localities, and they differ in ways that matter to the families using childcare services. Add the broad variety of approaches that different centres implement, and then try to find out what the high-priced centres might still add to this jumble. Basically, this is what our study is about.

### 3. Data and Methods

To conduct our study, we were able to secure the cooperation of two high-priced centres, two not-for-profit private centres, and one international school's preschool section, located in different metropolitan areas. Our sampling strategy aimed to maximise the commercial centres' variety according to structural characteristics, such as type of provider (nationwide or regional chain, individual enterprise), size and service portfolio. In one of the three metropolitan areas, we complemented our sample with the addition of two not-for-profit centres, both belonging to charities (one secular, one Christian) each operating multiple childcare centres.

In 2012, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the provider's CEO, the centre's director, at least three teachers, and at least five parents in each centre. We also collected documents such as contracts and brochures and did limited observation of the centres' operation. In 2015, we were able to repeat the process in three of the five centres. This article draws on insights gained in the process of compiling a detailed case study of each centre.

Methodologically, we take our interviews to be social interactions which are to be analysed in the spirit of ethnographic openness. Through analysing our study's participants' narrations – how they placed their stories' characters in relation to each other, how they positioned themselves and the interviewers, and to which broader discourses they connected (Karlsson, Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2013) – we learned about the practices that make up the childcare centre as an organisation (Mensching, 2008, p. 47–54),

and what this meant to our participants. The analytical procedure was adapted from methods established in the analysis of ethnographic fieldnotes. Significant topics were identified and their analysis was refined in an iterative process of open and analytical coding, writing memos, and exploiting the contrasts between different cases (see Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 150–168; Breidenstein, Hirschauer, Kalthoff & Nieswand, 2013, p. 124–166).

#### 4. The Individualisation of Care Arrangements

We would like to point to three phenomena that set, to different degrees, our high-priced centres apart from the conventional ones.

The first is a trend towards the individualisation of collective education and care arrangements. We see a certain rebalancing of the compromise between the standardisation necessitated by collective education settings and the flexibility granted to the families in utilizing them. On the centre's side, the availability of staff and its efficient deployment, for example, mean that opening hours cannot be extended indefinitely or on short notice, regardless of how convenient this may be for families. To a degree, families have to adapt their daily schedules to those of their childrens' educational organisations. Think of school as an extreme example, where the periods of mandatory attendance are fixed to the minute.

Several constraints resulting from a childcare centre's organisation were discussed extensively by our study's participants. The most prominent ones were the opening hours, a set drop-off phase in the morning, and pick-up phases around noon and in the afternoon, and two to four weeks of holidays in the summer. Our high-priced centres made a point of addressing these issues in a way that benefitted their clients (cf. Mader et al., 2014).

Both commercial centres did away with summer holidays. Families can of course still go on vacation, but they do not need to pay heed to the centre's schedule. Families in other centres have to either adapt to the holiday period, privately make other arrangements, or rely on the provider to arrange for temporary places in a childcare centre nearby.

The opening hours of our high-priced centres can be said to be above average. One of the centres, for example, opens from 7 a. m. till 6 p. m. (Monday to Friday), with one of the directors making a point of not intending to give the occasional tardy parent a hard time. In contrast, bringing your child past the end of the official drop-off-phase or being late for pick-up were frowned upon in our not-for-profit centres.

One of our commercial centres abandoned specified drop-off- and pick-up-phases. Still, the attendance of most children in this centre would have fitted into a conventional schedule; but this move allowed families to deviate and not appear as unruly or arbitrary exceptions. And, more importantly, this caters for non-standardized working hours and unplannable workdays. This is also the context in which above-average opening hours gain a specific meaning. They are not in themselves too remarkable or even unique – a publicly funded centre catering mainly for shift workers, for example, may even sur-

pass them. Instead, the opening hours are significant as a sign of the high-priced centres' accommodation of the contemporary professional's working conditions.

Across the field of centre-based childcare these aspects can well be regarded to differ between centres not in principle, but gradually. In fact, the whole sector of ECEC might be in the process of slowly adapting to changing realities of family organisation and the labour market. Nevertheless, the high-priced centres tend to stick out. First, they seem to be spearheading this development; second, they signal to their clients that they cater for the individual family's needs, and do not impose upon them what is convenient for the centre.

This flexibility, however, is not infinite. We found that the commercial centres in our sample were actively engaged in balancing flexibility with both economic and pedagogic imperatives. One centre, for example, initially put no boundaries on which hours on which workdays parents could book. This practice was soon abolished, as it turned out to be neither economically feasible nor to provide a coherent group experience to the children.

## 5. Childcare as a Commodity

Another difference between the types of centres is that high-priced centres treat childcare services as a commodity to put on a market, while state-funded nonprofit centres do not. This may seem to be quite an obvious difference; its consequences, however, are not necessarily as obvious. The reason that commodification of a small part of the German system is worth mentioning is that distribution of childcare services has as yet worked quite differently.

Let's take a closer look at how childcare places are distributed in the state system: Care and education at preschool ages are, basically, provided by the state and are available to all. Unfortunately, a persistent lack of places has long been a hallmark of the German system, which led to rationing. Although there have been significant efforts to increase the system's capacity, there was a notable lack of places when we began our study, and some of it remains today. Although the rationing mechanism has disappeared from the law with the most recent extension of the guarantee to a place, the practice of distributing state-funded childcare places has, in our experience, not changed much.

For situations of scarcity, federal law defined a set of criteria to prioritize the distribution of available places. According to these, places were first to go to children whose parents were

- in paid employment or actively seeking paid labour,
- attending vocational training, school, or university,
- participating in programmes aimed at integrating them into the labour market.

Every provider had to allow for these criteria in their selection processes; many providers amended the mandatory criteria by also taking into account the families' income or

the families' geographical proximity to the centre. (There is also a second strand of prioritisation criteria concerning children at risk, which we won't cover here). Overall, this mode of distribution points to childcare as a communal task, and to a specific mode of distribution: as long as the capacity is lacking, childcare is to be delivered first to those most in need.

Commercial providers which do not receive state funding – our high-priced centres – introduced another mode of distribution into the childcare system: that of the market. Much can be said about the differences between these modes of distribution (e. g. Apple, 2005); what we would like to emphasise here are some tangible effects they have on the experience of gaining access to and utilizing childcare services.

In the introduction we already pointed to alleged benefits that might attract parents to high-priced centres. Mostly, these benefits were about the features of a centre or its programme. We would like to add that, according to our findings, the mode of distribution of childcare services is at least equally important. Within each mode of distribution, centres and parents are positioned differently in relation to each other; and by being framed differently, childcare services and the roles of parents and centres gain different meanings (Mader, 2017). Both the practical and the symbolic uses for and functions of childcare services differ accordingly (Ernst, 2018); we will illustrate this in the following section.

## 6. Shifting Patterns of Recognition

The prioritisation criteria are tailored to and convey recognition of specific situations and subjectivities. They determine which persons, with which kinds of projects, and under which circumstances are worthy of a place in a state-funded childcare centre. This defines automatically who is not eligible for one of the scarce places. It thus happens that the state system does not cover situations which are otherwise much in line with contemporary discourses and with policies and politics in other welfare state arenas. This is the gap on which high-priced providers capitalize, and here we find what seems to be one of the benefits the clients reap from using them.

This is not an abstract matter, but one that directly affects the lives, the identity and the sense of moral and social worth of parents, especially mothers. In our commercial centres, we interviewed several mothers whose attempts to acquire a place in the publicly funded system had been frustrated. Their situation had been measured against the prioritisation criteria and it was determined that they were last in line for a childcare place, mainly due to their family's relative wealth. For these mothers, being denied a place translated into a rejection of their ambitions, plans and biographical projects. This is, among other reasons, because they modeled themselves after imaginations of specific contemporary subjects, which are highly valued and authorized in a variety of discourses and welfare state policies. They wanted, for example, to provide their child with an early education in a group-based setting, which is widely advocated for by education experts, and which is also an element of good parenting. They also wanted to

pursue their profession, which they connected to personal fulfilment and economic independence, drawing on feminist discourses and notions of an active and economically self-sufficient individual promoted in welfare state discourses.

These mothers found their ambitions invalidated in their dealings with the publicly funded childcare system. Despite doing, from their perspective, everything right, they were not rewarded with a childcare place. Instead, they found themselves referred to relying on their husbands' income – the male breadwinner model – or to privately arrange for adequate childcare.

All this was markedly different when these mothers engaged the high-priced centres. There, nobody but themselves authorized or invalidated their need for a childcare place. Apart from the money, the centre's support is unconditional. Or, to be more precise, the high priced centre's support does not depend on passing a test of moral worthiness, but on the ability to afford the fees.

## 7. Discussion

The ways in which the high-priced centres add to the German childcare system's variety can be summarized as enhancing the flexibility of childcare in several interconnected ways. There are the practical aspects of organising day care such as opening hours, drop-off phases or holidays. We argued that high-priced providers are spearheading a development to individualise their services within the framework of collective childcare settings. Second, there is the commodification of childcare services in itself, adding a distinct mode of distribution to the German system. Third, we focused on specific effects of the commodification of childcare. For some mothers this mode of distribution greatly enhanced the range of practical as well as symbolic uses they could put their access to a childcare place to; it allowed them to translate access to childcare into recognition of their ambitions, a recognition which the state system had denied them.

In trying to make sense of this differentiation, we propose to understand high-priced centres as part of an infrastructure that, for a price, assists parents in better conforming to the demands put upon the contemporary subject. Contemporary, neo-liberal discourses – among them those surrounding the 'activating' welfare state – compel persons to imagine themselves in ways that have been described as striving for a deeply contradictory figure of the 'entrepreneurial self'. Parents in general, and more specifically: mothers are at the same time compelled not to strive for self-realization, but to care for their child properly and – to exaggerate slightly – not to neglect it in a 'selfish' pursuit of personhood, life and vocation. Our high-priced centres address both the practical and moral conflicts that necessarily arise and are thus part of the social and moral infrastructure facilitating contemporary society.

Putting it this way allows us to make connections to trends and transformations in other areas, which intersect and overlap the transformation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Germany. Changing realities, for example, of family organisation and the labour market, and shifting discourses of early childhood make unconditional



childcare appealing to more and more people. From a (functional) macro perspective of welfare state analysis, unconditional childcare can even be understood to be a growing necessity. Empirically, with the increase in capacity and the guarantee to a place, the German childcare system might be starting to move in this direction. The commercial providers can be understood to have emerged at a specific time in this transition, enabling them to draw upon certain deficits of the state system. Only time will tell whether the ongoing transformation will make them obsolete or whether their niche persists. For the time being, we propose understanding our findings as encouragement to look, in researching ongoing differentiation of complex education systems, beyond clear-cut relationships of parents' social position and their (desire to) reaping benefits for their child's education from the education system.

Another topic for international comparison is how commercial and not-for-profit organisations relate to each other in different national childcare systems. The German situation is peculiar in that the system that has long been almost exclusively non-profit now sees, at its fringes, the addition of for-profit public daycare. In other countries, the mixed economies of childcare have taken different and unique developmental paths (Press & Woodrow, 2005; Lloyd & Penn, 2012). Accordingly, detailed studies of national systems such as the one presented in this article provide a necessary and promising basis to contribute to ongoing research into different regimes of regulating childcare markets in the context of varying national traditions and conditions (Bollig, Honig & Nienhaus, 2016; Haag, 2012; Naumann, 2014)

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**Zusammenfassung:** Vor dem Hintergrund der stark regulierten und in weiten Teilen staatlich finanzierten deutschen Kita-Landschaft wurde die zunehmende Verbreitung gewerblich betriebener Kitas vor einigen Jahren heftig debattiert. In diesem Beitrag stellen wir Ergebnisse unserer qualitativen Studie sowohl gewerblicher als auch gemeinnütziger Einrichtungen vor, in der wir der Bedeutung des Aufkommens (preislich) exklusiver Kitas nachgegangen sind. Wir konzentrieren uns auf drei Phänomene, die unsere gewerblichen von den gemeinnützigen Anbietern verschieden stark unterscheiden: (1) die Individualisierung von Betreuungsarrangements im kollektiven Setting der Einrichtung, (2) die Kommodifizierung des Betreuungsangebots, (3) sich ändernde Muster der Anerkennung, die auf Subjektivität und Selbstentwürfe der Mütter bezogen sind. Auf diese Weise werden von den hochpreisigen Anbietern Bedarfe sowohl bedient als auch hervorgebracht, die im Kontext neoliberaler Transformationsprozesse der Arbeitsmarkt-, Sozial- und Bildungspolitik aktuell werden. Wir betrachten hochpreisige Anbieter als Teil einer Infrastruktur, die es einer ausgewählten (und zahlungskräftigen) Minderheit ermöglicht, den Anforderungen an dieses zeitgenössische Subjekt besser zu entsprechen.

**Schlagnworte:** Elementarbereich, Vermarktlichung, Wohlfahrtsstaat, Kindertageseinrichtung, Anerkennung

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