The Project
»Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care«

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EBD working papers:

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Das Projekt »Elementare Bildung und Distinktion«
Johanna Mierendorff, Thilo Ernst, Marius Mader
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**EBD working papers**

The *EBD* working papers, published by the project »Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care«, are the project’s reports on results and ongoing work (»*EBD*« is derived from the project’s German title »Elementare Bildung und Distinktion«). The idea is to give updates on our progress and to facilitate discussion of the ideas and results presented in the texts.

Given the workings of academic publishing, it is not always easy to make this intention practical; some of the texts are manuscripts intended for publication in quality-controlled, commercial academic journals. Depending on the phase of the respective publishing processes, some of the texts may temporarily not be available. We try to keep these periods as short as the publishers’ contracts allow and keep our homepage (http://tinyurl.com/7f8bq7a) up to date with status information on our texts.
The Project »Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care«

The research project, part of the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft/German Research Foundation) Research Group 1612 »Mechanisms of Elite Formation in the German Educational System«, is located at the Center for School and Educational Research of the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. Principal researcher is Prof. Dr. Johanna Mierendorf; Dr. Thilo Ernst and Dipl.-Päd. Marius Mader are research associates. Including the recent extension, funding runs from October 2011 until the end of September 2017.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of commercial high-cost providers of center-based childcare – a very unusual phenomenon in German Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Against this backdrop we ask, using qualitative methods, how and under what conditions these providers establish themselves and how they manage to persist. What are the consequences for the further differentiation and hierarchization of center-based childcare?

In this introduction to our working paper series, we situate our project within the research group, outline the basic structure and recent transformations of German ECEC and explain our research interests. We then give an overview of our sample and comment upon our mode of analysis. Finally, we present what we found out up to now.

DFG Research Group 1612

In German education, there are opposing trends of an increasing social opening of educational opportunities and programmes on the one hand, and growing hierarchies within certain educational programmes and levels on the other hand (Krüger et al. 2012). From elementary to tertiary education, the projects of the research group »Mechanisms of Elite Formation in the German Educational System« thus research, for example, manifestations and effects of discourses on egality and excellence, competitive pressures, legitimatory imperatives and new forms of hierarchization. The main conceptual tool connecting the different research projects consists of the four mechanisms of elite formation: the choice of provider by families and students, the selection of applicants by educational institutions, coherence, and distinction (ibid.). The focus is on educational institutions that either present themselves as being somehow »excellent« or »elite«, or that such a character is being attributed to in politics, in professional circles, in the media or by those seeking education.

Transformations of German ECEC and commercial providers of center-based childcare

Following the tradition of West Germany, center-based childcare in Germany is essentially state-funded, not for profit and in large part provided by private (meaning: non-state) actors.
In this sense, post-ww ii center-based childcare in West Germany has always been privatized; in 2013, only one third of all childcare centers have been run by state institutions (municipalities or state agencies, for example). State funding of private childcare centers covers up to more than 90 % of the provider’s costs; the rest has to come from the provider’s own funds (e.g. from donations or other operations). The state, in turn, charges parents an income-dependent (and far from cost-covering) fee for a place in a childcare center.

In terms of the marketization of the childcare system, the situation is quite peculiar. On the one hand, marketization has certainly taken place, starting in the 1990s. Subsidies for example are, in most states, no longer provided for the existence of a childcare center, but retroactively paid for occupied places. Another example would be the restructuring of public ECEC administration according to concepts of new public management. On the other hand, two characteristic aspects of the political and rhetorical framing of marketization and market-based reforms are conspicuously absent from the German context. The first aspect is the emphasis on providers’ competition. This may simply be a consequence of the long-standing and quite notorious scarcity of places: there may be no sense in the notion of competing for customers. But there is also a certain reluctance to implement what may be called a »free market«. While federal states, for example, have since 2005 been allowed by federal law to subsidize for-profit providers, currently half the states refrain from doing so. The second aspect is the emphasis on parents’ choice that may, in combination with the providers’ competition, serve as a tool for a systemwide increase in quality. Choice, however, is as much part and parcel of German ECEC as is the priority of private provision. But this has nothing to do with market rationality, but with parents’ freedom to choose a center that best matches their philosophical and pedagogical preferences – private provision and parents’ choice are meant to immunize the system against the state’s ideological influence. To summarize, the ever-private, not-for-profit system of German ECEC has, since the 1990s, increasingly become marketized. However, it is still deeply rooted in its specific tradition in which ECEC is the sphere of the welfare state, not of private enterprises.

Currently, further transformations are in progress. Influenced by an economic line of argument that addresses early childhood as an important human resource of modern European welfare states, the entitlement to a place for children under 3 recently led to a vast expansion of provision (Klinkhammer 2012; Leu 2012; Urban 2012). On another level, public discourse and welfare state policy increasingly frame extra-familial childcare in terms of education (Joos 2002), thus linking it with hopes of both delivering equal opportunities and compensating for deficient family contexts (Betz 2010; Kutscher 2013). Seemingly opposing these intentions, the realm of center-based childcare is currently involved in a process of further differentiation; namely there is a proliferation of commercial daycare providers. In direct reference to these providers, fears are being voiced about the possible increase of social inequality in early childhood; what seems to be at stake is the established principle of equal access to childcare places.

Commercial providers of center-based childcare, however, form no homogenous group. Besides quasi-public centers that basically are peculiar forms of publicly funded childcare
provided by the employer, mainly two types of providers have to be distinguished: small businesses, each operating a single center, and corporate providers, operating chains of centers. Each of both types is to be further differentiated into publicly subsidized enterprises (in federal states where this is possible), and not publicly funded providers, whose services are very costly (mostly in states denying commercial providers eligibility for subsidies) (Ernst et al. i.p.). Public concerns about increasing inequalities are mostly aimed at commercial high-cost centers. These are claimed to intend to distinguish themselves from »normal« or long established childcare provision, to exclusively address the higher social and economic strata of potential customers and may thus contribute to the hierarchization of institutional childcare.

Research questions and goals

Both the research group and the project use the concept of mechanisms of elite formation as their central heuristic. The main assumption is that educational institutions are involved in a process of hierarchical differentiation, which manifests itself through the mechanisms of choice, selection, coherence and distinction. Choice means the decision by the clientele to attend a specific educational institution, while selection means the (non-)admission of applicants by the educational institutions. Coherence and distinction refer to the formation of collective identities, evidenced, for example, in similar expectations of the people involved, value judgements about and dissociation from other institutions etc. (Krüger et al. 2012).

Within this framework, the main issue for our project »Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care« is how processes of institutional distinction are set in motion and sustained. During the first funding period, we concentrate on a specific set of issues. Firstly, as high-cost commercial providers in principle lack legitimacy in the German context, we aim to identify patterns of legitimation used by providers to justify services somehow marked as »exclusive«, and those used by parents and families to justify their choice of such centers. Secondly, we look into forms of knowledge and experiences shared between parents and professional staff – assuming that coherence is critical for the centers’ long-term success, esp. in the context of growing competitiveness. Thirdly, we ask to what extent parents’ educational aspirations and the centers’ offerings match each other.

In the long run, three further aims have to do with the continuing existence of commercial daycare centers. We ask about the matches between collective strategies and orientations on the supply and demand sides. We assume that practices of distinction must, in order to contribute to the continuation of specific organizational cultures, be based on forms of knowledge that are at least partially shared between all involved. Next, we focus on the interactive production of coherence. Assuming a plurality of cultures within an organization, coherence-producing interactions – both basis and expression of organizational culture – will be analyzed; within as well as between different organizational milieus. Finally there will be a synthesis of our findings in profiles of institutional childcare. Taking the form of detailed case studies of
the centers researched, these will be composed of our findings about the structure and regulation of German *ECEC*, the formal structure of the respective center, its pedagogical and supportive services, aspects of the local childcare market and, of course, our findings on processes of choice, selection, coherence and practices of distinction. Such a synopsis will allow us to relate the centers to each other and to the structure of German *ECEC* as a whole, and thus facilitate insight into the stratification and possible division of the institutional landscape.

**Sample and data collection**

Based on a systematic review of the legal situation on the federal as well as on the state level, from conversations with experts of the federal states’ youth welfare agencies and from initial conversations with the CEOs of commercial providers, we generated a systematization of the landscape of commercial providers (Ernst et al. i.p.). In order to construct a diverse sample of centers that is suitable for comparative analysis, we first compiled a list of commercial high-cost facilities, categorizing them according to organizational aspects such as size, type of provider and components of the offered services. Aiming at a broad range of different centers, the participation of a provider’s sole facility, of a center that is one of a provider’s multiple sites and of an international school with a kindergarten section could be secured. The centers are located in three different metropolitan regions.

We then looked for two publicly funded institutions located in one of the three regions. One of these centers belongs to a secular provider, opened just a few years ago and is located in a neighbourhood of low socio-economical status. The other institution is a long established kindergarten of a Christian charity, located in a socially mixed neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. A sample overview:

- a commercial provider’s highly priced sole facility
- one of a commercial provider’s multiple highly priced centers
- an international school with a kindergarten section
- a publicly funded center located in an inner-city area
- a publicly funded center located in a suburban neighbourhood.

Both publicly funded centers are located in the same city as the commercial provider’s sole facility. All institutions – except for the international school, which admits children from the age of three – care for children aged from a few month up to school age (which usually means six years of age). For several weeks in 2012, we conducted interviews and observations in each of the centers, interviewing:

- the CEO
- the principal
- three teachers
- five parents.
The expert interviews with the CEOs and the principals aimed at the history and the organization of the center, the pedagogical concept, the clientele and the local service landscape. In a similar manner, aiming for expert knowledge, teachers were asked about teamwork, the organization of everyday work and the cooperation with parents. Additionally, we were interested in the teachers’ personal experiences of their center’s everyday life. In problem-centered interviews the parents were asked about their choice of childcare center, their experience with the kindergarten and the organization of everyday life with and within the institution.

Analysis and conclusions up to now

As our main analytical tool we use the documentary method by Bohnsack and Mannheim (Bohnsack 2007, 2010). Nohl (2012), Kramer et al. (2009) and Kramer (2013) are also of importance, especially regarding the further development of this method for the analysis of narrative interviews. For our observational data, both Bohnsack et al. (1995) and Vogd (2004, 2007, 2009) provide methodological guidance.

A first result of our research is a systematization of the landscape of commercial providers. By assessing the providers’ potential for expansion and the selectivity of access of the different types of providers we could show that previous debates in German politics, (professional) public and science relate to only a small section of the diverse types of commercial providers, especially discussions linking the proliferation of commercial providers to concerns about social segregation and a loss of quality in ECCE. Instead, the consideration of social inequality in German ECCE requires a differentiated perspective that includes the factual organizational conditions (Ernst et al. i.p.).

Another result of our research is an actor-focused heuristic for analyzing processes of parental decision making in choosing ECCE institutions. As an alternative to established variants of researching educational decisions, we conceptualize decision making as a process in which criteria of choice emerge from the process of finding a kindergarten. In this perspective, criteria of choice are not the starting points but results of decision making (EBD Working Paper 2). In the interviews we also found a close entanglement between the two mechanisms of choosing a center and of selection by institutions. Experiences with the institutional processes of selection are being used by the parents to stage the range of personal agency and opportunities in different ways.

A further result is that specific modes of distinction that we reconstructed cannot consistently be matched to material differences, e.g. to the organizational structure or the center’s equipment. Instead, the interactions between the center’s staff and parents have to be focused as essential opportunities and places of the production of distinction. Moreover, the reconstruction of the specific kindergarten’s organizational culture is a necessary basis for answering the question of new verticalizations in the institutional landscape (Mader et al. 2014).
References


