»Exclusive« commercial ECEC providers – institutional and familial practices of distinction

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Abstract

As a new phenomenon in German ECEC, commercial high-cost childcare centers are subject of controversial debates. The expansion of this type of early care provision raises concerns about the possible reinforcement of social inequalities in early childhood. However, mechanisms of distinction within these institutions cannot be matched to such criteria as type of organization or features of the facilities. In this paper we argue that the interactions between professionals and parents have to be focused as crucial sights of the production of distinction. Using data from an ongoing qualitative research project we elaborate on three modes of interactive production of particularization. Based on these findings, we show that a reconstruction of the unique organizational cultures is indispensable to address questions of new vertical differentiations within the field of ECEC institutions.
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The function and meaning of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Germany are shifting. On the one hand, there is the ongoing transformation of institutional childcare into the first level of the educational system (Klinkhammer 2010). Linked to this development is the hope for compensation of inequalities by early education and care (Betz 2010). On the other hand, one can find a gradual development of German ECEC from a primarily compensatory welfare benefit into a modern, economically structured service. In the course of this development, the field of institutional childcare has experienced further differentiation in the forms of childcare supply, including an increase in the number of commercial providers involved (Ernst et al. 2014). The finance model practiced in commercial institutions that do not receive state subsidies creates the economic entrance barrier of high parental fees, which seems to counter the hope for promotion of equal opportunities by ECEC. The German ECEC system consists of a variety of state-funded, nonprofit institutions and has traditionally been following the principle of equal access and affordable care for all children. The recent proliferation of commercial providers is publicly discussed as a possible renunciation of this principle. Related to this development, worries of increasing inequalities are accompanied by the question concerning processes of elite formation (Krüger et al. 2012).

This context begs the question of the way such processes are set in motion. Based on material collected within the ongoing research project »Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care,« (Mierendorf, Ernst & Mader 2014) we show that observable practices of distinction cannot consistently be mapped to different material and organizational structures. We focus on interactions between professionals and parents, which are significant moments in the production of distinction. In this paper, we firstly illustrate the changes in German ECEC and then outline recent discussions about the possible (re)production of social inequality in ECEC institutions. Secondly, by using our data, we are asking for the empirical substance of the speech of »elite kindergartens.« We point out that it is reasonable to speak of »doing exclusivity,« which means an interactive production of particularity. From that, thirdly, we reconstruct three modes of enacting exclusivity. Comparing data from commercial with data from nonprofit institutions, we ask for the way particularization works when no consistent material differences between the two types of providers can be found. Finally, we show that specific aspects of the services have to be focused on as resources of particularization.

1 Differentiations in German ECEC

Ever since the passage of the »Lisbon Strategy« in 2000, early education and care has been at the center stage of social and education policy. On the one hand, the expansion of the ECEC sys-
tem addresses young children’s mothers, facilitating access to occupation – for reasons of poverty and equality policy (Urban 2012, pp. 494–497). In addition, according to economic policy arguments (Leu 2012), the welfare states’ efforts focus on early childhood as an important resource for society’s future. By reframing German social policy in terms of social-investive and activating policies aiming at a knowledge-based, competitive and successful economy, early childhood is seen as a pivotal component for reaching this goal. The intention is to prepare children for their prospective role as employees (Klinkhammer 2010, pp. 205–212; Olk 2009, 2013).

The debate on education in the early years is accompanied by a risk discourse that applies pressure to specific family models and milieus. Familial resources that are deemed deficient shall be compensated by eCeC (Kutscher 2013, pp. 47–48). Hereby, the question of producing equal opportunities arises, while another part of the transformation of the eCeC landscape is becoming more important: an increasing number of commercial providers demanding high parental fees are joining the traditional nonprofit providers. The opportunity to attend a commercial high-priced institution depends on the family’s economic capital.

International research is focusing on commercial eCeC providers in the light of paths of economization of specific welfare states (Naumann 2011). Penn (2011) problematizes commercial providers’ hegemony within the English eCeC landscape regarding the access for children of low-income parents. Focusing on families’ care strategies, Stefansen and Farstad (2010) consider class-specific parental care arrangements and relate them to early childhood policies of the Norwegian and English welfare states. In most cases, international research focuses on commercial providers as an inherent part of the institutional landscape. By contrast, the increasing number of commercial providers is quite a new phenomenon in Germany. Against the background of the tradition of equal access, the high-priced, commercial providers are the subject of controversial debates (Ernst et al. 2014). They are accused of explicitly trying to differentiate themselves from nonprofit and public providers by offering a special service and exclusively addressing families of higher cultural and economic milieus. This type of commercial provider is discussed in the context of a vertical differentiation of the German eCeC system that may lead to an acceleration of new institutional distinctions in the sense of reinforced processes of elite formation (Krüger et al. 2012). In regards to the impression of the growing number of high-priced commercial providers, the question arises if and in which way processes of the (re)production of distinction in eCeC institutions are set in motion and extended.

2 The Elite in German eCeC?

High-priced childcare centers are criticized in the media for subverting the principles of equality of opportunity by only granting those families access that can afford to pay the sizeable fees. These commercial providers of eCeC are being demonized as »elite« institutions in the press and television (Grossarth 2009). While elite as a term in recent years has gained more
and more acceptance within debates on education in Germany (Hartmann 2002, 2008, Helsper 2009), corresponding semantics cannot be found in the field of research on early education and care – elite is not an object of substantial examination (Krüger 2012, p. 8). The other way round, ECEC is not taken into consideration in research on the elite in Germany (Wasner 2006, pp. 137–138, Hartmann 2007, Münch 2009, Bohlken 2011, pp. 355–382).

In interviews with the management, principals, teachers and parents of three high-priced commercial and two classic nonprofit providers we found that the term »elite« is also not being used at all by the said actors. The topic was only discussed when we introduced it. »Elite« was then almost always understood as possession of a lot of economic capital. »Elite« in the sense of achievement or effort seems to be immaterial in German ECEC. As interviews with professionals from countries with a tradition of private commercial education indicate, the term may be much more innocuous there.

3 Particularization – Doing Exclusivity

While the usage of the term »elite« appears uncommon in German ECEC, other more obvious and frequent references to forms of exclusivity can be gained from our material. From our perspective, exclusivity surpasses material features mentioned by professional and parental actors, such as above-average teacher-child ratios or a center’s stately building. While such features can, at times, be used to distinguish between commercial and nonprofit providers, they are by no means unambiguous the only ways to generate exclusivity. It is especially the interactions between professionals and parents that contribute to the production of exclusivity, to what we call particularization. Accordingly, Honig (2013) points out that care in institutional settings »marks a social space of possible care arrangements that is prestructured politically and contains pedagogical practices«* (Honig 2013, pp. 185), and furthermore it contains the social practices of all the adults involved – parents also have to be seen as »stakeholders of childcare.« In this sense, the institutional setting has to be focused on as a social space in which principles and values cannot simply be assumed; rather, they are being created in practice by interactions between the actors in the field. Acting in institutions has to be approached as a practice of recontextualization of external conditions and sociocultural orientations that combines effects of the educational system, external relations and interactional events (Honig 2013, pp. 185–188).

Against this background, distinction can be focused on as an institutional practice. According to our material, we show the importance that interactions between professional and parental actors in commercial institutions have for the production of exclusivity. This means that particularization has to be focused on in the processuality of its production. Interview passages, especially those in which interactional events are being thematized, are important and

* Translated by the authors.
dense sources. These narrations are a key to the reconstruction of the conjunctive parts of knowledge that orientate professionals’ and parents’ actions. In a first approach, we found three modes of particularization: the way the institution addresses parents, the production of a »feel-good package« plus relationship work and its staging.

3.1 Addressing

On the basis of our material, it becomes apparent that particularization, first and foremost, is being generated by the ways in which professionals address a specific top-earning clientele as important customers of a service. In addition to strategic means of addressing parents through advertisements in select magazines – that hint at distinct ideas of the clientele for which commercial providers aim – it is the direct ways of addressing parents, that is face to face, which seem to differ from other institutions. An excerpt from an interview with one of the two principals of a commercial kindergarten illustrates this circumstance. This kindergarten is one of an expanding provider’s multiple branches:

Interviewer: And when you take a look at the development of your center, how did the kindergarten evolve here in [city C]?

Principal: We started here with four groups, quickly opened up the fifth group, last year, group six, and by now, we are established in [C-town], are acknowledged, hardly have to do any advertising and keep going by buzz marketing, because there are so many things parents value in here and pass on to other parents, the concept which is intended mainly for working parents, for a start the opening hours and also because of the substance, where working parents clearly say, I don’t want to drive to the music school in the afternoon, to gym course and so on, and, and we then try to be a service provider to a certain extent, to accommodate parents differently, welcome them differently, creating a different type of transparency by documenting our work via email, via photographs, so that parents still have the feeling of catching an amazing amount and taking things off parents’ hands, a hairdresser comes to the institution, we have logopedics, music. So everything you otherwise have to manage with the parents’ »taxi« we try to offer for the children right here in familiar surroundings so that parents when they come to pick up their children can enjoy leisure and family time with their children (...).

From the provider’s viewpoint, they do not just provide a high-quality program to children. Rather, they also address parents as hardworking customers, who – by means of the timesav-
ing services offered – are provided with some better quality of life, and are enabled to make self-chosen recreational use of the time thus gained. In sum, commercial providers do not just offer care for children, but also explicitly aim at parents as beneficiaries of the services provided.

3.2 Comprehensive Care – the »Feel-good Package«

Not only are special requests made by parents being fulfilled by the professionals, but it is also the reliability and flexibility of the handling of children and parents that give rise to a carefree or »feel-good package,« as a teacher in one of our commercial institutions put it. In addressing parents, representatives of commercial kindergartens deliberately distance their institutions from public childcare centers. They establish some kind of contrast towards a pedagogy suggested to be common in other care arrangements that considers parents as an annoying accessory that is to be excluded from institutional practices, especially pedagogical practices. By contrast, the professionals liken their commercial institution to some kind of »deluxe hotel« into which parents check in by signing the kindergarten’s contract and that, in turn, has to respond to the parents’ wishes. That is how the manager of an international school, that also offers a preschool, expresses it. Of course, the parents’ wishes can only be fulfilled to a certain degree. The child’s wellbeing and the preservation of a certain quality of the pedagogical work are the limits set by the professionals we interviewed. In other words, apart from the established welfare schemes, the parents’ needs are being catered for and, by that alone, the commercial providers signal to parents that they are receiving an exceptional service.

This special service is also being recognized and appreciated by the parents themselves. One could say that parents in commercial institutions – in their own perception – enjoy some kind of special status or a special way of being dealt with. In their view, this is an exception that nonprofit kindergartens do not or cannot provide. Besides fulfilling parents’ special requests, this also involves reliability and flexibility in dealing with children and parents, which gives rise to a carefree or »feel-good package,« as one teacher of our first commercial childcare center put it. An excerpt from an interview with a mother whose child is joining the same institution confirms that this service strikes a chord with the parents:

*Interviewer: When you take a look at the everyday life with the childcare center, how is it from your perspective?*

*Mother: (...) That [i.e., what follows] is also a difference, I’m not the supplicant who is coming along and the mother who says something like I will come later for something like a quarter-hour, because there’s bad weather, right? This may sound stupid, but one is the customer and they are acting like that and for someone who needs such a reliable care for occupational reasons that’s a great situation or the*
opportunity to call and someone is still there up to 7 pm when the
need arises. I mean we needed this exactly one time, I couldn’t make
it back from the airport on time and it just has been like that, but at
that moment, when you know I will call and then no one has got any
problem, right? Someone is still there, then you’re not nervously sit-
ting in the car, thinking oh I have to make it, I have to make it,
right? That’s all just very, generally very relaxed also during the day,
well we handed over Emil*, I picked him up and in between I wasn’t
worrying at all, never, not a single time, I knew they would call if
something happens, but they won’t call, let’s say in an alarmist way
because of any trifle, they will first wait and see, right?

This passage shows that the »feel-good package« the childcare center offers is not only related
to specific wishes or temporal flexibility; rather, this indicates a much deeper trust parents
show towards professionals by giving their children into the professional actor’s aegis. This
hints at a form of knowledge of the child being well and safely sheltered that gives parents the
feeling to not worry about the care and development of the child. This knowledge or feeling of
reliable care for the child also contributes to the assurance of being a »good mother.«

3.3 Relationship Work and its Staging

In our interviews, the professionals explicitly refer to a highly educated and employed clien-
tele whose needs cannot be satisfied by »classic« childcare centers. Correspondingly, the par-
ents demand a lot. They are distinctly aware that they are customers of a service provider and
that they pay a lot of money. They behave accordingly in interactions with professionals –
self-confident and demanding. The parents do not see themselves as the supplicants they felt
they would be treated as in non-commercial facilities. Furthermore, in commercial centers, par-
ents have the opportunity to buy themselves out of routine activities, such as cleaning, cook-
ing and other organizational dedication.

However, parental demands go beyond that, they also encompass pedagogical-didactic
realms. Exemplarily, one can cite the statement of a teacher in our third commercial institu-
tion, a provider’s sole facility. Above all, she ascribes the parental demands to the parents’
social status:

* Interviewer: So that playing is being underestimated. Do you think it is or do you
relate this especially to the preschool-realm?

* Name anonymized.
Teacher: I think in general, well especially here because of this upper-class clientele the expectations the children are confronted with are immensely high, really. Well, myself, I come from [borough A], that’s also a borough which is not very low-class, socially so to speak, and you can sometimes notice it a little bit, that people expect a lot, but here it’s really topped up, in plain language. There is, I once had a case where I was asked if the not even two-year-old child, who just a moment ago had learned to speak clearly, if this child would have to learn to tie their own shoes. And then I answered that it’s absolutely sufficient, when one learns this at the age of six and when you go to school and you aren’t yet able to tie your shoes, it’s not the end of the world. And then we have, some people who lack of a bit of a sense for somehow for, for timeframes, when things simply are reasonable and when they really aren’t yet (...).

This example hints at different perspectives of professionals and parents concerning pedagogical work. In these, as well as in other cases, active mediation efforts, which can be conducted in various ways, become necessary. This is nothing unusual in pedagogical everyday life. However, the teachers in our commercial institutions are encouraged to approach parents in a way that is appropriate to the aspiration of being a service provider. If one follows the statements of the professionals and parents, a different way of including parents seems to show up here. In a clear distinction from public facilities, both parents and staff emphasize that an increased effort towards transparency and information transfer constitutes a significant characteristic that is unique for interactions in the commercial institutions we investigated.

From the actors’ point of view, this indicates a different form of relationship between parents and professionals; parents are involved in a different way in commercial kindergartens than they are in nonprofit institutions. Some kind of bond is established by the institutional service that spares parents work and enables them to have spare time which is or can be shared with the kindergarten at regularly organized barbeques or cooking events and other institutional happenings that promote the informal contact of the actors with one another. The actors in our interviews emphasized the very intensive catering for the children’s needs and the trusting, almost chummy contact between parents and professionals. This constitutes a specific form of particularization on both sides. It means that the actors involved are confirming the exceptionality of the service in a reciprocal way.

4 Resources of Particularization

Looking at the interviews we generated in nonprofit kindergartens, the question arises as to how exclusive components of the commercial institutions’ services really are. It is a debatable
point how interactive particularization is working when its empirical basis is missing. Weekly reviews, fresh food prepared by a kind in-house cook and other aspects are not characteristics solely of commercial providers. Beyond that, interviews we gathered in our nonprofit institutions hint at the possible normality of the features used as resources for particularization. Exemplarily, we can point to the usage of the term service; professional actors in nonprofit institutions are equally dedicated to this, as the interview with the CEO of a nonprofit childcare center shows:

*Interviewer:* Well I just heard it already, that parents’ voluntary participation is important for the providers’ work, right?

*CEO:* (...) Every year the parents choose a parents’ council, consisting of representatives of the groups who we get on board closely. Which also makes sense. If it’s about holidays and if it’s about opening hours, if it’s about services in our facilities, they don’t have to assist with those, we see ourselves differently. So, when we’re organizing celebrations, we organize them by ourselves, they are welcome to participate, so that they organize tombola prizes or something else but we want to present our work. And they shall take part in the celebration. So, have fun with their child. If they would render services, in this case, they wouldn’t even have the opportunity to look, what are the colleagues doing? Because they would be standing right in the middle of the happenings. So, parents’ participation for us really means that they are taken seriously, that they introduce their own ideas, but we’re doing the work. This segregation is totally clear. We’re the service provider not the parents.

Here, we can see a quite similar usage of the term that we found in our commercial childcare centers. In reference to the service provided, parents are addressed as consumers. Similar to organized extracurricular activities in commercial kindergartens, nonprofit institutions also use these occasions to offer parents and children common leisure time opportunities and to promote an informal contact between professionals and parents. This means educational partnership is being staged in nonprofit and in commercial centers in a comparable way, established within a familiar contact between professional and parental actors. In nonprofit institutions too, it is the trustworthy care of the child that gives rise to parents’ feeling of a safe care and of their child being in good hands.

In this sense, particularization is being produced in a comparable way in both types of center. Certainly, entirely different aspects are used as resources of particularization. This means, what and in which way something is made to work as a resource of particularization varies from facility to facility and hints at the unique organizational culture.
5 Conclusion and outlook

In our paper, we focused the question of processes of the reproduction of social inequalities in ECEC institutions. We have shown that the growing attention towards early education and care lead to debates about inequalities of access and usage. Accordingly, the increasing number of commercial high-priced providers is discussed as a possible reinforcement of social segregation. However, mechanisms of distinction cannot clearly be matched to different types of providers. Focusing on interactions, in a first approach, we found three modes by which particularization of a childcare center is emphasized and staged by professionals and parents in reciprocal loops, again and again. On that note, modes of particularization represent indicators of specifics of organizational culture not of different types of provider, but of each unique center. The common differentiation of nonprofit and commercial providers in the German debate, as well as the reductionism of questions for consequences of changes in the providers’ landscape, fall short. In contrast, the reconstruction of the specific organizational cultures we are currently working on provides promising starting points for the clarification of the questions discussed in this paper.

Thus, research on inequalities in early childhood has to ask for inherent assessments and values and, with that, also for distinctions in organizational cultures; these additionally have to be understood as being situated in and shaped by unique local contexts. Especially compared to other levels of the educational system in which vertical differentiations find expression much more obviously in certificates of different value, it is important to investigate if and in which way specific cultures of ECEC institutions can be understood as features of a vertical differentiation of the providers’ landscape.

References


