

# Embedded Internationalisation and Privilege in German Early Years Provision

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## INTRODUCTION

Although policy debates (White 2011) and scholarship (e.g. the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, published since 1993) relating to early childhood education are taking place internationally, little is known about the extent to which processes of internationalisation are affecting the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)<sup>1</sup> at the national level. This chapter seeks to address this gap, through examining the case of Germany.

The overall trend of increasing marketisation of education also affects childcare systems (Lloyd 2012), and education organisations use internationalisation efforts as an instrument for gaining prestige and market advantage. It is, for example, in the context of increasing marketisation

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within education that internationalisation has become a central feature of efforts aimed at creating images of outstanding education organisations in higher education (Bloch et al., in this volume). Assuming that such strategies trickle down through the levels of education systems (Krüger et al. 2012), the role internationalisation may play in reshaping German ECEC is of paramount interest—the more so because equal access features strongly in German ECEC, and programmes are differentiated according to their philosophical and pedagogical approaches, rather than according to any agreed-upon notion of their quality or excellence.

The increasing marketisation of ECEC features strongly in traditional ECEC research, which focuses on equity issues such as access to and use of ECEC, and on trends of segregation of childcare organisations and their clientele (Alt et al. 2012; Betz 2013). In this chapter, we ask whether internationalisation may fuel existing tendencies of structural segregation within the German ECEC system. To develop a nuanced assessment of the form of internationalisation taking place within ECEC and its possible impact, we propose to take a contextualised perspective that starts from an analysis of how internationalisation is understood, adapted and used in individual childcare centres.

We start with an overview of centre-based care in Germany. The recent emergence of high-priced commercial childcare centres in this sector has been accompanied by heated debates about the possibly exclusive and elitist character of such organisations (Ernst et al. 2014; Mader et al. 2014). We then discuss concepts used in the research of elite education organisations and internationalisation, as these need to be adapted to be of use in the examination of (German) ECEC. From data gathered and knowledge gained in an ongoing research project,<sup>2</sup> we identify, in the third section, three frames through which internationalisation is embedded in childcare centres. The fourth and final section consists of a systematic conceptual assessment of how internationalisation, embedded in these particular frames, may or may not contribute to further segregation of German ECEC. The conclusion summarises our findings and points out areas for further research.

### CENTRE-BASED CARE IN GERMANY

On the legislative and administrative levels, ECEC in Germany is not the responsibility of federal and state ministries of education, but belongs to the system of social security. In contrast to many other countries, early

years care and preschool education are not separated out as two distinct types of organisations; instead, German childcare centres are tasked to integrate both aspects. Centre-based childcare is essentially state-funded, not-for-profit, and provided by private (i.e. non-state) organisations—only about one-third of the roughly 54,500 childcare centres are operated by state organisations (Statistisches Bundesamt 2015: 15). Attending a childcare centre has long been commonplace for children from the age of three. As of March 2015, more than 95% of children aged 3–6 (over 3s) attended a childcare centre nationwide, with attendance rates 92% or above in every German federal state. Attendance rates for under 3s are steadily rising, although the national average of 28% masks sharp differences across the country. Compulsory education in Germany begins with the start of primary school around the age of six years, so kindergarten attendance is voluntary.

Administration and organisation of centre-based care are multi-tiered. Federal law sets the basic principles, and the states (*Länder*) have their own laws and regulations, provide funds and oversight. At the local level, the municipalities co-finance and manage childcare provision (see Oliver and Mätzke 2014: 176 for details on the underlying subsidiarity principle). Public funding covers centres run by public authorities, those run by private non-profit organisations, and in several states also the for-profit providers. For-profit or commercial providers are however few in number; they run only about 3% of all childcare centres. A small fraction of the commercial centres operate without state subsidies, relying on parents' fees as their only income, while the fees charged for attending a publicly funded centre are income-dependent and not intended to cover all costs. We will later draw on one non-profit centre and one high-cost for-profit centre from our sample to illustrate the argument we develop below.

## RESEARCHING ELITE ORGANISATIONS AND INTERNATIONALISATION IN GERMAN ECEC

### *Elite Organisations*

The issues of marketisation and increasing hierarchisation of educational landscapes are prominent in research on elite schools and universities. Particular attention is often paid to how specific education organisations may play an integral role in the (re-)production of (future) elites. We will

now briefly discuss possible adaptations of this line of inquiry for ECEC research. One approach would be to deductively define the (functional) elite as a certain proportion of the richest people, for instance, managers of big corporations or people in other kinds of influential positions and then examine how their education may have been instrumental in securing these positions for themselves (Hartmann 2013: 75). This approach, however, cannot easily be applied to ECEC and its organisations. First, the long timespan since these people's early education and the wide variety of educational trajectories make it difficult to draw inferences between early years provision and 'success' in adult life. Additionally, there is currently no distinct group of ECEC organisations in Germany which would widely be regarded as being exceptional or prestigious either in terms of quality or outcomes for children attending them. Thus, there are no predetermined starting points from which to identify an organisational foundation of elite formation processes. For a large part, this holds true for both primary and secondary schools in Germany, so seeking to identify ECEC organisations feeding into prestigious schools is arguably even more challenging. Indeed, German research into elites and elite education has never to date concerned itself with preschool education (Mader et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, within the field of ECEC research, questions of equity in relation to access, use and outcomes have formed the cornerstone of this academic field. The recent state-led expansion of the German ECEC system's capacity has renewed interest in this topic, with one of the main lines of inquiry focusing on disadvantages experienced by low-income groups (Alt et al. 2012). In this context, a heated debate has arisen in professional and academic circles about equality of access to quality care and the role of commercial high-priced providers. These providers are allegedly contributing to a vertical differentiation of German ECEC by marketing 'enhanced' services at very steep prices that are aimed exclusively at high-income groups (Ernst et al. 2014).

If and in which ways the establishment of high-priced commercial childcare centres leads to new processes of (organisational) distinction and segregation is the main focus of our broader research project which informs this chapter. Our approach to considering how the concept of elite education might be interpreted within the field of ECEC has been to research how notions of elite and exclusivity are constructed by those involved in German ECEC (Krüger et al. 2012). We found that both the term and the notion of 'elite' are virtually absent from German ECEC—both in the literature as well as in our sample's childcare centres themselves. There are

some tentative findings in the literature as to what key actors in the field consider a ‘good’ early childhood education. This, however, is related to the diverse discourses of pedagogic quality and is not aimed at identifying a group of ‘best’ or ‘elite’ ECEC organisations in Germany (Honig et al. 2004). We therefore decided to consider the issue further by examining how parents and teachers in individual childcare centres engaged with the interactional particularisation of their organisation (Mader et al. 2014). This mode of distinction, or of ‘doing exclusivity’, is, however, restricted to those directly involved in individual centres; this symbolic stratification is largely self-referential and cannot be assumed to be recognised in wider social or geographical circles. Approaching the question of how internationalisation may contribute to processes of differentiation and segregation of early childhood education thus means to ask how internationalisation processes may, on a structural level, provide resources that can be gainfully used in such interactional particularisation.

### *Internationalisation*

As there is no established framework for researching internationalisation in ECEC, we turned to literature on the internationalisation of higher education as this sector is much more strongly international and the theorising of these processes far more developed (Grothus and Maschke 2013; Kehm and Teichler 2007). Jane Knight conceptualises internationalisation as

the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. (Knight 2004: 11)

With this working definition, Knight is interested in developing an approach that is “appropriate for use in a broad range of contexts and for comparative purposes across countries and regions of the world” (Knight 2004: 11). We will use this definition and its accompanying exemplifications as a heuristic tool to explore what is understood by internationalisation and the specific activities developed in German ECEC.

That Knight’s working definition is mainly descriptive is actually an advantage for our current investigations. It mainly delineates the range of phenomena to include in the term internationalisation and so helps to analytically distinguish it from related phenomena such as globalisation or marketisation. Also, no *a priori* assumption is made about how

internationalisation might be connected to these latter developments, to segregation or to elite formation, thus providing a rather neutral starting point from which to develop further empirical and theoretical insights. Furthermore, the descriptive nature of the definition allows us to reflect upon the extent to which internationalisation efforts might be called 'strategic' in the sense that 'integrating an international dimension' would mean that the process has been actively planned, reflected on, or integrated into a broader strategy. We will argue that such strategic notions of internationalisation are largely absent from German ECEC and that understanding how processes of internationalisation have nonetheless become embedded into childcare centres' work is key to establishing how internationalisation efforts lead to the continuation but also disruption of processes of inequality.

Knight also proposes to distinguish three levels in analyses of internationalisation processes: the national, sector and institutional levels. For German ECEC, the national level translates to both the national government, which sets general ECEC policy, and to the level of the states, who are in charge of ECEC provision, administration and financing. At the sector level, that is policy arena, the social security system is most relevant here. The institutional level encompasses both individual childcare centres as well as the providers themselves, which may operate multiple centres each. In the remainder of this section, we will briefly assess the national and sector levels, but our focus in this chapter is on the institutional level. Along with identifying to what extent internationalisation is taking place, we will point out structural constraints that, compared to other education sectors, limit the range of internationalisation activities possible within ECEC. These constraints include the ages of the children, the low degree of standardisation of German ECEC, and the absence of federal, state and sector initiatives. Then, in the next section we outline the international and intercultural activities which we observed as taking place in the centres we studied.

Children attending childcare centres are aged between 0 and 6 years. At these ages, the children are not independently mobile and are, on a pedagogical and philosophical level, quite differently understood as autonomous subjects than is the case for older pupils or higher education students. The younger the children, the more they are regarded as beings in need of care and affection, further complicating the notion of children being recipients of formal teaching. All this has a strongly inhibitive effect on any internationalisation efforts that would require students to be both independently mobile and independent decision-makers—student exchanges and language courses abroad are among the kind of internationalisation

proxies used in other research which are rendered largely meaningless here. It could be argued that it is not the children but their parents who are the decision-making customers or clients of ECEC, but there are obvious limits to the types of programmes that can sensibly be offered to families seeking out early years care and education.

The low degree of standardisation is another important feature of German ECEC which limits developments around internationalisation. First, there are no certificates or examinations which children have to complete before they can enter the next phase of their education. In some states local health authorities do assess whether a child's development is such that they are 'ready' to start primary school (i.e. 'school readiness'); other states now focus on assessing whether a child might have any potential special educational needs. Meanwhile, all states have introduced language assessments at preschool ages. These assessments have been conceived of as identifying any needs schools must take into consideration when providing the child with an education, but they do not yield certification that could be used as capital by families to gain access to particular schools. Given the non-standardisation of German ECEC, parents' views on what is to be considered a desirable or successful early years education vary widely. In fact, the very broad range of educational philosophies and styles available to families in ECEC is one of the most prominent features of the German system. This means that up until now there have been few coalescing definitions of what excellence in ECEC should be comprised of.

At the federal, state and social service sector level, there are no policies or programmes that would amount to an explicit or strategic aim for the internationalisation of ECEC (although foreign language education might, in time, become an exception to the rule—see below). This means that there is no politically or pedagogically endorsed frame of reference which would suggest to childcare providers that they need to explicitly engage with internationalisation efforts.

#### INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL—EMBEDDED INTERNATIONALISATION

At the organisational level—individual childcare centres—several international and intercultural activities can be found that closely resemble those in other education sectors. One example would be the study of a foreign language, ranging from discrete familiarisation sessions in a new language

to full language immersion in bilingual environments. In some centres the focus is on German as a second language. While there are no international curricula in a strict sense, strong international and intercultural dimensions have been found to enter everyday operations in some centres where the diversity of their clientele requires this for pedagogical reasons. In centres where families have a range of national and cultural backgrounds, international and intercultural events, partnerships with community-based cultural and ethnic groups, community service and intercultural project work are often developed as extracurricular activities. Finally, and somehow resembling the notion of international students, there are non-German families using ECEC—though many of these families are not necessarily members of the global middle classes or elite, seeking an educational provision that mirrors what they received elsewhere or will go on to use when they once again move.

However, central to our analysis is our assertion that the international activities and centres' characteristics are not representations of strategic internationalisation, as they are not constructed in this way by the staff and parents interviewed in our research. Two case studies of centres illustrate how internationalisation might contribute to both the perpetuation and potential disruption of privilege.

The first centre is one of a non-profit provider's several centres. It is located in a migrant inner-city neighbourhood that is characterised by high levels of poverty and unemployment; due to low income, many families are exempt from the attendance fees that usually have to be paid to the municipality. The centre takes in children from a few months of age to school age. Owing to the multinational composition of the centre's clientele, there are necessarily intercultural and international dimensions to both its everyday operations and its extracurricular activities such as summer fairs or excursions. There is also an explicit focus on community outreach and service that revolves around assisting immigrant families to participate more fully within German society. This includes assistance with liaising with government agencies, schools and healthcare organisations as well as the provision of German-language courses for parents, and parent peer-support groups. This emphasis is also reflected in the provider's staff training and professional development activities. Many of these are tailored to fostering the staff's skills in engaging children and families in a context of language barriers, poverty and a multitude of different cultural habits (including German ones).



The second centre is a high-priced for-profit operation. It belongs to a commercial provider that runs several centres in larger cities. The centre draws clients from all over the city, operates a programme of German-English bilingual immersion and, like the other centre, takes children from a few months of age. Staff and the directors of the centre emphasise the flexibility of care arrangements offered and the high quality of education provided. Operations are completely bilingual; among each group's two or three teachers, there is one native English speaker. The centre is also frequented by English-speaking expatriates. The centre's rationale for operating a bilingual programme can be said to be twofold. First, it is seeking to build a social infrastructure for globally mobile professionals. Given the highly demanding jobs pursued by many of the parents, the centre aims to provide an extensive and flexible form of childcare to meet their needs. The provider also seeks to support the families and their children in an environment where there is language familiarity. Second, a foreign language appears to increasingly be one of the markers of a holistic and comprehensive educational package the centre aims to offer aspiring parents. Overall, the bilingual concept, the flexibility of care arrangements and the proclaimed quality of education are deemed to be the necessary things to do if the centre is to accomplish its mission of accommodating highly qualified parents who are, actually or potentially, mobile across borders.

Meanwhile, the centre in the migrant inner-city neighbourhood provides a different frame through which to understand international and intercultural activities. The provider's mission includes a strong commitment to furthering equal opportunities and enhancing the children's and families' agency. Against this backdrop, the international and intercultural dimension of the staff training, everyday practices, and community outreach are seen to be necessary to accomplish this goal. The activities are thus embedded in a social pedagogical coping strategy that is tailored to the provider's mission, the centre's clientele, and its socio-geographical location.

#### INTERSECTIONS OF EMBEDDED INTERNATIONALISATION AND PRIVILEGE

The international and intercultural activities outlined above are embedded within but are not at the core of providers' and centres' strategies for the provision of early years care and education. We therefore propose to think

of such activities as embedded rather than strategically conceived processes of internationalisation within German ECEC. The rationale for, and the outcomes of, international activities can only be understood within the particular context in which they are being developed and practised. In this final section, we consider further the three frames identified above—building a social infrastructure for mobile parents, a comprehensive educational package and social pedagogical coping strategies—and their connections to processes of (organisational) segregation and distinction. To achieve a nuanced assessment, for each frame, we will discuss aspects that point to trends of increasing stratification as well as to opposing trends.

### *Social Infrastructure for Globally Mobile Professionals*

While the organisational structure and purpose of international schools differ markedly from those of childcare centres, in some aspects there seems to be a functional equivalence. Hayden (2011) describes traditional international schools

as a means of catering for the children of expatriate diplomats and employees of transnational organisations who followed their parents' globally mobile professions around the world, and for whom education provided locally—perhaps because of language or a mismatch with university entrance requirements in the home country—was deemed unsuitable. (Hayden 2011: 214)

This draws attention to the role international education organisations—and, to some degree, childcare centres such as the commercial one mentioned above—play in enabling and supporting the cross-border mobility of the elite group of parents outlined by Hayden. Drawing on this perspective, a major function of these childcare centres is not the excellent education of the children, but the provision of a suitable social infrastructure for internationally mobile families. In other words—such specialised childcare provision can be viewed not necessarily as a tool for conferring further advantages to one's children, but as a necessary precondition for facilitating the increasing flow of well-trained expatriates across borders. Flexible and non-German medium extra-familial childcare has long been scarce. High-priced providers are therefore eager to capitalise on this lack, while the high fees contribute to their somewhat exclusive character.

Such internationalised, flexible care arrangements are, however, increasingly also being offered by state-funded non-profit providers. While the

overall proportion of bilingual childcare centres is low, it seems to be steadily rising (FMKS 2014). There is also an ongoing discussion within the sector on how to provide institutional childcare outside the ‘core hours’ (approximately 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.) (Stöbe-Blossey 2011: 380–383). The more such kinds of programmes grow, the less likely they are to be only accessible to specific, privileged groups of parents, thus losing their value as marketable indicators of excellence and distinction.

### *Comprehensive Educational Package*

Implementing a bilingual programme, and thus a foreign language education, is as close as ECEC appears to engage with the notion of strategic attempts to internationalise. However, as illustrated above, this is not necessarily how bilingual programmes are framed—we argue that they are better understood as one of several building blocks of a specific and comprehensive educational package that aspiring parents may seek. There are strong similarities to the interests and activities Vincent and Ball (2007) describe for the parents in their study, who can be said to be engaged in ‘making up’ the middle-class child. In the case of our commercial centre, the centre includes in its programme what Vincent and Ball call enrichment activities, such as music, gym and art. Not only is there a clear service aspect to such provision—as the parents do not need to organise these activities themselves and drive their children around in the afternoon—but the centre also ensures it signals to parents the high quality of these programmes (Mader et al. 2014). For example, the centre does not merely include science experiments in its education, but the provider employs a science graduate to run them, a trained singer to facilitate the centre’s music education, and one native (English) speaker per group, thereby signalling the quality of its foreign language training.

There are a number of ways in which childcare centres disseminate their claims of offering a specialised and superior education; in another commercial centre we studied there were, for example, certain artefacts such as small easels and a piano on display. While the existence of such programmes and ways of addressing specific class fractions are in themselves nothing new, they may be linked to internationalisation insofar as a foreign language seems to be more and more a requisite enhancement to any comprehensive educational package. Making up a middle-class child may thus increasingly include building a capacity for future international and cross-cultural mobility, independent of the family’s current level of transnational

movement. The high fees commercial childcare centres are charging also mean that such comprehensive service and education packages are only available to families able to deploy the considerable financial means necessary. This small niche of ECEC provision can thus be said to be marketing itself to a very particular clientele—one in which a privileged socio-economic position and specific educational preferences intersect.

However, this tentative assessment needs to be further differentiated and nuanced. Bilingual education at preschool age is steadily increasing, including within publicly funded childcare centres. Numbers available from the Association for Early Multilingualism in Day Nurseries and Schools show, for example, that the number of childcare centres offering some sort of bilingual programme has risen from 340 in 2004 to 1034 in 2014 (FMKS 2014: 1). Furthermore, catering for different families' needs and worldviews by offering choice among a range of educational philosophies is one of the central structural features of German Early Childhood Education and Care. This variety, along with possible effects residential segregation may have on the structure of provision, has meant that parents have always had a certain degree of choice in selecting their child's educational experience (Franke-Meyer 2014).

Overall, the increase in bilingual childcare provision and the ongoing discussion in the publicly funded childcare sector on how to better accommodate families' needs (e.g. the extension of hours of care) raise the question—how exactly might bilingual provision be deemed to denote a certain level of exclusivity in provision? Further research in this area is needed, and currently the focus of a study (Mader and Mierendorff 2017; Mierendorff et al. 2014).

### *Social Pedagogical Coping Strategies*

In the non-profit centre, international activities are embedded into the provider's and staff's mission of empowering its clients to participate in society. There are some fundamental features to this social pedagogical approach that do not lend themselves to commodifying the centre's services, that is, to make them into a product that can be sold to individual customers. This is due to the dual structure of social pedagogical work: on the one hand, it consists of advocacy on the client's behalf; it has to dialogically help the clients help themselves to autonomously manage their lives in a context of demanding societal normalcy. On the other hand, it is

engaged in the surveillance and supervision of deviance on behalf of the majority society—or, given its position in public welfare, on behalf of the welfare state (Böhnisch and Lösch 1973: 27–29; Klatetzki 2010: 16; Olk et al. 2003: xxi). Accordingly, the subjects of voluntary sector social work are, in our case, the families using publicly funded childcare centres, while the paying customer of the services is mostly the welfare state. Additionally, considering the aims of this approach—integration on the societal level, developing in individuals a capacity to autonomously manage their lives in potentially adverse circumstances—it is hard to imagine ways in which efforts at internationalisation could be conceived of as either introducing systematic differentiation among groups of people or providing individual families or children with a means of gaining or perpetuating privilege.

### CONCLUSION

Understandings of processes of elite formation, and how imperatives towards internationalisation intersect with these, operate differently in German ECEC when compared to the school and higher education sectors. Such an examination must be adapted to accommodate for specific features shaping ECEC—the age group of the students, the specific mission of care and education, and the peculiarities of the national and local contexts in which such care is being offered.

In the case of internationalisation, the most notable difference to other education sectors is the absence in German ECEC of the kind of strategic internationalisation found within higher education, which includes national and sector level policies that compel education organisations to engage in internationalisation activities. We proposed to understand the international and intercultural activities taking place at the level of individual childcare centres as being embedded in missions and strategies that have been tailored to the specific local context. In our research we have found evidence of internationalisation in centres' desire to create an infrastructure for globally mobile families, in the provision of a comprehensive educational package (particularly desired by middle-class families), and in centres' social pedagogical coping strategies tailored to the accommodation of less-privileged groups.

This analysis supports the argument that internationalisation in ECEC does not introduce new inequalities *per se*, but may modernise and blend in with existing mechanisms of differentiation. This is most obvious with

the provision of a comprehensive educational package—bilingual education seems increasingly to be a requisite component of the educational experience specific middle-class fractions may seek for their children. Yet, our research also suggests that initiatives that could be ‘internationalising’ in their outcomes (such as bilingual programmes) are becoming more commonplace across the entire ECEC sector; their value as markers of exclusivity can thus be expected to diminish in the future. More importantly, the social pedagogical coping strategies with their inherent notions of compensation and empowerment—helping families to navigate the social security and education systems, through both advocacy and the development of individual capabilities—show that internationalisation does not necessarily connect to mechanisms that perpetuate privilege but might actively oppose them.

Internationalisation, in the case of German ECEC, is taking place within a vastly differentiated field that is deeply rooted in its social welfare history, yet confronted with the same effects of globalisation and cross-border migration as other educational sectors. Our analysis points to the importance of employing a contextualised perspective on institutional-level internationalisation processes, taking into account the various local and regional settings in which particular ECEC education organisations operate.

## NOTES

1. We use ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) to refer to the sector of state-regulated, extra-familial care and education of children aged 0–6. ‘Centre-based care’ refers to ECEC as it takes place in daycare centres (as opposed to certified childminders), which is the predominant form of extra-familial care and education in Germany as well as the focus of the current research project.
2. The research project ‘Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care’ (Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg) aims to microanalytically identify the impact of the changing structure of German ECEC provision on processes of inequality and (organisational) distinction. It is a six-year qualitative study of three high-priced and two conventional, state-funded childcare centres. Principal researcher is Johanna Mierendorff; research associates are Thilo Ernst and Marius Mader. See Mierendorff et al. (2014) for further information.

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