

Context of the Review

The OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* was launched by the OECD's Education Committee in March 1998. The impetus for the project came from the 1996 Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*. In their communiqué, the Education Ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care, with the aim of enhancing further education, family and social cohesion, and employment opportunities for women (OECD, 1998).

Germany was the 19th country to be reviewed by the OECD. Prior to the visit a *Background Report* on ECEC policy was commissioned by the *Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*. The report provided a wide-ranging account of services across Germany and a comprehensive analysis of current policies and provision. From 6th to 16th June, 2004, a review team, comprising an OECD secretariat member and three experts with diverse research and policy backgrounds visited Germany. The rapporteur for the team was Professor Peter Moss of the London Institute of Education.

The OECD Country Note

Subsequent to the visit in Germany the OECD created the Country Note, which links the national background data with the observations of the review team. The OECD Country Note for Germany describes firstly, the *contextual issues shaping ECEC policies in Germany* and then *current policies and services*. The contextual issues selected for review have an important impact on the shape of German services and their performance. They include: demography, labour market and employment situation; immigration; recent history (in particular unification); subsidiarity and federalism; the *Träger* system; and the concept of social pedagogy. The chapter on *current policies and services* describes the major features of the system: maternity and parental leave provision; the structure of services East and West; the levels of provision; the providers of services; the funding of services; the workforce; regulation, professional development and quality maintenance; the opportunities provided for children with additional learning needs; and the place of parents in services.

Issues identified

The OECD review team then identifies a number of *ECEC issues* that are being discussed in Germany, e.g. how to develop the present system both in terms of coverage and quality; the tensions between national standards and local autonomy; the relationship between early childhood education and care, school and school-age childcare; workforce issues, especially the need for higher training standards and improved working conditions for the *Erzieherinnen*; financing issues, weaknesses in research and data collection; the place of children with special learning needs.

... and conclusions

The conclusions reached by the review team are as follows:

The strengths of the German ECEC system

Much strength and resources exists in the early childhood field in Germany: First of all, the long tradition of Germany in this field, with its rich concepts including the social pedagogic approach with its understanding of *Bildung*, *Betreuung* and *Erziehung* as inseparable features of early childhood services. The English-speaking world has much to learn from this holistic concept and accompanying practice. The German system is also well-developed, especially in the *Neue Bundesländer (NBL)*, which have coverage rates among the highest in OECD countries. A progressive development of services is also taking place in the *Alte Bundesländer (ABL)*, with the move toward full-day services, the development of out-of-school provision (the Hort) and the *Kindertagesstätten*, which offer multiple services to parents and mixed-age groups of children. Centres across the country are also relatively well-resourced (buildings, materials, outdoor areas...). The German system is not oriented on profit and its goal is to promote all children in the same way – in spite of the family income and the parentage. The regulations regarding decentral responsibilities and local provision of services also open - though not without some dangers - possibilities for innovation, and responsiveness to local needs and conditions. There is great openness to the need

<p><i>New perspectives on parental leave</i></p>	<p>for change, including the quantitative and qualitative development of ECEC-services and a provision which sees the situation of the child in the centre as the reconciliation of family and working life. This readiness is also on the side of the <i>Länder</i>, what is for example shown by the outline plan for the educational plans of the <i>Länder</i>.</p> <p>A strong base for development exists, but national planning is needed to build up a system responsive to <i>all</i> children, and to the changing needs of parents and contemporary German society. While parental leave is generous, its underlying assumption for decades in the <i>ABL</i> in practice has been <i>maternalism</i>, a strong belief that the young child should be cared for in the family, and in particular by mothers. As a result, a sufficient pool of services for young children under 3 years has not been developed, leading – as in many other countries - to interrupted careers for women with children and the emergence of a grey market in child-minding. New solutions need to be found that simultaneously protect the best interests of young children, equal opportunity for women and the changing needs of German society.</p>
<p><i>Democratic tensions</i></p>	<p>For the OECD review team, the role of the Federal government in this and other matters is crucial. In all democratic countries there is an unavoidable tension between centralisation and decentralisation, uniformity and local preference. The tension is particularly apparent in federal states, but in all democratic societies it is subject to constant debate and negotiation. In Germany <i>Länder</i> and municipalities are responsible for the quantity and the quality of the ECEC-services. Nevertheless there is hardly ever a final point, where all parties are fully satisfied. However, it is the Federal level that is finally responsible for the public welfare which includes also the protection of the rights of women, young children and minorities – all key stakeholders in the development of early childhood services. The development of ECEC is a national interest with respect to quantity and quality.</p>
<p><i>A lead by the Federal government</i></p>	<p>The OECD team places a strong value on decentralisation - not only as an expression of different perspectives and interests, but also as a means for stimulating innovation and change. At the same time, it suggests that there is a need to review the present balance between diversity and national standards in early childhood services in Germany. In particular, the Federal government is encouraged to continue to exercise its responsibility for ECEC services, within the framework of the Constitution, through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The continuation of quality and other initiatives</i> that focus the attention of the different stakeholders on important current issues. • <i>Legislation that defines common entitlements and requirements.</i> In this regard, the Federal government could serve parents well by developing a long-term strategy, in consultation with the <i>Länder</i>, to ensure that the legal entitlement to a place at 3 years should be extended in stages toward a universal entitlement from the age of 12 months. This is already the <i>de facto</i> situation in the <i>NBL</i>, which at present can mostly ensure access for all children whose parents need a service at that age. • <i>(Indirect) funding initiatives to ensure that important national goals are reached.</i> Among these goals would be to identify or attract new funding for early childhood services (the overall investment is low compared to the minimum 1% of GDP recommended by the European Commission Childcare Network). Another federal goal would be to ensure for families across the country, appropriate and roughly equal access to services, which implies improved resource levels and the standardisation of funding practices across the <i>Länder</i>. • <i>Other areas identified by the OECD review team for national-level initiatives were:</i> to establish, in co-operation with the <i>Länder</i>, state- and federal-level data collection. It is difficult to see how coherent policy can be made without comprehensive data on children and on existing financial flows. In this regard, a special responsibility for the Federal state is to monitor the development of ECEC services with particular attention to children's rights

<p><i>The training of ECEC staff</i></p> <p><i>Länder responsibilities</i></p>	<p>issues, e.g. to ensure the achievement of participation and defined outcomes for special needs and low-income children, and when necessary, the funding of affirmative action on their behalf by the responsible authorities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the interests of evidence-based policy-making, it would also be helpful, in the view of the OECD team, <i>to create a comprehensive research infrastructure in the ECEC field</i>, an area in which, for a number of reasons, Germany is weak. <p>Another issue that goes beyond the exclusive competency of the youth and welfare ministries is that of <i>training</i>. No substantial changes were made, however, when the Standing Conference of Education Ministers produced a new framework plan for the education of <i>Erzieherinnen</i> in 2002. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that current training is inadequate. A major reason put forward at Länder level for not raising the level of training was cost, but the present situation is hardly sustainable in the long term with regard either to recruitment or quality. Trends in other OECD countries and the research literature on the subject continue to make a strong link between the level of staff training and the quality of the learning and interactive environments offered to young children. The promotion of training to tertiary level would, in the view of the OECD team, better support an equal relationship between ECEC services and schools; enable staff to take further qualifications, and help to develop in the universities an academic and research presence for early childhood studies. A minimum as a first and important step is a comprehensive offer of further training.</p> <p>The <i>Länder</i> bear the major responsibility for child and youth welfare in Germany, and hence for the provision, organisation, operation and monitoring of early childhood services. At the operational level, the OECD review team identified a number of directions to improve access to services and their quality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A radical expansion - particularly in the ABL - of services for children under 3 years and for school-age children between 6-10 years.</i> The present rate of 2.7% coverage for the younger children in the West is far from the <i>NBL</i> level of 37% or the EU Barcelona recommendation of 33% coverage by the year 2010. Likewise, in the old <i>Länder</i>, the <i>Hort</i> serves 6.4% of children 6-10 years, but the service is growing, with new services tending to be placed within schools. In the <i>NBL</i>, 67.6% of children have places in the local <i>Hort</i>, which is a coverage rate unequalled in most OECD countries. • <i>A more proactive approach to young children coming from at-risk and/or special needs backgrounds.</i> Although there is much good will, and obvious improvements have been made especially in the <i>NBL</i>, there is insufficient data in general on the participation of these children and their progress. According to the PISA analysis (2202), the German education system has not been successful enough in redressing the imbalances caused by unfavourable family and social backgrounds. A response to the situation has to begin at the level of family and children's services. Some excellent initiatives are already in place, e.g. the MoKi project in Monheim, but according to the German Background Report, only 64% of children from the lowest income families (€500-900 euros per month) ever attend a kindergarten. Overall in Germany, 8% of 5 to 6 year olds were not attending kindergarten (despite this being an entitlement), but there is little information on which children and families fall into the 'non-attender' group. • <i>Supporting practice through in-service training, practice consultants and other well-tried quality measures.</i> Processes that could support the development and improvement of quality were suggested to the OECD review team by many stakeholders: in-service training; more consultation centres; a strong network of practice consultants with a reasonable number of centres to support; emphasis on observations of children; improved training and work conditions for pedagogues. Development of these measures for systematic review and reflection is encouraged.
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<p><i>Mechanisms for partnership</i></p>	<p>The decentralised and quasi-autonomous development of different early childhood systems across Germany over the past decades makes it necessary to improve understanding between the Federal and Länder levels. The review team concluded that it was important to explore co-operative mechanisms to provide a degree of national coherence to children’s services, in which early childhood centres, Hort and the primary school can be linked while preserving their own identities and distinctive approaches. One possibility would be for the Standing Conferences of Education and Youth Ministers to establish a joint sub-group, with Federal government representation. This sub-group would provide a meeting place between education and youth welfare, and between Federal and <i>Länder</i> governments. It would have the remit to develop and oversee the implementation of long-term strategies for children from birth to 10 years, and link effectively gender, family, social, labour and educational policy.</p>
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