

A Journalist Comments on the Need for Greater Attention to Early Childhood Education (June 30, 2006)

Abstract

A journalist describes the need for better, more extensive, and more innovative early childhood education, and he criticizes the lagging political will to provide the funds to make it a reality.

Source

The Riches of Early Childhood

Day care centers are supposed to remedy the integration crisis, demographic catastrophe, and the plight of our schools; they are to fill our value vacuum and build the foundation of the education system. And, of course, none of this is supposed to cost anything at all.

This is what education looks like: at the Am Zeisigberg Day Care Center children can learn arithmetic by climbing stairs. Every step leading up to their playhouse was recently numbered. Whoever goes two steps, and then another three, ends up at five. Real-life arithmetic. Numbering the stairs is just one of the many small innovations that helped this day care center in the small Brandenburg city of Müllrose win an award. Since last fall, the center has been the proud bearer of the German Day Care Seal of Quality, a kind of inspection sticker for high-quality day care.

In the meantime, about two hundred day care facilities have been inspected by PädQUIS, an institute at the Free University of Berlin. Forty percent passed on their first try. Everything gets tested in Germany: cars, frozen pizzas, beauty creams, says Wolfgang Tietze, inventor of the new seal of quality. “And yet, up to now, we knew very little about the quality of day care centers.” But if children spend an average of 4,000 hours in a good day care facility, then the impact lasts, even years down the road. They have a larger vocabulary, get better grades in school, and exhibit more positive social behavior.

A playroom in the house of education: That’s what day care was considered until a few years ago. Now it is supposed to become the foundation of the education system. Because according to current thinking, the problems with the German school system start with the very littlest ones. Children from immigrant families hardly speak a word of German when they enter first grade? Send them to day care for language training! Women are supposed to have children and work at the same time? Then finally open up more day care facilities, where even academics can feel good about leaving their offspring! Whether it’s the dismal school situation or the integration crisis, demographic catastrophe or our value vacuum, there is hardly a social problem that day care centers aren’t expected to solve.

Politics has also discovered “early learning.” When it comes to the educational panacea that is “day care,” an extremely grand coalition encompassing everything from the PDS to the CSU rules in Germany. Almost all federal states have amended their day care legislation and issued so-called education plans that regulate what the children are supposed to have learned by the time they start school. North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, wants to make language instruction and close collaboration with elementary schools compulsory. The day care centers are supposed to document the developmental stage of each child and identify health problems. These new ambitions definitely appeal to day care providers. “Our colleagues [in this field] feel like they are being taken seriously for the first time,” said Norbert Hocke of the teachers’ union [*Gewerkschaft Bildung und Wissenschaft* or GEW].

[...]

What a change! In order to be considered a good day care center, it used to be enough to have bright rooms, parent-friendly hours, and pleasant nursery school teachers who didn't smoke while standing around the sandbox. If organic food was used for meals then even critical college-educated parents were satisfied. In deliberate contrast to the state-run "total care" of little tots in East Germany, undemanding care was offered in the West up to the late 1990s.

Children were not supposed to be separated from their mothers until they were at least three and even then only in the mornings, please. At the same time, the aim was to keep the girls and boys busy enough with games, singing, and arts and crafts to protect them from any and all kinds of education. Numbers and letters had no place in day care centers. For decades, the significance of the pre-school years was "systematically underestimated," criticized Wassilios Athenakis, former head of the state institute for early education in Munich.

The PISA shock finally brought about a change, and attention was focused not only on schools but also on the years preceding school. It was discovered that, of all things, the country that had invented "kindergarten" – and thereby invented a word that even people in France, England, and Spain understand – had degenerated into a developing country (at least in West Germany) as regards early education. Although all parents have been legally entitled to day care for children three and older since 1996, this mandate generally only applies to four hours in the morning. Only one in three day care centers in the old federal states offers any kind of full-day program. And care for children under three is even worse here. Only three percent of all children in this age group find space in a day nursery.

The training level of staff is also incredibly low. German day care personnel train in vocational schools. In contrast to almost all other European countries, not even the director of a facility in this country needs to have a university degree. In the medical field that would be like letting preschool children be treated by nurses only, since university-trained physicians aren't necessary for this age group. That is why a career as a day care provider is unattractive to people with a college-preparatory high school degree [*Abitur*]; and it doesn't offer much of a professional future even to good students from lower-level secondary schools [*Realschulen*]. Such paltry training has consequences. "Four seasons education" is what critics call the droning rhythm according which many day care centers operate: the kids make baskets at Easter, glue leaves in the fall, and make Christmas stars in the winter.

New research findings, such as those by Bielefeld teacher Gerhard Friedrich, have a hard time making their way into the everyday routines of day care staff. Friedrich sent day care children to "number land," where they were supposed to explore the numbers one through ten using fairy tales, games, and music. After only ten hours of directed playful training, these children were a year ahead of their peers in number comprehension. [...]

Didactic concepts such as "number land" are in great demand in day care centers. "In contrast to many teachers, day care workers are willing to invest time – even their free time – in further training," said GEW official Norbert Hocke. At the same time, many day care workers wondered how they were supposed to satisfy the new requirements. That is the principal contradiction of the day care initiative. The facilities are given many additional tasks but no additional personnel. Most federal states also do not make any extra funding available for training programs.

Even guaranteed day care, which was enacted in 1996, had its price. Quality standards were lowered, classes became larger, less qualified staff was hired. This kind of policy is repeating itself now. "Everything is supposed to be different and better, but it isn't supposed to cost anything," criticized Ilse Wehrmann, long-time director of the Federal Association of Protestant Day Care Facilities [*Bundesvereinigung Evangelischer Kindergärten*]. In Bremen, for instance, the child to caretaker ratio is

20:1. Many of these children come from immigrant families. “Under such conditions it is impossible to give each child individual attention,” said Wehrmann.

The new requirements have long since shattered the tight schedules of day care centers. While teachers are given hours to prepare their lessons, day care staff members only have minutes to prepare. A scientific experiment or a consultation with parents cannot be planned on the side. The children face the same dilemma. If ambitious educational objectives are to be achieved in the four morning hours, then the day care center quickly turns into school: Monday arithmetic, Tuesday biology. But young children learn playfully and in passing, not in hourly intervals.

Germany the wonderful new day care land has only existed on paper in many places up to now. This is especially true of the prestigious “early learning.” German education minister Annette Schavan (CDU) boasts about Baden-Württemberg’s educational facilities, where “three- to ten-year-olds learn together.” But right now, they are only doing it on the piece of paper that is the coalition agreement of the new CDU-FDP coalition government in that federal state.

[...]

A counterexample is Rhineland-Palatinate, where education minister Doris Ahnen is tackling early learning with substance instead of hullabaloo. The federal state (similar to Saarland) is foregoing parent contributions in the last year of preschool and gradually expanding the childcare entitlement to two-year-olds as well. At the same time, it is making two million Euro available annually for training programs to familiarize day care providers with the state’s education plan, which is supposed to guide the children’s days like an invisible, behind-the-scenes curriculum

Without any additional funding the quality of day care centers cannot be improved, predicts Stefan Sell, social economist at the Koblenz Polytechnic. Germany spends about 0.5 percent of its gross national product on early childhood education and care. That is far less than countries such as France (0.7 percent), Denmark (0.8 percent), and Norway (1.0 percent), and far from the one-percent benchmark recommended by the OECD. Also, parent contributions in this country are higher than in almost all other countries. In Berlin, for example, the highest rate is 400 Euro per month for day care.

According to the report on children and adolescents, about 2.7 billion Euro is needed to offer all-day programs for all children under six to all parents who are interested. That’s one billion less than what family minister Ursula von der Leyen wants to spend in the future on parental benefits. It would be wiser to invest that money in day care centers, since the problem nowadays is less about families’ lack of money and more about the lack of available day care facilities. The federal government is not permitted to pay for this, however, since day care funding is the responsibility of the federal states and, especially, the local governments. But their coffers are empty. Plus, the financial boost from expanded day care facilities goes to the federal government since more working women pay taxes and contribute to social security. Economist Sell asks: “Why should a mayor invest in his day care centers?”

The overall social benefit of good childcare is enormous. But this insight easily goes missing, since the situation is so complex. According to a famous long-term U.S. study, for every dollar the government invests in good early childhood education, it gets up to seven dollars back down the road: through lower welfare costs, higher tax revenues, lower crime rates. Unfortunately, the gains don’t materialize until decades later, when the children are grown up and have jobs instead of collecting welfare. And that’s a time frame that extends well beyond a legislative period.

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Translation: Allison Brown

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