

*Path dependency and paradigm shifts –
Institutional changes in early childhood education in comparison*
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Summary

The *main goal* of this research project is to identify and to explain different paths of institutional change in early childhood education over a longer period of time from the late 19th century onwards up to now, investigating the relevance of broader societal factors in relation to institutional factors and the resulting path-dependency. While the explanation of development of schools as more or less isomorphic institutions has attracted considerable attention in scientific research, especially in new institutionalism, education is understood in a narrow sense as formal education in school or university, while institutions and organisation of early childhood education (ECE) are no subject at all in this strand of theory. However, this research project is based on the idea that education of children below the age of obligatory schooling, which moved from the back-stage to the centre of social policies over the last decades, is a fascinating area of rapid change. We find varieties in the approaches to education (and care) and huge institutional differences between countries. There is a common trend towards the dominance of a ‘pedagogical discourse’ replacing the formerly dominant ‘childcare discourse’ (Moss 2006), but this is far from unilateral and requires further qualification.

The *central question* is how differences and commonalities of developmental paths are to be explained and to identify path-dependency or path-breaking events or paradigm shifts in selected countries. How far can we speak of a trend towards convergence of different concepts and forms of institutionalisation towards a pedagogical paradigm, linking early childhood education closer to the educational sector and to the institutional structures of education and schooling? What are the driving forces even in those countries which have been formerly ambivalent or reluctant to expand public childcare facilities but emphasised private, especially maternal care responsibilities or market reliance for the provision of services? How does change affect the construction of the relationship between parents (fathers and mothers) and the state in providing education and care for young children? How do different institutional configurations of ECE affect social inequalities of children in having access to ECE?

This research project applies a *historical-institutional and comparative approach*. It builds upon *former research undertaken* that is documented in the publication *Child Care and Preschool Development in Europe – Institutional Perspectives* (Scheiwe/Willekens eds. 2009a). The project brought together researchers from different West European countries in an international conference in 2006 which resulted in this publication, assembling comparative contributions and country studies that investigate ECE in different European countries, since the contemporary features of systems of child care prove to be still heavily determined by the historical conjunctures from which they originated (see Scheiwe/Willekens 2009b). This project is intended to go beyond and develop these ideas further, ideally in a monograph, on the theoretical basis of historical institutionalism and a comparative approach relying on contributions from social sciences and law.

The argument

Socialisation of children, education and care are basic tasks any society has to organise. For older children, formal education has been made obligatory by the state, introducing obligatory schooling since the late 19th century in all industrialised countries. Schooling has structured the life-course of young persons and contributed to the creation of modern childhood. Obligatory schooling and extended periods of formal education brought about changes in the relationship between families, mothers, fathers, the state and other actors (such as Churches and other organisations and associations involved in education) and the market, between private and public responsibilities for the socialisation of children. The development and organisation of early childhood education show a surprising degree of differences among countries and over time and is much more heterogeneous than the parallel growth of schooling. While it remained residual for a long time in many countries, targeted mainly towards children in need whose mothers were forced to leave them unattended when going out to work in industry or agriculture, some countries (for example Belgium and France) started to develop preschools as institutions for small children above the age of three already at the end of the 19th century; educational issues were an important arena of political and cultural struggles over power

relations between the secular state and the catholic church and between different political groups and parties. This early development path starting at the end of the 19th century is often overlooked when it is wrongly assumed that public childcare expansion was mainly linked to the growth of female employment in the 1970ies with Scandinavian countries as forerunners.

Main differences can be seen between three groups of countries: The pioneers of early childhood education, especially Belgium and France, based institutions for children from three to school age on a 'preschool model' and a child-related educational paradigm (followed by Italy, Spain, Luxembourg at a later stage). Other countries developed institutions mainly on the basis of a residual approach and targeted childcare institutions predominantly towards children in need of care; institutions were assigned to the welfare sector under the supervision of municipalities as competent authorities for the provision of public services (for example, in Germany, the Scandinavian countries etc.). Shifts towards universalism, understood as child care and education for all young children, are possible even under a 'reconciliation' or 'compatibility paradigm', but the main difference is that this group of countries understood childcare predominantly as a substitute for maternal care and as public services allowing mothers to be employed. A third group of countries, such as the UK and some states in the US, followed a sort of a bifurcated approach which provided residual public education in nursery schools for targeted groups of children and market-provision of services for all others, with strongly class-related effects. These basic institutional models show different development paths, and varieties in timing and sequence of change are also visible (with forerunners like France and Belgium starting in the late 19th century, the Scandinavian countries expanding services in the late 1960ies/1970s, and various other countries where change began somewhat later). Not only differences in timing and sequence need explanation, but another focus is to analyse other dimensions of institutional variation and its impact upon development processes, such as differences with regard to the assignment of competences (legislative, administrative and financial competences) to different actors within the state, shifts in centralisation/decentralisation and governance of ECE and in the relationships between parents, children and the state (discretionary principles versus rights, universal rights versus residual or targeted rights from children in need or of employed parents, parental fees or free access to a public good etc.). These institutional dimensions are affected by the different goal-setting of national child care or preschool systems on the one hand, and on the other hand they restrict or limit future development processes and adaptations. Path dependency is thus a crucial concept in understanding the development of early childhood education, and hence this research project puts a strong focus on the institutional context within which such systems have developed: institutions, i.e. sets of rules telling us how to do certain things, narrow the paths reforms can tread.

During the last decades, early childhood education has attracted considerable attention not only of social policy makers at the national and international level (e.g., the EU targets to increase childcare provision until 2013) and has been subject to comparative educational and social policy analysis by international institutions such as the OECD. At the level of the United Nations, efforts have been made to interpret the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as including a right to early childhood education (UNICEF 2006).¹ There is a noticeable change in discourses about ECE at the social policy level, with a merger of different policy goals: from the point of view of employment policies and a perceived labour shortage in the future, an increase of female employment and mother's participation rates is favoured. Activation policies make better childcare desirable to activate unemployed lone parents, arguing that this is also an important contribution to fight child poverty (and to cut down public expenditure). The emphasis on children's capacity to learn in early years is another argument for an extension of ECE. International tests of children's achievements in schools (IGLU; PISA etc.) have fuelled worries of policy-makers and heated debates about the importance of ECE for integration, language skills and reducing social inequalities among children. At the same time, child-centred discourses about the child as a future investment, as an actor or rights-based arguments are on the fore, which encourages some authors to speak about a paradigm shift (Jenson 2008). While this argument rightly draws attention to changing discourses, I think this neglects long-term historical developments and underestimates the importance of state regulation of parental obligations and intervention into the family sphere since the late 19th century. One should distinguish debates and public discourses from

¹ See General Comment No. 7 Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood (CRC/C/GC/2005), p. 61ff.

'hard facts' such as public expenditure on young children. But what is definitely true is that the relationship of public and private responsibility and investment in early childhood education is under change; and this affects also the relationship between parents (mothers and fathers differently), the state, society at large and the market. While formerly the age of obligatory schooling marked a watershed in the relationship between parents, the child and the state, now younger age groups are also targeted within the context of life-long learning and affected by changing social policies, although ECE remains on a voluntary basis (only the Netherlands have decided to lower the age of obligatory schooling by one year).

Theoretical approach

This research draws upon the theoretical approach of historical institutionalism and investigates path-dependency and change,² since „choices made in the past systematically constrain the choices open in the future” (Myles and Pierson, 2001, p. 306). The question is whether and to what extent a given path, once entered upon, pushes social policy in a given direction and keeps it from developing in other directions, if and how choices made in the past have shaped the later development of child care policies, closed off certain venues, prevented debates from getting underway and/or stimulated innovative policy steps. Institutional and organisational choices matter, for example how competences regarding child care are divided between state and church; whether decision making on child care issues is centralised on the state level, decentralised towards lower levels of the polity or entirely left to private initiative; whether public care for children under school age is defined as a matter of education, of protection or of the emancipation of women (and, as a corollary, which political actors are supposed to produce discourses and policies with regard to public child care). The comparative study of the institutional structures underlying the provision of public child care requires an input from sociology, political science and history, but also from the law. Most of the relevant institutional factors take a legal form, and though the analysis of this form is far from sufficient to understand in how far institutions steer policies onto predestined paths, it is nevertheless indispensable: the fixedness which the law gives to institutions and the rigidity of the procedures which have to be followed to change the law form additional barriers to straying from the path entered upon.

State of the art in literature

Comparative literature on child care arrangements and policies in different countries started up in the 1980s and 1990s. The subject gained attention in the following years, fuelled by different policy initiatives and research funding through international organisations, such as the OECD, the ILO or the European Commission. In 1986, the EU-Childcare Network under the direction of Peter Moss started its work and initiated various comparative investigations. The OECD Directorate for Education initiated country studies and comparative investigation of child care issues in 1998; in the context of the 'Starting Strong (Early Childhood Education and Care) Network' 20 countries were investigated up to 2004 and several comparative issues were analysed.³ The body of literature and the number of research networks and projects have spread widely in the meantime. Comparative work concentrates on issues such as quality aspects, professional training and education of staff, costs and finances, preschool programmes and curricula, interaction processes, parental involvement and child development. This strand of literature is widely descriptive, has a rather short-time perspective and does not theorise the changing relationships between families, the state and society at large over a longer period.

Another strand of the scientific comparative literature focuses strongly on gender issues (Michel and Mahon, 2002; Michel 2006) and grants insights into the complexity of socio-political issues and conflicting interests involved. While many other comparative publications remain very much at the surface of empirical analysis of the actual situation, these contributions develop a conceptual framework that focuses on welfare state restructuring and the decline of the male breadwinner family, thus widening the perspective to integrate historical and institutional analysis as well as actor- and policy-related questions with the purpose of understanding divergent development patterns in the politics of child care.

² For the theoretical debate on path dependency see North (1990), Pierson (2000; 2004), Mahoney (2000) and Hall (1993); for recent overviews see Immergut (2008) and Sanders (2006).

³ See Mahon (2006) for an analysis of OECD discourses and the international studies.

This project draws upon this literature, but develops a longer time-perspective. Most of the literature only extends to the period from the 1960s onwards, which is too narrow. Although the 1960s and 1970s were an important period of change, fuelled by the growing demand for (female) labour power, the development of a service economy and the political demands for equal opportunities of the sexes and compatibility of employment and family, these socio-economic and socio-political factors explain only part of the picture. Often literature is focusing upon Scandinavian countries as forerunners of the development of childcare and social services, but this neglects alternative historical development paths and tends to overlook alternative explanations for variations in child care systems (Scheiwe and Willekens 2009; Bahle 2009). The conflict between state and church over competences for education and socialisation is another crucial factor for a different development path (Willekens 2009) with characteristic connotations (early expansion, pedagogical approach, school-like organisation, a different conception of learning in preschools and maternal care as complementary, not as substitutes) that has to be integrated into the research agenda.

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