

# Elementary Education in Germany

Dr. Martin R. Textor

Elementary education in Germany includes all institutions which cater for children until they begin school. Its position is ambivalent: On the one hand, it is part of the educational system (elementary level), on the other hand it is part of the welfare system as it is provided by non-public and public youth welfare services. Therefore one can also speak of child care institutions, which, however, also include after-school day care institutions (*Hort*). In Germany, attendance of elementary education is entirely voluntary.

Since 1 January 1996, every 3- to 6-year-old child has a legal claim to a place in a kindergarten due to a federal law. However, the main legal responsibility for preschool education lies with the German states, where the child care system is administrated either by the ministries of culture or by the social ministries (showing again its ambivalent nature). But also the local authorities have certain responsibilities, e.g. for guaranteeing enough places in child care institutions and for providing part of the financing – the other parts are shouldered by the states and by the parents. The child care institutions are mainly run by non-public bodies (primarily churches and welfare associations) and by the local authorities themselves.

## History

The first child care institutions were founded at the beginning of the time of industrialization as more and more young children were left unsupervised by the parents. The first institution in Germany was organized by the noblewoman Pauline zur Lippe-Detmold in 1802.

In 1840 Friedrich Fröbel founded the first "general German *Kindergarten*". His educational approach focussing on playing and on using materials developed by him became the most influential for the next 100 years. After 1900 the educational approaches of Maria Montessori and of Rudolf Steiner were spread in Germany and lead to the founding of *Montessori-Kinderhäuser* and *Waldorfkinderergärten*. After World War I many child care professionals were influenced by psychoanalysis.

During the Third Reich the elementary system was centralized and had to follow the national socialist ideology. During World War II many child care institutions were destroyed. In West Germany the system was rebuilt very slowly as the family was considered to be the best place for rearing young children. The kindergarten, only open in the morning, was supposed to supplement the family education of four and five-year-old children. In East Germany the opposite was the case: Institutions with enough places for all children from 1/2 to six years of age were built within two or three decades as they were supposed to free women for employment in the state industries and bureaucracy. They were required to follow detailed plans in order to further socialist education.

At the end of the 1960s the West German kindergarten system was severely criticised because of lack of places (especially for three-year-old and younger children), the neglect of education

– in contrast to care – ("Sputnik-Shock"), and its authoritarian approach. The consequences were the introduction of preschool programs and compensatory education on one hand and of alternative child care institutions focussing on anti-authoritarian education on the other hand (*Kinderläden*, parent initiatives). At the end of the 1970s these reforms were mostly discarded. Many kindergartens adopted the Situations Approach developed by Jürgen Zimmer, Armin Krenz and others. After 1990 also the Reggio approach became influential.

Since the reunion the child care system became more heterogeneous. In the West German states the duration of daily care was expanded due to the demands of working mothers. According to a new federal law from 2005 the supply of places for children under the age of three is supposed to be enlarged till the demand is satisfied. However, as the funds have to be provided by the local authorities (and the states) it is unclear whether this goal will be reached till 2010 as planned.

In East Germany the number of places was sharply reduced due to the declining number of births after the reunion and the population movement to the West. However, the supply of places (also for children under three years of age) and the duration of the care offered still satisfy the demand. The staff of East German child care institutions had to adopt the educational approaches used in the West after the reunion.

Since the turn of the century the quality of child care is criticised. At the beginning it was more or less a scientific debate. But then the PISA-studies as well as the Iglu-study showed that the German secondary and primary school system only produce mediocre results in contrast to the school systems in most other OECD states. Especially children from lower-class and migrant families are not supported enough and thus fail at school in much higher numbers as in other countries. Part of the blame was placed on the elementary education system by politicians, administrators, and the media.

At the moment many German states introduce special programs to identify children with insufficient mastery of the German language and to train them in such a way that they have similar chances to succeed at school as other children. There is also a new focus on education in contrast to care leading to the development of state-wide "educational plans" (see below). The non-public and public youth welfare services have introduced new approaches of quality management. It is also discussed whether the training of *Erzieher/innen* could be improved by placing it at an academic level. Thus in 2005 several *Fachhochschulen* have started to offer BA-courses in elementary education.

However, the amount of public money spent for child care institutions has not been increased significantly. Thus the most important factors of quality of care such as the staff-child-ratio or the amount of children in a group have not been improved. The results of measurements of quality of care are not published diminishing the need for improvements. Despite the fact that most of the staff is 40 years old and older, very little is done in the field of continuing education. Thus it can be doubted whether the present changes will improve the quality of elementary education significantly.

## **Organisation**

In crèches groups are of mixed ages for children of several months to three years. In kindergartens the groups include three- to six-year-old children, and in after-school day-care institutions groups consist of six- to ten-year-old children (sometimes also older ones). There

are between 12 and 25 children in each group, depending on the age of the children and the respective state laws. Some institutions are open for eight hours and more (also providing lunch); others are open for the same time but the children have to be fetched at noon and brought back some time later. Other child care institutions are only open in the morning, and a few have different children in their groups in the morning and in the afternoon. Most day care institutions now tailor their opening hours more closely to families' wishes than they did in the past.

### Day care institutions for children (31.12.2002)

<b>type of day care institution</b>	<b>number</b>	<b>statutory body</b>	<b>welfare organis.</b>	<b>number of places</b>	<b>whole day w lunch</b>	<b>whole day w/o lunch</b>
crèches	798	203	595	18.309	13.036	391
kindergartens	27.830	9.733	18.097	1.739.474	367.611	878.359
after-school day care institutions	3.469	1.795	1.674	180.912	125.600	27.069
day care inst. with same-age groups	4.813	2.602	2.211	454.021	366.475	33.287
day care inst. with age-mixed groups	6.157	2.696	3.461	337.602	248.599	52.603
day care inst. with same-age and age-mixed groups	4.212	2.057	2.155	366.215	271.662	61.026
<b>sum</b>	<b>47.279</b>	19.086	28.193	<b>3.096.533</b>	1.392.983	1.052.735
including:						
integrative day care inst.	9.801	3.483	6.318	770.080	365.053	236.695
day care inst. for handicapped children	299	70	229	10.783	9.569	433
child care inst. of companies	272	78	194	15.244	10.688	2.279
child care inst. similar to kindergartens	5.873	1.950	3.923	328.640	146.520	115.367
child care inst. of parents' initiatives	3.195	118	3.077	98.091	52.580	12.167

At the end of 2002 there was a place for 89.8% of the three- to six-year-old children in a child care institution – in contrast to 77.2% in 1994. However, the percentages differ between the West German states (88%) and the East German states (105%). The percentages for each state at the end of 2002 were:

- Baden-Württemberg: 103.7%
- Bayern: 87.5%
- Berlin: 80.6%
- Brandenburg: 96.8%
- Bremen: 82.0%

- Hamburg: 64.8%
- Hessen: 92.9%
- Mecklenburg-Vorpommern: 95.4%
- Niedersachsen: 83.0%
- Nordrhein-Westfalen: 78.1%
- Rheinland-Pfalz: 105.7%
- Saarland: 101.2%
- Sachsen: 105.0%
- Sachsen-Anhalt: 100.8%
- Schleswig-Holstein: 82.1%
- Thüringen: 126.3%

In the West German states there were places in child care institutions for 3% of the children under the age of three and for 5% of the children aged six and a half to 11 years. In the East German states the respective percentages were 37% and 41%.

### **Curriculum/assessment**

According to the Child and Youth Welfare Act of 1990 child care institutions have to encourage the child's development into an individually responsible and socially competent person. Their functions include the education, care and supervision of the child. Day care institutions are required to cooperate closely with the parents and to supplement the education provided in the family. They are responsible for noticing developmental deficiencies and behaviour disturbances which have to be reported to the parents. Then they have to help these children either by compensatory education or by organizing help from specialized institutions. Children are encouraged through play and other age appropriate activities to develop their physical and mental competencies and to learn to live in a group following its rules. Kindergartens also have the function of facilitating children's transition to school.

No curricula were developed for preschool and after-school child care institutions. Instead, the educational program is derived from the pedagogical orientations of the staff. Thus it differs from institution to institution. However, since 2004 the German states are developing "educational plans" for kindergartens and other preschool institutions which are supposed to be an orientation for the staff. Most of these plans – ranging from 25 to more than 300 pages – have already been published, many, however, as "first versions". They mostly list basic competencies to be developed by young children and describe the different fields of education (e.g., music, art, natural sciences, mathematics, and language). Mostly there are also chapters about observing children, collaborating with other institutions, cooperating with parents, etc.

### **Staff**

Children in institutions of elementary education are looked after primarily by state-recognised *Erzieher/innen* (qualified youth and child care workers) and *Kinderpfleger/innen* (children's nurses). The first are trained in *Fachschulen/ Fachakademien für Sozialpädagogik* (schools providing specialised vocational training). Those wishing to enter these schools must hold at least the *Realschulabschluss* (a middle-level school degree). The training encompasses two years with full-time schooling at the *Fachschule*, one or two practical years before starting school (or, for example, a training as *Kinderpfleger/in*), and one practical year in a day care institution after schooling, supervised by the *Fachschule*. *Kinderpfleger/innen* are trained for

two years at a *Berufsfachschule für Kinderpflege*. Those wishing to enter these schools must hold at least the *Hauptschulabschluss* (a school degree reached after nine years).

At the end of 2002 there were 374.170 persons employed in the field of early child care (96% female), of whom 43% (West German states) and 69% (East German states), respectively, were 40 years old and older. Around 64% of the employed were *Erzieher/innen* and 12.5% *Kinderpfleger/innen*; 6% were without training and 2.2% social workers. The rest were educators (with university degrees), were still in training or had several professional qualifications. 48% worked part-time in the West German and 79% in the East German states.

### **Expenditures for child care**

In the year 2002 10.5 billion Euros were spent for child care institutions. After subtracting revenues it was 9.2 billion Euros. In contrast to the year 1992 nearly 77% more was spent in the West German and 31% less in the East German states.

In comparison to other OECD states this is not much money. For example, in 2001 the public expenditures for a child in elementary education (aged three to six years) was 8.115 Euros in Great Britain, 6.468 Euros in Italy, 5.083 Euros in the Netherlands, 5.058 Euros in Austria, 4.629 Euros in France, 4.144 Euros in Denmark, and 3.913 Euros in Sweden – but only 3.448 Euros in Germany (according to the OECD).

To improve the system of elementary education as needed, will only be possible if more money is poured into it. Whereas politicians have realized the need for improvements, they have been unwilling so far to increase the funds significantly.