

## Rezensionen

**Harry Willekens, Kirsten Scheiwe and Kristen Nawrotzki (eds.),** *The Development of Early Childhood Education in Europe and North America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives.* Basingstoke, Hampshire / New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, ISBN 978-1-137-44187-3, 312 pages, 100 US dollars.

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The expansion of institutionalized state-funded childcare and education for children below the compulsory school age of six or seven has been one of the most significant developments in the social welfare and education sectors of many western countries during the last decades. Seen from a socio-legal perspective, it is striking that these developments have been accompanied by a shift towards the recognition of early childhood education (ECE) as a legal right not only in the domestic law of many western European countries, but also, and most significantly, in international human rights law.

In a previous volume, edited by Kirsten Scheiwe and Harry Willekens (2009), which provided a comprehensive overview of childcare and preschool developments throughout Western Europe, the authors discerned two basic ideal types of early childhood education and care: the educational model, which lays emphasis on an academic or pedagogical approach and has traditionally been linked to the educational sector, and the work-care reconciliation model, which mainly looks at providing care for young children in order to enable both their parents (i.e. also the mother) to go to work and earn a family income; this latter model has traditionally fallen within the remit of social welfare policy.

Whereas the work-care reconciliation idea certainly was the driving force for the expansion of ECE from the 1970s until the 1990s, more recently a paradigm shift towards the 'educational model' can be observed, even in many countries that traditionally have followed the care-reconciliation model. Scheiwe even concludes that 'the rights discourse as well as the educational paradigm [...] has been [...] winning out over care'. (p. 11) Nevertheless, this general shift has been taking place at different rates and with varying intensities, depending on the specific institutional and cultural contexts. Hence, the landscapes of ECE in Europe and North America examined in the present volume have taken varying shapes and retain significant differences with regard to e.g. the percentage of young children attending ECE, the kind of education offered to them, and the institutionalization of ECE as a service provided within (and as part of) the public sector. To under-

stand the differences and also the similarities pertaining to ECE, it is necessary to follow its trajectories over time. What ‘paths did institutionalized ECE take in different countries of Europe and North America, and how similar or different are they?’ Moreover, ‘how may these similarities and differences be explained?’ (p. 5)

These basic research questions raised by the editors in their introduction to the volume are the starting point for the comparative endeavour carried out in the fourteen following chapters, encompassing nearly all the western European countries as well as the United States and Canada (the latter countries I will leave out in this review). However, it should be noted that, except for a chapter by Franz-Michael Konrad looking at the kindergarten in East Germany as well as in West Germany, the volume does not include any account of eastern European countries, which is mainly due to the comparative perspective taken by the editors.

The authors of the chapters, who come from a broad range of disciplinary fields such as educational sciences, sociology, social work, history and law, look at the developments of ECE from an historical perspective, covering a time-span of about 200 years from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the roots of infant schooling and kindergarten were laid down, up to the present. Building on the previous volume, the book focuses on long-term developments for good reason, since previous research has shown that ‘events in the distant past may have been just as influential (or even more influential) than those in recent decades’. (p. 4)

It is not surprising that the various chapters of the volume do not consistently follow one theoretical approach, since many of them are rather descriptive or analytical (in the best sense of the word). However, the editors mainly draw on theoretical concepts and instruments which stem from historical institutionalism, notably by putting an emphasis on the concept of path dependency in particular. “‘Path dependency’ simply means that once certain ways of doing things have come to be socially accepted, routinized and perceived as normal, and especially once rules have emerged that either reward doing things this way or (more often) punish trying to accomplish the same things in a different way, it becomes more difficult to leave the path entered into than to stay on this path. Social change, of course, remains possible, but the more behaviourally ingrained and institutionally fixed current practices are, the higher the price that has to be paid to change them. The advocates of reform will then have to overcome serious obstacles and mobilize huge amounts of resources, and they will incur high risks in trying to change the existing pattern.’ (p. 18)

This is where law comes into play, either as a means of perpetuating and reinforcing existing institutional pathways or, on the contrary, as an instrument to foster social change, which proves to be cumbersome in most cases, as Will-ekens and the other editors explain: ‘once laws have been established *and* have

withstood the first test of being applied in practice, every new initiative will either have to be integrated into the existing legal framework or have to overthrow it in its entirety'. (p. 22)

The different chapters of the volume contain a broad range of insightful analyses of ECE in various countries, which stimulate comparison aimed towards a (cautious) theoretical generalization. Hence, the editors conclude their introductory chapter by stating: 'Although we have not been able to construct [...] a general theory of causes of ECE development, [the] findings bring us one step closer to doing so in future'. (p. 25)

Since it is not possible to delve into all of the chapters, I will mainly deal with three of them which may be of special interest to the reader on account of the more general findings they contain and the socio-legal perspective they take.

In his chapter, Harry Willekens examines the development of ECE in Belgium, France and the Netherlands with a special emphasis on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Belgium is especially interesting because of its position as '*the* pioneer in universalizing access to ECE – a fact hardly noticed in the literature. Belgium was certainly not a place where innovative pedagogical experiments flourished, but from the late nineteenth century it was a pioneer in making ECE attendance a normal part of the life of three- to six- year old children. [...] it was an educational project designed to support the development of the cognitive and social abilities children would need at school.' (p. 51)

In his contribution to the earlier volume the author already developed the thesis that Belgium's forerunner status was caused 'by a fierce competition between secular and confessional suppliers of preschools which has been going on since the late nineteenth century'. (p. 52) He uses his chapter in the present volume 'to take a further step in investigating whether this causal connection is particular to Belgium or whether it may be useful in developing a more general explanation of the national and regional differences in the nature and growth of regimes of ECE'. (ibid.)

For this purpose, the author takes France as an object of comparison to Belgium since the 'the struggle over educational hegemony between clerical and anti-clerical forces occurred in both countries' (ibid.), albeit with different outcomes. Whereas in France and Belgium alike, liberal politicians, advocates of the religiously-neutral 'laicist' state, strived to minimize the influence of the church in public education during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, clerical forces tried, at least in part, to preserve their formerly hegemonic position in this field.

However, the question arises why the Catholic Church was so active in spreading educational establishments even for children below school-age at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thereby drawing the State into the field of preschool education as a competitor, whereas in other countries, especially those in which

the Protestant religion was predominant, nothing comparable occurred. Willekens states that ‘I know of no scholarship addressing’ (p. 66) the causes. However, the author comes to a fascinating and also plausible answer: ‘the Catholic Church ran preschools *because it could*. To run a school one needs a building, teachers and money to pay them.’ (ibid.) Despite wide-ranging expropriations during the French revolution the Catholic Church in France, and also in Belgium, still owned many establishments which were suitable for use as schools. Moreover, its ‘ECE teachers, all of them female, came from a huge reservoir of nuns’. (ibid.) Nuns were regarded as the perfect ‘social mothers’ for young children at that time, as Meike Sophia Baader also describes in her chapter detailing the early Froebelian *Kindergärtnerinnen*, a role model for childless women advanced by parts of the German women’s movement around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Baader explains, ‘marriage and biological motherhood constrained social motherhood, such that female teachers [...] had to be unmarried’. (p. 223) It is apparent that nuns perfectly fitted the role as ‘social mothers’ for very young children, which underpins the plausibility of the thesis put forward by Willekens.

Although the rise of ECE in France and Belgium followed similar patterns therefore at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it took different directions in the second half of the century. Whereas in France the secular forces of the State managed to more or less entirely ban confessional teachers from public teaching by law, in Belgium the Catholic Church and its related political groups could resist similar efforts in parliament, which, in consequence, led to a coexistence of church and state-run ECE establishments. Ultimately, the developments described resulted in nearly universal preschool attendance in both countries in the long run.

In another chapter, Franz-Michael Konrad traces the systems of ECE in the two German post-war states, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), until reunification in 1990. In the FRG the social norm was a ‘family in which the father was the breadwinner and the mother took care of the children. [...] The economic boom in West Germany made it possible for married women to stay at home. This was supported politically.’ (p. 113) Kindergartens for children aged three to six existed, but they were ‘usually half-day facilities, and primary schooling was also based on a half-day model [...]. In the afternoons, working mothers were reliant on the assistance of relatives and friends.’ (p. 133) As Konrad explains, the expansion of the kindergarten infrastructure was very slow, and traditionally, a sharp line was drawn between kindergarten as a childcare facility and the school as an institution for educating older children. The author states that in ‘its school-distance the West-German kindergarten was an exception not only compared to the East European systems of pre-school education but also in respect of the kindergarten in

Western Europe'. (p. 134) Several initiatives to establish preschool elements in ECE were started in the 1960s and 1970s, e.g. by the German Education Council (*Deutscher Bildungsrat*), but their effects on the system remained rather limited.

In contrast to the FRG, family policies in the socialist GDR were more in line with the principle of gender equality. Women were 'urgently needed in the workforce' and the 'proportion of employed women rose steadily from 45 per cent in 1950 to 91 per cent in 1989 [...]. As a consequence, children had to get placed in public childcare. Hence, the number of kindergarten places was raised permanently. [...] Due to the need to secure the occupation of the mothers, kindergartens in the GDR were all-day facilities and free of charge.' (p. 138) With regard to pedagogical approaches, ECE in the GDR kindergarten was more school-like or 'academic' as Konrad puts it and more focused on preparing children for school. Thus, a greater emphasis was placed on structural learning and the enhancement of cognitive skills of children in areas such as 'arithmetic, music, art, nature, health, body care and so on'. (p. 140) Consequently, preschool teachers held a position in the kindergarten 'similar to that of the teacher in school. [...] In public awareness they were equal to primary school teachers, and last but not least they were paid almost the same.' (p. 140) However, most of these achievements were reversed after reunification when the GDR kindergartens had to adapt to the West German system with the lower qualifications, incomes and status of kindergarten educators (*Erzieherinnen*).

The kindergarten, like educational establishments in the GDR in general, could not defy the influence of socialist ideology and the imposition of 'conformity' by the State, which is rightly emphasized by the author. In contrast, kindergartens in West Germany underwent significant changes, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when modern and more child-centred pedagogical concepts were adopted. Those concepts, e.g. the situational approach (*Situationsansatz*), emphasized the personality of the child and, sometimes even playfully, tried to stimulate his or her abilities. As Baader shows in her chapter, progressive ideas such as those coming from the *Kinderladen* movement of 1968 had a huge impact on the conventional kindergarten, too, enhancing pedagogical knowledge and changing the understanding of ECE in general. However, it is true that the West German kindergarten remained, at least until the end of the 1980s, a 'conservative facility' (p. 142), given that it was socially selective, based on a part-time model and therefore reinforcing traditional gender roles, and widely detached from the school system.

It is no wonder that the German Federal Government as well as governments of the German states are currently undertaking efforts to (re-)establish features in ECE facilities that were characteristic for the GDR kindergarten, such as all-day

facilities, skills-based approaches and a greater emphasis on ‘academic’ education. For the author, however, this seems to be difficult to concede.

Whereas most of the contributions in this volume take a mainly historical and institutionalist perspective, the chapter written by Kirsten Scheiwe can be truly called ‘socio-legal’. The author traces the legal roots of ECE from its early beginnings until today and concludes that a shift towards the understanding of ECE as a social right has taken place. Looking at different western European countries, she groups the historical development of ECE regulation into three different stages. In the first period, up to the 1960s, law was used mainly ‘to organize the basic conditions of who could provide ECE and how, with few countries enacting comprehensive legislation on ECE only in the 1950s and 1960s’. (p. 190) The law regulating ECE was regarded as ‘objective law’, i.e. it set up requirements for the qualification of the staff, the infrastructure, the financing etc. without granting the children (and their parents) individual rights to access ECE: ‘Despite the lack of individual claims to ECE in this first period, it was as a matter of fact quasi universal in Belgium and France’.

The second stage identified by Scheiwe was the period from the 1960s until the beginning of the 1990s, when there was ‘the increasing use of law to set policy goals with regard to ECE and to oblige municipalities to provide ECE for certain groups of children. This was sometimes connected with granting an individual right to a child, starting in the Nordic countries.’ (p. 190) The breakthrough in favour of an individual right to ECE came in most countries in the 1990s and has continued since the turn of the millennium. ‘At present, most European countries do provide a social right to ECE to a child, although with considerable differences in factors such as the age of the child, number of weekly hours and whether or not it is provided cost-free.’ (p. 190) This significant change in the legal perception of early childhood and preschool education is, as Scheiwe illustrates, also reflected in the understanding and interpretation of human rights law. Thus, although ECE is not explicitly mentioned in the text, Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, setting out the right to education, has been interpreted by the competent UN Committee as also including public ECE.<sup>1</sup> This socio-legal finding presented by Scheiwe could serve as a starting point for a more normative approach towards the analysis of ECE as an integral part of the right to education in international and domestic (constitutional) laws.

In summary, the volume offers a broad range of insightful historical accounts of when and how ECE was established in different countries throughout western

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<sup>1</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.7 of 20 September 2006, CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1.

Europe and North America. It elaborates the differences and similarities of the developments and analyses them from an institutional perspective. From a socio-legal angle the most significant aspect is to understand how the ongoing change in the perception of ECE, from child-care to education, goes hand in hand with ECE being regarded as an individual right of the child. It will be most interesting to see if and how this normative shift will affect the further implementation and development of educational establishments for the very young.

## References

- Scheiwe, Kirsten & Willekens, Harry (eds.) (2009) *Child Care and Preschool Development in Europe. Institutional Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Hampshire / New York: Palgrave Macmillan.