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# Diversity-sensitive educational policies and practices in ECEC in Germany

**Barbara Gross**

Junior Professor at Chemnitz | University of Technology | Faculty of Philosophy | Institute for Education

**Marielena Groos**

Research Assistant at Chemnitz | University of Technology | Faculty of Philosophy | Institute for Education

## Politiche e pratiche educative alla diversità nell'ECEC in Germania

### Abstract

*Policies to mitigating inequality of educational opportunity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) have reshaped education across Europe. This paper presents an overview of diversity-sensitive educational policies and practices in ECEC in Germany. It discusses how ECEC addresses heterogeneity and diversity in the light of national and international educational policy. It provides examples of initiatives in different Länder and discusses the development of diversity-sensitive ECEC in Germany*

### Keywords

diversity-sensitivity, ECEC, educational policies, educational practices, Germany

Le politiche di educazione e cura della prima infanzia (Early childhood education and care, ECEC) hanno ridefinito le misure educative in tutta Europa al fine di mitigare le disuguaglianze nelle opportunità educative. Questo articolo presenta una panoramica sulle politiche e sulle pratiche educative sensibili alla diversità nell'ECEC in Germania; tratta di come l'ECEC affronti l'eterogeneità e le diverse sfaccettature della diversità alla luce delle politiche educative internazionali e nazionali. Il contributo fornisce esempi di misure adottate in diversi Länder e discute lo sviluppo dell'ECEC in Germania con particolare riguardo alla sensibilità per la diversità.

### Parole chiave

sensibilità per la diversità, ECEC, politiche educative, pratiche educative, Germania

## 1. ECEC for equality

There is consensus that a good quality of education lays the foundations of learners' futures, their social inclusion, well-being, educational achievement, and employability. Access to and the provision of ECEC for all children has thus been defined as a priority at global level (OECD, 2017) and within the European Union: see, for example, SDG 4.2 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) and the European Education Area initiative for 2021-2030 (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). However, the provision of ECEC and quality improvement initiatives vary considerably among European countries (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016), and EU Member States have prepared national action plans (for Germany, see UNICEF, 2021). As childhood is the starting point for inequality, marginalization and exclusion, it is assumed that this vicious cycle can be broken through high-quality ECEC and unlimited access to it. Research (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, Yoshikawa, 2017) has indeed shown that children who benefit from high quality ECEC gain higher cognitive and socio-emotional skills. In this context, quality refers to programs in facilities with trained staff, established pedagogical approaches and a holistic approach to child development.

Germany has traditionally been considered a conservative and corporatist welfare state, placing greater emphasis on social security than on social equity. However, recent political reforms and initiatives relating to ECEC are increasingly aligning with the principles of equal opportunity and social inclusion (Erhard, Scholz & Harring, 2018). ECEC thus strives for social and educational equity – especially but not exclusively equity of access to services.

## 2. ECEC in Germany

Due to the divergent historical trajectories of East and West Germany, ECEC developed under the influence of two contrasting political systems and within distinct sociocultural contexts (Erhard, Scholz & Harring, 2018). Today in Germany, Kita (*Kindertagesstätte*, or daycare facilities) include various forms of childcare and cover nurseries, preschools, childminders, and after-school care for primary school children. In 2023 the country had a total of 60 045 ECEC facilities (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023), more than three times the number of primary schools. Attendance of ECEC is not mandatory, but all children aged 12 months and above have a legal right to a childcare place that is partly subsidized by the state. Providers can be public or private organizations, or religious bodies. The principle of subsidiarity means the sector has a combination of public and non-public providers including municipalities, private non-profit organizations, and commercial entities. Ensuring the timeliness and sufficiency of childcare services falls under the responsibility of public providers. The pluralistic nature of the landscape and the distribution of responsibilities among various bodies, which is an inherent characteristic of the ECEC system in Germany, results in heterogeneity in terms of educational concepts and practices, facility size, and the number of children in childcare (Lengyel, Salem, 2023). ECEC is not administered by the *Länder* (federal states) ministries for education and culture but by the ministries for child and youth welfare, which take a more socio-pedagogical approach. While the federal government primarily sets out the broader legal framework, the detailed regulations, funding, and delivery are within the remit of regional and, more particularly, local authorities. Financing relies extensively on public funds, with municipalities alone covering approximately 50% of the costs. Federal resources are made available through targeted investment programs or indirect redistributive measures, as direct funding is not a standard practice. Consequently, parental contributions can vary considerably by state, municipality, and provider (Erhard, Scholz, Harring, 2018). Nevertheless, the federal Regulations on Parents' Participation in the Costs of Child Daycare provides for a tiered fee structure, taking into account social factors such as parental income or the number of siblings already enrolled in ECEC facilities.

While in recent years take-up of childcare services for children under the age of three has significantly increased, largely due to the expansion of publicly funded childcare, attendance of ECEC varies by age group and background. For instance, there is a notable difference in attendance rates between children with and without what is known as a "migration background": 34% of children aged 0-3 attend ECEC overall, with attendance rates of 21% for children with a migration background and 43% for children wi-

thout; 92% of 3-6-year-olds attend, with rates of 81% for children with a migration background and 99% without. There are also significant differences between regions. In city-states like Hamburg or Bremen, 38% of the facilities draw at least 50% of their attendees from those with direct experience of migration, whereas, in East Germany, this figure drops to 1% (Lengyel, Salem, 2023). In general, however, East Germany has significantly higher enrollment rates for children under three, largely due to historical differences in ECEC between East and West Germany (Erhard, Scholz, Harring, 2018). In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), there was a deliberate agenda to get women to participate in the workforce, and political commitment to gender equality; this actively encouraged women to pursue professional careers alongside motherhood and led to an increased need for childcare facilities.

Today, UNICEF (2021) is highlighting Germany's commitment to expanding and improving ECEC quality and access to it, with a focus on addressing the needs of children from diverse backgrounds. The introduction in 2013 of the legal entitlement to an ECEC place from the first year of life and the simultaneous expansion of the ECEC system were tied to a promise to improve educational opportunities for children (Hogrebe, Mierendorff, Nebe, 2021). To this end, the German federal government has been working closely with the *Länder* and municipalities to expand child daycare services for all and to improve their quality. In addition, as in other European countries, efforts have been made to integrate children with special educational needs into daycare facilities. Common quality standards have been developed in all federal states and parents are being relieved of the costs of daycare. Finance has been invested and programs developed to support daycare facilities. To facilitate program delivery and evaluation, support structures have been established, including regional coordination, networking offices, deployment of specialized personnel, and collaboration with diverse organizations, with a view to reaching families and children at local level. Additionally, the *Länder* have initiated programs aimed at integrating daycare facilities with family support services and coordinating services at the community level (UNICEF, 2021).

### 3. Diversity-sensitive education in ECEC

The quality of pedagogical practices plays a pivotal role in ensuring equitable and unlimited access to ECEC and thus the achievement of social and educational equity. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, educational policy in Germany has recognized the importance of ECEC for children's individual cognitive, social, and linguistic development (Lengyel, Salem, 2023). Each federal state has introduced its own curriculum to enhance the quality of ECEC and to provide guidance for professionals and parents. These federal curricula cover areas such as "Communication and Language" and "Values and Responsibility". The binding nature of curricula varies among the *Länder*, with some curricula having formal status and others being recommendations (Röhner, 2020).

In Germany, children are raised in a highly diverse society, particularly in urban areas. Social, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is no longer considered the exception, but rather the rule (Salem, Lengyel, Graßer & Montanari, 2020). This heterogeneity influences ECEC institutions, which, being integral to the education system, are part of a complex network of globalized relationships. For example, over the past 15 years, about 50% of four-year-olds in Hamburg, Germany's second-largest city, have grown up speaking more than one language (IfBQ, 2018). By 2022, 41.6% of all children under five in Germany had what is known as a "migration background" (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). In response to the increasing linguistic, ethnic, and social diversity within childcare, and in alignment with the principles of equal opportunity and social inclusion, the *Länder* have acknowledged the necessity of incorporating diversity-sensitive educational practices and strategies into their ECEC curricula. The aims of these curricula are to foster intercultural understanding and competencies, facilitate linguistic diversity, and ignite inquisitiveness about other languages. In particular, they prompt ECEC educators to reflect on the provision of equitable developmental and educational opportunity for all children, irrespective of their ethnic, social, and linguistic background.

Below, we briefly present and discuss examples from different *Länder*, namely Hamburg, Bavaria, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and North Rhine-Westphalia:

1. The city-state of Hamburg looks closely at the intersection of educational equity and ethno-cultural disparities, concluding that children come from diverse cultural backgrounds characterized by differences in language, religion, ethnic origin, skin color, migration history, and a multitude of other factors. The Hamburg curriculum highlights that the social esteem in which “family cultures” are held determines whether children experience themselves as worthy and recognized. Thus, ECEC educators are required to integrate aspects of different “family cultures” into the daily routine of daycare centers. In this regard, the curriculum underscores the need for ECEC facilities to provide a supportive environment, especially for children whose heritage language is not German, and to appreciate and support heritage languages. Facilities are encouraged to integrate games, projects and activities to achieve this. With a view to promoting diversity-sensitive, racism- and discrimination-critical pedagogy, the curriculum in Hamburg emphasizes the importance of having diverse teams that include experiences of migration and multilingualism, and a range of “family cultures” (Freie und Hansestadt Hamburg, 2012).
2. The Bavarian curriculum (2019) provides specific guidance, offering ECEC professionals recommendations for reflecting on whether and how their everyday practices integrate and demonstrate respect for children’s heritage languages. Such recognition can be given tangible expression, for instance through specially designed posters in various languages (including dialects), the issuing of announcements and the labeling of menus and material containers in heritage languages and scripts, and the incorporation of songs, games, plays, and rhymes in multiple languages into daily classroom routines. Similarly to Hamburg, the curriculum in Bavaria also emphasizes the importance for diversity-sensitivity of providing bilingual and multilingual children’s books and audio materials. The curriculum further emphasizes the importance of acquiring the ability to switch confidently between different languages as necessary in different situations and, conversely, to use only one language when the situation demands. This skill is not only relevant for multilingual children but is also an important aspect of mastering “academic language” [*Bildungssprache*]. Additionally, the Bavarian curriculum provides a “best practice” project, which is intended to be a replicable model and aims to enhance interactions between families, children, and ECEC staff within the framework of a prejudice-aware approach. This initiative resulted from collaboration between parents and the institution, and gave rise to an annual program called “Journey Around the Globe”. The project enables children to gain insights into the linguistic, cultural, and religious dimensions of families’ and ECEC staff members’ countries of origin through a diverse range of activities, including country-specific materials, traditional dishes, language learning through songs and rhymes, and discussions about religion. The pilot project has subsequently reported a marked increase in the engagement of families with migration experiences in the facility’s activities, coupled with greater representation on the Parent Advisory Council (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Familie, Arbeit und Soziales, 2019).
3. The curriculum of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (2011) underscores the significance of introducing children to written language as an integral component of linguistic education. It places particular emphasis on the use of storytelling, reading, and writing, not only to foster active engagement but also to nurture a deeper connection with language. Within this framework, it is imperative to integrate, strengthen, and broaden diverse (multi)lingual experiences. Given the multifaceted nature of language, the focus is on creating situations that encourage speaking, listening, and contemplation. This can involve elements such as phonetics, pragmatics, semantics, syntax, and literature.
4. The curriculum of North Rhine-Westphalia (2014) places emphasis on the use of nuanced and appropriate observation in everyday situations to assess the language development of children acquiring German as a second language. Continuous observation facilitates more precise recognition of individual developmental milestones. The aim here is to align language education with the principle of resource-oriented learning. Ongoing professional development is designed to equip ECEC educators with the requisite theoretical foundation in pedagogy and linguistics, as well as with a diverse range of practical skills. It provides theoretical knowledge about the language development of children growing up in monolingual and multilingual environments, a grounding in language teaching, a nuanced understanding of various language contexts, and covers the application of such knowledge to the interpretation of observation results and documentation. The curriculum also emphasizes the need for quality criteria during the implementation and evaluation of these observation methods. This includes traditional criteria such as objectivity, reliability, and validity, as well as factors such as language contexts, multilingualism, fairness, efficiency, and practicality.



The above curricula, despite their divergent approaches and emphases, share a common concern with the particular importance of language, multilingualism, and the recognition of “family cultures”. It is a statutory obligation under the Social Security Code and the German Daycare Expansion Act (TAG) for ECEC to recognize linguistic diversity. Proficiency in the German language is regarded as crucial for participation in the educational system and for educational success. However, children’s heritage languages also play a substantial role in their educational development and social integration as emphasized by Salem, Lengyel, Graßer and Montanari (2020). As recognition theory points out, empathy, respect, and social appreciation are necessary in order to achieve educational equity (Stojanov, 2007, 2011). In their emphasis on the importance of valuing and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity, ECEC curricula draw upon the principles of recognition theory and aim to mitigate mechanisms of exclusion.

The concept of integrating language education into everyday activities has also been validated in federal curricula (Lengyel, Salem, 2018). This approach acknowledges children’s multilingualism, values linguistic diversity, and promotes German as a second language in all areas of education. (Multilingual) language education is considered a cross-cutting activity. This encompasses aspects such as literacy, the acquisition of written language skills and the development of “academic language” [Bildungssprache] (Gogolin, Duarte, 2016), as well as the use of language for cognitive and communicative purposes, although the specifics of these vary between the different curricula. In contrast to specialized language development programs, which focus on specific linguistic sub-areas and employ predefined exercises and materials, the approaches and guidelines for integrating language education into everyday activities are more broadly formulated. They provide inspiration for bringing language and education-related activities into everyday routines and emphasize fundamental principles and teaching strategies that help stimulate language learning. The general nature of such guidance leaves the details of delivery open, giving ECEC educators discretion on how to integrate language education into their day-to-day teaching (Lengyel, 2017).

#### 4. Further Enhancing ECEC

While Germany has made considerable progress in ECEC, the system is – here and more generally in Europe, as pointed out by Vandenbroeck (2011) more than a decade ago– still characterized by inequality, and there is an ongoing risk of widening the education gap. It is essential that the country addresses the following challenges in order to provide all children with equal access to high-quality ECEC:

- A widespread challenge in many municipalities is the disparity between supply and demand, particularly with regard to daycare places for children under three years of age. On average, there is a shortage of 15 daycare places per 100 children under the age of three (Jessen, Spieß, Waights, Judy, 2020). Since the introduction of the legal right to an ECEC place from 12 months, municipalities have faced repeated lawsuits, as it is not possible to meet every claim for access in the context of ongoing competition for places (Menzel, Scholz, 2021). Parents with higher levels of education and/or income are more likely to have their needs met, while parents with migration experiences are the least likely, primarily due to unequal opportunities when it comes to securing a place (Lengyel, Salem, 2023). With ECEC spaces limited, allocation becomes a “black box”, an opaque process involving social and ethnic segregation (Nebe, 2021) and inequality. Additional ECEC facilities are therefore needed to address the current shortfall and ensure adequate provision and equal access to ECEC for all children.
- While some *Länder* offer free ECEC, others continue to charge parents for childcare services, which can be a financial burden for families, particularly those in low-income households. These disparities result in de facto regional, affordability-based inequalities (Erhard, Scholz, Harring, 2018). Access to ECEC for children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds<sup>1</sup> is thus hampered, leading to inequality of educational opportunity for children. Although there have been efforts to expand access to ECEC, it is not universally free of charge.

1 For additional information on social diversity and related segregation mechanisms, please see Hogrebe, Pomykai and Schulder (2021).

- Despite a legal entitlement to ECEC for children as young as 12 months, many refugee children experience significant delays in accessing ECEC, with some being unable to access it at all. The legal experts Meysen, Gonzáles and Beckmann (2016) argue that children should have this legal right from the very first day of their arrival in Germany. However, entitlement is only granted after children have left the initial reception facility and are assigned to a municipality. In certain *Länder*, asylum seekers from countries of origin labeled as “safe”, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ghana, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Senegal, and Serbia, are no longer allocated to municipalities. Instead, they are required to reside in the initial reception facility or designated accommodation for the entire duration of their asylum application process and are not allowed to relocate. This limits their employment, travel within Germany, and access to integration courses; in certain federal states, children residing in initial reception facilities may not be subject to compulsory education (Feneberg, 2023). Their access to educational institutions is thus impeded, making it increasingly difficult for parents and children to exercise their fundamental right to daycare placement, even though in formal terms the right remains intact (El-Mafaalani, Massumi, 2019).
  - ECEC practices aiming to foster intercultural comprehension and intercultural competencies run the risk of succumbing to culturalization. The concept of culture, despite its frequent incorporation into educational frameworks (e.g., “family culture”), can become entwined with the notion of an inherent and immutable aspect of identity. This can lead to cultural racism (Essed, 1992) or neoracism (Balibar, 1990). The reduction of individuals, including families and children in ECEC, to their cultural identity, may result in a division between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ or between the familiar and the foreign. Such divisions may inadvertently be utilized as the primary explanatory framework, characterizing differences as deficits. For example, disputes may be ascribed solely to cultural disparities, while other explanations such as structural discrimination, gender, and socioeconomic status are left unexplored. ECEC educators thus need to navigate the intricate terrain of acknowledging diversity while avoiding the pitfall of culturalization (Mecheril, 2015).
  - While Germany has made efforts to include children with diverse backgrounds, such as migrant and refugee children, there remain challenges with ensuring that all children receive diversity-sensitive, racism- and discrimination-aware, inclusive care and education. Numerous studies have revealed instances of discrimination within daycare facilities, where children and families encounter racism or ethnic discrimination (Bostancı et al., 2022). This discrimination becomes evident through the absence of diversity-appropriate educational materials, entrenched racist practices, and biased behavior among professionals. Discrimination hinders learning and participation and limits human freedom and development. Consequently, parents may opt to withdraw their children from ECEC facilities or file complaints, leading to the termination of their contracts by institutions due to compromised trust. Such exclusion significantly impedes the sustainable discussion and resolution of racism-related issues and the achievement of social and educational equity (Bostancı et al., 2022). More targeted support and resources may be required to address the specific needs of these groups. Furthermore, there is a need to incorporate discussions about discrimination into ECEC curricula across all 16 *Länder* (Wagner, 2022).
  - Quality standards in ECEC are not entirely consistent across the *Länder* and can differ from one facility to another. Inconsistent quality affects developmental outcomes for children and can make it difficult for parents to make informed choices about which childcare facility to select for their children. Parents with a “migration background” attach significance to specific criteria when choosing childcare services. These criteria include streamlined registration processes, proximity to the home, and, notably, the quality of daycare facilities, measured by factors such as the linguistic diversity of educators and acknowledgement of the value of cultural diversity (Jessen, Spieß, Waights, Judy, 2020). Nevertheless, research findings (Lengyel, Braband, 2021) have revealed that, despite being part of curricula, multilingualism frequently plays a secondary role to German in the eyes of ECEC educators. Additionally, children’s
- 2 “Safe countries of origin” are states where the political and human rights situation are considered stable and unproblematic. Asylum seekers from these countries often have reduced chances of their applications being approved, as it is assumed they do not face persecution or threats in their home country (Feneberg, 2023).

heritage languages are seldom integrated into the daily practices of ECEC facilities, particularly those catering for a significant number of migrant children (Kratzmann, Smidt, Pohlmann-Rother, Kuger, 2013). This underscores the need to enhance quality and stop perpetuating monolingual educational settings in which German is regarded as the sole valid language (Lengyel, Salem, 2023).

- There is a shortage of ECEC educators, leading to higher staff-to-child ratios, which impacts the quality of care and education provided. Akba and Ayça Polat (2022) have highlighted limited opportunities for access and career progression, suboptimal working conditions, and instances of cultural and discriminatory practices, as well as rarer recognition or effective incorporation of multilingualism as a resource in pedagogical work. These challenges make ECEC particularly unappealing for individuals with experience of migration. Furthermore, attempts to include ECEC educators with “migration backgrounds”, aiming to build heterogeneous teams, can risk ethnic discrimination, attributing “intercultural competencies” to them due to their transnational biographies and thus resulting in othering and culturalization (Rosen, Lengyel, 2023).
- There are concerns regarding the training and qualifications of educators in ECEC facilities in general and in regarding diversity, racism and discrimination awareness and inclusive care and education in particular. It is essential to professionalize ECEC educators in order to provide high-quality care and education to children, and there is a need for further investment in this area. This issue assumes particular significance in light of the higher level of qualifications ECEC personnel are now expected to have. As a multitude of ECEC facilities transition into inclusive institutions and witness increasing enrollment by children from diverse and refugee backgrounds, there is a compelling demand for these children to have dedicated attention and support, as a result, for example, of their status as learners of the German as a second language and of the possible presence of particular educational needs. However, ECEC educators often lack the necessary training to adequately address these demands (Müller, Faas, 2021).
- Parents, especially those with direct migration experience or who are not proficient in German, continue to have limited involvement in the planning and development of ECEC services. Engaging parents in decision-making processes and incorporating their feedback could help improve the quality of services and ensure that they align with families’ needs and expectations. In addition, research (Nentwig-Gesemann, Walther, Bakels, Munk, 2021) has shown that even young children can actively help shape their environment and educational spaces; thus, greater consideration needs to be given to children’s agency in this context.
- The effectiveness of ECEC programs and investment is not always adequately assessed. It is necessary to evaluate the impact of measures intended to further children’s development and ensure their future success, to ensure that optimum use is being made of resources and that they are in proportion to the demand for services. This would guarantee sufficient places in daycare facilities for all children so that no disadvantages arise for specific children and all receive high-quality care and education.

## Conclusion

The role of ECEC in promoting social and educational equity in Germany has been recognized not only by academic scholars but also by educational policymakers. In response to increasing linguistic, ethnic, and social diversity within Germany and within ECEC facilities, the *Länder* have introduced diversity-sensitive educational strategies and practices into ECEC curricula. Considering four selected curricula, we have been able to demonstrate that despite their varying approaches and emphases, the curricula share a common focus on support for the development of language skills – in the “academic language”, in German as a second language, and in heritage language(s) – and on the importance of “family cultures”. Notably, all the curricula emphasize integrated language education in everyday contexts, requiring ECEC educators’ professional competence to include diversity awareness in this respect. Although Germany has made significant strides with regard to ECEC, disparities persist. However, improvements in ECEC access, quality and adaptability are discernible across the board.

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