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## Re-framing of Childcare in Germany and England: From a private responsibility to an economic necessity

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## Re-framing of childcare in Germany and England: From a private responsibility to an economic necessity

In both Germany and England a process of re-framing the political discourses around childcare for infants (0–3 years) can be seen in the last 10 years. In this paper, this re-framing process is analysed using the example of the political debates around the introduction of two central pieces of legislation on the expansion of childcare for this age group: the Tagesbetreuungsausbaugesetz (TAG) (2004) in Germany and the Childcare Bill (2005) in England. While family policy and childcare have been considered ‘soft’ topics in both countries, childcare has been re-framed as a ‘hard’ economic issue in both England and Germany during the period analysed. However, as the comparison shows, this re-framing takes place in the context of specific welfare state traditions.

### **1. Introduction**

Like most post-industrial welfare states, England and Germany increasingly face similar challenges that can be described as a sectoral shift from production to services, an ageing population and a changing household structure (Esping-Andersen 1999; Pierson 2001). These challenges – among others – have been caused by growing labour participation among women and changing gender roles, which result in an increasing need for care services for the elderly and for children. These services, which in the past were mostly unpaid caring work provided by women in the household, will increasingly need to be ‘externalised’ (Esping-Andersen 2006) and consequently either taken over by the welfare state or organised through the market.

Both West Germany and England have a traditionally low public involvement in early childhood education and care. In the conservative welfare state of Germany with a strong male-breadwinner model (Lewis and Ostner 1994), care for young children was considered the responsibility of mothers. Similarly, in the liberal English welfare state, intervention in the family was low traditionally except in cases of child neglect or abuse. However, both

countries have experienced dramatic reforms in the last 10 years in relation to childcare: The first step was the introduction of public childcare for pre-school children (aged 3–6 in Germany and 3–5 in England) throughout the 1990s in both countries (Evers et al. 2005). The second step was the expansion of early years education and care for children under 3 years of age.

This paper scrutinizes this ‘second step’ of the expansion of childcare for children under the age of three. The shifts that occur in both countries with the introduction of childcare for children under three mark significant discontinuities with their institutional and cultural paths. The gender and family models embedded within welfare policy can be understood as policy paradigms (Bacchi 1999). The observed changes challenge the underlying norms on gender relations and the upbringing of children, etc. that are deeply rooted in the cultural understanding of the welfare state. How can these changes be explained?

Interestingly, when analysing these recent reforms in the extension of childcare, the main theories that explain policy development fail. First, from an institutional perspective, a stronger path dependency would be expected (Pierson 2001). Public responsibility for the care of infants and young children constitutes a novelty in both countries and breaks away from with dependence on non-state intervention in this field. Second, from a theory of gender welfare analysis, which would also hint at stability rather than change, these changes in policies and institutions also signify at least a partial modification of the underlying family norms and gender ideologies (Daly 2000; Lewis 2004), as well as the cultural understanding of childhood and education in both countries (Pfau-Effinger 2000; Kremer 2005) linked with the gender ideology. Third, the rapid expansion of family policy coincides with the return of social democracy into office in both countries – consequently, a theoretical perspective of ‘parties matter’ (Seeleib-Kaiser 2003) could be considered a theoretical frame of analysis.

However, since in both countries the introduction of childcare for children under three happened only in a subsequent term of office (the second in Germany and third in England), it cannot be considered one of the top priorities of either of the social democratic parties in charge. At the same time, though, the childcare agenda has also been adopted by the conservative parties in Germany and England, and consequently a more sustainable and thorough policy change is expected which will outlive changes in government. Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective or power structures, it would be difficult to explain how childcare entered the political agenda in the first place. Childcare and family policy have never been high on the agenda of trade unions or other social actors of aggregated interests –

the expansion of childcare comes long after it had been put onto the political agenda by the women's movement in the 1970s. In contrast, in both cases the governments in power introduced these reforms not in response to social movements but as elements within their welfare state modernization, in reaction to changes in society and the economy.

In family policy, especially in the field of child-rearing, cultural norms and values are of utmost importance (Bacchi 1999; Kremer 2005). Therefore it is assumed that, within the political sphere, the cultural norms around education and care will need to change in order to enable such a significant shift in policy. This paper<sup>1</sup> analyses whether a shift in the political debates around childcare can be found in both countries. The central hypothesis is that the changes found mark a shift in meaning within this policy field, which also explains why childcare climbed high on the political agenda of both countries. It will be shown that these strong cultural norms and values around gender, the family and the upbringing of children have been changed in the two countries using 'objective' evidence and 'economic' rationality.

This paper's theoretical approach follows an interpretative explanation of the policy change that marks a culturalist turn in policy analysis, looking at policy discourses and normative frames of policy development (Fischer 2003; Nullmeier et al. 2003). In contrast to 'classic' approaches, the agenda setting and policy formulation process is not considered as guided by the rational behaviour of the political actors, but as an interpretative process (Schneider and Janning 2006). These interpretative processes are documented in public debates analysed in policy papers, in political debates or interview texts (Nullmeier et al. 2003). In the analysis of these texts, special attention is paid to the framing and the legitimation of policies (Ullrich 1999; Fischer 2003). The framing refers to the specific understanding of a particular policy field and the meanings attached to it – in this case, are early years services considered to be childcare or education? Are they considered to be benefiting the children or the parents? The legitimation of policies refers to the arguments used for introducing a particular set of policies and the cultural norms and values attached to them.

## **2. Traditions in childcare and early years services in Germany and England**

West Germany has been characterized as the archetype of a conservative welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). It traditionally has high wages and high protection for the core male workforce institutionalized in stable collective agreements and social insurances that

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<sup>1</sup> The basis for this paper is the study 'Sustainable growth, social inclusion and family policy – innovative ways of coping with old and new challenges', and sub-project 'The gateway of education and family policy' (Prof. Dr. Sigrid Leitner and Dr. Anneli RÜling).

guarantee the maintenance of status in the event of unemployment, sickness or old age. This welfare model also presumes a gender division of labour inside the family that is based on a male breadwinner model with a female homemaker and carer. From a feminist perspective, West Germany has also been characterized as a dual welfare state and a traditional male breadwinner model (Lewis and Ostner 1994). Since the 1960s, women's employment rates have been rising and the traditional breadwinner model has been modernized, allowing mothers to work, although mostly part time. (Pfau-Effinger 2000).

Apart from this gender division of labour in the household, cultural norms and values around childhood and childcare are also an important factor. In West Germany, childcare and social services have generally been considered obligations of the family, with the mother seen as the primary responsible and best carer, especially for small children. Mothers who were in gainful employment were considered to be abandoning their children and were called bad mothers, 'Rabemütter'. This ideal, which dates back to the time of the Reformation, has also been enforced culturally by the Nazi government (Vinken 2002). After the war, this norm was continued in the West German welfare state, which supported motherhood and home-based care through different fiscal and leave policies for mothers of younger children (Ostner 2006). For mothers of schoolchildren, the education system provided education and care in the morning only, leaving the afternoon free for recreation or other activities. This allowed mothers only part-time employment, leaving childcare a private responsibility.

In congruence with the gender ideals of the female homemaker and carer, the upbringing (Erziehung) of children in West Germany was considered to be the family's responsibility. Until recently, a strong institutional division existed between the tasks of education (Bildung), care (Betreuung) and upbringing and socialization (Erziehung): while education was only the responsibility of the school and the educational system, care and upbringing were considered to be the duty of parents (Deutscher Bundestag 2005: 44). Institutionally, the separation of education and upbringing was established in the institutional division between the educational system and the public care for children in difficult family situations and foster care ('Jugendhilfe'), as well as in the differentiation of the professions of the teacher and the social worker (Gottschall and Hagemann 2002). This understanding presupposes a self-regulation of the family as an institution of socialization. Education is understood in the German context merely as the responsibility for cognitive development of children. This presumption led to a system of half-day schooling, while social skills are to be learned outside the education system, within the family and civil society (Gottschall and Hagemann 2002).

Only in 1992, in the context of German re-unification, was a legal right to a childcare place (Reform des Kinder und Jugendhilfegesetzes) established guaranteeing a part-time place for every child from the age of three. Because public childcare for children under the age of three as well as afternoon care for schoolchildren was very rarely available, parents with both partners in full-time employment or working flexible hours had to rely on private forms of childcare.

England has been described as a liberal welfare state, which is characterized by low intervention of the state into the market, low levels of de-commodification and low redistribution (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1999). In principle, the welfare state is residual, and welfare state benefits are highly targeted, means-tested and granted at a low level only. In the welfare triangle between state, market and the family, the market plays a dominant role because many social services are organized through it.

As a liberal welfare state, England has a limited tradition of general family policy as such. Instead, the poor were supported through different forms of poverty relief. Due to the lack of support for mothers within the welfare state, until the 1990, England and the UK have been characterized as a strong male breadwinner model (Lewis and Ostner 1994). However, in contrast to the West German welfare state, there was little explicit support for mothers as homemakers comparable to parental leave or payments for care. A tax-splitting system, which supported the traditional male breadwinner family, was abolished in the 1990s.

Following the minimal welfare state intervention, childcare was considered to be a private responsibility of the family (Letablier and Jönsson 2003) and not part of the education system. However, this was not necessarily combined with a strong mother ideology as in West Germany. Consequently, the gender model of distribution of labour is ambivalent: on the one hand, there is no or little active support for familialization and for mothers as homemakers. On the other hand, due to the lack of public support for childcare beyond school hours, women are still supposed to be available as carers and homemakers. Nevertheless, the lack of social support leads to a high pressure on mothers to be in the labour market.

The cultural norms of raising children assumed childcare for pre-school children as a primary task for mothers. The state offered 'care' only for children of single parents or for those at risk of harm or mistreatment, thus connecting the notion of 'care' with neglect and social deprivation (Lewis 2003; Vincent and Ball 2006). Care for pre-school children was not considered part of the education system. This was reflected in divided competences: while childcare (for neglected children) was the responsibility of the Department of Health, 'nursery

education' in the form of pre-school reception classes was under the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Despite rising rates in the employment of women and mothers since the 1970s, the government did not assume responsibility for the reconciliation of work and family life until 1998. Only childcare for children at risk and some pre-school reception classes existed; however, the supply was patchy and covered only a few hours. The idea of supporting children's socialization through childcare was not part of the educational agenda, but remained an idea confined to the middle and upper classes (Lewis and Lee 2002: 3f.). Parents started organizing playgroups and parent initiatives in the voluntary sector in the 1960s, and publicly funded places have expanded since the 1960s. In 1972 there was an attempt by the Thatcher government to provide some nursery education for 3- and 4-year-olds, but this was abandoned in 1980. Childcare expanded mostly through private market institutions such as private day nurseries and childminders, as well as through parent initiatives and voluntary sector institutions; this led to a large regional variety in the supply of childcare services.

In contrast to the West German case, however, childcare places in England were barely subsidized through local authorities or at the national level. In the 1990s, some government policies were introduced to help cover childcare costs: in 1990, a tax relief for employers offering childcare was introduced; in 1994, some childcare costs could be received as income support as an element of the Working Families Tax Credit for low-income families; in 1996, the Conservative government introduced a voucher scheme, which again was abandoned in 1997 when the Labour government came into power (Lewis and Lee 2002: 5ff.).

### **3. Recent policy trajectories and political debates in childcare and early years services**

In 2004 in Germany, the TAG, a Bill that assigns to local authorities the duty to supply sufficient childcare for children under the age of three, was introduced and passed in parliament. In the Bill, the government legislates that each year 1.5 billion euros, which are saved annually through labour market reforms, have to be invested in childcare by local authorities. The Act came into force on 1 January 2005; the first report on local government compliance was published in 2006. The Act also states that childcare for children under the age of three should be regarded within the triad of education, care and socialization, calling for an integrative approach (BMFSFJ 2004: 4).

In the TAG, the government estimates that until 2010 230,000 new places will be required to fulfil the needs of parents in employment, searching for employment, in education and training, and for children with special needs. This estimated number of places corresponds to a child-place ratio of 20% nationally, with 17% in the Western federal states and 39% in the Eastern federal states (BMFSFJ 2007).

According to the Act, childcare places should be provided at the local level as a mixture of public daycare centres, voluntary sector institutions and about 30% in places with private childminders. Furthermore, the TAG stated that childminders, who had so far been working mostly as self-employed with little social security should receive more support and higher regulation, such as health and emergency insurance as well as public subsidies and some quality inspection (BMFSFJ 2004). Apart from the offer of institutional places in the non-profit sector, the places in the market (which consists mostly of self-employed childminders in Germany) should be monitored and coordinated by local authorities.

In the election of 2005, the Conservative party won the majority and a coalition of the two large parties – the Conservatives and the Social Democrats – came into power. However, in family and education policy, and especially the extension of childcare, the new government held similar positions to the red-green coalition. The coalition treaty of 2005 promised the extension of whole-day education and care for schoolchildren. Furthermore, in the chapter on family policy, the aims of the TAG are emphasized and possible sanctions are introduced: if the pace of childcare expansion is too slow and it shows that more than 10% of local authorities will not match the aims of the expansion, a legal right to a childcare place will be introduced from 2010 for children from two years of age (CDU/CSU/SPD 2005: 97).

In 2007, the goal of expanding childcare up to 35% for children under the age of three was established in the coalition and will be financed partly through the national government; a new Act ('Kinderförderungsgesetz') was passed through parliament in 2008, establishing the right to a childcare place for every child from the age of one. Furthermore, the new law offers the same access to public subsidies to for-profit providers as to public and third-sector institutions. This has created resistance mostly from the third-sector institutions (church and welfare charities), which to date offer a large number of the childcare places.

The effective expansion of places that can be measured in the last few years has been slow but steady. According to national statistics counting only the places in childcare institutions and not with childminders, in 1998 there were 166,927 places for children under the age of three altogether, which corresponds to a child-place ratio of 7% (although 35% in the Eastern

states, 1.9% in the Western rural states and 23% in the city states); in 2002 there were 190,914 places or a child-place ratio of 8.6% nationally, which can be broken down into 4.3% in the Western states and 37% in the Eastern states (BMFSFJ 2006: 11ff.). In the first period of the red-green coalition, only a very limited expansion of places can be observed. Between 2002 and 2005 a more rapid expansion was evident: in 2004 the national child-place ratio had an average of 10.8% (7.7 % in the Western states and 37.7% in the Eastern ones) (ibid.). These figures show almost a doubling of places for children under three years of age in the Western states. In 2007, the national average for childcare places rose to 15.5%, with 9.9% in the Western and 41% in the Eastern states (BMFSFJ 2008: 37). The expansion of childcare is no longer a matter of political controversy, but of practical realization.

### **Political debates and controversies in Germany**

The parliamentary debates around the passing of the TAG in 2004 can be regarded as the result of a paradigmatic shift in the meaning of childcare, in which childcare was re-framed in a demographic and economic context and thereby gained importance.

Generally speaking, in the parliamentary debate, all parties argued in favour of the extension of childcare places for children under the age of three. This agreement is surprising because the extension of childcare for children below the age of three was relatively new on the political agenda and definitely not part of the Conservative line. The idea that childcare enhances the reconciliation of work and family and could lead to increasing birth rates was often mentioned; also the notion that investment in childcare would be an investment in the future which would foster economic growth (Deutscher Bundestag 2004). All parties accepted the importance of measures to enhance the reconciliation of work and family life for the economy as well as for demographic development. Furthermore, the idea of investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as pre-emptive social policy was implicitly agreed upon by all parties.

This is surprising insofar as during the election campaign in 2002 the question of family policy had marked the main division line between the Social Democratic and Conservative parties. The CDU and CSU had promised a highly paid universal care allowance for all parents with children aged 0–3 and did not mention the extension of childcare or whole-day schooling (Bösch 2002). As will be shown in the following section, the re-framing took place mainly through the establishment of the new paradigm of ‘sustainable family policy’ by the

Minister for Family Affairs, Renate Schmidt, which was realized in the government of the red-green coalition.

It can be seen from the debate on the TAG that the CDU as the main opposition party had changed positions within barely two years and accepted the new paradigm of the 'sustainable family policy' that should enable the reconciliation of work and family life through the extension of childcare and the support of mothers' employment. Considering the scope of the ideological opposition against childcare and whole-day schooling from a Conservative standpoint, this shift in language is quite significant, although there are some different emphases remaining in the wording as well as in the political priorities: the CDU is more prone to call for 'enabling choice' of parents rather than 'reconciling work and family life'. Furthermore, when calling for an integration of education and care, the Conservative party emphasizes the importance of the families' role as educators, which should be supported and enabled by the state (not only through ECEC, but also through educational guidance).

Interestingly however, it was a Conservative Minister for Family Affairs who pushed the political and cultural shift of extending childcare for children under the age of three even further. In 2007, two years after the TAG came into force, the target was extended. Under the rule of the Conservative Minister for Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen, the further extension of 750,000 childcare places until 2013 was decided in Cabinet, followed by the right to a childcare place after the age of one from 2013. This ultimate aim can be considered the result of the cultural change that has taken place since 2002 and reached all parties.

However, looking at the political debates, it is clear that the main aim in extending childcare places is to enable a better reconciliation of work and family life – in other words, it is the first function of childcare. There has been hardly any political debate on the educational function of childcare and the possible outcomes for children through the improvement of the educational quality of care so far, e.g. in childminder settings. This is due on the one hand to the fiscal restrictions and the higher funding that would be required to introduce higher quality and more places at the same time. The second issue is the division of competences between the national and the federal state level, in which the federal states are responsible for educational standards and inspection. The interviewed experts mentioned that they considered the general extension of places as a first step, which needed to be followed by an initiative on quality as a second step. Some first attempts to improve quality can be seen in a recent speech of the Minister for Family Affairs in October 2007 (BMFSFJ 2007), where she calls for a coordinated effort in order to promote higher quality in childminder care places as well as a

need for better training for childcare staff not experienced in handling children below the age of three. However, the question of quality and the sharing of competences from the federal and state level constitute a major gap in the German debate on childcare. This gap, however, can be explained as one element of continuity from the institutional welfare state layout in which the federal states hold the competencies for education that cannot be overcome easily through national debates.

In England, the political strategy towards childcare and children's services is multifaceted and comprises childcare places as well as integrated services.

In 2004, the Labour government presented the 10-year strategy 'Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children' (Her Majesty's Treasury 2004), which set up an extensive policy framework for the development of childcare over 10 years. The policy targets of the strategy included the reconciliation of family and gainful employment for parents, and the enhancement of child development. The programme aims to increase childcare places and childcare quality over 10 years through inspection as well as education and training for the childcare workforce (ibid.). The strategy includes the expansion of universal childcare for 3–4-year-old children up to 15 hours per week by 2010 and '20 hours eventually', but there was no concrete aim of expansion in childcare for younger children. However, the strategy promises the extension of paid maternity leave to 9 months from 2007 and to 12 months from 2010. Furthermore, children's centres should be increased to 3,500 until 2010, which means 'one in every community'. Finally, within the strategy the government increased the childcare element of the tax credits to lower income families up to £175 per week for one child and £300 for more children (Vincent and Ball 2006: 33).

As one element of the 10-year strategy for childcare, the Childcare Act was passed in the House of Commons in 2005 and came into force in 2006 (House of Commons 2005). In this document, the government for the first time assumes the legal responsibility for the provision of childcare places for children of all age groups. Furthermore, the Act draws together several policies on childcare under one framework. First of all, it defines the duty of local authorities to ensure sufficient childcare for children of working parents in their local community. This includes the increase in universal care for the 3–4-year-olds mentioned in the National Childcare Strategy up to 15 hours per week in 2010. Second, childcare for younger children and school-age children should also be provided if their parents are in employment, in training or have special needs – this marks a development from the Childcare Strategy from 1998, where no childcare places for children under the age of three were mentioned. The local

authorities have to assess and monitor the childcare need at the local level and should coordinate the market with the various local providers. However, the municipalities receive no additional funding for this task. The local authorities are allowed to provide childcare facilities themselves only if there are no private providers. Third, the 'Transformation Fund', which subsidizes training of the childcare workforce, was introduced as one element in the Childcare Act. Finally, the Act establishes a curriculum, 'Birth to three matters', which is integrated in the Early Years Foundation stage, part of a national educational curriculum for children from birth to 18 years, which defines the aims of child development and education. Fifth, it sets up a new framework of regulation and inspection of childcare places. Finally, the Act regulates the extension of Sure Start Children's Centres, which should be extended to 3,500 nationwide until 2010 – one in every community, starting with the most disadvantaged areas. (Linsey and McAuliffe 2006: 405).

### **Political debates and controversies in England**

In the political debates during the passing of the Childcare Act in 2005, various topics were discussed, especially the questions of the quality of childcare, the outcomes for children and whether parental care or external childcare would be better for child development. Generally speaking, all parties involved were in favour of extending childcare, albeit with different priorities. There was also a shift in the political discourse, because family policy as such did not exist in the English welfare state and for the first time the state was taking up responsibility for the regulation of this field.

There had been a debate on childcare and early years services for some years previously. In the manifesto for 2001, the Labour party promised to extend universal childcare for children aged 3–4 years, and to extend early excellence centres in the 500 new Sure Start centres for children aged 0–5. There was a general aim that childcare places should be extended, but no mention of the quality of childcare places (Labour Party 2001).

However, it can also be shown that the priorities of the Blair government on the childcare issue shifted during its three terms in office: in the first years, the question of maternal employment, especially for lone parents, was considered of paramount importance in order to combat child poverty. After some time, however, the issue of the quality of childcare came up on the political agenda. This might be due to the results of research which has shown that childcare below the age of three is only beneficial for the emotional and cognitive development of the child if the care provided is of high quality (Melhuish 2004; Smith et al.

2007). So, first, the primary function of childcare – helping reconciliation of work and life – was discussed, and some years later the issue of the educational value of childcare was also debated.

Following some criticism of an economically driven welfare-to-work agenda, which was considered to force parents into the labour market regardless of their childcare responsibilities, the Labour government changed its perspective on childcare. As a consequence, the issue of quality and the ‘outcomes for children’ have gained paramount importance in order to justify the extension of childcare places. Because the approach of evidence-based policy making is committed to a ‘what counts is what works’ paradigm, within the political aim of tackling child poverty there is a need to increase the quality of care in order to improve the educational outcomes of ECEC for the children involved.

### **Comparison**

We have seen a significant discursive shift in both countries in the years between 2002 and 2005. Previously childcare for young children under the age of three had been considered a private responsibility of parents. In both cases, local authorities are responsible for ensuring the sufficiency of places for parents in employment and training as well as for children with special needs. However, the municipalities do not necessarily supply childcare places themselves. In Germany, the local authorities cooperate with the local networks of providers, which consist mainly of non-profit organizations (Evers et al. 2005) as well as childminders, and subsidize the places offered by the various providers. In England, the local authorities monitor demand and supply of the local childcare market and cooperate with existing providers, which are mainly market-based, but offer no general subsidy.

There are also different foci in the provision of childcare for the early years in both countries: while Germany aims at a sustainable, public sector-like provision at highly subsidized rates for all parents in order to increase the birth rate and foster economic growth, in England childcare subsidies for the early years services are specially targeted at the lower income groups and public childcare aims mainly to combat child poverty and social exclusion through integrated services.

This funding mechanism remains a significant difference between the German and the English system of service delivery. In Germany, the statutory right to a childcare place from 2013 is connected with a sustainable and legally binding duty of local authorities to co-fund the childcare places. Initially, this will be supported by the federal Ministry for Family

Affairs. Through this new duty, the welfare state increases and guarantees its provision of social services – leading to a real expansion of welfare responsibilities, though not necessarily to higher welfare spending because positive fiscal effects through less unemployment and higher social security contributions might compensate for the childcare spending in a medium-term perspective. However, on the short-term basis, the local authorities will be reluctant to meet the childcare targets quickly because they are confronted with rising costs (Deutscher Städtetag 2003). Consequently, the main problem in Germany is still the lack of availability of suitable places in most areas in the Western states.

In England, the places are offered mostly by for-profit providers and are rarely subsidized because the principle of welfare provision is that services should be financially sustainable at market prices (Evers et al. 2005). The political programmes for increasing childcare are always of limited duration – they should give some help in the kick-off phase, but in the long run the care provision should be self-sustaining. As a consequence, in England parental fees are much higher than in Germany, and the affordability of childcare remains the largest problem for working-class parents, and also, to an extent, middle-class ones (Ball and Vincent 2005). Availability is also a problem for full-time or flexible hours, but generally speaking the childcare coverage rate is much higher with places for about 35% of children under the age of three, although most of these places are only part time. Consequently, the main problem is not the lack of availability but the affordability for parents, as well as the sustainability.

#### **4. The drivers for extension of childcare and early years services**

##### **Germany**

In the German context, a successful re-framing of family policy and childcare from a ‘soft’ policy for gender equality to a ‘hard’ policy fostering economic growth can be observed during the second term of office of the red-green government. As some researchers argue, the main policy driver for family policy reform in Germany has been the demographic change (Auth 2007; Leitner 2007).

The increasing attention on demographic issues has been fuelled by a dominant public debate on low birth rates, a fear of the ‘dying nation’, as well as the economic costs involved in the demographic changes, especially through the rising costs for pension insurance (Berger and Kahlert 2006; Auth 2007). In the political sphere, there has been a growing re-thematization of pro-natalist policy in the context of family policy since 2002. The issue of pro-natalist policy had been a taboo in post-war family policy due to the racial pro- and anti-natalist

policies during the Nazi period and the second world war, from which the democratic West Germany wanted to distance itself (Willenbacher 2007). When Renate Schmidt became Minister for Family Affairs in 2002, the demographic issue was put on the agenda as a new aim of family policy in the Social Democratic party.

It has been used as an argument for reform that the 'old' family policy supporting the male breadwinner model was based on out-dated gender roles. This was seen to make women refrain from having children, because they have to make a decision between career and family due to a lack of reconciliation policies. Consequently, the modernization of family policy should enable the reconciliation of work and family life according to the life choices of couples and families (BMFSFJ 2005a). Reform was considered necessary because, as the expert commission on the family notes, the low birth rate can be traced back to the fact that 'family policy on the national, regional and local level has much too long ignored the fundamental changes of economic, social and cultural patterns in Germany' (Bertram 2006: 8; *Translation Anneli Rueling*)

The foremost aim is to raise the birth rate up to the level of 'desired children'. Through the use of the demographic argument, a re-framing of family policy from a 'soft' issue on equal opportunities and enabling women's labour market participation to a 'hard' issue can be observed between the years 2002 and 2005. This was used as an explicit political strategy in order to increase the political weight of family policy (Ristau 2005). Instead of 'just' enabling mothers' employment, family policy and childcare are specifically regarded as fostering economic growth, stabilizing the social security systems and thus making the welfare state 'sustainable' (BMFSFJ 2005a). The recent reforms stand in the context of a new political and normative framework called 'sustainable family policy'.

Sustainability in this context means first of all the 'effectiveness' of policy through strategic set-up and consequent scientific monitoring and policy evaluation. Second, it means that society should be able to sustain itself. Generally speaking, the commission on the seventh family report maps out the objectives as such:

The aim of sustainable family policy is to create a social, economic and political framework which enables the future generation to invest in the development and education of children, to practise generational solidarity and to interpret care for others as part of their own life perspective.' (BMFSFJ 2005a: 427; *Translation Anneli Rueling.*)

This issue is linked with the economic and social aspects of sustainability – safeguarding human capital and social integration. In the document quoted above, the idea of human capital investment is also taken up. The sustainable family policy is measured according to the following indicators (Ristau 2005; BMFSFJ 2005a): a birth rate of at least 1.7 children per women in the medium-term perspective, better reconciliation of work and family, lower poverty rates of children through enabling both parents' employment, higher levels of education, especially through the improvement of early childhood education and care as well as strengthening competence of parents in the upbringing of their children in order to insure good child development. These aims constitute a clear break with a conservative breadwinner model where the woman is mainly responsible for childcare and might be working part time. However, there are some contradictory elements remaining at the policy level that support the male breadwinner family – such as the tax-splitting system that subsidizes traditional role models.

The main driver of this process of re-framing was the Ministry for Family Affairs. Several scientific studies were commissioned by the ministry in order to prove the economic effectiveness of family policy measures in order to enhance the reconciliation of work and family life among men and women, and especially the macro-economic efficiency of sustainable family policy and better reconciliation (BMFSFJ 2003; BMFSFJ 2005b; Eichhorst et al. 2007).

Many of the studies work with international comparisons to other European countries that show a better economic performance coupled with a higher birth rate and labour market participation of mothers – the Nordic countries and France are popular examples. Another study shows through international comparison that other European countries with good reconciliation policies and high women's employment rates also have higher birth rates (BMFSFJ 2005c). Even though the 'Barcelona target' of the European Community – which sets the benchmark of childcare places for one-third of children under the age of three to be reached in every member state by 2010 – did not play a role in expanding childcare places for children under the age of three in Germany, the international comparison and policy learning played an important part in the re-framing process. The message is 'good reconciliation policies "work" elsewhere'. Further studies used econometric modelling to show the short-term impact of public investment in childcare in the economy and at the local level. They argued that childcare would create high rates of return and 'save' welfare state expenditure in other areas, because it would create new employment opportunities leading to higher revenue from taxes and social security contributions (Spiess et al. 2002; BMFSFJ 2005).

Consequently, extending childcare is first of all regarded as a strategy for economic growth and second as a social investment strategy beneficial for child development. The argument that spending on family policy should not be regarded as costs but indeed as investments, which will pay off in the future, was also adopted in several studies that proved the ‘effectiveness’ of family-friendly policies for the whole economy as well as on the company level (BMFSFJ 2005b). For the ‘business case’ of reconciliation policy, there is also an argument that the human capital of highly qualified women is ‘lost’ through long periods with the family and away from the workplace, which leads to a future and already prevailing shortage of highly skilled workers. In this case, the economic aspects of sustainability are highly stressed.

The general argument is that family policy should enable reconciliation of work and family in order to stabilize human capital: on the one hand, highly qualified women should be retained in the labour market at the same time. On the other hand, highly qualified women especially have fewer children – through a good reconciliation policy they should be encouraged to have children *and* stay in the labour force. The issue of the safeguarding of human capital is therefore twofold: in the present, highly qualified women are required as workers and, for the future, the children of highly qualified parents are required as human capital. Interestingly in contrast to the English debate, the fertility or the educational achievement of lower educated women is hardly mentioned in the debate. The policy is targeted mainly at middle-class parents; however it marks a paradigmatic shift from the Conservative idea of the family where the mother is the primary parent responsible for childcare.

The question of the educational value of early childhood education and care is rarely mentioned in this context. Although there are specialist debates on early years pedagogy, educational value cannot be considered to be a policy driver so far. There have been certain steps towards a better integration of education and care for children from three years of age through the establishment during this period of Länderbildungspläne, federal curricula for education from the age of three, as well as through the introduction of minimal training for private childminders. However, education for children below the age of three is still not an issue in the general debate and there is hardly any research on it. This might be the next step as some recent studies on the educational value of ECEC show (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2008).

## **England**

In England the main and first driver for the expansion of childcare was the aim to fight child poverty and enable parents and mothers to return to employment (Ball and Vincent 2005; Sylva and Pugh 2005; NNI Research Team 2007). This driver can be seen as a certain continuity in liberal welfare state ideology, because poverty prevention and targeted policies have always been a justification for state intervention in the liberal model (Mahon 2002; Clasen 2005). In this context, the target of eradicating child poverty is the main driver of the early years services. The political strategy against child poverty works in two dimensions. First, there has been a strong attempt to get unemployed parents back into work and to increase the female employment rate. As employment has been found to be the most effective method of poverty prevention, parents' employment is regarded as the first step towards the eradication of child poverty. Second, through socially inclusive programmes targeted at disadvantaged children, the poverty and welfare-dependence cycle should be broken over the life course of children.

The expansion of childcare is one element of a welfare-to-work-policy targeting low-income parents and getting lone mothers back into employment. The idea is to support self-sufficiency of parents instead of welfare dependency, which presumes the notion of 'dependency as evil' and a failure of the individual in the first place (Bacchi 1999). This idea is deeply rooted in the liberal welfare state philosophy. The targets set by the Labour government are ambitious: halving child poverty (on the basis of 1999) and bringing 70% of single parents into employment by 2010. This aim links in with the active labour market policy programme 'New Deal for Lone Parents' introduced in 1998. Consequently, the childcare subsidies introduced are targeted mainly at low-income parents (and specifically at parents from disadvantaged communities in order to avoid social stigmatization), who are absent from the labour market. One reason for this programme is that the availability and costs for childcare constitute a real barrier to employment.

Public subsidies for childcare for children aged 0–3 are granted in the form of the working tax credit for low-income parents and the establishment of subsidized childcare facilities in the most disadvantaged communities (Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative [NNI]; children's centres). The subsidies are targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds only. This approach is called 'progressive universalism' (Her Majesty's Treasury 2004): while the government is providing some universal provision – for children from 3–5 only – public support is aiming at those who need it most. This targeting goes along with a policy tradition

of a liberal welfare state that provides support for the poor in the first place, while parents with middle and upper incomes are not considered to be needy.

The second aspect of the expansion of childcare for the under-threes is the aim of ‘giving children the best possible start in life’ (Her Majesty’s Treasury 2004). In the context of the English policy paradigm considering social inclusion, the connection between education and care is much more relevant than in Germany. By targeting children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the aim of ‘giving children the best possible start in life’, there is a need to legitimate the public policy development through its effectiveness for child development and its outcome for social inclusion over the life course. Consequently, the research studies that are cited in the public and scientific debate show that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from ECEC, especially the access to good quality care before the age of three (Sylva and Pugh 2005).

As argued earlier, the idea follows the logic of childcare policy as social investment in children and especially of children ‘in need’. The naming of the programmes – for example, ‘Sure Start’ or ‘Every Child Matters’ – is telling: it evokes the image that the state has to rescue children from socially deprived backgrounds and the risk of neglect or abuse. The policy is ‘pre-emptive’ insofar as the idea is to help parents in difficult life circumstances as well as to invest early in today’s children in order to prevent low labour market attainment, crime and antisocial behaviour in the future. One influential summary report on the effectiveness of early years intervention for disadvantaged children concludes:

The evidence on childcare in the first three years for disadvantaged children indicates that high quality childcare can produce benefits for cognitive, language and social development. Low quality childcare produces either no benefit or negative effects. (...) Studies into adulthood indicate that this educational success is followed by increased success in employment, social integration and sometimes reduced criminality.’ (Melhuish 2004: 4f.)

Consequently, economic and social sustainability through human capital development and long-term lower welfare state expenditures are the focus of attention.

Interestingly, in England no studies with European comparison are used – only studies learning from other liberal welfare states, especially the United States and Australia. Policy learning was institutionalized through copying programmes such as Sure Start, which was modelled after the US programme ‘Headstart’ that showed very positive effects. This can be understood in the context of a liberal welfare state that is opposed to public support of social

services for the wider population as is the case in the Scandinavian welfare states. Or, to put it the other way around, there is a fear that the people would want ‘Swedish childcare places and British taxes’ (Glass 2005) – two things that do not go together. In the frame of a liberal welfare state, the need for public intervention as such requires legitimation.

In order to justify public intervention in the area of childcare, the effectiveness of this policy for the development of children and for combating social exclusion needs to be proved. The political and scientific debate relied heavily on a variety of scientific studies that investigated the effect of ECEC on the development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. First, studies on brain development were prominent. Second, studies which looked at the long-term effect of ECEC on the readiness for school, educational attainment of children and success in later life were used (Melhuish 2004; Sylva and Pugh 2005). Especially popular were research results that showed long-term effects such as lower unemployment and lower crime rates (Sylva and Pugh 2005: 13). In this respect, the expansion of children’s services in England remains within the frame of a liberal welfare state, and financial support is targeted mostly at the lower qualified population. The aim is to ensure social inclusion over the life course.

## **5. Conclusion**

In both countries, childcare for the early years has been expanded and this has been justified through a process of re-framing childcare as an economic issue. This re-framing has proven very successful politically. In both countries, until the late 1990s, childcare had been considered a ‘women’s issue’ and not as important for the sustainability of the welfare state. Since the turn of the millennium, childcare has increasingly been considered a vital element of welfare state reform.

The first line of argument for the extension of childcare in both countries is the better reconciliation of work and family life and the assumption that mothers will increase their employment participation. This is considered to lead to higher economic growth, lower welfare dependency, and higher tax revenue and social security contributions. The new framing considers childcare a productive factor in social policy, a ‘one fits-all’ strategy that is to solve all kinds of problems in the welfare state.

The difference between the two countries lies in the main target group of the expansion as well as the central aims of the strategies and the topics discussed. In Germany, it is mostly higher qualified women who have been targeted, because they are missing as ‘human capital’ in the labour market if they have children, and they are also the ones who should increase

their fertility rate. Furthermore, the expansion of childcare should lead to increasing economic growth through a higher labour market participation by mothers and the creation of new jobs in childcare. These will be highly subsidized and created mostly in the public sector; however, subsidies will also be available to private crèches and childminders. In England, fertility is not so much of an issue – probably due to a higher fertility rate of 1.7 children per women. The primary aim in England is to increase mothers' employment rates in order to eradicate child poverty. Consequently, the childcare policy is mainly targeted at parents from disadvantaged communities. In both cases however, the primary aim of the expansion of childcare is to improve the reconciliation of work and family life, and to promote mothers' employment; the latter is increasingly considered to be an economic necessity for the economy as a whole and/or for the economic sustainability of individual households.

The underlying assumption in both countries concerning the 'reconciliation' aspect is that, if there is enough affordable childcare available, mothers will take it up and increase their employment participation. In both countries, it is argued that there are still a lack of flexibility and appropriateness in the childcare offered. Present studies in Germany, where only about 30% of mothers work when the children are under the age of three (BMFSFJ 2005), show that a larger percentage of mothers with young children would indeed like to join the labour force if suitable childcare was available. In England, however, the picture is much more complex: considering that the actual employment of mothers with children under the age of three is around 60%, some mothers would prefer to work less and some would like to work more.

Concerning the educational aspect of childcare, it is possible to see a different framing in the two countries: while the quality of childcare for children under three is less of an issue in Germany, it is of high importance in the English policy discourse. The reason is that educational outcomes for disadvantaged children are a high political priority under the liberal paradigm. The discourse is concentrated on social investment in children, especially for those at risk. Consequently, one can see a stronger link between education and family policy in the English childcare debate. The debate on education of pre-school children and the quality of education has so far not been paramount in the German debate, which has focused mostly on the quantity of provision. However, expert debates are claiming a higher integration of education and care, and stressing the importance of educational outcomes for disadvantaged children. As a consequence, the educational aspects of childcare might gain importance in the public debate in Germany in the following years as well.

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