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Learning stories, pedagogical work and early childhood education: a perspective from German preschools

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 200 years, early childhood provision in Germany has primarily been oriented towards the goal of work-care reconciliation. Even though there is a long tradition in Germany of education-oriented approaches, the primary goal has always been care. The extensive development of early childhood centres for children under three years of age over the past 10 years is likewise driven by the goal of reconciling career and family life. However, the issue of improving young children's education has also become more important. This is clear from the German federal states' education plans, which are a curricular guideline for the form and content of work in early childhood centres. The education plans show, however, that there is a lack of clarity in terms of how education is understood. Two different understandings of education are implicitly competing with one another: the school-based, normative and the social constructivist understanding. This contribution illustrates this dichotomy by means of the key pedagogical processes of observation and documentation. A subsequent empirical analysis of learning stories from Germany confirms that there is an unclear and contradictory understanding of education in pedagogical practice too.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood provision; documentation; learning stories

Early childhood in Germany: work-care reconciliation as the driving force

The development of early childhood provision in Europe and North America over the past 200 years can be explained with reference to two different paths (Willekens, Scheiwe, & Nawrotzki, 2015): one group of states (1) bases its early-years children's provision on the content and structures of school education, whereas another group (2) is oriented towards the goal of work-care reconciliation. The history of early childhood provision in Germany is strongly influenced by the path of work-care reconciliation (Scheiwe, 2009): back in the nineteenth century, institutions for otherwise unsupervised children ("Kinderbewahrnstanalten"), primarily created through church and private initiatives, aimed to provide these children with care and protection (Reyer, 2006). In the course of this development, the emphasis was always on the charitable function of the institutions, with the main target group for a long time being children affected by poverty and neglect. It was only after the Second World War that the emphasis shifted both in West Germany (FRG) and East Germany (GDR). In the GDR the

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“Kindergarten” (pre-school for children aged between three and six) was open to all children, thereby enabling a high number of women to move into employment (Konrad, 2015). In the FRG too, it became more and more common for all children to attend kindergarten, with the proportion of children aged three to six enrolled in early childhood centres increasing from 33% (1965) to 66% (1975); this provision, however, was almost exclusively limited to kindergartens offering half-day care (Konrad, 2012). Finally, in the 1990s (after the German reunification), a further expansion took place (Rauschenbach & Riedel, 2015); between 1990 and 2000 through the creation of new half-day kindergarten places, and from 2000 through the establishment of care provision for children under three years of age. An important driver in this development was the desire to get more women – and, respectively, mothers – into employment. On the one hand, this desire was on the part of the women themselves, who were demanding more freedoms and independence from their husbands in the context of the emancipation movements. Public early childhood provision was the main prerequisite here in the realisation of a desire for independent employment (Baader, 2015). On the other hand, there was also a distinct social and economic interest in bringing mothers into the workforce. In various publications, for example, it was argued that an expansion in early childhood provision may contribute significantly to an increase in mothers in employment (e.g. Büchel and Spieß 2002; Engelbrech & Jungkunst, 1998). The consultancy firm McKinsey’s active engagement in the development of early childhood education with its “McKinsey Educates” initiative (Kahl, 2006) is an example of how companies can steer public interest towards the educational potential of early childhood. The promise to give children in early childhood centres access to education at an early age was possibly also an important incentive in motivating families to make use of early childhood care provision. In particular, the results of the first PISA studies (e.g. Fthenakis, 2003), which were felt to be devastating and provoked intensive discussion in Germany (Rauschenbach & Riedel, 2015), also helped to draw increased attention to the importance of the early years in children’s continuing education.

By establishing a legal entitlement to a place in early childhood provision initially for three-year-olds (1996) and later for one-year-olds (2013), the legislators created a context for a significant improvement in the framework conditions for the promotion of work-care reconciliation. This significantly increased the proportion of children in early childhood care: for children between the ages of three and mandatory school age (usually at the age of six years in Germany), the proportion of children in early childhood care in 2017 was 93.4%, whereas in 2007 it was 89% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018). For children under three years of age, the increase was even more noticeable, for whereas in 2007 only 15.5% of children in this age group attended an early childhood centre, in 2017 it was 33.1% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018). In the first year of their lives, however, children rarely attend early childhood provision – they are usually cared for within the family (parents, grandparents, siblings) (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2018). The parental allowance – which is enshrined in law (income-dependent on up to 100% of the previous net income of the main parent carer) and is paid for the duration of the first year of the child’s life – makes it possible for the parents to look after the children (Ahrens, 2017). If, therefore, we look only at children between the ages of one and three, we see that on average every second child in this age group attends an early childhood centre. In addition to this, children under three

years of age are often looked after by childminders. Here, the children are usually cared for in a private environment by semi-professional people (childminders) in small groups. About 5.1% of children under the age of three are cared for by childminders, however this form of childcare is rarely still used by parents of older children (proportion in this form of childcare under 1%) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018). Despite this considerable increase overall, surveys of parents show that the actual need for childcare for children under three is still not being met, which is why we can expect an increase in childcare capacities over the next few years (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2018).

This clear increase in extra-familial childcare is not only apparent in the proportion of children cared for within early childhood provision, but also in the length of time children spend in daily attendance at early childhood centres. The parents of just under half the children (48.7%) who attend an early childhood centre have set up childcare for 40 hours or more per week; for children under three this proportion is in fact 54.7% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018).

The expansion of early childhood care provision in Germany over the past few years is therefore a continuation of the work-care reconciliation path embarked upon in the nineteenth century (Scheiwe, 2009). This development confirms the theory espoused by Willekens et al. (2015), according to whom the systems of early childhood provision in the individual states are characterised by a high path dependency: “once certain ways of doing things have come to be socially accepted, routinized and perceived as normal [...] it becomes more difficult to leave the path entered into than to stay on this path” (Willekens et al., 2015, p. 18).

Framework of early childhood provision: reluctant transformation to education

As well as a strong focus on work-care reconciliation in Germany, there is also a long – if always inferior – tradition which emphasises the path of education. Alongside institutions for otherwise unsupervised children, schools for young children (“Kleinkinderschulen”) also arose in Germany in the early stages of the development of early childhood provision, and these placed more emphasis on preparation for school (Reyer, 2006). Friedrich Fröbel, too, with his system of play care (“Spielpflege”), emphasised elementary educational content, giving rise to a movement which resulted in the setting up of kindergartens in many parts of Germany (Konrad, 2012). In addition, the impact the approaches espoused by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Maria Montessori had in Germany shows that there was interest in Germany, too, in teaching fundamental educational content sooner than the year children start school (Franke-Meyer, 2014; Scheiwe, 2009). Another example is the concept of the kindergarten as the “preliminary stage” of the “democratic comprehensive school” in the GDR (Reyer, 2006). In the FRG (West Germany) too, in the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s, there were attempts to distinguish kindergartens more clearly as educational institutions. The intention here was to place particular emphasis on children’s cognitive development through a systematic early learning programme which was to replace the kindergarten pedagogy of looking after children and providing them with a protective space (Konrad, 2012). Numerous pilot projects were set up in the course of these debates, but they were not able to meet

the high expectations, so the general trend within German early childhood centres moved once again towards an emphasis on personal and social education as a complement to the care provision offered (Konrad, 2012). In the second half of the twentieth century – at the latest, however, since the 1990s – the educational orientation in the united Germany has become increasingly important. The German “Eighth Code of Social Law” (“Achstes Sozialgesetzbuch”), passed in 1991, sets out within the “Child and Youth Services Act” “education, care, and upbringing” as the goals of early childhood centres in Germany. In contrast to school, children’s and young people’s centres (including early childhood provision) have no independent mandate for the education, personal and social education of children, rather they complement the family, which continues to take precedence (Konrad, 2012). The path of education has therefore thus far always played a secondary role in the development of early childhood provision in Germany. As Willekens et al. (2015) have demonstrated with regard to other countries too, changing paths once a path has been embarked upon is beset with obstacles.

In Germany these difficulties emerge even more clearly if we analyse the early childhood workforce. In Germany, teachers in early childhood centres are usually trained as state-recognised educators (“Erzieherinnen”). Trainee educators usually complete two years of training at a vocational college specialising in social pedagogy, as well as one year of practical training.¹ The state-recognised educator qualification corresponds to a level 6 within the German Qualifications Framework and level 5 within the European Qualifications Framework and is therefore formally equivalent to a bachelor degree. In terms of content, however, the training provided by vocational colleges specialising in social pedagogy is oriented towards “the practical requirements linked to the everyday organisation of day-care for children and established ECEC practice” (Rauschenbach & Riedel, 2015, p. 67). The educator’s job description is in this respect oriented more towards the work-care reconciliation approach and less towards education.

The increasing importance of education as the goal of early childhood provision meant that the suitability of state-recognised educator training was increasingly called into question. In 2004, university degree courses for teachers in early childhood centres were introduced for the first time; they were supposed to provide a scientifically oriented qualification (Pasternak, 2015). Despite high growth rates at the beginning, however, this new job profile did not achieve widespread take-up in practice, and today it has stagnated at a relatively low level: the proportion of academically qualified teachers among employees in early childhood centres is 6.4%, whereas – now, as before – over 70% of the teachers are qualified state-recognised educators (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer., 2017). There are multifaceted reasons as to why Germany has been hesitant in making the training more academic. One significant factor is economic considerations, for teachers with a higher education qualification command a higher salary. Thus far, however, the administrative bodies of early childhood education centres, as employers, have created only very few higher-paid positions. Even the initiative which set up degree courses at universities came mainly from the universities themselves. They were supported in this by the federal state ministries; the majority of administrative bodies or employers in early childhood centres, however, hold fast to the qualification route of the state-recognised educator. If there is to be a change of path –

from work-care reconciliation to education –, it would probably be necessary to ensure that significantly more teachers in early childhood centres receive the same training as teachers in schools, i.e. to train them in universities.

An important milestone on the path of education is the development of education plans as a curricular framework for the work in early childhood centres. Since 2004, each of the 16 federal states in Germany has developed its own education plan, formulating content-focused, pedagogical and organisational aspects of the work in early childhood centres (Diskowski, 2009). The central, national basis for the education plans is a joint resolution made by the Conference of Youth Ministers and the Conference of Culture Ministers in 2004, in which the participants agreed on a “Common Framework of the Federal States for Early Education Provision in Early Childhood Centres” (Jugendministerkonferenz, Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004). This specifies, in particular, various educational fields (e.g. “language, writing, communication” or “nature and cultural environment”) which are echoed in similar ways across all the education plans of the federal states, forming the “core” of the plans (Smidt & Schmidt, 2012, p. 246). The education plans, however, are not a differentiated curriculum which determines precisely what a child should be learning and when and how s/he should be learning it. They offer, rather, a general guideline which provides an orientation for shaping the content and methodology of work in early childhood centres. Just as the education plans differ from one another in terms of their content, there are also differences between the various federal states with regard to the binding character of the education plans. Whereas in some federal states the education plan is conceived as a general orientation, in other states it is more binding. There are therefore also differences between the federal states in terms of the information and further training provided to teachers on the content of the education plans; there has been no systematic introduction across early childhood centres nationwide (Viernickel, Nentwig-Gesemann, Nicolai, Schwarz, & Zenker, 2013). The education plans therefore only partially fulfil their function as a tool of guidance in pedagogical work (Meyer, 2018).

The education plans are the expression of attempts to place the educational aspect more firmly in the foreground, and – to use the words of Willekens et al. (2015) – to change the path. Within the education plans themselves, differentiation from the path of work-care reconciliation has no role to play, for the plans are unequivocally oriented towards education. A new dichotomy becomes apparent, however, in which two different understandings of education are competing with one another. On the one hand, there is a school-based, normative, understanding of education in which the orientation towards a general developmental norm and the associated categorisation of development is of great importance. On the other hand, there is a social constructivist understanding of education which emphasises informal learning that is incorporated into everyday life and foregrounds the individual interests and development of the individual child. It is precisely this social constructivist understanding of education which takes up more space in the preambles and introductory sections of the education plans, e.g. when they sketch out the image of the child as an individual, independent learner, competent in his/her own development. For example, the Bavarian education plan states: “Education for children is a social process in which children and adults actively participate. Education only takes place in mutual interaction, in communicative exchange, and in a process of co-construction, not least in terms of the construction of

meaning” (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, and Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, 2016, p. 11). Education is defined here as an interactive process which is less about appropriating declarative knowledge and more about the holistic development of the child’s personality. By contrast, however, the concrete formulation of the content of the work in early childhood centres often demonstrates a school-based, normative understanding of education. In connection with education, for example, the Bavarian education plan, mentions “language and literacy” alongside “enjoyment in speaking” and “interest in dialogue” as general learning dispositions, and “the capacity for linguistic abstraction”, “textual comprehension” and “the ability to recognise different linguistic styles and types of text” as “the goals of education and personal and social education”, i.e. explicit knowledge content, the mastering of which is the prescribed norm (loc. cit., pp. 197–198).

The aim of this contribution is to illuminate more clearly the dichotomy within the new educational orientation in the development of early childhood centres in Germany. This will be exemplified using the field of documentation. To this end, this contribution will, on the one hand, examine the general rationale for documentation within educational policy, and, on the other hand, analyse concrete implementations of the documentation by means of learning stories in pedagogical practice within German early childhood centres.

Documentation and learning stories as the expression of different understandings of early childhood education

Documentation in Germany

Documentation is the written, visual and auditory recording of situations in early childhood centres. A broader understanding of this includes notes from observations and conversations, completed observation sheets, or other standardised methods of developmental diagnostics. More narrowly, documentation relates exclusively to the recording of processes and objects perceived by the senses, without evaluating or categorising these; it is a recording that is focused on the educational process (Knauf, 2019). In Germany, a particularly wide variety of methods of documentation is employed. The centres themselves may decide which methods they would like to implement, and to what extent. Generally, several methods are used in parallel in early childhood centres (Fröhlich-Gildhoff & Strohmer, 2011). Many centres have developed their own methods or adapted existing methods to their own requirements (Viernickel et al., 2013). Among the existing methods, the portfolio and learning stories are particularly widespread (OECD, 2015).

Within the education plans, which are the guidelines for the work in early childhood centres, documentation is closely connected with observation, so the documentation becomes a textualisation of the observed behaviour of the children, and is only rarely understood as an independent field of activity. The reason for this close connection between documentation and observation is the high value attributed to the diagnostics of educational and developmental processes in education. Documentation is already addressed as a basis for the diagnostics of individual children in the “Common Framework of the Federal States for Early Education Provision in Early Childhood

Centres” (Jugendministerkonferenz, Kultusministerkonferenz, 2004, p. 5). This situating of documentation as part of a diagnostic method is also echoed by the majority of the education plans. For example, the Baden-Württemberg education plan states that documentation serves the “recording and evaluation of individual educational and developmental processes” (Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport Baden-Württemberg, 2011, p. 18).

Whereas the general sections of the education plans emphasise children as subjects actively participating in their learning process (in line with the social constructivist understanding of education), the sections on documentation convey a different perception of children: here, the majority of children are described as objects of observation and documentation (in line with the school-based, normative understanding of education), and the teachers are supposed to observe and analyse the individual behaviour of the children. In some education plans this is interpreted as a particular kind of attention paid by adults to children. The education plans from Berlin and Hamburg, for example, state that the child has “a right to be considered and observed” (Behörde für Arbeit, Soziales, Familie und Integration, 2012, p. 36; Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft, 2014, p. 33). Observation (and therefore also documentation) are understood here as a particular (positive) attention paid to the individual child.

However, children are not seen as objects of specialist observation across the board; in some education plans they are also described as active creators of documentation. In the education plan from Hessen, for example, we read: “the documentation incorporates the perspectives of children and parents” (Hessisches Ministerium für Soziales und Integration, Hessisches Kultusministerium, 2016, p. 116). Here, the teachers function as facilitators of different perspectives which they gather and incorporate. In Berlin’s and Hamburg’s educational programmes the children are even “recognised as subjects of observation” because their perspectives are meant to be integrated and taken seriously (Behörde für Arbeit, Soziales, Familie und Integration, 2012, p. 36; Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft, 2014, p. 34). Here, children themselves are described as actors who shape the documentation.

Overall, the education plans prove to be contradictory, especially with respect to the role of children. In terms of documentation, the education plans essentially express a formalised understanding of education within which a precise observation- and documentation-based diagnostics makes it possible to customise educational offerings. By contrast, the education plans proclaim elsewhere the self-determinacy and self-competence of the child; children who are naturally competent in their own educational process and know themselves which stimuli they require to further their education might not, however, be reliant on custom-fit external educational offerings. The educational plans therefore show very clearly the dichotomy between the school-based, normative perspective and the social constructivist perspective within the two understandings of education.

Learning stories

Learning stories are a form of documentation designed to enable a debate with children’s educational processes that is focused on their strengths. For learning stories,

situations in which the children are active are selected as examples, described and interpreted. The teacher formulates a story from this which is generally articulated as a letter to the child and illustrated with photos of the selected situation (Knauf, 2018). The learning stories method was originally developed in New Zealand and is still used in New Zealand today as a key assessment for children of pre-school age (Carr & Lee, 2012). The analysis of the children's behaviour in the situations concerned is conducted using learning dispositions. These are understood as intellectual habits or patterns with motivational and affective character (Katz, 1993). This focus on learning dispositions means it is less a question of assessing children according to a norm and more a question of evaluating them on the basis of their individual development (Carr, 2001). Accordingly, this form of assessment does not apply a predetermined grid to the children's activities, rather it takes its starting point from the children's behaviour, putting them at the centre as active learners (Knauf, 2017b). The focus on learning dispositions means domain-specific achievements take a back seat, for learning dispositions can be observed in all the children's activities (e.g. building, crafts, role play or ball games), so they are independent of particular content. This method is supposed to take into account the different interests and personalities of the individual children. The narrative character of learning stories and the way in which they are addressed to the children are supposed to increase the children's participation in the educational documentation (Knauf, 2017a). The basic idea is that children find it easier to follow a story than a description written in a factual style. If children can understand the story, this is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for conversations about a particular situation which can stimulate the children's self-reflexivity. The German Youth Institute ("Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI") adapted the method to the German context in a project begun in 2004, with the result that today there is widespread use of a variant of the concept for the work in German early childhood centres. In general, learning stories are short texts written by teachers about what they perceive and how they observe and interpret it. In this sense they provide insight into the perspectives and priorities of the pedagogical staff. The next section of this contribution will explore teachers' understanding of education by analysing some learning stories.

Methodology

The basis of the investigation presented here is the analysis of 338 learning stories from 32 different early childhood centres throughout Germany. The selection was based on the principle of theoretical sampling, whereby material is taken up in the sample until there is a theoretical saturation, i.e. until no more new variants are recognisable (Breuer, 2010). Of the learning stories in the study, 67% come from groups with children older than three, and 33% from groups with children under three. The early childhood centres included in the investigation were asked to select learning stories which they believed were typical of the work in the centre. The assumption here was that the teachers in the centres would select particular learning stories that they perceived as particularly successful. The sample cannot claim to be representative, but the method of theoretical sampling ensures a certain explanatory power. The analysis of the learning stories was based on the principle of grounded theory (ibid.). The aim was to identify the patterns underlying the learning stories and, respectively, the theories

contained within these. The method is meant to ensure that the analysis is based on the material and that no external theories are imposed on the data.

Types of learning stories

The main challenge of the analysis was analysing the extensive data material in a way that was both appropriate and manageable. Following the Grounded Theory Methodology, the first analytical step (open coding) was therefore to identify characteristics within the data material (Breuer, 2010, p. 80). The characteristics were divided into two groups: form (length, photos, text, quotations by the child, direct address) and content (theme, linguistic level, evaluative character, intensity of the analysis, specification of next developmental steps, focus of the observation, participating people). The range of variation in the characteristics (= characteristic variants) was measured in the course of dimensionalisation (Kelle & Kluge, 2010, p. 75). In terms of the people participant in the respective characteristic, the following three dimensions, for example, were differentiated: (1) the child who is being addressed (2) the child plus playmates (3) the larger/whole group.

The second analytical step was to assign all the learning stories to the different characteristics or their dimensions. A synoptic consideration of the characteristics and their dimensions showed that the learning stories greatly differ from one another, particularly with respect to two characteristics, namely the focus of the observation and the intensity of the analysis:

- *Focus of the observation:* The learning stories in the study vary greatly in terms of their focus. For example, there are learning stories with a general, abstract perspective on the observed situations, or which summarise several situations (e.g. “You really like playing in the outdoor area”), learning stories which describe concrete observations (e.g. “You take really good care of the plants in our raised bed”), as well as detailed descriptions (e.g. “First, you got the watering can from the water station and filled it with water. Then, you carried the heavy can past the swings to the raised bed. Once you got there, you first checked which plants needed water ...”). The focus varies, therefore, in three stages between – to continue the metaphor – wide angle and telephoto.
- *Intensity of the analysis:* The learning stories also demonstrate clear differences with regard to the significance of interpretations and reflections. For example, some of the learning stories concentrate on describing the perceived situation and contain no analysis at all. Another proportion of the material contains an analysis in the form of a categorisation of the observed situation into an educational field, a developmental task, or the particular (presumed) emotions of the child whose activity is under study (“You are developing your sense of balance and your coordination”; “You still get upset when something doesn’t work straight away”). A third proportion analyses the observed behaviour of the child, mostly positively, in the form of praise (“You’re doing that well”). The learning stories here therefore vary likewise in three stages between neutral observation and categorising assessment.

The types of learning stories in question were established by combining these two characteristics, resulting initially in nine different types. It became clear, however, that not all nine types can be clearly differentiated from one another, so (following the principle of reduction), several types were merged together. The typology makes it possible to structure the learning stories field and thereby provide an overview of the variants in implementation. The idea is to develop a system of classification that is abstracted and generalised from the individual cases, one which makes it possible to locate the individual case but also describe the totality of the data material (Breuer, 2010, p. 90). The use of the characteristics, the focus of the observation and the intensity of the analysis achieve the greatest possible homogeneity within the respective types and the greatest possible heterogeneity between the different types (Kelle & Kluge, 2010, p. 85). In a further stage of classification, the data material was processed once more in order to assign each learning story to a type.

The final typology therefore comprises six different types of learning stories. The overview in Figure 1 shows the short designations developed for each type and the respective one-sentence summary descriptions.

After the classification, and in order to ensure the depth and significance of the analysis, the learning stories were characterised as precisely as possible by drawing out from the various combinations of characteristics a context of meaning in terms of content (Kelle & Kluge, 2010, p. 94). This made it possible to identify relations between the various characteristics or dimensions of characteristics. This is linked with the aim of identifying the different theories of learning stories contained in the material (the grounded theories). This “characterisation of the established types” also encompasses the formulation of corresponding abbreviated designations (ibid.); it is presented below.

		FOCUS		
		GENERAL	CONCRETE	DETAILED
DEPTH OF ANALYSIS	NO ANALYSIS	EVENT REPORT Description of a particular event	PHOTO STORY Pictures of, and quotes by, the child	DETAILED DESCRIPTION Meticulous description of the child's behaviour
	ANALYSIS	OMNIBUS REVIEW Description of several situations or educational fields	RESEARCH REPORT Exploration of the child's behaviour and thinking	
	RATING		PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTION Report on achievements of the child	

Figure 1. Types of learning stories

Type: event report

Learning stories which come under the category of the event report present a particular event from daily life in the early childhood centre, for example, a trip or a particular craft activity. The learning story reports and conveys the event as comprehensively as possible, embellishing it with lots of detail and photos. The focus of event reports is general, placing the event – rather than individual children’s learning experiences and educational processes – at the centre. That is why these learning stories are not usually addressed to an individual child, rather to all the children participating in the event. Neither do these learning stories offer any interpretation of the event in relation to the development of an individual child, any assessment of individual behaviour, or any recommendations for follow-up activities or developmental steps. 48 of the stories in the study, i.e. 14%, can be categorised under this type.

Type: photo story

These learning stories consist of several photos documenting a situation at various points in time. The photo stories also include a short, often handwritten text. This often consists of a quote from the child, indicated by quotation marks. For younger children who cannot yet say very much, words are sometimes put in the child’s mouth. These learning stories usually have a purely documentary character, which means they contain neither interpretation nor assessment, nor do they offer any recommendations for the child’s next possible developmental steps. They make up 11% (n = 38) of the learning stories in the study.

Type: detailed description

Detailed descriptions convey a sequence of actions from an individual child’s daily life in meticulous detail. They provide a precise description of facial expressions, gestures and verbal forms of expression, recording even the minutest behaviour. This precise description is neither interpreted nor assessed. Neither are any recommendations or suggestions made for subsequent developmental steps. Many learning stories categorised under the “detailed description” type do not contain any photos; they mostly consist in approx. one page of text. Of the learning stories in the study, 30 can be categorised under this type, i.e. 9%.

Type: omnibus review

These learning stories bring together several situations that are classed by the teacher as typical for the child. They often systematically incorporate various educational fields (e. g. crafts and building, sport and movement, social behaviour, music, knowledge of nature and experiments), producing a comprehensive picture of the child’s activities and preferences. Each individual situation is only outlined in brief and in a general sense, and usually classified within a broader developmental context and assessed accordingly. This involves going into detail almost exclusively on what has been

achieved and almost never on perceived shortcomings. These learning stories are often relatively long, comprising several pages, and elaborately illustrated with photos. The highest proportion of the learning stories analysed can be categorised under this type: 93 in total (28%).

Type: research report

These learning stories are characterised by a detailed representation of a situation as well as an inquisitive, explorative approach. Precise description of a situation is followed by an interpretation in terms of a classification within a broader context, although it is not so much general developmental patterns as the individual development of the child that is taken into consideration. In some learning stories, the interpretation is also formally separated from the description by a sub-heading (“What do I think E. has learnt?”); here, in the descriptive section, there is a linguistic switch from the use of the second person to the use of the third person. In addition, some learning stories under the “research report” type contain questions that are put to the child in order to check the teacher’s interpretations. These learning stories usually also contain recommendations for further actions that link to what has been observed. Most of the learning stories within this type contain photos; they usually comprise one to two pages. This proportion of the learning stories makes up 22% of the learning stories in the study (n = 75).

Type: performance description

The learning stories within the “performance description” type focus on a shorter sequence of actions. In contrast to the detailed description and the research report, these are primarily interpreted and assessed in the context of measurable achievements. In terms of content, they focus especially on particular developmental steps (e.g. learning to walk, independent eating) or on abilities demonstrated by the child that are relevant for school (e.g. numeracy, learning rules). Sometimes these learning stories also describe an improvement in behaviour perceived as disruptive (e.g. a child getting up during circle time). In this respect, these learning stories tend to have a retrospective character, summarising a positive development; they do not suggest any future developmental steps or any possible educational provision for the child. Again, most of the learning stories within this type are illustrated by photos. The length varies greatly between a few sentences and several pages. 54 of the learning stories in the study (16%) can be categorised under this type.

Discussion

This study provides the first document-based analysis of learning stories collected on a cross-provider and cross-institutional basis. The limitations of this study are due to the limited data set. The typology devised here could be further differentiated with a larger and representative sample. It would also make sense to complement the pure document analysis undertaken here with additional forms of empirical social research (observation, interview), which would make it possible to take into account the whole process of

working with learning stories. Case-related analyses would also be informative, as they would illuminate the combination of learning stories with other methods of observation and documentation.

The analysis of the learning stories in this study offers a differentiated insight into the teachers' perspectives on children and on education within early childhood provision. The learning stories in the study were therefore not analysed from the point of view of how far they correspond to the theoretical concept of learning stories, rather they were used in order to throw greater light on how teachers "do early childhood education". The frame of reference here is firstly the differentiation between the two (historical) paths of early childhood provision: work-care reconciliation and education (as introduced in section i), and secondly the divergence between the two understandings of education (as set out in section ii) as, on the one hand, a school-based, normative process, and, on the other, a social constructivist process.

It is first of all important to note that the use of learning stories as a tool in the daily work of the early childhood centre is an expression of an increasing orientation towards the path of education in Germany. A provision exclusively focused on caring for the children – no matter how high the quality of the care provided – has no use for learning stories. The analysis of the learning stories, however, shows that the path of education can be travelled in different ways:

Several types of learning story analysed here clearly represent a school-based, normative understanding of education which is focused on a targeted acquisition of knowledge and competencies and which conceives early childhood provision as a site of formal learning. This is particularly evident in the "performance description" type, which describes a child's particular progress in learning and development. Even the "omnibus review" aims to trace a (positive) development across different areas. Both types contain an assessment of the child's behaviour, with teachers taking on the role of adjudicators. Learning stories are understood here as an instrument which teachers use to test, diagnose and assess. This understanding takes its cue from the role of a teacher within a school and is based on a hierarchical relationship between the teacher as a person with knowledge and the child as a person who does not have knowledge (yet). Taken together, these learning stories make up 44% of the material analysed.

Another proportion of the learning stories, however, expresses a social constructivist understanding of early childhood education. In learning stories within the "research report" type, the understanding of education foregrounds informal and incidental learning, i.e. it looks for learning opportunities within everyday life. Here, learning stories are used less for diagnostic and assessment purposes, and more for the purpose of comprehending and analysing the children's activities and enriching their educational processes through the teacher's own ideas. These learning stories – which, however, make up only 22% of the documents analysed – usually express an understanding of education as informal learning.

The remaining types of learning story are, on the whole, less focused on educational processes and more focused on archiving situations and experiences perceived as positive. The learning stories within the types "event report", "photo story" and "detailed description" do not analyse the events; instead, they focus on description. These learning stories – which, after all, make up 34% of the material in the study, represent a perspective on early childhood provision which foregrounds children's

wellbeing and the generation of enjoyable experiences without attaching any explicit educational intention to these.

This shifting between educational documentation as a means of describing enjoyable experiences, exploring learning processes, and assessing children's behaviour can be understood, on the one hand, as utilising the creative freedom (typical of Germany) that teachers currently have. It is also, however, an expression of the indecisive programmatic orientation of early childhood education in Germany. This study suggests that Germany stands at a crossroads between, on the one hand, the care orientation described by Willekens et al. (2015), which they argue traditionally characterises the German system, and, on the other hand, the education orientation which dominates in other European countries.

Note

1. Due to the federal structure of Germany, there are deviations from this paradigm within certain states, in particular with respect to the length of the two phases.

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