

Childhood in North American and German culture

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Project
documentation and
reflection
on the project

Research on growing up, meaning of childhood and familial affection for North American children in comparison with my own experiences as well as my general knowledge of the German educational system and culture.

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1 Preface

Our present-day society is to be characterized by complexity and change. The family as the prime social authority increasingly often cannot and does not accomplish many of her original tasks as teaching and supervising their children anymore but hands the responsibility over to licensed representatives of the state.

To reflect this change happening right now in the minds of German families the German government decided to set up the new KitaFög regulations¹, which can be looked at in the following quote from the “Deutscher Bildungsserver”:

„Ab dem 1. August 2013 soll der Rechtsanspruch auf frühkindliche Förderung in einer Tageseinrichtung oder Kindertagespflege bereits ab dem vollendeten ersten Lebensjahr gelten“²

„Tageseinrichtungen sollen

- 1. Die Entwicklung des Kindes zu einer eigenverantwortlichen und gemeinschaftsfähigen Persönlichkeit fördern und*
- 2. Die Eltern dabei unterstützen, Erwerbstätigkeit oder Ausbildung und Kindererziehung besser miteinander zu vereinbaren.“³*

Since 1996 children in Germany have had the right to go to kindergarten at the age of three.⁴ But by enacting the new KitaFög law (see above), the state starts to monitor the education and way of thinking of the one-year olds who are brought to facilities called “Kindertagesstätte (KiTa)” up to nine hours each working day a week.

But this change of exemplifying moral and ethnic feelings to the children through the own life from non-family members could be afflicted with several problems such as the dissolving of attachment to the parents and the loss of interfamilial trust.

As I could follow this altering process of the meaning of “childhood” through media and younger children in my near environment, I wondered about the way of growing up of future generations and asked myself, if there are countries that have already undergone this change

¹ SGB VIII article 24 paragraph 2

² [1] - Deutscher Bildungsserver 2012.

³ [2] - KitaFög article 1 paragraph 1

⁴ [3] - cf. Bildungsserver.de/Rechtsanspruch-Kindergartenplatz

and what the effects of having a childhood within the protection of the family or the state are. I therefore decided to research growing up, meaning of childhood and familial affection of North American children and to compare it with my own experiences during childhood as well as with general knowledge of the German education system and culture.

1.1 Description of the project

Since I could easily imagine the life of North American kids to be of great difference to ours I first travelled to Irvine, California in summer 2010 and worked for five days in the Boys & Girls Club to get into contact with Americans from age eight to fourteen. The idea to work with these children during their summer break and to get the knowledge why they do not stay with their parents during vacation could be realized with help by my father, who needed to work in Irvine and could afford my stay in the camp. By talking about a camp, I refer to a place for children and teenagers to work for school in the computer room, relax by playing billiard or other games, watching films or doing sport activities in the gym or outdoors. This Boys & Girls Club is open during the school time as well as the vacation time to keep the teenagers away from the streets and to give them a second home.

Nevertheless I also longed to get into contact with younger children to elaborate on my first impression of the American lifestyle. My aim could be realized one year later, in June and July 2011, when I flew to British Columbia, Canada. I first stayed for three weeks in Vancouver and worked in the Pacific Heights Elementary School. Primary school, in this case, gets the meaning of a school consisting of kindergarten grade to grade seven, which are integrated in North American elementary schools in contrast to German primary schools that just include grade one to grade four.

Then I travelled to Nelson, a smaller town west of Vancouver and visited the French-speaking primary school *École des Sentières-Alpines* for one week in total, to get more background knowledge about the Canadian youth, their way of bilingual growing up and education.

At the end of my trip I lived for further three weeks with a family in Prince George, 1000 km north of Vancouver, the mother of which works as a daycare mum with nine children from age two to age nine. By talking about a daycare mum I mean a mother, sometimes with own children, who looks after other infants and small children who are brought there during the day by their working parents. She helps them with their homework, plays with and feeds them with the love of a maternal mother.

1.2 Personal view on the project

To exactly prove the above mentioned working thesis (First I supposed the North American education being more advanced than the German way of teaching and second I also was thinking of the fact that the kids might feel the effects of the loss of the familial affection), I decided to live and to work with the concerned children.

Initially I expected to get access to the teacher's way of working with the children and maybe to get to know new methods of teaching that I longed to bring to Germany if I decide to work as a teacher in primary school. Furthermore I desired to answer the question, if they like their way of working and how they judge the American educational system, which might be of use for our system in Germany.

Furthermore I thought that it is of ut most importance for all parents to think about their children's way of growing up. To set up my own opinion it was very helpful to know the view of American parents, whether they are glad to know their children to be in care of a daycare mum as well as a Kita or on the other hand if they prefer spending more time with them. I hoped my project might also lead to a renewal of moral expectations for parents as I would like our society and every individual living in it to rethink the importance of the own career in comparison with the improvement of the childhood of their kids.

Since Germany seems to support the same educational direction that the North Americans are already living right now, it is of high importance to concern oneself with the problems and troubles that will surely arise within the families - problems and troubles concerning the decision for or against a very early daycare. How important is it for American parents to spend the first years of their baby's life with them in contrast to the German families? For I desire to be a mum myself sometime in the future, it is just right to think now about such questions, since it might also affect my personal choice of career aspiration.

As I am a young woman of seventeen the answer to these questions is of high relevance now. The decision if I want to become elementary school teacher, working in comparable jobs with infants and children or if I am more interested in doing surveys and gaining insight into different opinions and cultures has priority over nearly everything else in my present life. This gave my project on North American childhood a very personal character.

1.3 Educational context of the project

This project establishes, besides the economical insight in how the educational system in North America functions, a project-specific reference to my lessons of policy and economy in school.

In this subject my classmates and I concentrated on discussing the “influence of the state in economy” (cf. planned economy, social economy) as well as the “relationship of individuals, society and state”, which was a topic in qualification phase 1 (Q1) of the senior class of secondary school⁵. Additionally my project can be referred to the topic of the threat of “unemployment” with its resulting effect of being afraid of “poverty”, which was topic in the term Q2. The most common cause of American parents’ need to give their children away, is regarded as being their fear of losing their work (→80% of asked parents; self made survey 2011).

Even more significant is the project’s reference to my English lessons, in which we talked about the topic of “Them and us” (Q1) and, more specifically, about values in matters of keeping traditions (mothers stay at home) versus their renewal (career-oriented parents) and their effects on the society.

On top of that the topic “love and happiness within the troubled mind” (Q2) is of significance within the scope of my project as the parents have contrary feelings for what is right (teaching their children and watching them grow) and what they have to do (work to get money). This inner conflict is also the reason why you could say they seem to be in an “extreme situation” (Q2) as well as their children, who feel the loss of familial security but cannot change anything about it.

While we talked about the social structure and “dreams versus reality” in Canada in the term Q3, we also discussed the topic of “bilingualism” in the country that officially speaks English and French at the same time, although its practical realization seems to be more a kind of an utopian dream. Bilingualism can also be found at the school I visited as the French-speaking school École des Sentièr-Alpines proves.

On top of that the topic we intensified during that class was “Canadian Identity” (Q3) in contrast to the American culture. And where can you discover typical Canadian character traits better than watching and talking with children who have not yet learned to mask their real feelings and opinions?

⁵ [4]cf. kultusministerium.hessen.de

2 Realization of the project

2.1 Factual description of the execution of the project

My project started in the Boys & Girls Club of the Harbor Area in Irvine, California, in the summer break 2010. For several days I went every morning to the camp to learn, play and have fun with the children. With arriving at 7:30 am and checking the presence of the 25 pupils (age five to fourteen), I started my day. Together with the two leaders (Nicole age 32; Bahar age 25), their apprentice (Sam age 17), who works there after his high school has ended, and the Athletics Director Ryan (age 22) we formed the team of the Boys & Girls Club Irvine, which is in close contact to three further Kids Clubs located in Eastbluff, Lou Yantorn and Westside.

To get an insight in how the affected persons think and feel, I had several interviews, first with the team, then with some parents and at last with the kids. I was particularly interested in how their daily routine happens to influence their life. Furthermore I asked about their likes and dislikes in the system of educating the children outside the family circle.

On top of that I attended to all the outdoor activities as having lunch in the park or swimming in the sea. On these trips I was able to gain a deep insight in the psyche of the children, which made it considerably easier to comprehend the American way of thinking.

Since the system of going along with the children's daily routine proved to be very successful, I improved it in Canada one year later by living directly in the families. So when I worked in the Pacific Heights Elementary School in a suburb of Vancouver I kept on having interviews with teachers, the headmistress Mrs. White and the children of different grades. I accompanied nearly all teachers for at least two lessons in the two weeks I worked there.

As well as the elementary school in Vancouver the French-speaking École des Sentières-Alpines in Nelson BC offered me the possibility of getting a one week insight of the franco-phone culture by having several interviews.

After these projects in camps and elementary schools I went to meet the younger children that live with a daycare mum in the daycare named "Flutter bugs" throughout the day, comparable to the German "Kindertagespflege". While in Germany this system of having a daycare mum or daycare dad has just started with the new KitaFög law⁶, in Canada the most popular organi-

⁶ [5] – BMFSFJ

zation concerning the early child care program Canadian Child Care Federation⁷ was already established in 1987 .

Daycare normally starts at 7:30 am with preparing breakfast “for the whole bunch” (daycare mum Courtney 2011), then playing in the garden when the weather is nice, get chased or needed for giving “bums away on the swings” (Matthais 2011) as well as professional supervision. At midday, after I had helped cooking lunch, I read a bed time story for the five children less than five years old, who were having a nap time afterwards while the older ones were playing video games. Normally the children are fetched up by their parents at four or five pm after having been for eight to nine hours in the daycare program.

2.2 Personal experiences over the course of the project

My first impression of the “Boys & Girls Club” was one of a meeting place during vacation time for young teenagers, comparable to the German “Ferienspiele”. But actually that is not quite right for the club provides room for doing homework after school as well.

What is really amazing is the outcome of the leader Bahar’s interview as the Boys & Girls Club was built seven years ago by an old woman to keep the kids from drinking and smoking in the street after school. Its function then changed into a place to avoid staying at home for which their parents have to pay 150\$ a week while the guardians just get 10\$ per hour.

Although seven out of ten parents claim to have chosen the club because of their flexible work time, just three emphasize that meeting friends is the most important reason to take their children to the club. But all of them were happy that their child reports enjoying the day at the Boys & Girls Club. No word about them feeling uncomfortable or preferring something else, which stood in direct contrast to the kid’s statements.

They explained, after getting familiar with my presence, that they go there because they have nothing else to do while their parents are working. Some of them, like Sabrina (age ten) are even sad that their mother does not even have the time to make her breakfast in the morning and just fetches her up at 5 pm. Even the quiet Daniel (age eight) mentions preferring to play with his cars at home instead of having to do sports in the Boys & Girls Club. But nevertheless, what I found particular appalling was their muttered indifference to my request if they would like to do something else instead. Shona (age twelve) described it with a shrug of her shoulders, a glance at the floor and the accurate words: “I am used to it. It’s normal.”

⁷ [6] - CCCF 2012

This “used to be [...]” also seems to refer to the educational system throughout the whole North America. The children in Canada go to preschool at the age of two or three, then join the kindergarten class, which is located at the elementary school building, at the age of five. Of special interest for me was the fact that one quarter of Mrs. Andrew’s kindergarten class had nannies to look after them even after school, while their parents continued working.

In contrast to that the German children were used to being away from their parents for just a very short time in the morning during Kindergarten at the age of three. Now that is changing, too, and seems to become more like the system in America.

But there are also many positive aspects in school life. People of grade four to grade seven (last grade in elementary) very often used laptops sponsored by the school to work on their topics, which all the teachers mentioned to be a great advantage. In the whole building blackboards were replaced by smart boards, which were frequently and gladly used by teachers and students alike (example: presentation tasks sixth grade of teacher Unruh).

Furthermore I got the impression of the school system being much stricter than in Germany. The kids got admonishments even for whispering and severe punishments as having to go home because of too much talking, especially during the daily readout. But although it was so very different from what I know from my own experiences in Germany, it is fact that their learning time was more effective and therefore the kids got a lot of free time as incentive.

On top of that I was impressed by the aid of the Special Education Assistance (SEA), who helped the teachers during education mostly voluntarily. I, for my part, would like to transfer this concept of having a second contact point for the children to the German school system.

Surprisingly for me were also some pedagogical concepts of teaching like performing “theme days” or other methods as in the francophone School in Nelson, which differed a lot from the schools in Germany. They walked along the drawn ciphers on the playground and used puzzle cards for learning the verb conjugations. Furthermore the “huge classes” consisting of twelve to thirteen students were equipped with several couches or tents to offer chill out time for the kids. Strange was also the sitting on the floor for teaching many subjects like reading and pronunciation lessons.

When I talked with Jaqueline’s mother, she told me that this French-speaking school located in a mostly English-speaking province (British Columbia) offers her daughter the possibility to learn to communicate with her francophone grandparents, who live in Québec. Jaqueline’s

just English-speaking Dad Nil, in contrast to his wife, supported the idea of bilingualism as a way to have better job chances in future times for his daughter. Moreover he told me that they have many close English-speaking friends that especially employ francophone nannies from Québec for the opportunity of bilingual education in the early childhood.

The most striking element in the job as a daycare mum, though, is trying to “kill the clock” (Courtney 2011), which was surprisingly hard. One has to be creative for the children always need occupying activities. That could also lead to the perception of the postponement of the own basic needs as eating and going to the bathroom, while working as a daycare mum. More fundamental was the well-being of all the children and to reach this goal it did not matter if they just wanted to play, eat something or need to get patched up.

The outcome of the several interviews I had differed to a great extent. Positive: The parents of the brothers Raley (age eight) and Brenden (age five) used the daycare to give them more social contacts beside the school. The mother did just work halfdays until Brenden was three out of the wish “to educate him in [her] way of thinking until I consider him to be old enough” (Catherine).

Of special interest in the scope of my project was, however, one interview with Caleigh’s (age: two and a half) mum who told me, she wanted her child to be in a daycare four days a week to give herself the chance to work instead of being a mother the whole day. She has the point of view that her career with gaining money is not just of importance for the living standard of her family but it also helps her keeping the inner feeling of being an independent individual up. As I looked at her brand-new GM Pickup in front of the house I wondered how high she wants her living standard to be and, more important, how high the price she and her daughter have to pay for living in wealth is.

The total contrast to the desire for luxuriousness was the outcome of the questioning of Tiany’s (age four) dad, who is a farmer. He had not much time coming directly from his work on his farm and needing to look after the cows again directly after fetching his daughter from daycare. For him daycare offers the possibility of knowing his child to be in safe hands while he, as a divorced parent, has not enough time to educate and to keep his child busy on his own. Unfortunately he even did not have the time to get informed about Tiany’s actual developments by the daycare mum.

Courtney afterwards mentioned that exchanging communication between her and the parents is essential for the child's progress. "What I forbid in daycare the parents have to keep on doing at home to support the same moral standard."

When I asked her why she has her three children in her own daycare she answered that she wants to be a part of her children's life. "Seeing every step and improvement, especially of my son Gus [age 3] makes me happy. I cannot stand the thought that somebody else encounters his first words, first steps or his first drawn picture."

3 Reflection concerning the European & international competences

Reflecting the outcome of my project I would consider it more successful as expected. At first it was striking that all people I worked with during the project were very cooperative by spending time for interviews and offering help to me. I felt totally comfortable and accepted, especially because of the fact that after some time they enlisted my assistance, which was good for my self-confidence.

Beside the intercultural interest, the improvement in the social sector based on the desire to offer the parents children the best education possible, especially the upper described pedagogical methods were impressive to me.

The lesson I learned: North America and especially Canada can be considered as being more advanced in effective education than the German system and it mirrors the result of the path that the German society will take in the future. Due to the success of the Canadian way of teaching, I now totally understand why Canada has reached the sixth best country result with 524 points, which is higher than the calculated average of 494, according to the last PISA study of 2009. We in Germany did not even reach the average mark published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development⁸.

But on the other hand there are also negative aspects concerning growing up outside school. In contrast to the current German educational culture, the Canadian kids are more often away from home all day long since the earliest childhood, but as they are used to living under the guidelines of the state-supervised organization, they do not seem to really miss the family as a prime social authority anymore. Children are too small to reflect their situation when getting asked directly, but they are nevertheless able to feel the alienation that has taken place sometime in the past.

⁸ [7] - OECD 2010

Although the parents and leaders clearly experience the alienation, their opinion about the right way of teaching their children differs to a very great extent. Some do not like the new system and are shaping their children's mind by themselves, while others prefer this system for having more individualism in life as well as time for going to work, which can be regarded as being a character trait of the North American Dream: getting rich through good education and work.

In my point of view I would prefer a combination of the North American school and education system and the original German family, which fulfills the task of protecting childhood by offering a feeling of security.

On top of that, this project, which includes living in North America, clearly offered me the possibility to improve my English language as well as my knowledge of French due to the bilingual bonus of Canada.

For me personally the project provided loads of character alterations: I became more open-minded, self-disciplined and grew more confident, which was also acknowledged by my teachers through better marks and my friends at school, too.

4 Outlook

Reviewing my project I have detected my interest in the German social policy, especially concerning children's education. The project's topic is of great relevance in the social and political sector of Germany, too and it will be very interesting to trace the development in this domain in the near future. Since I was not yet able to do a survey with parents and kindergarten teachers in Germany, this extrapolation of my project promises to get exciting.

Concerning North America and especially the country of Canada, I can say that I definitely would like to travel there again and, if possible, go there to study for one or two semesters, as the landscape is beautiful and the people very helpful, co-operative and generous.

Since I had fun working with all the children I consider it to be a possibility of working as a teacher or social worker one day. But concerning working in a daycare, it is not my expectation for my future as it is a very stressful and exhausting job with too little free time and too little appreciation for this kind of hard work.

But what I am absolutely sure about is the fact that I would like to be a mum later in my life—a mum who personally cares about her children and who does not give her children away for

state surveillance the whole week. Though I believe the contact with kids the same age is important for the child's development, I will only work half-day maximum in the first years for experiencing every step in the growing up of my child.

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