

## Chapter 5

# Focusing Interrelations of Education Plans and Social Inequality in Early Childhood: The Example of Children's Social–Emotional Skills

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### ABSTRACT

*Contributing to research on social inequality in early childhood, this chapter addresses the relevance of education plans in institutional early childhood education and care (ECEC) towards fostering children's educational advancement. To do so, results are discussed from an ongoing research project focusing on 3-6-year-old children's social-emotional skills (SES, taken as an important marker of educational advancement). Next, taking a qualitative multilevel stance, interviews with ECEC providers' representatives in Lower Saxony, Germany were analyzed with regard to challenges in advancing SES, showing interrelations as well as discrepancies between ECEC politics and practice, questioning the impact of education plans on reducing social inequality in early childhood.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Exploring education plans and social inequality in German ECEC

Even before going to school, education is central to children's everyday lives as international studies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018) and national reports (German education report, 2020) show. In Germany, this can be concluded from the expansion of ECEC offers in the past years: Today, 93% of 3- to 6-year-olds visit kindergarten (German education report, 2020, p. 86), 52% of which stay there all day long (German education report, 2020, p. 88). In this regard, focusing on

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7379-2.ch005

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education plans in ECEC, which is still quite a new approach in Germany in contrast to other countries (Meyer, 2017), seems to be a very fruitful chance to compensate for social inequality (German education report, 2020, p. 102; Meyer, 2017), fostering skills relevant at school (Conference of the German Ministries of Youth and Culture, 2004) such as those becoming apparent in the Programme of International Student Assessment [PISA] tests (OECD, 2019). To do so may be especially beneficial for children in the federal state of Lower Saxony, which is the focus of this chapter. There, 3-6-year-olds may be enrolled in kindergarten free of any charges due to a relatively recent ministerial decision (Ministry of Culture Lower Saxony, n.d.). However, advancing educationally-relevant skills in German ECEC is not that easy (Kuger & Peter, 2019, p. 17). First, there is still a lack in capacities which especially hinders children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds from participating – especially with regard to high-quality ECEC and over a longer time period (Kuger & Peter, 2019, p. 18). Among other things, this holds true because it might be especially difficult for the parents of those children to match their jobs to the opening hours of Kindergarten (Kruger & Peter, 2019, p. 17). Moreover, there is a lack of qualified educators (Kuger & Peter, 2019, p. 17) and educators' qualifications do not yet match the mentioned ECEC changes (German education report, 2020, p. 92f.). Additionally, children in German ECEC have become more and more diversified with respect to, for instance, their mother tongue and migration background (German education report, 2020, p. 97), which are, next to socio-economic background, potentially determining social inequality (Bader et al., 2019, pp. 40ff.; see also Nienhaus, appearing).

With this background, the research project outlined in this chapter aims to place into perspective the role of education plans in Germany –and especially in Lower Saxony –towards fostering 3-6-year-old children's educational advancement with respect to the state of social inequality in ECEC. In doing so, SES –considered to be key to future educational success by international (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2001; Nix et al., 2013; Sylva et al., 2011) as well as national studies (Klipker et al., 2018; Wiedebusch & Franek, 2019) –are taken as an example. With regard to education plans in German ECEC, SES belong to a domain termed “personal and social development, values and religious education<sup>1</sup>” (Conference of the German Ministries of Youth and Culture, 2004, p. 4) which translates to “emotional development and social learning”, “ethical and religious questions” as well as “basic experiences of human existence” in the case of Lower Saxony (Ministry of Culture Lower Saxony, 2018, p. 7). Considering gaps in advancing children's SES in German ECEC leading to an increase in deviant behavior (Klipker et al., 2018; Wiedebusch & Franek, 2019), the project focuses on discrepancies in this domain (Nienhaus, appearing). Outlining these contexts in more detail, this chapter starts with an overview of studies focusing on social inequality in ECEC either with regard to a political macro- or a practice micro-level. Additionally, SES will be further considered in detail along studies and empirical examples with respect to their educational relevance. The focus will be on how research on interrelations of education plans and social inequality –focusing on orientations of representatives of ECEC providers (1), educators as well as parents (2) and interactions of educators and parents in formal meetings (3) in ECEC– is carried out in the project based on qualitative multi-level analysis (Hummrich & Kramer, 2018), drawing special attention to the project's first research level. First results from four expert interviews on this level will then be analyzed in three steps, focusing on challenges in advancing SES. Concluding the chapter, the aforementioned results will be put into perspective with respect to future results on the remaining project levels, focusing on possible scenarios (Nienhaus, appearing) in ECEC practice.

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