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Key Concepts Of Parenting Support In France And Germany

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Abstract

This article is the result of a comparative analysis of parenting support programmes in Germany and in France. Parenting support covers actions undertaken in order to help parents cope with their parental functions. It does not include financial support policies.

The research has been conducted simultaneously in the two countries, by two researchers following a common pattern. This included an overview of the institutional framework and the parenting support programmes run by different kinds of organisations at different levels, and a review of available research findings and assessments of these programmes. The results show that the number and variety of parenting support programmes are growing rapidly in both Germany and France. However, the approaches differ: German programmes are often presented as « parents' education », whereas in France, the parents themselves are considered to be the best experts in educating their children. In France, parents are often just given individual advice either by other parents or by professional experts, while in Germany, said programmes tend to resemble training programmes including behavioural learning methods.

Key-words: parenting support, Germany, France.

Introduction

The regular surveys conducted within the framework of the *European Values Survey* show that, in Europe, great importance is attached to families and their role in the care and education of children. Even though the status of the family in French and German politics is beyond dispute, the family policies in both countries vary in their approaches. The main difference in the financial support parents receive in the two countries pertains, first and foremost, to the effect it has on the participation of mothers in the labour market (Greulich 2008). A comparison of birth rates and the number of infant care facilities leads to a similar conclusion.

In the following, this paper will compare the parenting support policies in France and Germany. This analysis will not be based on statistical figures but on the different support approaches that aim at strengthening parenting competencies. The present comparison, which was initiated as part of a European study (Boddy 2009), shows a strong trend towards 'parenting support' in both France and Germany. This can be interpreted as a response to similar changes in the development of families in the two countries.

Following a brief description of the initial situation in both countries, three different types of parenting support will be introduced, each of which is widely used in Germany as well as in

France. They are: parent education, counselling and parent-and-child centres. These support measures were selected for the comparison as they are quite common in both countries. As such, they serve to illustrate the differences and similarities in the way German and French family policy attempts to cope with the major changes in family and society.

Peuckert (2007, p. 36) delivers a common definition of family as a "social unit that consists of at least one child and one parent and which is characterised by a permanent relationship of solidarity and a personal bond". He distinguishes between five family forms: married couples with children, one parent families/single parents, unmarried couples with children, same sex partnerships with children, stepfamilies and adoptive families. In French literature, one often comes across the words 'parents' or 'parenthood' (parentalité) in addition to the term 'family'. This applies, in particular, to statistics on households and parents as well as to research projects that deal with newer forms of parenthood and parenting support. The terms 'parenthood' and 'conjugal relationship' are separated from one another: Parenthood refers to a relationship that cannot be cut off, whereas a conjugal relationship can be seen as transitory.

In French and German politics, the term still being used is 'family policy', even if a specific policy is actually designed to address parents. The current family policy objectives in France can be summed up as follows: "to promote birth rates, to provide financial support to families, to help socially disadvantaged families and to enable the reconciliation of work and family life." (HCF 2009, p. 5) In this context, it does not matter whether the parents are married, in another civil union or not.

Over the past few years, Germany has experienced a paradigm shift towards a sustainable family policy. Its key objectives are the support of families, the reconciliation of work and family life as well as the support of lifestyles with children. To this end, family policy aims at improving the time management between institutions and family, the provision of a support infrastructure (pre-school care for children under the age of three years, early education programmes for children, the improvement of counselling services for parents and the expansion of all-days schools), the centralisation of social services and at improving the income situation of families with children (e.g. parental allowance and tax deductibility of child care expenses, etc.). In Germany, the objective to help socially disadvantaged families is less emphasised than in France. It is noticeable in many countries that the development of family forms is characterised by declining birth rates which result in a demographic aging of our societies. At the same time, the number of childless women and men is increasing. Marriage is also becoming less relevant for founding a family. However, in both countries public acceptance of children born to an un-married mother is equally widespread: approx. 90% in France and Germany, compared to only 73% in Canada or 50% in the US (Höpflinger, Fux 2007, p. 57). Nine out of ten children in Germany grow up with married parents, although this number is declining. At the same time, however, the number of children growing up in other family forms (single parents, stepfamilies, adoptive families) is increasing. This holds particularly for the proportion of single mothers. In France, only about two-thirds of children live with married parents. Three-quarters of all French children and adolescents under the age of 18 live with their parents. Around 16% of all children and young people live with a single parent (HCF 2009, p. 12). In Germany, approximately 20% of all children and adolescents grow up with a single parent (2004) - this trend is increasing.

Despite the decline and diversification of family forms and parenthood, it can be noted that the importance attached to children and their education and upbringing is increasing. The principles of child education are becoming increasingly blurred as parents are torn between contrasting educational aims: On the one hand, there is the child's right to self-determination and participation and, on the other hand, there is the need for the child to accept certain rules and regulations. The family is seen as the primary source of prevention when it comes to juvenile delinquency, school failure, psychological distress or handicapped children and adolescents (Chauvière 2008). It is therefore important that parents receive more than just financial support.

Parenting Support and Parent Education in Germany and in France

In Germany, more than five million people participate in family education programmes every year. Only 0.4% of the total budget of 20.8 billion euros for child and youth services are spent on parent and family education. The general furtherance of family education is governed by the Child and Youth Services Act, as laid down in Book VIII of the Social Code [SGB VIII]. Paragraph 16 includes two provisions:

1. Mothers, fathers, other persons having parental powers and young people shall have access to the provision of general furtherance of education and upbringing by the family. Such provision is to enable mothers, fathers and other persons having parental powers to exercise their educational responsibilities more effectively. Provision must also help to find ways and means by which situations of conflict can be solved without resorting to force.
2. Provision for the furtherance of education and upbringing by the family shall in particular include:
 - Programmes of family education responding to the needs and interests as well as to the experiences of families in different situations of life and education, making families better equipped to cooperate in educational establishments, self-help as well as neighbourhood help activities and preparing young people for partnership and life with children;
 - Counselling in general matters of the education and development of young people;
 - Family leisure time and recreation programmes, especially for families under stress or in a crisis including, if necessary, the educational care of children.

The family education governed by this paragraph addresses all parents and persons having parental powers and requires them to create positive living conditions for young people and their families. It is not designed as individual case support in crisis situations. Family education includes adult education, parental counselling, youth work and work with children, family group work as well as social and community work. Various support services exist in a number of different informal and institutional settings (Pettinger, Rollik 2005, p. 10). Given Germany's federal structure, each Federal State has to interpret paragraph 16 SGB VIII in manifold ways. There exist various different programmes and institutions that deal with parent and family education. These range from self-help groups, where parents get together to exchange experiences, to larger institutions with a long-standing history of parent education.

In France, parenting support is provided by different institutions. Unlike in Germany, there exist no statutory provisions.

The forms of support are varied and range from financial assistance and counselling to the allocation of home help services. Families with children affected or at the risk of poor educational conditions receive assistance from the Child Welfare Authorities (*Aide sociale à l'enfance*). The types of family support offered or ruled by a court are statutorily regulated. They can include out-patient counselling as well as child care or placement outside the family. The term 'support for parenting' (*soutien à la parentalité*) describes a number of programmes that have been established over the past decade and continue to be developed. The annual report of the Court of Auditors mentions the REAAPs, the providers of assistance in the areas of school attendance, parent mediation, family and relationship counselling as well as children's, teenagers' and families' refuges. Government spending in these areas amounts to 75 million euros (Cour des comptes 2009). Although the government is the main source of funding, different agencies are charged with the running of the programmes. This often takes the form of collaborations between several institutions at the local level that receive joint funding for running said programmes.

As stressed by the Court of Auditors, there is a distinct lack of programme evaluations both at a local and national level. Furthermore, there is no reliable estimation on the number of parents that participate in these programmes. This can (partly) be explained by the fact that the use of these provisions is sometimes anonymous, often free and always voluntary.

Support to parents in groups

Family Education Centres in Germany

One of the central institutions in Germany is the family education centre. Around 50% of all programmes for the promotion of parenting skills are offered and run by family education centres (Lösel 2006, p. 150). There are 586 of these institutions across the whole of Germany (Textor 2007, p. 374). They are considered the most influential institutional form of family education (Lösel 2006, p. 20). Their scope and purpose, namely the provision of family support services, is set out in § 16 SGB VIII. Just like many other social policy areas, family education has also been hard hit by drastic austerity measures. 90% of the staff working in family education centres are part-time workers. The remaining 10% of full time employees hold management positions, and they are usually better qualified than part-time staff. Young families aged between 25 and 34 years make up the largest group of participants of programmes in family education centres (40%), around 93% of which are women (Schiersmann et al. 1998). Fathers are still an exception in family education programmes, although parental allowances were introduced by the German Ministry for Family Affairs several years ago with the aim of facilitating the return of women to the labour market and to promote the parental leave of up to 12 months for men with a guarantee to return to their job after that period.

For the past ten years, the response to the changing requirements of family education has, first and foremost, been increased networking and collaboration between different institutions. This does not only include changes in the organisational structure of family education services. Networking and increased collaborations, which follow the setting approach, also provide the necessary tools to pool ideas as well as financial and human resources in a more efficient manner. (Rollik, Pettinger 2005, p. 138). The use of new public management tools is essential for a sustainable family policy. The most common form of interaction occurs in "parent-and-child groups". They do not necessarily offer formal parenting programmes, but may focus on joint activities with parents and children, such as baby massage. Parent-and-child groups are regularly offered by institutions for a certain duration. They usually address a specific issue and are guided by a qualified person. After parent-child groups, the next most common form of family education is standardised parenting programmes offering parenting courses. One example is the programme called "Strong Parents-Strong Children" (Starke Eltern - Starke Kinder): « Each programme comprises a minimum of 16 hours, based on eight to 12 sessions, each of two to three hours duration. Programme methods include a mix of presentations, small group work, self-learning exercises, discussions, role plays, and weekly tasks » (Boddy et al. 2009, p. 57)

There exists a lack of substantiated information on family education practices in family education centres. Only two studies can be considered representative in this context. Ch. Schiersmann et al. (1998) conducted a nationwide institutional study of family education centres. The core aspects of their analysis included programme topics, target groups and organisational structure of the programmes (b) composition of participants, (c) qualification levels, (d) human resources development, (e) financing of institutions. F. Lösel et al. (2006) conducted a representative inventory and evaluation of parent education programmes.

REAPs in France

Unlike in German family education centres, these networks are not based on programmes but on groups that are to foster an exchange of experiences between parents under professional supervision (social workers, psychologists, etc.).

In 1997, there first were government recommendations to set up “REAAPs” (Réseaux d’écoute, d’appui et d’accompagnement des parents) an approximate translation of which is “Parental Consultation, Care and Social Support Networks”. These networks were actually intended for all parents, without targeting any specific group. The premise was that all parents may find themselves confronted with difficulties to which they cannot, by themselves, provide the answers. The underlying idea is that parents need support to enable them to exercise both their rights and their duties as parents.

The principle of the REAAPs is a partnership between different institutions and other organisations. Financing is coordinated at the departmental level. This provides leeway for variations in components between departments in the networks they set up. Network operating costs are covered by the Ministry of Health and Solidarities.

The practical application of these networks works at two levels. Firstly, animation of the networks is the responsibility of Prefects, who are the representatives of the central State in each department. Their work involves assessing if territorial needs and overseeing interventions applied on the ground, in conformity with the needs that have been identified. The Ministry encourages the development of departmental web-sites to make information more accessible to parents. Secondly, for the projects on the ground, parents have to become actively involved in developing them. They can initiate such projects or contribute to setting them up, to running them, to defining them, and to evaluate them. Professionals such as social workers can intervene as needed to provide certain specific competences such as the animation of discussion groups, but also to offer advice or suggest directions to already-existing intervention structures in the department. State funds available to the REAAPs cannot, however, be used to pay the salaries of these professionals on a permanent basis. They therefore have to be integrated into structures that have other sources of funding. So the partnership between different groups presupposes that each will contribute its own source of funds.

These networks and the activities they jointly undertake target all parents of children under the age of 18, even if they acknowledge different levels of difficulties between different geographical areas within the same department. According to the Circular of 13 February 2006 with respect to the REAAP, these “must... ensure that parents bring up their own children, based on their own know-how, but also their capacity to help each other in order to regain confidence in their ability to fulfil this parental role”.

Parents’ participation in REAAP activities is on a voluntary basis. The “discussion groups” (groupes de parole) are the most numerous and they reflect the way things have been changing in France over recent years. The way discussion groups with parents operate is a good illustration of the REAAP “philosophy”. The underlying principle is that parents meet to discuss questions that they all encounter in their children’s education. Often the groups focus on specific themes. Most of the time the discussion groups are animated by a professional (a psychologist or social worker) or by non-professionals. Training is provided for discussion-group animators. The different activities are directed to interested parents concerned with the themes that are raised. The main purpose is to give parents a great degree of freedom to actively participate in the organisation of the group meetings and the exchange of experiences.

In these groups, parents are able to express their difficulties and they learn how other parents deal with similar situations. They learn that they are not alone in their struggle and that there is always a way out of the problems they face. Depending on the specific themes relevant to the parents, it is sometimes possible to invite experts.

Academic literature on REAAPs is sparse. According to V. Séhier (2006), the innovative aspect of these networks is that the supervising professionals are not there to tell the parents what to do. Instead, parents and professionals are to meet on an equal footing.

I. Voléry (2003), however, argues that, based on observations of parent groups and interviews with professionals, the latter are having difficulties with this as they have not been instructed on how to implement this new approach. As a result of the lack of profound theoretical knowledge of family education, they resort to their own subjective and familiar patterns and standards of family and education. Given the shortage of funds, the professionals do not receive adequate

training to prepare them for their new role. The consequence of this policy of austerity is that professionals tend to make their own suggestions to parents instead of assuming their role as dialogue moderators.

Comparison of Family Education Centres and REAAPs

Family education centres and REAAPs differ significantly in terms of the organisation of parenting support and thus also in their institutional procedures and structure. Despite a consensus that it is crucial to allow parents the greatest possible degree of participation, the forms of interaction and the framework conditions of such programmes show distinct variations. Whereas in family education centres interaction most commonly takes place in parent-and-child groups, where only certain themes are addressed under the supervision of a professional, the professionals of REAAPs merely provide a framework for meetings in which mothers and fathers themselves decide on the themes and topics to be addressed. Parents' courses, for instance, are aimed at analysing and teaching better parental patterns of behaviour, whereas group meetings, first and foremost, provide a setting where parents can express and discuss their difficulties. It is therefore possible to identify two different problem-solving approaches. Whilst parent-and-child groups follow a more formal structure, group meetings as part of REAAPs display a more spontaneous and process-like character.

The institutional organisation of parenting support in family education centres can be described as centralised support, since the entire spectrum of services is organised by management staff. The underlying idea of the REAAP programme is to network and promote the collaboration of local institutions and services that have their own organisational structures and their own hierarchies. In other words, it can be said that the family education landscape in Germany is still largely vertically organised with regard to parenting support, whereas parenting support in France is organised at a horizontal level between various social institutions and services.

Clear similarities can be identified when it comes to the financing of parent support and the access to support measures. Both family education centres and REAAPs are facing cuts in the employment of professionals with many working hours. Furthermore, it is also unusual for programmes to receive long-term funding, which can have a negative impact on the motivation of employees in the different programmes.

Access to parenting support programmes of family education centres and REAAPs is based on voluntary parental participation.

Individual Counselling

Parental counselling in Germany

Parent and family counselling in Germany is a broad field. According to the German Working Group for Adolescent and Marriage Counselling (Deutsche Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Jugend- und Eheberatung), there are currently 12,852 counselling centres across the whole of Germany (www.dajeb.de as of 25/09/09). Generally, these counselling centres offer counselling services to married couples, families and pregnant women.

In addition to general family counselling centres, there are also child guidance clinics which are designed to provide guidance in order to help children, young persons, parents and other persons having parental powers clarify and cope with individual and family-related problems and their underlying factors, solve educational issues and cope with situations of separation and

divorce. What is particularly important in this regard is that it is required by law that qualified staff from different branches of study who are familiar with different methods and approaches shall cooperate in providing such assistance. The main issues addressed by child guidance clinics are: general questions pertaining to the development and education of children, child rearing difficulties, unusual behaviour, developmental delays, psychosomatic complaints, emotionally disabled schoolchildren, parent-child conflicts, child abuse, sexual abuse, bedwetting, eating and sleeping disorders, issues of partnership, separation and divorce as well as issues regarding visitation rights of parents without custody of their children.

The majority of professionals working in child guidance clinics are psychologists (56.1%) and social-pedagogues (29.3%). Other professions include child and youth therapists, educational therapists and physicians with additional qualifications in behaviour therapy, person-centred psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, play therapy or family therapy, all of whom are bound by professional secrecy. The most important feature of child guidance clinics is their interdisciplinary approach.

The participation in parental counselling programmes is always voluntary. These programmes rely on the readiness of parents to use them. To facilitate the participation of parents, the programmes provide low threshold access, i.e. they are free. An online search engine for counselling centres makes it easy for interested persons to find a counselling service nearby. It is also possible to contact child guidance clinics via the internet which allows parents to stay anonymous if they wish to do so. Parental counselling is an area of child and youth services that has been continuously growing over the past years (the number of people engaging in counselling services rose from 197,955 in 1993 to 310,561 in 2006). Parents, families with a stepparent and single parents constitute the three largest groups of participants. In most cases, it is mothers who make initial contact with a counselling centre (mothers account for almost two thirds of all applications; fathers make up about 10% of all applications). The most common reasons for seeking assistance from counselling centres are relationship problems (nearly a third), school/vocational problems, development problems and separation or divorce of parents. Less common reasons for seeking assistance are juvenile offences, addiction, indications of maltreatment or indications of sexual abuse.

Parental counselling is offered by public (child and youth welfare office) and non-statutory agencies. Although almost two thirds of all counselling activities take place in non-statutory agencies, the child and youth welfare offices play an above-average role in the provision of parental counselling and child guidance.

The majority of parents who attend counselling have children aged between 6 and 9 (school enrolment age) and between 9 - 12 (transition from primary to secondary school).

The most pressing issues currently discussed with regard to parental counselling are: adoption and consolidation of the attachment theory in the context of parental counselling, stronger focus on socially disadvantaged families, online counselling as well as separation and divorce and, as a consequence thereof, an intensification of the collaboration with family courts. A sub-problem of separation and divorce counselling are the so called "high-conflict divorce-cases" which account for about one tenth of all separations and divorces in Germany (Paul, Dietrich 2007, p. 10).

Counselling in France

In France, there exist several forms of family counselling all of which are only indirectly addressing parenting issues.

Family and Relationship Counselling

Initially, this form of counselling was developed in the 1960s and had become widespread in the 1970s. This led to the introduction of a formal qualification programme for family and relation-

ship counsellors in 1993. However, until the present day, there is still no official recognition of this profession.

At the beginning, these counsellors dealt primarily with pregnancy counselling and family planning and they offered advice to women on contraception and abortion. In 1967, a law on contraception was passed and when, in 1975, abortion was legalised, it was until 2001 tied to the condition of attending a counselling interview with a «competent person». Later, issues pertaining to sexually transmitted diseases were also addressed. Today's family counselling deals, on the one hand, with these traditional issues and, on the other hand, also with matters regarding families and couples in the broadest sense, such as maternity, sterility, adoption, sexual and emotional relationships, communication problems, difficulties of stepfamilies, educational issues, violence and disrespect. To a certain extent, the counsellors also see it as their responsibility to prevent violence between partners and towards children.

Family and relationship counsellors are bound by professional secrecy. Counselling sessions are either attended by one or both parents with or without children. Qualified counsellors offer their services in several institutions (IGAS 2006, p. 8):

- 1253 'Centres for family planification and education' [Centres de planification et d'éducation familiale] which are located in the centres for «early maternal and child care» (Protection maternelle et infantile) : local centres providing medical and psychological support to pregnant women and women with infants free of charge
- Social services provided by city councils, in hospitals and schools
- 366 non-statutory agencies with predominantly voluntary counsellors
- Own practices.

The most common working method is the counselling interview, where people can speak about their problems and where they are assisted in finding their own solutions. New counselling methods are also used, especially group talks. Such parent group talks, which are organised by family and relationship counsellors, are sometimes also offered as part of REAAPs.

Couples Therapy

Couples therapy developed parallel to family and marriage counselling. It deals only indirectly with the education and upbringing of children as it primarily focuses on couples and overcoming conflicts. In the first few years, relationship counselling services were predominantly consulted by women who came on their own to seek advice on marital matters. At that time, this form of counselling could be equally described as assistance as well as therapy. In the 1970s, these counselling services were increasingly used by couples, hence the name "couples therapy". Due to the increasing influence of psychoanalysis in the 1980s, couples therapy has become a research field in its own right in the last two decades. The approach used today is an individualistic one which recognises the right of individuals to self-determination as well as the need for relationships. The aim is to improve the relationship of couples in order to prevent separation or to keep the psychological burden of separation to a minimum (Dupré Latour 2006).

Comparison of Parental Counselling and Family Counselling

The German and French counselling landscape pertaining to issues of marriage, pregnancy, abortion and family shows a similar distribution of counselling services. France, however, has no legal institutions devoted to parental counselling, and the available data shows that there are significantly fewer counselling facilities than in Germany. In addition to family therapy and marriage counselling, parental counselling was explicitly included in the SGB VIII in 1991. This was to facilitate a shift from family and psychoanalytic counselling towards social pedagogical counselling. Parents are thus entitled to assistance in the education and upbringing of their children. Children and young people are explicitly included as recipients.

Centres for parents and children

In Germany

Mothers' centres are open-door meeting places for mothers and their children. These centres, which can be found in most districts and municipalities, do not provide uniform support services. It is, however, possible to identify three core principles applied in mothers' centres: (a) the so called principle of non-professionals helping non-professionals ("Laien-mit-Laien-Prinzip") which allows mothers to become experts of their own situation and to codetermine the agenda of the meeting according to their interests and desires. They have their individual skills and competencies which play a part in these meetings; (b) Mothers' centres pursue a bottom-up approach which means that there are no rigid hierarchies or centralized decision-making powers. Mothers' centres avoid school-like learning; (c) Mothers' centres have flexible opening times that offer better access to mothers with children as they can arrange their visits to the centres according to family routines. Mothers have the opportunity to play an active role in mothers' centres. They are remunerated for their involvement (8 euros p/h in cities and large towns; 3 to 5.50 euros p/h in small towns). As these centres do not offer counselling courses, professionals are not present. Professionals usually provide outpatient services, they organise weekend seminars for reflection and provide support to mothers upon request and if necessary (Jaeckel 2002, p. 9).

In Germany, there exist more than 400 mothers' centres. Founded in the 1980s, mothers' centres soon became a popular and successful concept. On average, each mothers' centre is visited by 30 - 40 mothers and twice as many children every day (Jaeckel 2002, p. 10). The women using these services are usually living in the direct neighbourhood, they come from all levels of the population and are predominantly young mothers with toddlers or single-mothers. Unlike, e.g. parent education centres, mothers' centres operate with an annual budget of only 40,000 euros. Larger centres have an annual budget between 80,000 and 200,000 euros at their disposal. This allows them to employ mothers on a part-time basis. The majority of mothers' centres are part of the "Mothers' Centres National Association" (Dachverband Mütterzentren e.V).

At the beginning, mothers' centres were developed as a result of a study conducted by the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut).

In France

In France many departments have opened "parent-children reception centres" (Lieux d'accueil parents-enfants). These facilities were inspired by the approach adopted by F. Dolto in the "Maison verte".

The central principle of how these facilities operate is that the early childhood professionals are present to receive the children accompanied by their parents. This is not therefore a form of child care but of support for the parenting role. The idea is that it is the parents who look after their children and that the professionals intervene to propose activities, encourage them in raising their own children, answer their questions, and so on.

The centres are organised at the local level; a national overview does not exist. Descriptions and analyses of the centres show that they can vary quite substantially. It is, however, possible to identify some key features:

- A child (until the age of 3 or 4 years) must always be accompanied by one or both parents or by another representative.
- People are not asked for their name, only the child is addressed by its first name, i.e. people remain anonymous.

- The design and furnishing of the centres is to make both children and adults feel comfortable. The aim is to create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Children and parents can drop in at any time during opening hours without prior registration.
- There are always several professionals present during opening hours whose task it is to create a relaxed atmosphere, to ensure that rules are observed as well as to give adults the opportunity to talk about their concerns, worries and fears with other adults and professionals. Here, parents can also obtain information on other possible forms of parenting support.

G. Neyrand (1995) has conducted one of the few studies on parent-children reception centres. He says that their development is characteristic of the concern for early childhood education, the prevention of problems in parent-child relationships and thus of deviant behaviour which is becoming increasingly widespread in our society.

According to his analysis, the key objectives of these centres can be summed up under the motto "bonding to facilitate independence" {"attacher pour mieux détacher"). On the one hand, it is aimed to promote mutual trust in order to strengthen the parent-child relationship. The findings from interviews with 100 parents show that they feel supported in their role as parents, and that these centres provide a setting where problems can be discussed before they escalate. The perception of the parent-child relationship is a different one than at home. On the other hand, the aim is to provide children with socialising opportunities, to establish new relationships and to promote their independence.

Comparison of Centres for Parents and Children in Germany and France

Mothers' centres with the concept of "non-professionals helping non-professionals" are actually quite similar to the basic idea of the REAAP group meetings. The first similarity can be identified with regard to the discussion groups in REAAPs, where parents meet to discuss their problems and concerns with other parents and where professionals are only consulted for advice and guidance if the parents wish so. Another similarity with the "Lieux d'accueil parents-enfants" exists insofar as children and parents jointly meet with counsellors, but that the supervision and guidance of the children remains with the parents while the professional assumes a regulatory role.

Strengths and Weaknesses - Findings of the Comparison of Parenting Support in Germany and France

Organisation

A common criticism of German family education and family education centres in particular is that the service access threshold is not low enough. It is criticised that family education only addresses middle-income families and not those most in need of support (Rupp 2003, p. 7). This is associated by a walk-in model of services that is still not flexible enough. In order to improve family education in both qualitative and quantitative terms, it is necessary to bring family education services closer to the families which, at the moment, is still an exception.

Another weakness is the lack of collaboration between the different family education agencies. This can partly be explained by competition for public funds which often leads to situations where several similar family education services are offered in the same region, most of which are then neither fully occupied nor profitable. Furthermore, this does not make it easier for families to find the right form of support.

In France, on the contrary, the coordination and funding of the networks is carried out by the departments. Perhaps, the French tradition of centralised administration and management has an advantage in this respect.

The “social area analysis”- a theoretical concept which focuses on a specifically defined area to combine common research data with specific requests within this defined area - has become a much used tool in Germany. This method can also be applied to family education in order to develop a better understanding of the social structure in different districts, cities, regions, etc. and to improve the structure of services offered.

Pedagogical Approach

In Germany, family education is still, by many parents, perceived as a concept designed to absorb the negative effects of their individual parenting deficits which is why many parents do not use family education services. In order to improve public opinion in this respect, it is necessary to make it even clearer that family education aims at the development of existing skills and resources, not on their replacement. In this context it might also be worthwhile to take H. Thiersch's concept of “life-world orientation” (“Lebensweltorientierung”) into consideration as has been the case in many areas of social work since the 1980s (Thiersch, Grunwald 2001, p. 1136). The German concept of “Lebensweltorientierung” allows to avoid the often seemingly discriminatory practice of family education which is also characterised by a mass of technical terms and language. The aim is to adapt family education to the life and living environment of the parents and not vice versa. To this end, it would be necessary to replace the walk-in model of services, e.g. parental counselling, with a “we-come-to you” model of services, i.e. to go and visit parents in their homes. The topics and themes addressed and the skills and competencies taught must be customised to the life and living conditions of the participants and should be practiced in joint exercises.

Another option could be to promote networking in neighbourhoods, communities, etc., as long as this follows specific criteria. An uncontrolled «flourishing» of voluntary services could put the much needed professional support services in the shade. It is also important to make sure that all socio-economic groups are integrated into the networks and not only the middle-class.

By contrast to Germany, the activities of French parent groups, counselling services and parents' centres are based on the needs and issues of parents and do not speak of deficits. However, this approach also has its shortcomings as it requires parents to be proactive and to take initiative in making use of these services. Parent groups depend on a sufficient number of participants. Furthermore, it must be ascertained that another aim is to impart educational norms. According to a psychologist, the exchange between parents is to “make one aware of what it means to be a good parent and to become such parent oneself”. She describes these processes as an “imitation, manipulation and internalisation” of what makes good parents (Laurent 2002, p. 105). I. Volery (2003) illustrates how problems in socially disadvantaged districts are reduced to being the result of the behaviour of «the young people». At the same time, the parents are made responsible for the social unrest caused by their children in these districts. This responsibility is then addressed in programmes financed as parenting support. F. Jesu (2006) points out that ‘parenting support’ is quite ambiguous in this context: as regards families with a low social status, this alleged form of support is a hidden form of control.

Financing

All providers of family education services face serious cuts in public funding which forces them to cope with reduced financial resources and to resort to self-financing to the extent possible.

This policy of savings has been tightened over the past decade. The number of permanent full-time staff is decreasing and they are, usually, only employed in the administration and management of family education organisations. The key tasks are, by and large, carried out by underpaid part-time staff and interns. In Germany, this policy is only supported through government incentives.

In France, the financing of REAAPs is also subject to criticism. It is a matter of using non-financial resources that already exist, those of parents and of the different services and organisms that are already present on the ground, by mobilising the actors on the basis of shared priorities. This means delegating the work of developing these priorities to local actors. As a result of this, one must then readily accept that interventions will vary in scale and quality depending upon the geographical areas affected (Bastard 2007). Users will come into contact with different interventions in terms of both their extent and their quality; the geographical factor may therefore be critical. For a State that has traditionally been highly centralised - very much the case in France - these changes therefore incorporate risks in terms of the equality of citizens' access to services financed by the State. From the point of view of the citizens living in areas where the support framework works worse than in others, this can be considered as being unfair.

The consequence of this policy is that much needed professionals for the direct work with parents and children are not being employed. New jobs are only created for the purpose of establishing new networks. Although this can, sometimes, lead to innovative and interesting forms of cooperation, such networks are deprived of their financial resources once their partnership is about to become established.

The different institutional procedures and structures of family education centres and the REAAP programme show that the more institutional forms of support are also more financially stable than other forms of support. Family education centres (formerly known as Mothers' Schools) have, for many decades, been a relatively stable form of support in the German parenting support system.

Conclusion

Despite the differences in the institutional organisation of parenting support in Germany and France, all programmes share, though to a different degree, the concept of «networks». Parenting support is the responsibility of and dependent on the exchange between many different agencies, institutions and professions, if it is to develop a better understanding of its work and to improve its services in the future.

On a positive note, it must be said that the German family education landscape is characterised by a sufficient variety of service providers and institutions across the whole country. On a negative note, however, it is said variety that makes it difficult for those interested to find adequate support that meets their needs. That is why it is so important to promote increased networking and improved cooperation between family education services. In fact, a lot is already being done in this respect.

With regard to the French parent-and-child groups it is likewise the absence of an overview of existing groups that is being criticised. As a result, parents are poorly informed about the support services available. Furthermore, the state, which is funding these groups, has no control over them.

A key finding of this comparison is that parenting support in France and Germany use different approaches. Whereas in Germany, parent education and parent counselling aim at teaching parents how to educate their children, parents in France are neither instructed nor given advice on their educational tasks. In France, parents can attend parent-and-child groups in order to express their individual problems and to receive answers and suggestions from other parents.

The way in which they learn about new and different forms of educating their children is much more subtle, and it is up to the parents to adopt them or not. They can also seek advice on their relationship. The underlying principle of all support services in France is that of unimpeachable parents to determine the best interests of their children: They know best how to educate their child.

In Germany, on the contrary, the state sees it as its explicit responsibility to ensure that parents are taught how to educate children.

Perhaps, the main difference does not lie in what is being presented but in how it is being presented. After all, it is also the case in France that the structure of parenting support is set out in such way that certain norms and standards of today's knowledge about child education and development are being presented. And it is professionals and not the parents who have this knowledge. Parent-and-child groups as well as parents' discussion groups play an important role in acquiring this knowledge.

A similarity between the two countries is that the parenting support measures outlined serve the purpose of a standardisation of good child education through parents. It appears as if the state is attempting to counteract the variety of family forms and different lifestyles by means of standardised norms.

Notes

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