

Migration as Ethical Challenge – Migrational Background as Disadvantage for the Choice of a German Kindergarten? (A Case Study)

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Abstract

Children with migrational background attend German kindergartens in a high percentage. How to react to different forms of segregation? The paper analyzes what kind of advantages and problems, also in the field of language, these melting-pots have. Especially Christians should face the fears and problems in this special period of childhood. Ethically, the issue is discussed in the field of individual ethics and institutional ethics.

Keywords: migrational background, childhood, kindergarten, individual ethics, institutional ethics

Introduction

“To which kindergarten have you sent your children? Oh, isn’t this the one where so many children of migrant families are going to?” With these or similar questions one is likely to be confronted with when choosing a kindergarten for your children in Germany and, I think, in other countries in the European Union. For me, as German moral theologian, working in Regensburg (Bavaria), this was the case when choosing a suitable place in kindergarten for my own children. It is also one of the first situations when one is directly confronted with the issue of migration and migrational backgrounds outside the family context. Surely, such a case study is depending on your residential area.

But what criteria should be applied in this decision-making process? Is the nearby kindergarten in the district better than the one with the pedagogy of Montessori? A rather unconvincing criterion in the context of theological ethics seems to be if the decision depends on how many play dates might come from migrant families, when looking for a suitable kindergarten. Why this is a rather inadequate criterion will be explained in this contribution.

1. Situation: Age of Migration

In the Age of Migration (Polak 2011, 151) 84 % of the children of migrant families in Germany attend a kindergarten (Migrationsbericht 2010) which applies, on average, to children who are between 3 and 6 years old. After having completed their 4th year of life, 90 % of the children with a migrational background attend a German kindergarten. The quotas for children from migrant families have become relatively high. The average percentage of these children in Bavarian kindergartens is 18.3, for example (Kuger / Kluczniok 2008, 163).

Most of them participate in a full-time childcare. The reasons for this are not yet scientifically evaluated. One might think of the parental intention to strengthen the knowledge of the foreign language or of financial reasons. In Germany, there is a political agenda to expand childcare so that, in general, the attendance in kindergartens and day nursery is probably increasing for children with and without migrational background (Schmidt 2012, 26).

What is meant by migrational background? See § 6 Art. 2 of the „Migrationshintergrund-Erhebungsverordnung“ (29.9.2010): for the situation in Germany applies if (1) the person does not have the German citizenship or (2) the place of birth lies outside today’s borders of the Federal Republic of Germany and the immigration of this person was after 1949 or (3) the place of birth of one of the parents lies outside today’s borders of the Federal Republic of Germany and the immigration of this person was after 1949. The reasons for migration are diverse: Work, being a refugee, new partnership etc. (Becka 2011, 9).

There are three factors, which influence the attendance of kindergarten for children with a migrational background: the local segregation (1) that means the concentration of migrant families to certain regions and districts, the social segregation (2) that means the concentration in the lower educational- and socioeconomic classes and the ethnical segregation (3) that means the social and local concentration of migrant families from the same ethnical group (Schmidt 2012, 216). The question remains how these factors influence the decision-making process as to which kindergarten should be chosen. It is a fact that the segregation differs from urban to rural areas. That means, with the criteria ‘migrational background’ one is most likely to be confronted with when living in a city and in a district with a high percentage of migrant families.

2. Kindergarten – a special period of time

In the time of attending kindergarten, the development of one’s personal identity, the experience of ‘othering’ (Bünker 2011, 148) and developing a collective sense of community is very important for both: the foreign and the indigenous children. Already children are

challenged to find orientation and their position in a culturally and religiously pluralized world. Intercultural and interreligious education is part of the processes of development that should already start in early stages of childhood in the face of the challenges of a pluralistic world – according to the latest empirical study concerning religious and interreligious learning between 3 and 6 years (Schweitzer / Biesinger / Edelbrock 2008, 9).

Especially for families with a migrational background, cultural-religious roots are very important characteristics of identity, often, they are even stronger than for families of the native culture and country. Religion with its special claims strengthens the connection to the cultural heritage as well (Harz 2009, 124). That is the reason why families with migrational backgrounds hold up their background also in the sphere of kindergarten.

On the part of the kindergartens public administration and management, the question as to which approach the kindergarten has towards migration, arises: compensatory, intercultural or critical concerning structure and politics. The compensatory one is linked with the forthcoming success in school and sees integration as assimilation. The intercultural approach to migration looks for acceptance, cultural self-understanding and cultural and/or intercultural competence and integration is seen as inclusion. The last one searches for the acquisition of critical reflection concerning societal structures, in order to find and ask for mechanisms of discrimination. Integration is considered as incorporation by this approach (to migration) (Schmidt 2012, 216). All three want to realize equal opportunities but in different ways. The compensatory approach negates L1-Acquisition (L1 being the mother tongue) for example, the intercultural does not.

The political and pedagogical focus shifts towards kindergarten, in order to give children with migrational background the best opportunities for the education and integration in Germany. But in general, the time spent in kindergarten is a rather neglected scientific area but it can be considered as an important instrument for the transition from family to school (Bouras 2006, 224).

New empiric studies found out that if more than half of the children speak a foreign mother tongue the conditions for learning German are bad. In Germany, 13.3% of the kindergartens are in this problematic situation. A high percentage of children with migrational background correlate negatively with the language competence of all children (Becker 2006, 462). It also affects the quality of these institutions in general (Kuger / Kluczionik, 173).

This problem is faced politically by reducing the size of a kindergarten group, for example. A model that uses a different approach is applied in the United States. It works with the so called “bussing”, which means to distribute the relevant children equally via bus. Another approach works with the family and supports family centers, where mothers with migrational background are seen as partners in the process of their child(ren)’s integration. This instrument accepts the concept of family in its importance as the place of socialization and education (Schmidt 2012, 234).

But what about the parents of the indigenous children?

3. A question of individual ethics: Indigenous play dates only?

In Germany, the parents decide which kindergarten the child attends and how long (half-time, full-time). In most cases, they are forced to take the children to the nearest primary school. However, some parents choose a private school. These are about 9.0 % of pupils (Statistisches Bundesamt 2009, 6).

In Germany, the period of kindergarten is the one where the neighborhood can meet. Performance differentiation only starts with entering school life. That is why the issue of migration is very challenging in kindergarten, especially in this period of early childhood when leaving family life on an hourly basis – for the first time, in most cases. That means that the time of kindergarten can be a melting-pot for all children in a district.

But how to react as parents to the high percentage of children with migrational background in the nearby kindergarten? Is migration a disadvantage or more likely an advantage? What can one say from an ethical point of view?

One can think of solidarity in the ethical context, for example: solidarity with the children with migrational background, who can learn from the indigenous play date, surely under the condition of having the intention to learn. And naturally the other way round: the indigenous child also has the possibility to learn. I will exemplify this later on with regard to language. Therefore, all children are in a win-win-situation.

But there is a limit of solidarity, for example when the children with migrational background dominate the kindergarten. But how many percent of children with migrational background can be handled in a satisfying manner? Or is this view a new way of discrimination? New scientific studies have given the information that over 50 % are too much. But is this not the view of a compensatory approach to migration? Is an intercultural approach not obliged to have a more view – that means to be open for all children regardless their migrational status or other criteria's like having the ability to speak in the territorial language). The social principle of solidarity has its limits.

But one can think of questions of equal opportunities, especially justice of distribution. Adapting the theory of justice, as written down by John Rawls, for this special situation of deciding about places in kindergarten the veil of ignorance (Schleier des Nicht-Wissens) is an interesting instrument. Which portion of children with migrational background can be dispersed among kindergartens to get a well-mixed group? 50 % per cents seem a critical limit which should be considered.

But why should we as Christian consider this challenging situation?

4. Theological Background: Migration as common experience

Migration is a central issue of the human condition in the Bible. Look at Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel; Joseph, his brothers; and their descendants (Campese 2012, 4). One can think of the migration from slavery in Egypt. This Judeo-Christian experience of migration and liberation provides the basis for the preamble of the Decalogue: "I am The Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery". (Ex 20,2) This indicative formula makes migration and liberation to one of God's most important action towards Israel (Fremdling 1997, 100). The exodus is not a past, but permanent appeal to migrate (Manemann 2011, 70). The protection of the foreigner and even the love for him and the principle of hospitality are central issues in the theology of the Old Testament.

"The New Testament portrays Jesus as the leader of a new Israel, who just after his birth had to flee persecution as a refugee to Egypt along with Mary and Joseph." (Hollenbach 2011, 808) Jesus leads his disciples in a new kind of migration and, in a symbolic interpretation, as Exodus into freedom and redemption on the basis of his death and resurrection. The instruction "Erga migrantes Caritas Christi" reminds us, furthermore, on Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who gave birth to her Son away from home (Lk 2,1-7) and was compelled to flee to Egypt (Mt 2,13-14) (Erga Migrantes 2004, 15). When one has a look at Gal 3, 28 it can mean that there are borders because of gender, nation, people, class, but these borders are relative in the community with Jesus Christ.

Being far away from home and, therefore, being foreign is a common experience for Christians as for other religions "Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all descendants of the Patriarch Abraham, whose experience of God's call led him to migrate from the home of his kinsfolk to the land of Canaan." (Hollenbach 2011, 808)

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the historical impact of migration of early Christianity and displacements of the patristic period. Particularly evident in 1 Peter, themes of

being foreign, exile and pilgrimage are presented and also into the experience of early Christianity (Rowlandes 2011, 858).

In our days, the Second Vatican Council speaks in *Gaudium et spes* 27 explicitly about being the neighbor to migrants. The theological ethicist David Hollenbach holds the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters in the human family and no longer considers nationality or ethnicity. All people are created in human dignity. This so called “Christian Cosmopolitanism” should let us forget borders and national limits and their political significance but should not let us forget the positive role of borders to strengthen an identity. This Christian cosmopolitanism helps to identify all people as one community.

That is why differences, as migrational background, should play no further role, also in the searching of a place in kindergarten and also in the distribution of places for children.

5. A question of institutional ethics: Only catholic ones are allowed?

Until now especially the perspective of the parents has been considered. In Germany, there are communal kindergartens, confession-bound kindergartens and kindergartens with special pedagogical concepts. When there are too many applications, the administration of the kindergarten makes criterias for the distribution of kindergarten places.

Should it be a child of catholic parents or a child of a non-confessional bound family? Only baptized children are welcome? Should it live nearby or should it come from further away? In the last year of kindergarten, all of the so-called pre-school children, who want to go to the kindergarten, have to be admitted. The Sinus-Survey of Migrants says that 33 % of people with migration background are Catholic (Sinus-Sociovision 2008, 133).

Remembering the migration experience from the Holy Bible, the ‘migrational background’ should be a criterion in this decision-making process and also high-ranked to fulfill the biblical and theological mission. That affects the self-image of the ‘institution kindergarten’ to fulfill explicitly biblical experience and mission.

Concerning the discussed approaches to migration (compensatory, intercultural, and critical), a Catholic kindergarten, on the one hand, should apply the intercultural concept to be open to the intercultural exchange. On the other hand, the critical one should be considered, too, concerning the ranking of the criterion “migrational background”. Is the kindergarten in an area where the field of migration is no issue or in a district where segregation can be recognized? If there are different groups in kindergarten: how can the children with migrational background be distributed: no ethnically homogenous group, for example.

These are very detailed problems but the question of language is one question which should be considered explicitly.

6. Language problems

Often there is the parental fear that the indigenous language is not practiced enough in a kindergarten with a high migrational percentage. Language as an instrument of cultural expression and key to integration and equal opportunities is very important.

In the research of pedagogy for little children, it is shown that those children who are confronted with other languages acquire a trans-lingual-competence. The reason is that multilingual children learn the arbitrariness of semiotic signs early on. They recognize earlier than monolingual children that the connections of form and meaning of words are up for discussion. To think multilingually is a starting point for arising challenges (Lengyel 2011, 101).

In general, attending kindergarten is of importance for the cognitive development, the development of social competence and for the language development, the most important issue. For the children with migrational background, acquiring a language in a – sometimes – new

country is a special way of learning. Three factors are relevant here: the motivation to learn the language, the general opportunity to get in contact with the language and the individual competence to learn a language (Becker 2006, 450).

Multilinguality is the condition for their acting (Lengyel 2011, 97) and thinking. That is why it is not enough only to give courses in language but to look at fostering language acquisition, so that deeper connections with language, acting and thinking can be understood.

Surveys show that children who get in contact with the German language in the age of 3 or 4 can learn the most important morpho-syntactic qualities of German sentences within half a year (Thoma / Tracy 2006, 74) There is no scientific knowledge yet as to when the bilingual L1-Acquisition (mother tongue) and when the successive L2-Acquisition starts (first foreign language). The later success in school not only depends on the attendance of kindergarten but also on factors as the cultural level of the families (Khan-Svik 2008, 141). Analyses have shown that preschool attendance affects school readiness both directly and indirectly (via cognitive and linguistic skills) (Biedinger 2010, 43).

Conclusion

This example from everyday life is an example for connecting individual ethics and institutional ethics. And the problems of segregation (local, social, and ethnical) can be faced by guidelines for the institution and by reflecting individual premises. Concerning institutional ethics, the institution kindergarten (together with people in charge of questions of pedagogy) should reflect how to react to the children with migrational background (giving opportunities, dividing one ethnical group etc.) and the politics should have strategies in mind how to protect children in advance and how to face manifested segregation, especially in special districts. The questions of individual ethics ask the parents of the indigenous children to show solidarity and to foster justice in this special period and place of childhood: the kindergarten where all children from the neighborhood should meet (Biesinger / Edelbrock / Schweitzer 2011). The trust in the institution kindergarten has risen on the side of the migrant families. They are asked to show certain openness to the foreign culture. The German bishops suggest in this situation to create places in kindergarten which are free of charge and to let participate organizations of migrants (Integration 2004, 30).

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