
East German cover director revisited

Child Care Without Walls: An East Berlin Update

by William R. Woodward and Michael Kalinowski

Approximately two years ago, Exchange (June 1990) described numerous changes occurring in East Berlin as the Berlin Wall fell. This child care update is based on visits to Berlin in October 1990 (the month of German reunification) and in 1991, as well as telephone conversations with German child care specialists in early 1992. We'll look at the impact of reunification from the viewpoint of three child care experts from (East) Berlin, two of whom were featured in the original article.

Employment in Former East Germany

Real reunification did not occur overnight; and it is a process that is proving to be expensive, sometimes difficult, and one that will take many years to complete. The process has affected millions throughout Europe, but most significantly the Germans themselves. One example of the difficulty of reunification is surging unemployment, which may exceed 1.5 million people. Under Communism in what was formerly East Germany, every worker was guaranteed a job for life. To reduce unemployment, the government of what was formerly West Germany enacted legislation entitled "Make-Work Provisions" to provide one to three year temporary positions. It is common in (East) Berlin for workers to believe that (West) Berliners discriminate against all of them, but especially single mothers in hiring; it is not uncommon in (West) Berlin to

believe that those from the former East Germany are lazy and somewhat less capable.

Kuno Beller

Professor Kuno Beller, head of the Institute for Infant Pedagogy at the Free University of (West) Berlin notes there are few hard facts yet available on changes in child care. In his opinion, relatively few programs in former East Germany have closed thus far, although there appear to be plans to significantly scale back the amount of child care currently provided.

Fewer than 2% of children under three years of age in former West Germany are being served in child care, while in former East Germany, 60% to 70% of children under three have been in child care settings. One critical question is by what percentage child care in the East will decline and in the West will rise.

Some believe reunification will lead to increased demands for child care in the West, as the percentage of mothers attempting to enter the labor force increases.

Professor Beller indicated that there are great conflicts and resistance to change. "Reunification will take years to overcome, and child care changes are not going to move very quickly." From an East German point of view, however, the great problem is the dismantling of programs and cutbacks in funding. Funding in (East) Berlin is no longer controlled by the former East German state but by a city (West Berlin) government that is not accustomed to providing the level of child care support to which East Germans have become accustomed.

The tension will be to what degree West German structures will allow the strong system of child care in the East to remain, as well as to what degree West Germans will admit there may be something to learn from East German social service programs for young children.

Others in (East) Berlin suggest that the most striking change thus far may be in the curriculum, which is no longer prescribed by the state.

Thus, there may begin to be a greater emphasis on children's developmental needs, less authoritative structure, and more experimentation with curricula that has proven effective in other countries. Health and hygiene regulations have also been amended, allowing, for example, mats rather than beds for naps.

In general, there is an anxious mood in (East) Berlin regarding future funding of child care, but for the time being a spirit of innovation prevails with some optimism about future possibilities.

Andrea Schmidt

Andrea Schmidt, director of the Isabella Blume Kinderkrippe, learned about her appearance on the cover of **Exchange** when an American teacher arrived in 1990 and showed her a copy. The article was translated for the parents, who were very curious. One year ago, as she was awaiting word whether she would remain as director, we asked what would happen if she wasn't selected. "I'll become the secretary and give the director a hard time," she said with a laugh. Her concerns at that point were that much of what was good about East German child care might disappear, including guaranteed places in a program for children, a good teacher-child ratio, a free medical system which included weekly doctor visits to the center, and free shots.

Andrea Schmidt remains in charge at the Isabella Blume Kinderkrippe. Her teachers have also remained in what she feels has always been a progressive program. To an American observer, her program was at least comparable to an average child care center in the United States in regard to teacher-child interactions and the range and quality of materials available.

She believes reunification is hard on many people. "It is good for the people who can handle freedom and its responsibilities, but harder for those who can't, and unfortunate for those who choose to do nothing. I love the freedom. My heart goes out to all those who have lost their jobs."

Christine Weber

Dr. Christine Weber was previously head of the East German Department of Infant Pediatrics, a department responsible for overseeing the curriculum for all of the former East Germany's infant centers. She is a respected researcher who has amassed a large data set on thousands of children in hundreds of child care programs in former East Germany. In October 1990, when we interviewed her after the original **Exchange** article, she shared her concerns about reunification. In her view, "Americans believed East Germans were very unhappy and reunification would bring all Germans happily together. But many Americans may not have understood that people here had normal lives, wore normal clothes, had normal children and were relatively content. We realized that the East German system was not working and wanted a change. Now a decision has been made and we have to face the future.

Our first reaction was surprise, then happiness, and now we are a little scared. For many of us this future is hard to face, since many of us have been used to a system where everyone was paid no matter what was or wasn't accomplished. After reunification, people waited to see how many would lose their jobs and how many would remain. Most really believed they would be among those losing their jobs and that they would never be able to obtain another."

Dr. Weber's position was terminated with that of her colleagues when her department was closed. Her daughter had earlier lost her position as a translator when the newspaper service she was employed with closed. Dr. Weber quickly founded the Institute for Child and Family Education to conduct research, consult with other programs, and provide teacher education. She currently employs eight co-workers in two year, temporary positions funded by the state.

Bettina Rubesame

Bettina Rubesame is a child psychologist with a strong background in family systems therapy, who has remained current the past decade through reviewing Hungarian, West German, and American theorists, in spite of official prohibitions against publishing such work.

With 15 years of experience working with families in a municipal clinic, she is one of the new breed of child care entrepreneurs who has organized a privately sponsored, parent-initiated child care facility in (East) Berlin with two teachers and 26 children.

"It was a long-standing wish on my part to invent a new model," she disclosed. The philosophy of her program is based upon the Reggio Emilia programs in Italy which she has read about and visited. In 1991 she successfully competed against several West Germans for a grant from the Mott Foundation.

One of the most interesting features of her program is the merging of nursery school (kindergarten) with full day care (kinderkrippe). At her center, children one to six years of age are grouped together in family units, in which older children take care of younger ones. "What matters to us most is to teach children to take

care of each other," she said. Because the program is a parent cooperative, parents renovated the facility, administer the budget, hire the teachers, cook, and clean. The program is open from 7:00 am to 5:00 pm.

With contributions from the Freudenberg Foundation, Bettina Rubesame has also set up a consulting center for eight caregivers, to help them adapt to the new system. One unusual component of her training involves experts, supported by honoraria provided through the (East) Berlin Artists' Association, who come to this center to demonstrate their skills and teach caregivers graphics, ceramics, painting, and acting for use with children.

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Dr. William Woodward, professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, spent a recent sabbatical in Germany.

Dr. Michael Kalinowski, born in Germany, is associate professor of family studies and director of the UNH Child Study and Development Center. He has observed several programs since reunification.