



Children Exploring the/ir World

a German-Polish Exchange on Project Work with Children
as Part of the EU-Comenius-Regio-Project
"Young Children as Active LEarners - YALE"

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Dear Readers,

In the field of educational policy, municipal administrations are facing the important tasks of ensuring sufficient childcare to fulfil the needs of the town, and of appropriately organising work in the field of early childhood care. The quality of early childhood education and socialisation is however of equal importance as the availability of places in early childhood day care centres and their effective organisation.

How can we guarantee high level early childhood care? Which goals should stand at the fore in this process? How can we guarantee a regular quality evaluation of early childhood care? How can we continually keep in mind that our efforts and activities are concerned with the child, her natural development, her happiness and safety? These are questions that local administration structures in Europe are considering just as we – the project partners within the frame of the EU Programme Comenius-Regio and participants of the Oder partnership – are.

Active learning practices provide the child with the opportunity to develop according to her needs and interests. They foster her independence while creating a basis for co-operation; these are important aspects for children both here and now and in their future life as active European citizens.

This publication arose in the context of the Berlin and Poznań experiences made while implementing methods of active learning in everyday work in early childhood day care centres. It does not solely provide a summary of practical solutions; it also relates of regional and common German-Polish activities, challenges and friendships that developed over the course of the project.

I wish to sincerely thank every committed person who contributed to the realisation of this two-year project. I am convinced that the broad co-operation that has been initiated among the Berlin and Poznań representatives, the insights gained, and the common experiences will not be of interest only for the partners of the YALE project but also benefit all interested early childhood care professionals, representatives of educational institutions and educational policy as well as parents on both sides of the Oder.

It is with great joy that I invite you to read the following publication.

Mariusz Wiśniewski
Deputy Mayor of Poznań



Dear Readers,

The following publication introduces the concept and results of the EU Comenius-Regio project “Young Children as Active LEarners exploring the/ir world” conducted by the Land of Berlin and the city of Poznań. The contents and aims of the project are of great relevance to our countries: They are concerned with the learning processes of young children. The common question was to identify methods that early childhood practitioners can implement for the children to grow into acute, independent young people who are motivated to acquire new knowledge in a manner they enjoy.

Our society needs and will continue to need inquisitive, curious children and young people who can think independently. The expert exchange focused on early year pedagogical practices that nurture these abilities. In accordance with the principle of the Comenius-Regio project, early childhood practitioners engaged in intensive conversations with one another on site, as did the people in charge of early childhood day care centres, in administrations as well as in training and consultancy institutes. Part of the project also consisted in disseminating results to an expert audience. These efforts include the present publication, which was translated into three languages, as well as professional symposia and publications on websites. Of course, the parents of the children in the day care centres also constitute an important part of the public.

Besides the pedagogical aims stated above, an essential aspect of the project was and continues to be the strengthening of cross-border understanding and co-operation on education issues between Berlin and Poznań. The evaluations of the binational meetings demonstrate the existence of mutual esteem, professional inspiration, productive intercultural exchanges, eye-opening insights, curiosity and confusion, critical scrutiny of working methods that had been used so far. This clearly reveals that a lot has already been set in motion – beyond national borders, among the participants, in people’s minds.

In my position as State Secretary for Youth and Family in the Land of Berlin, I am very happy about the development and the results of this Comenius-Regio project: Polish and German neighbours worked jointly on the issue of the “education of young children”. The idea of Europe thus became more alive and lost some of its abstraction. This issue is of particular concern to me. It is through experiencing life together in Europe, interculturality, cross-border co-operation and hospitality that these values will increasingly become self-evident.

I would like to thank the city of Poznań as well as the early childhood day care centres, the day care providers, the institutes, the administrations and especially the colleagues who tirelessly translated back and forth! I hope you will remain in contact after the completion of the project!

**Sigrid Klebba – State Secretary for Youth and Family
Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science, Berlin**

YALE – Young Children as Active LEarners Exploring the/ir World





YALE – Background and Objectives

In the past years, progress in scientific insights and social changes have led many European countries to reassess the institutional education and socialisation of young children. Numerous studies emphasise the fact that children learn from the moment they are born. They actively get to know the world around them and attempt to understand it. They are thus increasingly perceived as young explorers or scientists who collect new experience every day through observation, experimentation and questions and who learn to overcome difficulties and solve problems.

This approach requires the education of young children to be characterised by active, participatory working methods. Early childhood day care centres become places where children learn from their early age to perceive their needs and interests, to value others, to express empathy and solidarity and where they grow into active and independent individuals. In this educational philosophy, early childhood professionals accompany the children's development. They support the explorative activities of the children, inspire them, enable them to make new experiences and do not provide "ready-made" knowledge. Children and adults are partners in this learning process, they interact with one another, conduct a joint explorative process that can be initiated both by the children and the adults.

The Polish understanding of education continues to be dominated by a traditional teaching model where the teacher actively passes on his or her knowledge to the children who are "recipients" of these educational contents. This traditional understanding encourages children to develop their ability to solve tasks schematically. It does not emphasise co-operation and does not focus on independent personalities who solve problems together creatively. The latest international comparative studies of the OECD (PISA, 2013-2014) confirm this point: Polish children perform very well in the areas of mathematics, literacy and natural sciences. However they cannot appropriately apply their acquired knowledge in everyday life. The Polish educational concept reflects social processes and preferred values such as performance, rapidity, competition and individualism. Present scientific studies demonstrate the significance of a child-friendly inspiring education. It is thus important for society to redefine the educational process, the concept of the child and the role of the early childhood practitioners.

The observations and experiences of the *Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early Childhood Development* (IMD) reveal that these new approaches of early childhood education are gradually developing in Poland. Early childhood practitioners require support in implementing these new working methods for the educational offer to respond to the needs of children and



prepare them to take on life in an increasingly diverse society.

In Berlin too, many changes took place in the field of early childhood education: A binding quality development system has been in place since 2004 for all of the 2400 or so early childhood day care centres that care for some 145.000 children aged 6 and under (approx. 35.000 of which have a mother tongue that is not German). This system is based on the Berlin Early Childhood Curriculum for providers of early childhood day care.¹ The curriculum describes the various educational areas of early childhood professionals, as well as their tasks and methodological approach. Key in the curriculum is the concept of the child.

Planning and designing projects with children in early childhood day care centres is one of five educational method tasks presented in the Berlin Curriculum. The practitioners provide new access to experience and knowledge through project work. They observe the children and identify their needs and interests, are open for the children's initiatives or develop projects based on concrete occasions that correspond to the inclinations of the children. Studies conducted by the *Berlin Institute for Quality Development in Kindergarten* (BeKi) since 2008 in Berlin early childhood day care centres² show that practitioners find it difficult to integrate project work in their daily pedagogical activities. The pedagogical concept papers that each day care centre needs to draft say little about project work too.

The EU project YALE thus came into existence first out of a need to provide an enriching contribution to the discussion on the direction and framework of education and socialisation in the Polish and German context. Second, through practical work in the day care centres solutions to the question of how to successfully design project work with children were to be developed. Learning methods that prepare children for life in a continually changing society pave the way into the future for our countries and our continent. The German-Polish exchange of experience enhanced the professional experience and the structures of early childhood education in both countries. It opened up a space to reflect on one's own pedagogical work and contributed to many useful changes in the early childhood day care centres.

¹ Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science, Berlin (Ed.): Berliner Bildungsprogramm für Kitas und Kindertagespflege, new updated edition, Verlag das netz 2014.

² In Germany, „Kindergarten“ is an institution providing education – in a broad sense – and care for children before compulsory school age (translator's note).



YALE – Description of the Project

Framework of the Project

“Young Children as Active LEarners Exploring the/ir World” (YALE) – this German-Polish project was conducted within the frame of the EU programme Comenius-Regio from August 2013 to July 2015. It aimed at further developing the quality of early childhood education in Berlin and Poznań. Numerous activities took place during this period: Binational meetings in both cities, training activities of the pedagogical staff, projects and activities in the partner early childhood day care centres as well as meetings of the administration group in both countries. Exchanges of experience, practice examples and strategies took place both on the administrative and on the pedagogical level, in order to create the necessary conditions for an effective development of project work methods in the early childhood day care centres of both cities. In the field of early childhood education, neither country can do without a qualitative offer that encourages the participation and the active learning of the children. Regardless of socio-cultural and structural differences, all children in the EU should grow to become mature, open-minded and self-determined citizens.

German-Polish Exchange

The pedagogical approaches of the two countries reflected the differences in both political and social systems. The social values, the history, the role of religion and the concept of the child also influence the present-day views on education and socialisation in each country. Becoming conscious of the differences and foremost of the

similarities in both educational systems can enhance and facilitate one’s own work. An important part of this work consists in not only seeing and naming the differences but in also understanding the backgrounds and turn these into an asset for one’s own work.

“I learned a lot about Poland, about the country, the culture and the mindset, I understand it better. And that way I understand my colleagues better.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

“Thanks to the German-Polish exchange we were able to make sure that in spite of the cultural, financial differences, different mindsets and educational systems, we are united by a common goal: Nurturing the child in her natural individual development.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

We cannot take familiarity with the neighbouring country for granted – not even among people who only live two hours by train from one another. This German-Polish exchange thus aimed at increasing familiarity with the pedagogical practice in the neighbouring country and learn about the conceptions of early childhood education and socialisation. The exchange provided a unique opportunity to perceive one’s own work from a different perspective, put it into question and receive



feedback. The professional discussion helped to further develop the participants' professional practice. This exchange required an open attitude in order to reach out to others and process their feedback

"The pedagogical approach of our western neighbours primarily led us to reflect our own work and in the end inspired us to introduce changes in our way of working."
Early childhood professional in Poznań

"It was interesting for me to find out how others work and also to have the opportunity to go there and directly experience it."
Early childhood professional in Berlin

Conditions for Success

It is not self-evident for an international exchange to succeed. Good conditions, a well thought through concept of the activities and a comprehensive preparation ensured that the exchange within YALE could take place on eye-level and benefit both sides. Two project partners looked back on a long co-operation on issues of early childhood education, which provided a stable and sustainable basis for the new challenges. Both sides were connected in content through their interest for pedagogical strategies that encourage the active, explorative learning of children (and adults). In order to increase the impact of the project, exchange did not take place solely on the level of early childhood day care centres.

Role of the Project Partners

The city of Poznań initiated the project and took responsibility for the jointly prepared project proposal. The project managers were the "Office for Project Coordination and City Revitalisation" of the Poznań administration and the "Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science" in Berlin. These offices provided for the framework of the meetings and took charge of the organisational and administrative tasks. What is more, an inspiring exchange of experiences took place on this level regarding the organisation, administration and financing of early childhood day care centres,³ quality development in the centres and the training of the practitioners. In Poznań, three early childhood day care centres took part in the project: *Przedszkole N° 46*, *Przedszkole N° 42 "Kwiaty Polskie"* ("Polish Flowers") and *Przedszkole N° 87* named "*Jacusia and Agatki*". These centres have been working for a few years already with the "project approach" based on Lilian Katz.⁴ On the German side, the early childhood day care provider *Kinder in Bewegung gGmbH (Children in Movement - KiB)* participated in the project with "*Kita Brauereihof*" ("Brewery Courtyard"), "*Kita Löwenzahn*" ("Dandelion") and "*Kita Sausewind*" ("Dashing wind"). The Berlin centres align their pedagogical work on the Berlin Curriculum. There, project work constitutes an essential task of the practitioners. All participating centres took part in training activities in their countries on YALE-relevant topics and conducted projects with the children in the centres. These experiences were presented and discussed as part of the binational meetings. In addition, observations took place in the centres during the binational meetings,



inspiring and stimulating the participants well beyond the frame of YALE contents. The *Berlin Institute for Quality Development in Kindergarten* (BeKi) in the *International Academy Berlin for Innovative Pedagogy, Psychology and Economics*, Berlin gGmbH (INA) provided the expert pedagogical support on the German side. On the Polish side it was the *Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early Childhood Development* (IMD), a non-governmental organization. Both project partners structured the contents of the binational meetings and conducted trainings and reflection sessions with the YALE centres.

Structure and Time Frame

YALE grew over the course of two years in several project phases. This guaranteed that insights gained during training activities and observations could flow into the daily work in the early childhood day care centres.

In both cities, the kick-off events took place in autumn 2013. Intercultural preparation seminars for all project participants in each country turned out to be particularly important. The binational meetings took place in November 2013 (Poznań), in April 2014 (Berlin), in October 2014 (Poznań) and in March 2015 (Berlin). The closing conference was conducted in June 2015 in Poznań. IMD and BeKi organised training activities for early childhood professionals between the binational meetings. In Poznań, representatives from 28 centres additionally took part in a training on active learning processes, 14 of which were able to visit Berlin centres as part of a study trip.

Communication

Both groups included participants with language skills in the other language. It was important for the project to hire language mediators who were not only proficient in both languages but also had a good knowledge of the cultural and pedagogical backgrounds in both countries. Of considerable importance was also the preparation of the participants with methods of intercultural learning.

“The language barrier did not constitute a big obstacle to understand one another. In our conversations and discussions, we referred to similar previous experience. Non-verbal utterances supported our communication. Shared experiences brought us much closer, we very quickly found understanding for one another and were able to work well together.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań.**

“The visit to Poland touched me emotionally, especially the hospitality and the loving relationship with the children. Really we should think beyond Poland and Germany, it’s always about people.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

³ In Poland, early childhood day care centres are called “przedszkole”, which can be directly translated as “pre-school”.

⁴ Helm, J. H., Katz, L. G.: *Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years*, 2nd edition 2010.

YALE – Experiences in Poznań





The Lilian G. Katz Project Approach

The Lilian Katz project approach is based on insights and studies on the development and learning of young children. Prof. Katz had trained the IMD team as well as some directors of Poznań centres between 2005 and 2009. YALE had the essential task of further developing this method with the help of the international exchange.

*Introduction*⁵

The project method focuses on the child as the subject of her own learning process. The method encourages children to take initiatives and develop their autonomy. It is based on the belief that children learn best when they feel safe, and engage both emotionally and intellectually in the exploration of their world.

The project method promotes:

- **A new concept of the child** – as an actively engaged creator of her own knowledge
- **A new role for the practitioner** – as a companion, initiator, both a partner and participant in the child's learning
- **A new working style** – Learning as a joint and interactive process involving both children and early childhood professionals
- **A new role for the parents** – Parents as partners who actively participate in the educational process.

Research Projects with Children and their Phases

A research project has a set structure. It consists in three phases of equal importance during which certain actions repeatedly take place: Children and early childhood professionals will discuss, investigate, research, conduct fieldwork, reflect their process and summarise the knowledge gained. Project work typically has a processual character as neither children nor practitioners know how the project will develop and how it will end.

First Project Phase

A project starts with the choice of a topic, an overview of what the children already know and what they want to investigate. The project topic should engage the children's interest and arise from their emotional, social and cognitive needs. Careful observation, discussions with the children as well as talks with colleagues and parents play an essential role to identify the issue the group will be focusing on. It is worthwhile at the beginning to provide the children with a common experience as regards the potential topic. This gives the early childhood professionals an opportunity to review the initial knowledge of the children and the group's understanding of the issue. They find out what children already know and how interested they are in the topic. Early childhood professionals have to evaluate whether the children can investigate the topic actively, directly and as independently as possible. Based on the evaluation of the commitment of the young researchers, their motivation and of the



prospects for realizing the project, the early childhood professionals decide whether to select the topic. After this, the children compile their present knowledge on the topic with the help of the early childhood professional. They produce mind maps, draw pictures or posters. Common discussions and games lead to the formulation of first questions and hypothesis and to the description of what the children want to learn at the beginning of the project.

- What is the curtain for in a theater?
- Why does the light get switched off?
- How can the light behind the actors get switched on?
- How does one set up a representation?
- Why do the actors get changed?
- What does the equipment in the theater look like?

Project “Theater”

– Early childhood day care centre N° 87

In the first project phase, the early childhood professionals decide on the pedagogical goals, they prepare the group room, collect material and objects to explore and invite the parents to participate.

Second Project Phase

Once the children have formulated their questions, the second project phase starts. They now conduct investigative activities to deepen their knowledge and their understanding of the topic while reflecting their experiences. The children conduct outings, interview experts,

observe and investigate objects and phenomena, discuss and look up information in books. This enables them to deepen their understanding of phenomena and events in their direct environment. These activities are reflected in their play. They repeat scenes, tell stories, draw pictures, construct models. They thus demonstrate their understanding of the topic, repeat, sort out and memorise information. The early childhood professionals support the process by observing the developing ideas and providing help to carry them out. During the second project phase, early childhood professionals document the process together with the children and summarise the new information. They check whether the questions formulated were answered and formulate new questions.

Third Project Phase

When the interest for the topic diminishes, it is time to move on to the third project phase. The children first discuss what they have experienced and learned so far. They look at photos, constructions and drawings. They sort and retain their new knowledge while drawing new pictures, posters and cards and producing thematic maps. They realise how much they have already learned and can retrace their own learning process themselves. They analyse their own progress and thus authentically strengthen their own self-esteem. The group decides on which experience they want to share with others (such as parents or other classes). The final presentation provides an opportunity for jointly celebrating the process and experiencing recognition from others for the research work.



Role of the Early Childhood Professionals in the Project Approach

During the project work, the early childhood professionals take on the role of attentive observers and gentle companions who focus on the dialogue with the children. They create the setting necessary for the development and realisation of the projects, shape the room and collect materials and resources. They document the course of the project in such a way that children and parents can make sense of the process and of the knowledge and skills acquired. The learning process during the project is a common, interactive process in which children and early childhood professionals actively collect and process information and experiences.

Co-operation with the Parents as Part of the Project Work

A good project requires constant co-operation with the parents who receive information about the project phases. The parents have the opportunity to take on an active role in the educational process of their children. They can take part in the process of choosing a topic, come along on outings, support investigations, bring books, material and resources for the project corner and pursue various project activities at home.

⁵ Helm J.H., Katz L.G., Mali badacze – metoda projektu w edukacji elementarnej, Warszawa 2003.



Examples of Projects in the Early Childhood Day Care Centres in Poznań

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 42 “Polish Flowers”
– The “Human Being” Project

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 46
– The “Shop” Project

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 87 “Jacusia and Agatki”
– The “Small Animal” Project





Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 42 “Polish Flowers” – The “Human Being” Project

Choice of the Topic and Project Goals

The group of six-year-old children consisted in a new constellation with children from three existing groups, so that they hardly knew one another. It was important to us, the early childhood professionals, that the children developed a liking for one another, got to know one another, learned to communicate with one another and work together. That is why we wanted the first common project of the group to bring the children together. Seeing as our children were to start school the next year, we considered it important for them to learn to make presentations in front of the group, show some initiative as well as accept other opinions and ideas. Choosing the topic was challenging at first. Our observations of their play and discussions did not reveal any common idea for a project topic. So one day the group’s early childhood professional decided to talk with the children. The children named topics they felt would be appropriate for a project. The suggestions varied greatly and included e.g. “flowers”, “space” or “human beings”. The boy who had named the latter example could not give good reasons for his idea but the group immediately started to list all the things they could do. The children discussed where one should go, e.g. to the “*Museum of Bones*”, to the doctor’s, they related their accidents and hospital stays, swapped their knowledge about human beings (what can a human being not live without: not without a head, not without a heart). The first discussion already demonstrated their great interest for the human

body and how much insight they could gain through this project.

Key Events during the Project

Over the course of the project, the children mostly asked “*How does it work, what does it look like?*” It was difficult at first to find an appropriate way for the children to independently find answers to their questions. The key event was our co-operation with the nearby primary school. The children visited a biology room where they examined a human skeleton which they wanted to get to know thoroughly. We were allowed to borrow a few books for the centre as well as a human anatomy model with extractable organs. The school visit marked a turning point for the project. It motivated the children to ask many questions and look at books. Thus inspired, the children asked questions such as “*Why does the pupil get smaller when light falls on it?*”, “*Why can only the tip of the tongue taste sweet?*”, “*How is it possible that we can bend our knees?*” We attempted to answer these questions together with the children. One mother described the impact of the project at their home: “*My son is competing with his older brother to find out who knows the most about the human body.*” At the request of one early childhood professional, both boys prepared a multimedia presentation of the human body which they gave to the whole group. When we examined X-rays of the spine, one girl said: “*My spine is curved and I have to go to rehabilitation*”. For the majority of the children, the word “rehabilitation” was a new concept. The



girl proudly explained what rehabilitation is about and which exercises she has to do.

What did the Children Learn during the Project?

Two months within the project, we could hardly believe how much the children had learned. At the beginning they had named such body inner parts as the heart, the brain, veins, the skull, the lungs. When we revised our mind map at

the end, they used concepts and described relations such as *“Human beings have the spleen and this is the only organ that cannot be transplanted”, “In the ear there is the cochlea”, “The eye has a pupil, retina and iris”, “Blood flows through the aorta”, “A healthy liver is pink”, “the knee has a kneecap”, “Human beings have neurons”*.





Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 46 – The “Shop” Project

Choice of the Topic and Project Goals

In our day care centre, the children can choose from different pastries at breakfast. In early October, the children started asking a series of questions related to the ingredients and the baking process. At the same time they would play related games in the kitchen corner. Their motivation to find out about the secrets of a chef was strengthened when they prepared sandwiches on their own. The children started bringing their favourite recipes. So we decided to satisfy their curiosity with the project “Bakery”. The parents took part, supported the activities of the children and slipped into the role of experts. They baked sourdough bread. Even though the children enjoyed taking part in the joint activities, they did not show any interest after that and did not follow up on the topic. The turning point came after a visit to a bakery. A shop emerged in our group’s room. Over the first days, they tried to set up a stall with baking goods and used for this purpose objects from our room. The shop grew every day and its owners increased their assortments of goods. They transformed the group’s room, used several shelves, drawers, worktops, boxes. Our “Bakery” project turned into the “Shop” project.

Key Events during the Project

The most important and most interesting joint experience during the project was the set-up of various shops in our group’s room. The children enjoyed full freedom to design the room and everything happened according to their individual ideas, which always motivated the group to move

on to the next activity. Every day, the children came with new ideas about what the shop should look like or how to exhibit the assortment. The first shop was primarily set up by boys. The children came up with a logo and produced posters and information boards. Since the girls felt a little excluded, they opened up their own competing shop a few days later. They had many ideas on how to design the shop and brought many items from their homes. The second shop in the group’s room caused much agitation, in addition to the joy of common play and design. The children thought about the situation and discussed amongst other things how to split the assortment and how to get the customers interested. At the same time, we conducted many discussions and integrating games to ensure the project was enjoyed by all and provided no ground for arguments. We found several solutions. The children created a poster to find customers and affixed it to the door of our group’s room. Thus the other children in the day care centre could learn about it. The shops continued to develop every day. The set-up of the shops, the shape and size changed. They were opened from early morning up to the closing hour of the day care centre in the afternoon. The children had a multitude of ideas which they tried to implement. The “Daisy” shop increased their range and offered books in addition to the foodstuffs.



What did We Manage to Achieve?

The “Shop” project was a lot of fun and greatly contributed to the integration of the group. At the beginning it looked like it was going to be a difficult year, as the boys presented strong personalities and formed a large group. Conflicts often took place which pushed the weaker children to the edge where they retreated from activities. The largest success of the project was the intensive group building and the involvement of all the children in the project work.

“As an early childhood professional, I opened up more for the individual needs of the children and the support and development of their interests. I trusted more in the children’s independence, instead of taking work off them and setting limits I gave them more freedom and opportunities to make decisions and experience success.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**





Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 87 “Jacusia and Agatki” – The “Small Animal” Project

Our group consists of children aged 3-4 who are in their first year in the early childhood centre. This is their third research project. Most children are very active and interested – they ask many questions, discuss different topics, enjoy doing handicraft and work independently in smaller groups. They are always busy doing something and capable to come up with their own games. In spite of this, part of the children did not actively take part in the projects. These children preferred individual play but observed with interest what the other children did during project work.

Choice of the Topic and Project Goals

The topic of our project arose from the interests of the children, in relation with the season. In springtime, one may find many small animals in the garden of our centre. The children often discover different interesting animals. We noticed that all children, including the shy ones, enjoyed taking part in the discoveries. We formulated the following goal: To deepen the knowledge of the young researchers on their immediate environment and on caring for small animals.

What Interested the Children Most?

Young children explore their world with all senses – they have to touch, hear, smell and see. We kept this in mind and set up an appropriate project corner. There one found an anthill in a jar with larvae and ants, a container with spiders, snails and caterpillars. The project corner also had models and photos of animals, magnifying glasses,

microscopes, jars and boxes as well as books. The children followed with enthusiasm the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a moth. A special event was a meeting with an employee of the butterfly house in the zoo, who introduced small exotic animals to the children.

Key Events during the Project

The metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a moth was an important event. One day, a child brought a little caterpillar she had found on the way. The children had already been asking the following questions: “*Why do caterpillars turn into butterflies?*” Within four weeks, the cocoon turned into a moth. It was a great surprise for the children – they all expected a butterfly. They carefully observed how the moth let its wings dry after it had left the cocoon. The children wanted to feel like the moth too and thus built themselves their own cocoons out of paper and wrapped themselves up in them. As the young researchers could not feed the moth themselves with nectar they decided to set it free in the centre’s garden so it could feed itself. The metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a moth was a great emotional moment for the children.

What did we Achieve?

After a few years’ experience with the project approach, we noticed that each project got different children actively engaged. One important rule for project work is that the children do not all have to participate in every activity. One boy who up to then had been mainly interested in



cars and constructions out of twigs, built an anthill out of twigs and a “little worm house” together with a friend. This boy had so far reacted rather aggressively and negatively to spiders and beetles.

His many observations and the fact that he got to know the animals better resulted in a change in his attitude towards them – he can now let them live in peace.





YALE – Important Steps in the Process from the Perspective of the Participants

Project Start

The early childhood day care centres participating in YALE have been conducting research projects with children for a certain time and follow the Prof. L.G. Katz project approach. YALE enabled the centres to deepen their understanding of the project approach. The early childhood professionals began looking into the subject matter during a joint workshop with heads of the centres, practitioners and experts of the Astrid-Lindgren-Institute (IMD). The focus lay foremost on a first acquaintance, the identification of expectations and intercultural preparation. The participants also explored the active learning process of children.

First German-Polish Meeting – Visit to Poznań

The first binational meeting of all partners took place in November 2013 in Poznań. The visit focused on the participants getting to know one another and introduced the two early childhood education systems. The Poznań participants presented the theoretical background of the project approach based on Prof. Lilian G. Katz and provided concrete examples of research projects conducted by the children. The German partners had the opportunity to become familiar with everyday life in Polish early childhood day care centres. The Berlin early childhood professionals noted that the children were indeed encouraged to act independently during project work but autonomy and independence was hardly detectable in the remaining daily routine of the children. This provided the Poznań colleagues with

food for thought which they pursued in the training activities with the IMD.

*“During the evaluation of the first visit I understood that our planning of the work in the course of project work and the planning of didactic work in our daily routine diverge greatly. The project work offers the children freedom to choose a topic, freedom to decide how to implement the project idea, freedom to deepen their knowledge about a topic they are interested in. In contrast, it is the practitioner who chooses all other contents without heeding the needs of the children. One wonders: Why? Why can we not ask the children what they would like to do before we decide on the next didactic step? Ask them what they are interested in and what they would like to find out more about? This type of planning would mean that the children feel responsible for their learning process beyond project work.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań***



Second German-Polish Meeting – Visit to Berlin

The visit to Berlin in April 2014 was marked by a workshop on personal experience with active learning methods. The participants searched for individual experiences and situations in their biographies: When were they themselves able to learn actively and when were their activities restrained? With this exercise, the participants could become aware on a personal level of the significance of active learning for the children and of the conditions required. The participants could discover many points in common in spite of the national and cultural differences, especially as regards their common understanding of the importance and responsibility of the role of the early childhood professional.

The German partners introduced the fundamentals of “open work” in early childhood day care centres, shedding light on their understanding of movement for the development of young children and the significance of room and space design. The Polish participants had the opportunity to conduct observations in Berlin centres. This first visit in Berlin centres was a key moment for many.

“The most essential aspect was the observation of the practitioners’ individual access to the children in the Berlin centres. The practitioners perceive the children as individuals. The work with the children (or with a small group) marks the starting point for further work with a larger group of children. The children already learn the basics of democracy in the centre. The conditions created enable the children to make decisions individually as well as in a group in various everyday situations.”
Early childhood professional in Poznań

Participation of Other Poznań Early Childhood Day Care Centres in the Frame of YALE

In connection with YALE, the IMD conducted further training activities for 28 heads of early childhood day care centres and 36 early childhood professionals in order to promote the use of active learning methods. 14 heads additionally conducted observations in Berlin centres of the care provider *Kinder in Bewegung*. After participating in the training activities, the heads initiated a working group to exchange experiences. Mutual visits in their centres and observations support the further development of their expertise.

Third German-Polish Meeting – Visit to Poznań

During the Poznań visit in November 2014, the practitioners presented examples of projects conducted with the children and deepened their understanding of both approaches. A meeting of those in charge of educational policy in both cities also took place. This meeting centred on the issue of quality development in early childhood education and socialisation as well as on co-operation among the administrative levels with their different competencies. The presentation of the updated Berlin Curriculum for early childhood day care centres was followed with great interest.

Fourth German-Polish Meeting – Visit to Berlin

The last study trip took place in March 2015 and was devoted to the learning paths all participants had walked individually and as a group. The Berlin practitioners organised a workshop for the Polish practitioners on the topic of psychomotor activity, an important part of the daily routine in KiB centres.



YALE - Experiences in Berlin





Children Exploring their World: Project Work as an Educational Method

Project work with children as a way of active exploratory learning is embedded in the Berlin Curriculum (Berliner Bildungsprogramm, BBP) and as such is one of the educational tasks of the early childhood professionals. “A project can be defined as a consciously singled out action of children and adults where both engage with a topic from their living reality following a structured time frame and contents.”⁶

The Berlin centres participating in YALE work using the BBP-based project work method which is based on the principles of the contextual child development approach (Situationsansatz)⁷ developed in the 1970s. Early childhood educational processes are closely connected to the children’s experiences, so project topics arise from the concrete living contexts of the children. Projects offer the opportunity to intensively engage with the topic of the children beyond everyday routine and over a longer period of time. They aim at providing the children with new possible paths of action. The project steps are based on the analytical steps of the Situationsansatz.⁸

Project Steps in Detail: Starting a Project

The process of finding a topic can take many different paths. Observing the children in their everyday life offers good opportunities to learn about the topics they are interested in. A project can also start after an event or a concrete situation that moved the children. Equally, the practitioners can suggest topics to the children that are important for their present and future

development. Meaningful topics thus can be found in the life of the children, in the children’s group, in the families, in the direct environment as well as in world events that have a direct or indirect impact on the children.⁹ The children themselves can often not concretely formulate meaningful topics. All the same, early childhood professionals should perceive complex topics such as “poverty” or “cultural diversity” as an opportunity to strengthen the children thanks to project work.

Exploring and Analysing

The early childhood professionals are in charge of choosing a key context or a topic that will be explored and analysed in the next step. Not all topics are suitable for a long-term project. The spider in the garden can fascinate the children for a whole afternoon but will not suffice as a project topic. However, questions such as “What exactly do the children find so interesting about the spider? Is it maybe their own fear of this animal, or their power over this small creature?” can lead to a project topic. The team of practitioners compile their observations, analyse and evaluate them together. Which of the children’s topics can be found behind the situations observed? Which topics do the practitioners themselves have a relation to? The topic does not always become obvious with a single observation. Generally, the exploration phase lasts two to three weeks during which project ideas are found and discarded again until a topic has emerged. The children are involved in the process from the very beginning,



their ideas will be taken up and discussed e.g. in the morning circle or the children's conference. Consulting the parents in order to engage their interest and resources is particularly helpful in the exploratory phase.

Making Decisions, Setting Goals

Once the project topic has been thoroughly explored, the early childhood professionals decide with the participation of the children which direction the project should take. The practitioners are in charge of formulating the project title and setting a goal that will provide orientation as a lighthouse does. Further refined goals are formulated that relate to the children's individual skills and provide a direction. The practitioners should be aware of how to promote the children's skills as regards their ego competencies,¹⁰ social competencies, knowledge competencies and learning method competencies within the frame of the project. Project work is thus not arbitrary. The goals may change over the course of the project. The tenet is to remain open for processes, to support the curiosity of the children and adapt the pedagogical goals in consequence.

Planning and Taking Action

The early childhood professionals then plan together with the children the activities that are meant to lead to the achievement of the goals. The children's participation in the project is voluntary. Generally a core group will emerge consisting of children who are particularly appealed by the topic. The enthusiasm of these children may spread over the course of the project onto children who are at first not involved, or

some may drop out of the project after a while. Stimulation in the form of material, space design or natural phenomena make project learning an exploratory and inquisitive process involving all senses. Over the course of the work, the centre can open up to the outside environment and undertake excursions and outings or invite experts. Parents and neighbours are often available to share their expertise. The point is not to work on every facet of the topic. There too, the children's ideas and suggestions take priority. The activities are not planned for the children but rather with them. The course of the project remains open, and there may be also unexpected results and turns in the course of the project. When the children's interest in the topic dwindles and their curiosity is satisfied, the project can be brought to an end in a joint process.

Evaluating and Reflecting

The practitioners and children document the whole project development and make it visible for both children and parents. This allows for a better comprehension of the progress made so far with the children and in the team. The children are stimulated and motivated to think about results and develop new ideas. The practitioners too evaluate their actions, check which goals they have achieved and set themselves new goals for their future work. The intermediary evaluation aims at reviewing the actual situation. It is also possible to modify the direction of the project if the project so far failed to meet the needs of the children. The project always closes with a final reflection both within the team as well as together with the children and the parents. It intends to once again present to



the parents and children the path and the learning steps taken by the children and the skills acquired in the process. It should be noted that the adults too learn through the projects, as they rise to new challenges and widen their skills – be it the necessary agreements within the team or the co-operation with other centres. These experiences are of great significance for their professionalisation as practitioners.

Role of the Practitioner during Project Work

In this area of pedagogical work too, the practitioners are both teachers and learners. They accompany the children on their learning path, open rooms for the children to make their own learning experiences. They do not provide ready-made answers to their questions. Together with the children, they explore over a long period of time a topic and questions beyond the daily routine in the centre and thus create new access points to the world. Their task is to remain alert, perceive the children's signals, recognise their needs and select an appropriate project topic. They consciously restrain themselves and take up on the children's questions. They reflect on how their own biography and cultural background impact their relationship with the topic and if necessary deal with their inner resistance related to the topic. Thus the topics of the children become the topics of the adults. The practitioners are aware of what they want to achieve with a project, which goals they are following, which

learning experiences they want to provide to the children and which skills they want to promote this way. They get the children involved from the start in all processes of the project work and let them participate in the decision making process as regards the direction the project should take and the choice of activities to achieve the set goals. They let the children act autonomously. They structure the day with flexibility to let time slots emerge for project work and let them flow into the daily routine of the centre. Timeframes reserved to exchange and agreements with the colleagues are equally important to enable project work across groups.

⁶ Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science, Berlin (Ed.): "Berliner Bildungsprogramm für Kitas und Kindertagespflege". New updated version, 2014, p. 40.

⁷ More on the contextual child development approach: Zimmer, J.: Das kleine Handbuch zum Situationsansatz. Cornelsen Scriptor, 2006; Preissing, Ch., Heller, E. (Ed.): Qualität im Situationsansatz. Cornelsen Scriptor, 2009.

⁸ See: *ibid* p. 38pp; Preissing, Ch., Boldaz-Hahn, S. (Ed.): Qualität von Anfang an. Cornelsen Scriptor, 2009, p.66-67.

⁹ More on this, see: Heller, E. (Ed.): Der Situationsansatz in der Praxis. Cornelsen Scriptor, 2010, pp. 138-140.

¹⁰ "Ego competencies" as defined by the Berlin Curriculum encompass "becoming aware of oneself, trusting in one's own strengths, acting responsibly on one's own behalf, developing independence and one's own initiative, directing one's attention and learning to concentrate." (Protz, R., Preissing, Ch. (Ed.): Bridging Diversity – an Early Childhood Curriculum. Berliner Bildungsprogramm. Verlag das netz, n.y., p. 24)

Examples of Projects in the Berlin Early Childhood Day Care Centres

KiB-Kindergarten “Brauereihof” in Berlin-Spandau
– The “Identity” Project

KiB-Kindergarten “Löwenzahn” in Berlin-Lichtenberg
– The “Family” Project

KiB-Kindergarten “Sausewind” in Berlin-Rudow
- The “Me and my World” Project





KiB-Kindergarten “Brauereihof” in Berlin-Spandau – The “Identity” Project

What did we Observe?

During our first training activity on the topic of project work, we became aware of the fact that in the projects so far we had rapidly moved on to the implementation with the children. We did not leave enough time for exploration and analysis. In order to modify this, we put up a sheet of paper in each room in order to keep spontaneous notes of our explorations. We wrote down the interests, needs and questions of the children. It became obvious that many children were experiencing insecurities in their search for identity and were looking for individual validation. They were asking “Did I do it right?”, “Who should I trust?”, “What may I show of my own body, and what not?” Based on these observations, we developed the topic: I AM ME AND YOU ARE YOU. We started the “identity” project together with the parents and children using question boards on the walls in the corridor. The parents could reply to questions unobserved. We gained beautiful and loving glimpses into the family life of the children. The parents also brought family pictures in the shape of collages that were put up on the walls and stirred varied discussions. The children were proud to show their own family. We then discussed in small groups: “Which feelings do you know?” The practitioners wrote the answers down. The children then tried to mimic feelings. We made photos of the children’s representations. Later on, the photos and the

children’s descriptions were turned into a feeling barometer and a memory match game.

What did we Want to Achieve?

We aimed at strengthening ego competencies by letting the children experience and experiment with their own physical options. We aimed at strengthening the children’s social skills, to perceive and support the abilities of others. We wanted them to feel more confident to defend their boundaries and accept the boundaries of others. Their knowledge too was important to us. We wanted them to develop a basic understanding of their own bodies, make physical experiences and think about social ascriptions and roles.

Challenges and Stumbling Blocks as regards the Practitioners, the Children and the Parents

One stumbling block during the implementation of the newly acquired method was that only the practitioners taking part in the YALE project conducted the experiment. The other practitioners took on a rather passive attitude. We still had to clarify the goal of our project work. What can we change, what is already working well? We noticed that we needed some leeway with the daily time structure in order to have time for making plans, implementing them and reflecting on the process. After the second training activity of the whole team, project ideas emerged for each floor in our centre that required a joint implementation.



Practitioners, Children and Parents Experience Surprises

The children learned more than we could imagine. Their self-perception and conceptions of themselves changed, as we noted over the course of several small group discussions and one-to-one chats. The most interesting insight for the children was: I can and am allowed to say no if I want to.

The magical moments of our project for us were when the children showed personal initiative and when they conducted discussions with one another. The children brought items from their home and their appreciation for one another increased.

We were also surprised by the impact of the work with the book “Little I-AM-ME” by Mira Lobe.¹¹ The book tells of a search for identity. We invited the children to come along onto the journey of the Little I-AM-ME. We prepared our movement room for that purpose. While we were reading the book to the children, we visited the different stops of the adventure. The children played scenes from the story. The movement material based on Hengstenberg¹² led to a lot of fun. The children made a stuffed “I-AM-ME” which they enjoyed using. Together they developed their own game. We practitioners were mere observers, which we greatly enjoyed.

We informed the parents as part of meetings of parent representatives. They were interested in the documentation produced, asked questions and enjoyed looking through it.

Practitioners, Children and Parents are Proud

The children enjoyed using all the material on offer: The book “Little I-AM-ME”, the psychomotor activities as well as the self-made memory match game. The DIY “Little I-AM-ME” and the mirror also provided support for their self-finding processes.

The children increased their *social competencies* by taking actions together and experiencing themselves as part of the group. Repetitions created a safe framework. Respect and tolerance developed and they learned to perceive the feelings of others. As regards their *knowledge competencies*, the children learned to name parts of the body, perceive and understand mimics and body language. In addition to increased body perception, they also increased their speech comprehension. By working with varied materials, they broadened their *learning method competencies*. The DIY toy made them proud of their own accomplishment. They realized: I am capable of something, I am important! The children were able to experience and try out motoric abilities, tension, and relaxation through role games. The children participated in the development of the photos and of the family walls, which provided many occasions for conversations: They talked about their families, identified common features and differences.

Changes as Regards the Practitioners, the Children and the Parents

We became familiar with a different approach to project work and implemented it. This resulted in activities that were more engaging and more interesting for our children. We made use of new spaces for experiences, including outside of the centre. We had regular exchanges and redesigned our rooms. The co-operation between practitioners and parents also evolved to the better. All in all, the atmosphere, the exchange among colleagues and the reflection of the practitioners became more intensive in the centre.

¹¹ Mira Lobe, Susi Weigel: Little I-AM-ME. Verlag Jungbrunnen, (2014) 1972.

¹² Hengstenberg Material stimulates and supports the children's natural urge to move. <http://www.hengstenberg-pikler.de>





KiB-Kindergarten “Löwenzahn” in Berlin-Lichtenberg – The “Family” Project

What did we Observe?

After several group observations, we noticed that the children were playing “family” during the play phases. The children’s emotional attachment to the “Family” topic also became visible in the morning round or in one-to-one conversations. Their comments included statements such as “My dad is gone, I want to be with him.” “Why do you have two mummies and I only have one?” “What is a family?” These questions encouraged us to take “Family” as a project topic. Further conversations focused on observations, experiences and feelings of the children. We, the early childhood professionals, now wanted to hear from the children what they wanted to learn about the topic. Questions arose such as “Do you have a mum and dad?” “Where and how do the others live?” “Which language do you speak at home?” “How large is your family?” “Do only human beings have families?”

What did we Want to Achieve?

Project work provides the children and us practitioners with the opportunity to design an open learning process. The children can get engaged according to their interests and shape the topic. We practitioners can also participate depending on our strengths and accompany the process. We formulated our objective thus: The child knows where she stands in her family. She becomes familiar with diverse types of families.

Challenges and Stumbling Blocks as regards the Practitioners, Children and Parents

The biggest challenge for us practitioners consisted in analysing the many ideas, observations and questions of the children and determining the topic of the children. We found it difficult to formulate a concrete goal, seeing as the “Family” topic has many facets and is of considerable scope. We found the supervision of our pedagogical coordinator as well as the training activities in the frame of YALE helpful. At first we suggested to the children to go to a library and look for books that could help us answer some of the questions. The children found it interesting to look for such books. A further important step was an information afternoon held for the parents. The parents received questionnaires which they discussed with the children and filled out. The next step consisted in taking family photos to the centre for the children to introduce their families.

A further challenge for practitioners and parents consisted in organising a reading day. To our surprise we could not motivate German-speaking parents to participate. Their unease was too great. We were particularly pleased to have two mothers whose mother tongue is not German volunteer to read to the children.

The mothers were very excited and insecure at first. They were wondering “What should I expect?” “How will the children react when they hear a foreign language?” “Will the children like it if they can’t understand a single word?” We documented this reading session and could inform



all the parents very quickly. This intensified our communication with them.

Surprises as Regards the Practitioners, Children and Parents

Both mothers were very happy about the positive reactions of the children on reading day. We practitioners were surprised by how well the reading day had been accepted. The children of the two mothers were particularly proud. It was a good experience for all children in the group to hear stories and fairy tales in another language, even if they could not understand this language. They followed the story using the illustrations in the book. In the evaluation round they commented “It was strange to hear the tale in another language” “Because they were pictures I knew which story it was.” This moment was particularly special for the children who heard the story in their mother tongue. The project work demonstratively strengthened many of the children’s competencies, in particular social-emotional ones. This became visible when they redesigned their room in the course of the project. They helped and supported one another. Their self-confidence was invigorated, they dared to speak in front of other children.

Practitioners, Children and Parents are Proud

As the “Family” project developed, those children who had shown little courage and self-confidence faced a challenge. They used the photos to tell about their families. In the course of the project, they increasingly developed an interest for the other families. The idea emerged to replicate each child’s bedroom. It is not always possible for the children to visit all the other

children, so this was a way for each child to visit another in a playful way. In this project phase, the younger children in our group, who up to then had not participated in the project, expressed the wish to take part. The children developed the idea to create a family memory match game. Another highlight of the project was a family party. The families who wanted to participate prepared their favourite food. Recipes were swapped. The families used different materials to design their favourite place where they like to spend their free time. All in all the celebration was very successful. After our “Family” project had come to an end, the children continued to be interested in the question “Are there families among other species?” They learned through a children’s book that spiders too live in a “family unit”. This was an eye-opening moment for our children.

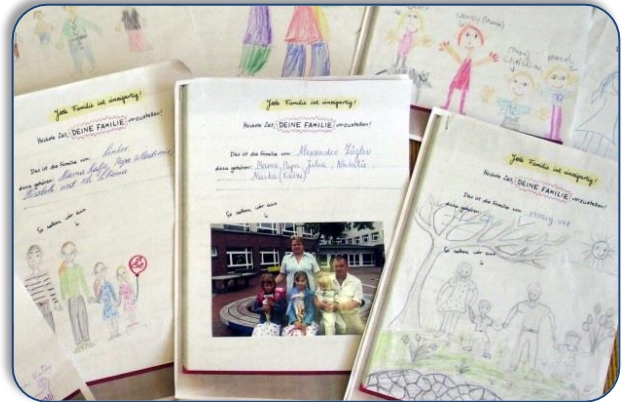
Changes as Regards Practitioners, Children and Parents

We recognised how rewarding it is to become aware of the children’s topics. This project work method gives us practitioners, the children and the parents greater opportunities to work on certain issues. The sense of community among various people can develop on an equal footing. We became aware of the fact that involving the children and parents does not create a burden but rather enriches the centre’s everyday life.



Leonie Sophie:

Das ist mein Kinderzimmer.
Ich habe eine gelbe Wand und noch eine orange
Ich habe noch ganz viele Punkte auf meinen
Boden, blau, orange, rote, braune, schwarze, grüne
Mein Bett da kann ich Spielzeug reinmachen wo
mein Kissen ist. Eine Kiste für das Spielzeug, ein
brauner Schrank, Spielzeug, eine Waschmaschine





KiB-Kindergarten “Sausewind” in Berlin-Rudow - The “Me and my World” Project

What did we Observe?

We noticed that the children were coming to us with a great many topics and questions and wondered how interested they really were in these questions. In the morning round we often made the following observation: What a child says will often be taken up by other children. The children’s volatility and their statements made us waver. Which topics were the children really interested in?

What did We Want to Achieve?

We launched our project “ME AND MY WORLD” with 15 children aged 2.5 – 6 with a large discussion group in the centre of which we put a globe. Our goal was to raise the children’s awareness of the world and their environment, to show them the world’s diversity. We wrote down questions and quotes of the children and soon noticed how turbulent such a large discussion group could quickly become, the children were distracted and lost interest. They had no connection to a globe. This showed us, practitioners, that our expectations had been too high. The questions of the children “How does one make ice-cream?” “Is there a lighthouse in Berlin?” did not at first receive the attention they would have deserved.

Challenges and Stumbling Blocks as Regards the Practitioners, the Children and the Parents

We consider it a challenge to “meet” the children in their living world and, together with them, go on a search for what moves them within

a long-term project; take their interests, needs and questions seriously and set off on this research journey with them. We discussed with six other colleagues: “How do we actually access the children’s topics?” The differing opinions and conceptions among the practitioners also caused some difficulties. Practicing tolerance and skills to handle differing opinions represented a great challenge for the practitioners.

A further concern of ours was “How do we engage all the children? Do we have to get all the children involved?” The question of what we wanted to achieve and how took us onto new paths. Our goals stopped being so rigid, we had to rethink our approach. The course of the project with its changing goals and the children’s ideas continually prompted us to make new analyses of our scope of action and paths, and modify them accordingly. Good planning, joint team agreements and the conversations with the children helped us to keep track of the project and its goals. The experiences with YALE supported us in the process of sustainably modifying our work with the children. We now manage better to create free time slots for agreements and discussions.

Once we had decided to respond to the children’s questions (e.g. “How does one make ice-cream? Is there a lighthouse in Berlin?”), we noticed that we were on our way to recognize the topics of the children. We developed the questions and contents with them in small groups. We handed them some responsibility and got them involved in the planning of the project. The



practitioners also followed their interests and their knowledge and co-operated with the groups of children. The joint research journey knew no boundaries: experiments, using different media, out-of-house activities and a lot more were possible. We, the practitioners, prepared the room with suitable material and accompanied the children in their activities. Parents had the option of bringing materials, starting up conversations with their children and work on small homework tasks with them. The transparency of the project in the centre resulted in everyone feeling addressed and involved. Grandparents, friends and neighbours often enhanced the pedagogical work in the project by sharing their experiences.

Surprises as Regards the Practitioners/ Children and Parents

Nearly every day we were surprised to see how committed the children were and how intensely they were taking part. A great example of this was our outing to the Television Tower, one of Berlin's landmarks: our personnel situation at that point was extremely bad and we had had to postpone the outing several times. We the practitioners already thought that the children had lost interest in the outing. But we were wrong, the children had not given up. Fortunately! They remained committed and got further children on board who at first had shown little interest. Thus our fear of having to reach every child lost its significance.

Practitioners, Children and Parents Are Proud

We attentively followed the questions related to the lighthouse: "Is there a lighthouse in Berlin? Which function does a lighthouse have? Is

there another tower in Berlin?" These research questions led us to the TV tower. At that point we had to gather new information. "How high is the TV Tower? How do we get there? How much does the admission cost?" The highlight and conclusion of the project was our outing to the TV Tower. Now, when we are out and about with the children and they see the TV Tower from afar, they shout: "Look, there's the TV Tower."

The transparency of the project led the parents to perceive the questions of their children too. Photos of specific activities provided the parents with a close view of our work. Once the parents noticed how carefully we were working on these topics with their children, we received a lot of positive feedback.

Changes in the Practitioners, Children and Parents

We took another path than the one we had originally planned: We worked in small groups, did not hold on to things, accepted changes, kept our expectations low, welcomed and appreciated the questions and topics of the children, gave them time and calm. We learned from one another and reached our goal together. Children developed a plan of action and pointed to impressive solutions. One example from our everyday life: The children who have table duty should actually also eat in this room. One boy who had table duty came one day and asked a practitioner: "Can I eat in the other room? I know I have table duty. When I am done with my lunch, I'll come back and take on my table duty."

In short: One can change rules, think them over and improve them, they are not rigid!







YALE – Important Steps in the Process from the Perspective of the Participants

Start of the Project

In Berlin, the YALE Project started in October 2013 with an introductory meeting for all Berlin partners. An intercultural seminar also took place in October 2013 to deepen the contact among the participants while preparing them for the first meeting in Poznań. Everyone had a chance to express their expectations as regards the project and clarify their role in the project. The seminar also provided an introduction in the fundamentals of intercultural communication. It offered a presentation of the Polish educational system and discussed the concept of the child in a changing society.

Binational Meetings

The first binational meeting in Poznań in November 2013 provided an opportunity for the participants to get to know one another as well as fine tune the implementation of the project. The hospitality and official reception in the representative location of the Poznań town hall contributed to an excellent kick-off. The visits to the Poznań early childhood day care centres and the Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early Childhood Development provided a more concrete picture of the future co-operation. The German participants were able to become familiar with the pedagogical work of the Polish partners in the early childhood centres' daily routine as well as with the project approach based on Lilian Katz.

Both sides presented the principles of their pedagogic work. This clarified their concepts of the child, their common ground and differences as

well as the expectations towards pedagogical work in both countries. The visitors were inspired both by the work of the Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early Childhood Development as well as by the early childhood centres – amongst other things by the close co-operation with the parents, the careful documentation of the projects with the children as well as the high appreciation for the questions of the children. Differences became visible regarding stricter safety regulations and tighter duty of supervision in the Poznań centres.

The exchange on the administrative level included a first overview of the basics of organising and managing a system of early childhood day care. It became clear that early childhood day care centres in Poznań are organized by the municipality while in Berlin the centres are led by private non-profit organisations. This leads to different tasks as regards the administration of the whole system, an issue that was brought up again in the follow-up meetings.

The focus of the practitioners during the visit in April 2014 in Berlin lay on “active learning”. A workshop provided the practitioners with the opportunity to reflect on their own personal experience with active learning, to shed some light on the conditions in the centres of both countries and illustrate the role of the practitioners when supporting the children's learning processes. The contact among the practitioners was very intensive and warm-hearted in spite of linguistic barriers. The observations in the Berlin centres aroused the



interest of the Polish participants for “open work” with the children and room design. The “open work”, meaning children transiting between different groups, cannot be implemented as such in the Polish centres due to legal and structural reasons. The co-ordinators in charge of early childhood policies in Berlin and Poznań discussed the issues of quality development and finances. The focus lay in particular on the binding quality system for the Berlin centres with its internal and external evaluation as well as on a series of supporting measures. The results of the on-going academic monitoring were also presented.

The third binational meetings in October 2014 in Poznań focused on the project approaches in both countries. Presentations of concrete project examples provided concrete illustrations of both approaches. Additional observations in the Poznań centres further illustrated the project approach based on L. Katz. We observed changes in the centres since our first visit the previous year, as the children were given more opportunities to act autonomously.

On the administrative level, a wider circle of players from the policy field in the city of Poznań as well as the surrounding region discussed the issues of the role of centre sponsors, the role of the city of Poznań and of the Land of Berlin in supporting practical application and securing quality.

The last binational meeting in Berlin in March 2015 concentrated for the most part on the common reflection and evaluation. The participants looked back on the whole development and documented the outcomes of the YALE project. As a particular highlight, the

German practitioners conducted a workshop on psychomotor activity with their Polish partners. This co-operation was enriching for both sides and is meant to be continued. A Berlin centre and a Poznań centre made plans to this effect.

This last bilateral meeting took place in the presence of representatives of the Poznań political level. The discussion focused in particular on the transfer of centres from public to private sponsorship and on the opportunities and risks linked to it.

Training Activities and Projects in Berlin Early Childhood Day Care Centres

The Berlin Institute for Quality Development in Kindergarten accompanied the implementation of the training activities on active learning and project work with children. The first team trainings took place in January and February 2014 in the YALE centres. As part of the trainings, the practitioners challenged their project conceptions in order to then deepen their understanding of the project method as embedded in the Berlin Curriculum. The description of the planning steps in project work at first caused some irritations among the practitioners. The choice of topics based on the seasons or selected issues is also widespread but the focus tends to be determined differently in the Berlin Curriculum: Project work with children focuses on questions taken from the life of the children. The teams were intensively engaged in determining project topics and stepped into the investigative phase. There, topics such as “diversity in the early childhood centre”, “different family forms”, “settling-in in the centre and in the children’s group” or “dealing with



separation” came up. The impressions of the first visit in Poznań widened the understanding. Based on the experiences made there, the Berlin early years professionals looked for ways to document the questions of the children and give the parents the possibility to participate in the learning experience of their children.

“The transparency of the children’s statements, what the children asked – we took this from the Polish side. We were so enthusiastic after the first trip, how the questions hung on the walls, how the parents had access to it and took part.”

Early childhood professional in Berlin

The second series of training in autumn 2014 aimed at reviewing the progress of the projects that had already started in the centres. Some centres experienced difficulties determining the topics of the children in the investigative phase. This was probably linked to the fact that for some, the step by step process in project work proved to be a new experience. The second training was thus very helpful to check the path chosen. It made clear to the practitioners what they had already achieved and which advantages this approach to project work provided for their work and most of all for the children.

As part of the last training series in the Berlin YALE centres in the spring of 2015, the early childhood professionals used the time to report on their challenges and stumbling blocks and jointly looked for solutions. While some of the teams had already completed their first project – such as “Me and my world”, “My family” – and

were looking for new topics, others were in the middle of conducting their projects. A further development became visible in the second project round. The topics were based on the reality of the children’s lives and were easier to grip. The project “There is a fire – what happens when everything has gone” arose after a fire in a nearby early childhood centre and responded to the worries and fears of the children. Besides showing solidarity to the centre in question, the project work provided educational processing for the phenomenon of fire and the work of fire brigades. The practitioners discussed the consequences of a fire with the children. The children decided to put all the toys away to find out what it felt like when nothing was left. At this point, the positive impact of the co-operation with the Polish centres became once again visible – we got the parents intensively involved in the project work from the beginning and pursued the questions of the children.

“At the beginning, with the first training, so any insecurities arose in the team because there was another view on project work. And in the course of the following training activities, it became clearer and clearer that it’s not about looking for or selecting any old project topic but rather about hearing why the topics are interesting for the children, what hides behind it.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

YALE – Reflections





Reflection of the Participants in Poznań

The YALE project had a great impact on the personal and professional development of all partners involved and modified the daily routine in the early childhood centres. One of the main advantages of the project was the opportunity to work together with the Berlin partners and to exchange views. The experiences from the study trips – observations of the work in the centres, joint discussions and workshops, exchanges of insights and experiences with representatives from various educational institutions – fostered the reflection of one's own work and the concept of the child. The local meetings and discussions among the partner centres and the workshops

“The visit allowed me to perceive the work of the early years professionals in a different way. I saw that great effects on the children’s development become visible when one follows the child and actively let her act. The visits provided me with a lot of inspiration for work and changed my attitude towards my work.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

“I wholly identify with the claim that “travel broadens the mind“. This co-operation was very prolific and creative, I hope for both sides. It enriched my knowledge and experiences as a civil servant and pedagogue.” **Department for Education, Poznań Municipality**

with the IMD experts contributed to a deeper analysis of the study trips and to a transfer of the experiences into the daily routines of the centres.

“The educational approach of our western neighbours led us above all to reflect our own work and as a consequence inspired us to modify our way of working and the design of the rooms. These contacts resulted in us opening up more to the children and their active discoveries, thus enabling them to act more autonomously, with more choices and more freedom.”
Early childhood professional in Poznań

The systematic design of the YALE project – involving the early childhood centres, representatives of public authorities for education, experts from Beki and IMD – considerably promoted the implementation of modifications in the daily routine of the centres as well as the further development of the whole educational system in Poznań.

“Meetings and discussions within the circle of partner centres with the IMD resulted in a deeper analysis of the experiences gathered during the study trips and reflections on the options for and the good of changes in project work. A concept was formulated for the further development of the partner centres.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**



“Thanks to the study trips, representatives of the city became familiar with the work in early childhood centres from the perspective of the centre. For us, practitioners, it gives us the feeling that we have allies too among the civil servants. We wish for this branch of our co-operation to continue in a prolific manner.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

“No doubt the insights and the opportunity to participate in the project events will impact the shape of future educational projects in the partnership of early childhood centres as educational institutions with the Poznań municipality. The experience of the German partners with the introduction of modifications in the early childhood education presents practical insights which the city of Poznań can use in its analysis of the potential forms of educational organisation in Poznań.” **Department for Project Coordination and City Revitalisation, Municipality, Poznań**

Work within the frame of YALE resulted in many substantial changes. The practitioners opened up to the individual needs of the children. They strive to perceive the children as a whole and take both their emotional as well as social and cognitive needs into consideration. They endeavour to create conditions in the early

childhood centre that enable the children to use the resources, make decisions independently and take responsibility for their choices. Autonomy and the children’s activities are given educational priority.

“The personal experiences and observations of the work in the Berlin centres inspired me to reflect on the development of children’s autonomy. I think even more about where the boundary to safety aspects lies.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

“It is important for children to learn actively and creatively not solely in the conducted projects but rather the whole time – when they are playing, eating or putting their clothes on, during autonomous actions and when playing together with friends.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

YALE had an impact on the design of rooms and spaces in the early childhood day care centres. The centres examined the function and design of all their rooms and thought about how they could inspire the children to actively learn and promote their independence. They paid more attention to free and diverse movement in the rooms of the centre. They went back to natural material and toys as well as articles of daily use.



“Creatively designed spaces, natural objects which the children can use in different ways, freedom and places made for young researchers, adults who grant the children the needed time and acceptance for diverse activities – all this inspires children to act bravely: to try things out, ask, question their own ideas, discover, overcome challenges and endure defeats.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

As part of the YALE project, elements of open work in early childhood day care centres were also introduced. Once a week, the children may freely use the rooms of the whole centre. They can play in the corridor, in the cloakroom or in the rooms of other groups.

“Observing open work in the Berlin centres gave us new impulses and encouraged us to implement changes that are good for the children – though often a lot of work was necessary to change the mind-set of the adults.” **Early childhood professional, Poznań**

“This is the path to teach children to make autonomous decisions and take on responsibility. The principles of open work give the opportunity to choose an activity and get back to it. It enables changes in the community of the children and the composition of the social relationships to all friends. We implement many of the ideas in our work. In communication with the children we gather their suggestions. We put all the rooms in the centre at their disposition. We practitioners often work with smaller groups and make arrangements with the supporting staff.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

While conducting the research projects, the practitioners started paying more attention to their observations of the children. They observed what the children came to day care with, which needs they have and what they are interested in. This led to a deeper analysis of the individual needs of the children as well as the needs of the group.



“I learned to perceive the needs of the children hidden behind a specific topic. I try to question more and to observe before we make our final decision on the topic. Thanks to this I have learned not to speed up the process. I give the children more time to rummage around in the topic and make autonomous decisions.” **Early childhood professional, Poznań**

“I pay attention to the choice of the project topic. It has to be meaningful for the children and have a link to their interests or even life experiences. I try to find out about the experiences the children have had so far. As a practitioner, I try to live up to my supporting function. I pay even more attention to the children’s own initiatives, planning, fulfilling tasks and developing interests.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

“Participating in the project enabled us to start co-operating with other (Poznań) centres. We exchange examples of good practices and ideas, support one another to overcome difficulties and look for solutions. We hope that this co-operation will continue to develop.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

“The exchange with other Poznań centres gave us a feeling of unity and cohesion, support in everyday situations as well as inspiration and ideas to implement changes in our centre. We took the initiative of visiting one another’s centre. This gave us an opportunity to experience the work of other practitioners, analyse one’s own contribution as well as share one’s professional successes and acknowledge strengths.” **Early childhood professional in Poznań**

YALE contributed to important discussions on the quality development of early childhood education in all Poznań centres.

With the activities conducted in the frame of YALE, all participants could expand their knowledge and skills and thus create favourable conditions for the quality development of early childhood education in Poznań.





Reflection of the Participants in Berlin

YALE had a lasting impact on all levels:

Administrative and Monitoring Level

YALE strengthened the relationships between Berlin and Poznań. Up to then, the co-operation between the two cities, only 250 km apart, focused mainly on economic relations. Contacts in the educational field remain rare. With YALE, this co-operation has picked up some momentum. At first, the talks on the administrative level brought the differences to light in terms of statutory responsibility for early childhood services. The Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science is a public authority of the Berlin Land with responsibilities centred mainly on the finance and monitoring level. The providers of the approx. 2400 centres independently design their pedagogical work within the frame of the legal requirements and agreements (such as the Quality Agreements for Early Childhood Day Care Centres). The early childhood centre supervision authority is attached to the Senate Department and ensures that the requirements for operating centres are met. In Poznań, the city itself takes the role of provider and fulfils the tasks of supervising, monitoring and financing. The discussion on the situation of the Land of Berlin, with its monitoring function without acting as a provider, was of particular interest.

“International exchange always requires that one explains one’s own system and actions and formulates the background for it. This gives a great opportunity to justify, reflect on and question one’s opinions. One can thus also recognize the significance of child day care in one’s own country and how it is embedded in one’s culture.”

Project co-ordinator of the Senate Department in Berlin

Support and Training Level

The exchange on the pedagogical level focused on, among other topics, presenting the long path towards quality management in early childhood education in Berlin. The discussion particularly considered the questions of the criteria of good quality in early childhood education and of who defines these. The exchange on the evaluation concept was particularly interesting. Evaluation in Berlin aims less at controlling pedagogical practices than at developing and embedding quality on the basis of the Berlin Curriculum. Professional exchanges and consultation are firmly rooted in this system. Those in charge – such as the project partners within YALE – work in close co-operation. YALE further strengthened the co-operation among the Berlin partners.



Over the course of these two years, the representatives of BeKi, KiB and IMD gathered extensive experience in conducting and monitoring projects. The length of the project offered a unique opportunity to develop new concepts, pass them on to the early childhood professionals, accompany their practical implementation and reflect on them with the practitioners. The implementation of quality in early childhood education in the participating centres thus did not follow a “top-down” approach but was developed in co-operation with the practitioners.

The exchange and professional discussion with IMD was of particular benefit, providing recognition beyond the limits of Poznań for the IMD’s long-standing work with Poznań early childhood day care centres. The intensive and productive exchange with the Polish partners expanded the perspective of the Berlin partners and deepened their intercultural competence. It created a perceptible desire and motivation to engage in international projects again in the future.

Pedagogical Practice

The project had the most visible effects on the level of day care centres. YALE impelled the practitioners to question and deepen their hitherto existing understanding of project work with children. Attitudes towards projects with children changed, the teams further developed their pedagogical practice.

All participants among the Berlin centres report that the project work method taught as part of YALE is sustainable in their work with the children. The intensive processes during the

project phases ensured that the topic of the children are picked upon, resulting in the children being much more involved.

“The children got more out of this project than at other times. The long-lasting impact is visible as they keep coming back to this topic and kept having new insights and started discussing it again.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

“We perceived a change – at first when we asked the children: “What do you think about it?” or “How do you think we could do it?”, “How do we get there?” They were disconcerted that we were not providing answers. They first had to think, they often weren’t used to it. It was also a process for the colleague – to withstand it, not intervene, not provide guidelines – that was a total learning process on both sides.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

A positive impact was also noticeable in the co-operation with the parents. The project work intensified the contact to most families. The careful documentation of the project phases opened up a space for the parents to get involved in the project work with their ideas. The open exchange among families with varied cultural backgrounds is particularly pleasing and contributes to the sustainability of the change.



“We got the parents involved on a different basis, namely, in my opinion, parity. It wasn’t that we, the practitioners own the whole wisdom. We opened up to the parents and asked “How can they be part of our project?” We got the families involved in the work of the whole group in such a way that they now take part with great joy and fun each time. We get to talk more often and we feel mutual appreciation.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

The positive impact on the teams of the centres should not be underestimated. They profited first and foremost from the training activities. The project work required the teams to communicate intensively. The modified attitude towards project work resulted in a higher motivation in the teams which in turn led to greater joy in daily work and a work of higher quality:

“We now observe a lot more, talk about what moves the children, which topic might hide behind it. Some colleagues do not yet feel confident that we can find out about it that way, but we are practicing, it’s a process that is constantly in motion.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

“It has to do with the attitude towards project work. This way it was more interesting, we took part with more joy and fun because we didn’t know ourselves what would come from the children. They could participate in decision making processes and it was interesting and instructive – for us too.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**

The international exchange provided another view on one’s pedagogical work. The teams of the Berlin early childhood day care centre were inspired by their Polish partners in many ways. Meeting the children on an equal footing, listening to their questions and taking them up with appreciation have become new premises in all centres. At the same time the positive example of the co-operation with the parents in the Polish centres prompted the Berlin teams to involve the families more intensively. The diverse and creative implementation of the project ideas in Poznań also made the German partners think about their options for realising projects.

“The involvement of the Polish colleagues can be felt so strongly, they put their heart and soul in it, they want to change something, they were so interested. It is incredible how much verve they put into it. We’ve already had so many visits organised by them privately, we like going over and discussing our experiences. The commitment they have, it’s contagious.” **Early childhood professional in Berlin**





Participating Organisations in Poznań

City of Poznań – Municipality: The Department for Education of the Poznań municipality is the provider of early childhood day care centres, primary schools, secondary schools as well as middle schools. It monitors 115 municipal early childhood day care centres and 20 pre-school groups in the Poznań primary schools.

The Office for Project Coordination and City Revitalisation coordinates and implements projects co-financed by EU and national funds and pertaining to various fields of activities of the municipality. <http://www.poznan.pl/>

Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early-Childhood Development (IMD) : The Astrid-Lindgren-Institute for Early Childhood Development is a non-governmental organisation that has been conducting projects to the benefit of young children and their family since 1993 and is active in the field of quality development in early childhood education. <http://imd.org.pl/>

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 42 “Polish flowers”: The publicly owned centre N° 42 is located in the Wilda neighbourhood, has five sections and offers space for 125 children. <http://p42poznan.edu.pl/>

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 46: The publicly owned centre N° 46 is located in the Grunwald neighbourhood, has 7 sections and offers space for 175 children. <http://przedszkole46.poznan.pl/>

Early Childhood Day Care Centre N° 87 “Jacusia and Agatki”: The publicly owned centre N° 87 is located in the Wilda neighbourhood, has 4 sections and offers space for 100 children. <http://przedszkole87.pl/>



Participating Organisations in Berlin

The Senate Department for Education, Youth and Science, Berlin (Sen BJW) is the competent authority of the Land of Berlin for youth and is responsible for the financial, professional, legal and political development of the early childhood day care system.

The International Academy Berlin for Innovative Pedagogy, Psychology and Economics gGmbH (INA) conducts development as well as research projects and training activities. *The Berlin Institute for Quality Development in Kindergarten (BeKi)* is commissioned by the Land of Berlin. It supports the implementation of the Berlin Curriculum and monitors the quality development process in the Berlin early childhood day care centres.

Kinder in Bewegung gGmbH (Children in Movement - KiB) is the non-profit provider of early childhood day care centres of the Berlin Landessportbund (Sports Federation) with its youth organisation, the Berlin sports youth (Sportjugend Berlin, SJB). The 21 KiB early childhood day care centres (Kindergarten) work with the aim of using movement as a pedagogical principle and of putting language education as a cross-sectional task at the heart of the daily routine of the centres.

KiB-Kindergarten Brauereihof (Brewery Courtyard): This centre is located in the Berlin district of Spandau and cares for 100 children aged 6 and under. The centre works on the basis of an open floor with groups of mixed ages and takes part in a national programme for language education.

KiB-Kindergarten Löwenzahn (Dandelion): This centre located in the Berlin district of Lichtenberg cares for 150 children aged 6 and under, among which several special needs children who are supported in groups of mixed ages.

KiB-Kindergarten Sausewind (Dashing wind): 150 children aged 6 and under living in the district of Neukölln attend this centre. A large number of the children is younger than 3. The older children are cared for in open groups of mixed ages.



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