

# Reducing developmental risks by additional staff hours: Effects of a government program to support day care centers with socially deprived children

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Social inequality  
Developmental screening  
Day care center  
Policy

## ABSTRACT

To ameliorate effects of social inequalities on children's development the German federal state law for child day care and preschools provides additional funds for day care centers in socioeconomically deprived regions in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The goal of these funds is to support three to six year old children with developmental risks. Day care centers can choose to use these funds for the employment of additional staff. Our study aims to investigate whether the number of weekly working hours provided by this additional staff is associated with a reduction of developmental risks in 4 competence areas over one year. A multilevel linear model ( $n = 83$  day care centers) reveals that additional working hours decrease the prevalence of children with developmental risks. These results provide evidence for a beneficial effect of the federal state law.

## 1. Introduction

In a representative nationwide survey, children from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) are more frequently affected by psychopathological problems and psychosocial impairments (33.5%) than children from families with higher SES (9.8%) (Hölling, Schlack, Petermann, Ravens-Sieberer, & Mauz, 2014). Children from families with low SES are more than two and a half times more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) than are children from families with higher SES (Schlack, Mauz, Hebebrand, Hölling, & KiGGS-Study-Group, 2014). Children from families with low SES (66.4%) are more likely to be overweight or obese and participate less frequently in physical activities than children from families with high SES (87.1%) (Krause & Lampert, 2014; Kurth & Schaffrath Rosario, 2007; Manz et al., 2014). Low socioeconomic status is associated with poorer informal learning at home, resulting in children being less well prepared for formal schooling and at greater risk for poor health literacy (Hoff, 2006; Hoff & Tian, 2005). Furthermore, a low SES is associated with a less frequent participation in the early childhood health screening and monitoring program (Rattay et al., 2014).

These results illustrate the tremendous impact of social inequalities on children's developmental health, and on the use of medical services. Therefore, early prevention is a public health priority especially for children with a low SES (Schlack et al., 2014; Spencer, 2008; Spencer,

Thanh, & Louise, 2013).

*1.1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC), day care in Germany and the federal state law for child day care and preschools of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania*

ECEC. An investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to solve the problems mentioned above (OECD, 2017). Preschool attendance fosters children's health and educational status (Barnett, 1998; OECD, 2012; Zoritch, Roberts, & Oakley, 2000). However, rather than the pure access to ECEC, its quality is important to actually improve children's competencies (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001), especially high quality pedagogic interactions between day care staff and children (Anders et al., 2012; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, R., MD, US, 2006; Viernickel & Fuchs-Rechlin, 2015). However, high quality interactions are more likely in the framework of an appropriate day care staffing ratio ("Personalschlüssel") (Bock-Famulla, Strunz, & Löhle, 2017).

### 1.1.1. Day care in Germany

In Germany, this ratio for 3 to 6 year olds varies widely between and within the German federal states (*Min*: 1: 6.1; *Max*: 1: 14.3; *Mdn*: 1: 9.2). For example, in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania this ratio varies

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.07.025>

Received 21 February 2018; Received in revised form 19 July 2018; Accepted 19 July 2018

Available online 20 July 2018

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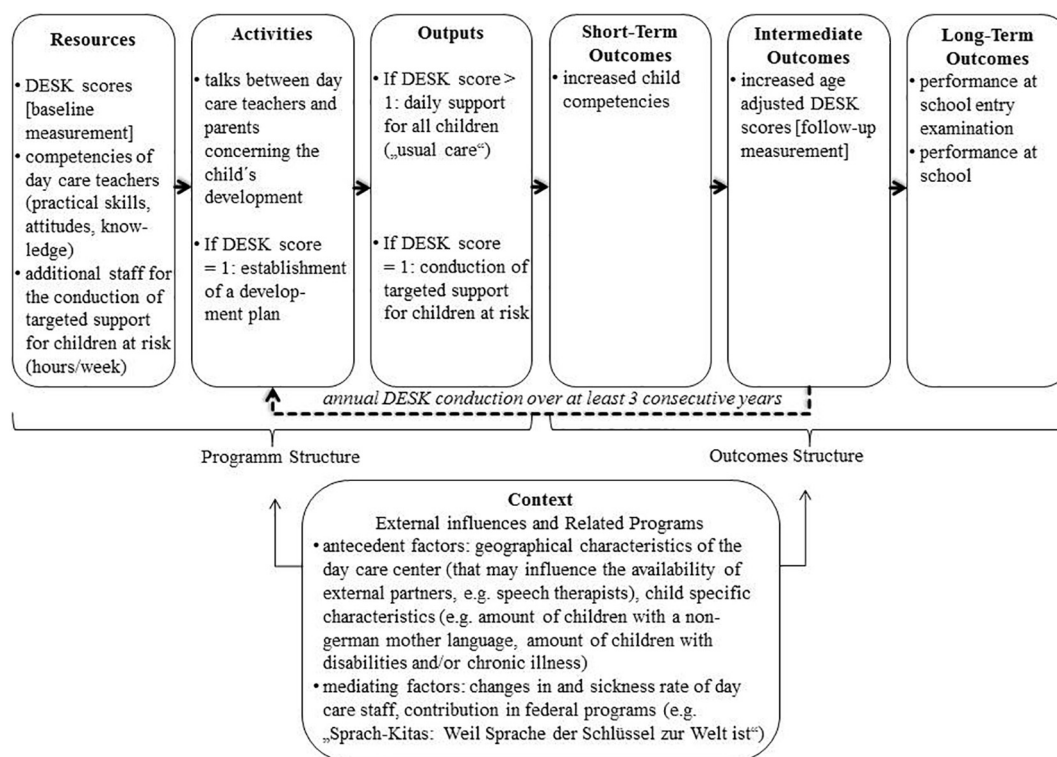


Fig. 1. Program and outcome structure of the federal state law for child day care and preschools Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (logic model).

from 1: 12.6 to 1: 14.3 (*Mdn*: 13.7) (Bock-Famulla et al., 2017). Considering recommendations for an appropriate ratio (referring to children 3 to 6 years a ratio of 1: 7.5) high quality interactions in day care centers in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania can be seen as challenge (Bock-Famulla, 2008; Bock-Famulla et al., 2017; Bock-Famulla, Lange, & Strunz, 2015). This ratio refers to activities of day care teachers that are directly conducted with children („unmittelbare pädagogische Arbeit“). It is assumed that these activities account for approx. 75% of the teachers working time in contrast to the „mittelbare pädagogische Arbeit“ including parent-teacher talks, staff meetings, activities to observe and to document educational processes of the children, cooperation with external institutions such as primary schools and youth welfare offices (approx. 25% of the working time).

However, differences between the German federal states not only exist in terms of the day care teacher vs. child ratio. Although throughout Germany day care is part of the child and youth welfare („Kinder- und Jugendhilfe“) and legislatively regulated by the German Child and Youth Services Act („SGB VIII“) a total of 16 different federal state laws detail a patchwork of priorities and operational measures. This includes considerable heterogeneity in legislatively regulated contents of early education in day care centers („Bildungspläne“). Despite the German reunification further differences prevail, e.g. concerning the perceived urgency to enhance work-family balance by legislative initiatives, which is less established in the Western federal states than in the former Eastern-German federal states. The extent of structural differences is evidenced by the fact that in Eastern-Germany 51.8% of the children aged under 3 years attend day care (Western-Germany: 28.1%; national average: 32.7%) (Bock-Famulla et al., 2017).

*The federal state law for child day care and preschools of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.* The federal state law for child day care and preschools, is a statutory activity of the government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Its goal is to foster children's healthy development in general and, specifically, to meliorate the effects of social inequalities on children's development.

A total annual amount of EUR 5 million are provided for day care centers in socioeconomically deprived regions (Ministerium für

Soziales, and Integration und Gleichstellung Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Ministry of Employment, G. E., and Social Affairs Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania Germany) (2015)). The use of these funds is restricted to individual as well as group support for children with developmental risks. The funds can be used either for personnel costs or material costs. Day care centers can employ additional staff or increase the working hours of already existing staff. Consequently, the amendment improves the day care teacher vs. child ratio that is an important prerequisite for an effective promotion of children's developmental competencies.

Mandatory criteria for claiming these benefits and funds from the State of Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania are an annual application of the „Dortmund Developmental Screening for Preschools (DESK 3-6)“. The DESK 3-6 is a valid, standardized, objective, and reliable developmental screening instrument to detect developmental risks in the domains fine motor, gross motor, language and cognition, and social development (Tröster, Flender, & Reineke, 2004; Tröster, Flender, & Reineke, 2011) (see section 2.4.2). Another mandatory criterion for claiming benefits is the participation of these „DESK-day care centers“ in the evaluation of this federal state law (Gottschling-Lang, Franze, & Hoffmann, 2014).

Day care centers are selected by the following mechanism: the youth welfare office in each region in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania is legally bound to subsidize day care center fees if these are unreasonable for parents (decision based on the German Child and Youth Services Act („SGB VIII“ and „SGB XII“)). The youth welfare offices determine the day care center specific amount of subsidized fees. Subsequently, providers of day care centers with an above the mean proportion of subsidized day care fees are informed about the opportunity to obtain additional grants and benefits (i.e. at least an annual amount of EUR 20,000 for day care centers attended by < 50 three to six year olds, or at least an annual amount of EUR 40,000 for day care centers attended by ≥ 50 three to six year olds, respectively). Participation in the program is voluntary for day care centers. The day care institution can decide upon their use of the funds.

According to a survey among all recipient institutions conducted in

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