

Early childhood education between differences and convergences since the mid-20th century : towards a European model?

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Education, in its broadest sense, refers to the process of developing human capacities in each individual and is one of the basic conditions of social reproduction in any human group. In many societies throughout history, education has been partially formalized and institutionalized in what we call “schools”. However, it is only in recent history, and especially in Europe, that the idea that young children and even infants could attend educational institutions has emerged. Early childhood education, in its diversity, refers to the many forms of collective care with an educational purpose that emerged essentially in Europe since the late 18th century, with several distinctive features. It was provided by paid staff who had no family ties or preexisting bonds of solidarity with the children concerned. It was provided in specific places and by specific institutions and, as such, was legally supervised and sometimes even directly administered by public authorities.

From the perspective of the history of education, the history of early childhood education presents the unique challenge of studying education for children who generally do not yet attend school. This specificity is further complicated by the fact that early childhood education has of course not been alone in the field of early childhood. Other approaches, including medical and psychological, have developed their own knowledge and know-how. Consequently, the history of early childhood education is also the story of its establishment as a legitimate institution and practice, in relation to other approaches to early childhood.

The historiography of early childhood education in Europe has well developed since the 1990s. Important works have already been devoted to its pioneers and to its first forms of institutionalization in the 19th century (Lascaride 2000), usually on a national basis (see Reyer und Kleine 1997, Franke-Meyer 2011 Konrad 2004 for Germany, and Luc 1997 for France). However, comparative historical works have been less common (Luc 1999, Melhuish and Petrogianis 2006; Scheiwe & Willekens 2009, Hagemann, Jarausch & Allemann-Ghionda 2011; Nawrotzki, Scheiwe, & Willekens 2015; Caroli 2022; Kasüschke, Braches-Chyrek, and Franke-Mayer 2025) while the transnational approach have remained the exception (Nawrotzki, Scheiwe & Willekens 2015; Caroli 2017 and 2019).

This historiography has stressed the fact that the development of early childhood education has been and continues to be uneven. By the end of the 19th century, some countries had already developed educational facilities for younger children, often located in or adjacent to schools. In contrast, in other countries, such facilities were not widely implemented until the mid-20th century. Early childhood education has been and continues to be very different according to the age of the children. As children approach the compulsory schooling age, they are more likely to be cared in an institution with educational objectives, which reflects the “preschooling” task typically assigned to these institutions. Conversely, the younger the children, the less frequently they are considered as requiring education in an institution.

The concept of educating the youngest child is a relatively recent one, with the consensual term “early childhood education and care” only becoming widely used from the 2000s onward. Until the mid-20th century, the focus of childcare was primarily medical and limited to physical care (see Rollet 1990 for France; Reyer & Kleine 1997 for Germany). This exclusively medical vision of care was challenged by the infant psychology advocated by Melanie Klein and Anna Freud from the 1930s onward (Shapira 2015), and later by René Spitz and John Bowlby from the 1940s onward (Van der Horst 2013). Early childhood education therefore had to struggle with a narrow medical perspective and at the same time with the emerging child psychology, which ultimately had a significant influence on its development. As a result, the role of developmental psychology, with its

emphasis on stages of development, has been particularly important in shaping educational approaches to the youngest children. More importantly, in many countries, the contrasting approaches to early childhood – one medical, focused on the infant's health, and the other educational, focused on the future pupil – became institutionalized as a distinction between day nursery and preschool. By contrast, few, essentially Nordic countries have developed a unified system of early childhood education, in which children aged one to five are cared for in the same institutions.

This striking fragmentation of institutions caring for young children is reflected in the diversity of supervisory bodies (Scheiwe 2015). Supervision has been centralized at the national level but also delegated to the regional or local levels in federal states. Day nurseries and preschool have generally not fallen under the same authorities (Education, Health or Social Affairs), which in addition may have been subject to changes. The fragmentation of early childhood education institution was also the result of the great diversity of actors on the ground. Early childhood education has historically been characterized by the predominance of private actors – churches and philanthropic organizations – which has given way to a complex interplay of public and private action, involving competition, substitution and coexistence.

The historical diversity of early childhood education is such that it even challenges the notion of early childhood education as a shared European reality. To make sense of these disparate national situations, a coherent interpretative framework was developed among political scientists (Scheiwe and Willekens 2009; Scheiwe, Willekens and Nawrotzki 2015 and Scheiwe and Willekens 2020). Taking a long-term view, they considered a variety of institutional forms in terms of both care and education. Bahle (2009) identified different national trajectories. In Catholic countries, the Church had occupied the field of early childhood education since the 19th century. In response, public authorities also assumed responsibility for this area. This occurred as early as the late 19th century in France and Belgium and later in the 1970s in Spain and Italy. This institutional competition led to the reproduction of a secularized version of an early childhood education model derived from and adapted to elementary school, which is often referred to as “preschool”. In other countries, often characterized by Protestant or pluralist traditions, this initial competition did not exist, and early childhood education remained initially less developed.

In addition to the conflict between the State and the Churches (essentially the Catholic Church), Bahle also saw early childhood education at least initially as part of a class conflict (Bahle 2009). Regarded as a familial responsibility within the bourgeois model, the education of the young child could only take on a collective and institutional form to address the perceived shortcomings in the care and education of working-class children. Consequently, it was primarily an instrument of social control, designed to educate mothers and discipline children. In contrast, during the latter half of the 20th century, as European welfare states were established and women, including those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, increasingly engaged in external employment and higher-skilled roles, the social legitimacy of early childhood education grew stronger. The early childhood education sector experienced a period of unprecedented growth which even occurred in new countries, where the sector had previously existed to a limited extent or even had been non-existent, including the Nordic countries and Eastern Europe, where Marxist views on female paid work and the role of early childhood education as the first stage of the “socialist education” were instrumental.

The formation of comprehensive care systems for children between one and five in these countries (particularly in the Nordic countries) was often facilitated by the fact that no other institution previously occupying this field had defined a specific age segment. This was in contrast to countries where the Catholic Church had played an important role in creating age-specific categories as in France, Belgium, Spain, and Italy. In those countries, where early childhood education had already been in existence for a century, growth in this sector was also very strong. However, it followed the institutional divisions inherited from the conflicts between the State and the Church in the 19th century, which explains why day nurseries and preschools developed separately. Political scientist

examined these historical continuities using the concept of “path dependency”, which “simply means that once certain ways of doing things have come to be socially accepted, routinized and perceived as normal, and especially once rules have emerged that either reward doing things this way or (more often) punish trying to accomplish the same things in a different way, it becomes more difficult to leave the path entered into than to try on this path” (Nawrotzki, Scheiwe, and Willekens 2015, p.18).

Drawing on this historiography, the envisioned volume will have two main objectives:

- First, it will focus on the more recent period from the mid-twentieth century onward, which has until now received less attention among historians. Yet, it was a period of significant expansion and institutionalization of early childhood education, which had previously been a marginal phenomenon in the majority of the European societies. During this time boundaries of early childhood education were redefined to include new age groups, institutions and knowledge.
- Second, this volume aims to address the question of a European model of early childhood education by describing both the differences, which have been often well studied, and the convergences, which have often been neglected. This requires the tools of both comparative and transnational history to be mobilized. The very notion of a “European model” of early childhood education also raises the question of which relationship it had with other regions, especially North America, and whether Europe has truly served as a “model” for other countries in the world especially in the “developing” countries.

To that end, the contributions proposed for this volume could be related to one of these three themes:

1. Opening the black box “nation” and reassessing infra-national diversity in the history of early childhood education in Europe since the mid-20th
2. European convergences in early childhood education since the mid 20th century
3. Discussing the notion of a European model of early childhood education

1.Reassessing diversity at the national level in the history of early childhood education in Europe

The path dependency approach, which combines political science and history, offers a stimulating interpretative framework, but also has limitations. The first lies in its focus on institutional arrangements. The development of early childhood education has not been a straight-forward process. It has rarely been the result of new standards and legislation alone but rather has been primarily shaped by political struggles. This volume therefore encourages contributions dealing more broadly with the political and social contexts in which early childhood education has developed. Discourses, debates, and political mobilizations involving political parties, trade unions, professional associations, and parents, whether collectively organized or not, constitute the backdrop in which new provisions in early childhood education became possible.

Second, the focus on institutional arrangements also tends to overlook the practices and day-to-day workings of early childhood education institutions. This volume is therefore an invitation to address the question of facilities, equipment, and their financing, as well as staff training and the public they serve. Practices also include pedagogical practices. In the second half of the 20th century, pedagogical approaches specifically designed for early childhood gained recognition. However, there is a lack of historical understanding regarding the dissemination and practical implementation of these new pedagogical approaches. This kind of study, primarily by sociologists, focused on the recent period (Garnier 2024). One of the aims of this volume is to help fill this gap. Last but not least, in these many different contexts, women played a pivotal role in all various aspects of early childhood education, including mobilization, pedagogical innovation, training, and the day-to-day

operations of these institutions. Therefore, gender must be considered as a fundamental category for understanding the evolution of early childhood education.

A third limitation of the path dependency approach lies in its presupposition of “national” trajectories, which tends to homogenize infra-national diversity. In fact, early childhood education is primarily a local matter, with funding, facilities, equipment, and staff typically financed and managed by municipalities. Yet, national studies, including those comparing different regions within a country, are still very rare. In addition, the notion of national trajectories also overshadows the particularities of institutional actors, even when they operate on a national scale. In Germany, early childhood education can be provided by public or private institutions. The latter may be secular or religious and depend on the Catholic or the Protestant Churches, which are both organized nationwide. Thus, diversity is not only horizontal, but also vertical. This volume would therefore welcome research that accounts for the diversity of institutional players in the early childhood field within a single national space. While acknowledging the results acquired through the path dependency approach, this volume is an invitation to take a closer look at the category of the “national”, which would otherwise remain a black box. The aim is to renew the use of comparison at the European scale by extending it to new objects such as regions, towns, individual facilities, or institutional actors.

2. European convergences in early childhood education since the mid 20th century

Another consequence of the path dependency approach is to stress differences between countries and downplay the importance of common historical contexts and convergences beyond the various national paths. In fact, early childhood education as it has developed in different European societies since the mid-20th century reveals at least three major common trends. First, expansion, even if it occurred at different paths and on different scales, has been continuous throughout Europe. Second, institutionalization has grown through the strengthening of the legal framework, the establishment of training courses and degrees and the professionalization of the work with young children. Third, early childhood education has emerged as such and has gradually entered the perimeter of education, albeit in different ways.

Comparison can be used to identify national trajectories, but also to look for elements that are similar, albeit in different forms, in various national contexts. Lasting similarities can be observed beyond highly contrasting national situations, highlighting convergences, which cannot be explained by the simple juxtaposition of the compared entities. These convergences imply that the actors at the origin of these developments have found themselves involved in circulations and spaces where they have been able to formulate, transmit and exchange representations, knowledge and institutional models beyond the national horizon, i.e. within a transnational framework. When considering nations in isolation, this transnational framework may be overlooked. The history of early childhood education in the second half of the 20th century would benefit from being approached from a transnational perspective, which has proved its worth for the 19th century (Luc 2015).

This volume aims first to document this process of convergence by encouraging comparisons between countries or territories that highlight both differences and common trends. France and the GDR (Christian 2019b), for example, show significant differences and at the same time shared developments, which demonstrates converging trends on a European scale beyond the Cold War divide. Further studies comparing different countries and regions would be beneficial especially in the field of training (Geiss and Westberg 2020). A second approach to this process is to investigate the various international arenas in which early childhood actors may have interacted. International organizations such as the International Bureau of Education (IBE) (Christian 2021), UNESCO (Christian 2024b), the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (*Organisation mondiale pour l'éducation préscolaire*, OMEP) (Christian 2019), the International Centre for the Child (*Centre international de l'enfance*, CIE) (Christian 2024), the European Economic Community (EEC), the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) (Garnier 2016, p.62-

68) have for decades contributed to the development of early childhood education as a relevant field of knowledge and policy in the international arena. In addition, further research is needed to identify and study other influential organizations, such as professional or pedagogical associations that have developed internationally, including Montessori International or the Pestalozzi-Fröbel Verband, or specific places that have had a strong attraction such as Reggio Emilia or the Nordic countries, which are perceived abroad as an educational model, especially concerning education to nature.

In addition to this institutional approach, it is also possible to examine individual trajectories of actors. Originating from a national horizon with their own legal, institutional or cultural characteristics, they confronted their mutual representations, competed with each other, and became acculturated to each other. They then converted the representations and practices they had contributed to forge in a transnational context back into their national horizons. Exemplifying this transnational trajectory are figures such as Suzanne Herbinère-Lebert (Christian & Legris, 2023), a French preschool inspector and the inaugural president of OMEP, Eva Schmidt-Kolmer (Christian, 2023), a pediatrician of Austrian origin who played the main role in the reform and expansion of day nurseries in the GDR, and Margherita Zoebeli (Caroli et alii, 2024), a Swiss educator who received training in France and became influential in Italy. Further research is needed about other biographical trajectories of influential figures to help reconstruct the field of early childhood education. While individual trajectories are certainly valuable, group studies offer insights that are equally important. The prosopographical approach has much to offer, and it has not yet been used in the field of early childhood education.

III. Is there a European model of early childhood education ?

The notion of a “European model” of early childhood education raises the question of its relationship with other regions, especially North America, where early childhood education also developed as it did in Europe. The kindergarten movement reached a critical mass in the USA at the turn of the 20th century (Beatty 1995). In the post-World War II era, the development of early childhood education in the USA and Europe followed similar paths. In 1965, the Head Start project was initiated to provide educational care to children from the poorest social groups on a local scale (Zigler and Styfco 2010). However, following a conservative backlash leading to President Nixon’s veto in 1971 (Rose, 2010), early childhood education was left to be organized by the market and remained in a fragmented state, with a social service for the poorest and a commercial educational service for the richest, more or less supported by tax deductions. The United States has been and continues to be a major contributor to the development of knowledge about early childhood education. However, the institutional development of early childhood education was blocked.

This distinguishes somewhat the US-American context from the European one (Sonya Michel 2015), where early childhood education has since the 1970s gradually become an integral component of a more institutionalized welfare state, which is recognized as a European peculiarity (Kaelble 2013). At the same time, this European peculiarity should stay open to question. A stimulating case study is England, which, despite its European location, exhibits notable parallels with the USA in terms of the evolution of early childhood education. (Nawrotzki 2015 and 2011, Cameron & Moss, 2020). Conversely, the evolution of early childhood education in the former British dominions outside Europe seems to show more convergences with Europe. The cases of Australia, New Zealand, Canada (Mitchell & Moss 2024) and, within Canada, Quebec would deserve more detailed study in this regard.

The notion of a “European model” of early childhood education also implies the idea of a model to be imitated. Yet, UNESCO’s priority until the 1970s, was literacy and primary education, not early childhood education, which was left to OMEP as an NGO. Until the 1970s, the main proponents of early childhood education, involved in OMEP, UNESCO, the IBE, and the CIE, were predominantly European. In the many new states created as a result of decolonization, early childhood education was perceived as the privilege of an elite, often European, and was subject to

criticism (Christian 2019a). It did not seem to be regarded as a component of the modernization that these “developing” countries had otherwise claimed. As a result, during the 1960s and 1970s, a period of expansion and strong convergence in Europe, early childhood education remained an absolutely marginal reality in the countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa (Mialaret 1976). Against the backdrop of Third-worldism that prevailed among UN agencies in the 1970s, pedagogical and institutional approaches encouraged by UNESCO and OMEP were also called into question for their Eurocentric bias (Christian 2024a).

In contrast, since the late 1990s, international organizations, including UNESCO, have been promoting early childhood education on a global scale. Early childhood education has gradually developed worldwide, starting with the middle classes in large cities, particularly in countries in the Global South. It would be interesting to investigate whether international organizations and governments in these countries have drawn inspiration from existing policies and pedagogies, and which institutions in which countries have potentially served as “models”. It would also be interesting to know more about these transfers, when they exist, and whether and how the initial model was adapted to local realities.

Submission

Please send your proposal (around 700 words) by **15th December 2025** to michel.christian@unige.ch and joelle.droux@unige.ch.

We will review the proposals and give you a feedback by **1st March 2026**.

Papers should be sent by **15th September 2026** for a first review by the editors.

Further information: <https://www.unige.ch/fapse/erhise/projets-fns/L-education-de-la-petite-enfance>

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