

The role of pedagogy professionals in the inclusive process

by Susanne Nowack

ABSTRACT

Pedagogy professionals are the linchpin when it comes to creating inclusive processes in day nurseries. Their attitude, their interventions in everyday group life and their knowledge and skills are crucial for implementing inclusion. By structuring everyday group life and shaping the learning environment, they create the framework conditions for inclusive processes. Inclusion can only be implemented if people work as a team. Professionals therefore need to have particular skill in cooperating and reflecting with other people involved.

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1. Introduction

Inclusion has become increasingly important as a topic in public day care for children since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN CRPD) was adopted in 2006. The signatory countries – including Germany since 2009 – undertake to create social conditions for participation and inclusion that do not exclude anybody. This includes all levels of the education system and therefore also early (childhood) education. Given the fact that places for children under three are expanding, inclusion is also becoming increasingly relevant for the provision of day care for the youngest of children.

Early childhood education work based on inclusive policies is still comparatively new and a field of research that is still developing. Questions/issues surrounding the development of inclusive structures and concepts for the implementation of inclusive pedagogy for children in the first three years of their lives have thus far received little attention (see Sulzer & Wagner 2011, 8; Seitz et al. 2012, 6). At the moment there are still unanswered questions about the role and responsibilities of pedagogy professionals in achieving inclusion in day nurseries. They have doubtless played a central role in shaping pedagogical work and therefore also in the implementation of inclusive processes.

This paper deals with the role of the professional in the inclusive process. Before I address this, I will first of all present some guiding principles and requirements of inclusion in the context of day nurseries. Chapter 3 will then examine the key aspects of the role of the pedagogy professional. These include pedagogical interventions, structuring of everyday group life and shaping the learning environment and the skills to reflect and cooperate. The text concludes with a short summary (Chapter 4). Section 5 has additional questions that are there to stimulate reflection on one's own inclusive practices. You can also find references to further literature here to be able to work on the complex subject in more detail.

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2. Inclusion in the context of day nurseries

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for the implementation of an “inclusive education system” and refers to the diversity of life situations in which children and adolescents grow up. This diversity is to be seen as normal and considered systematically (see Behr 2010, 13f.).

Guiding principles of inclusion

A concept based on these comprehensive guiding principles of inclusion takes each child’s individual needs as a starting point, looking at their respective characteristics, peculiarities and affiliations. As an individual, each child combines a variety of characteristics such as gender, family culture, age, language, stage of development etc. and therefore has multiple affiliations. Disability is also a possible aspect of this diversity. An inclusive education aims to give each child the same respect, to enable him or her to participate and learn and to provide him or her with the necessary support.

Breaking down barriers and broadening participation

Inclusion in day nurseries with children under three also means focusing explicitly on possible threats, barriers and processes of exclusion standing in the way of children taking part and hindering them in their development. These barriers need to be broken down and inclusive structures and processes with the goal of participation expanded.

Seitz (2012) points out in this regard that it is important to “conceptually combine an education that is prejudice-conscious, environment-sensitive and gender-sensitive with approaches of reflected inclusive pedagogy and for this to be done profitably” (Seitz et al. 2012, 31).

Characteristics of inclusion that are consistently referred to in specialist publications (see Sulzer & Wagner 2011; Kron et al. 2010) are as follows:

Characteristics of inclusion

- All children have the right to participation in high-quality education, irrespective of their religious or ethnic origin, gender, socio-economic situation and other individual circumstances.
- Diversity in groups is considered normal and is used as a source of enrichment for learning and education processes.
- The different needs of all children are the starting point for learning processes and for individual support and encouragement in social community.
- Children who are particularly at risk as far as their development and participation are concerned need special attention and support.
- Adjustments to structure and content are made in all areas of the education system, including early childhood education.
- Barriers that hinder the participation of children in education processes are broken down.

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Inclusion applies accordingly to all children who attend day nurseries and affects the institution as a whole: the mission statement and concept, the forms of group activities, and the type of individual pedagogical measures used. Inclusion in day nurseries involves every professional in terms of their attitude, their duties, their activities and their skills.

Inclusion as a service provided by the facility

The admission of a child to the day nursery and his or her participation do not depend on his or her abilities. Rather, the achievement of inclusion through ensuring participation and support is to be understood as a service provided by the facility.

“We see inclusion as a process that aims to create an appropriate environment for all children. For pedagogical work, this means that concepts, programmes and activities are to be adapted to the needs and interests of the children, not the other way round where the children have to adapt to concepts that have been devised totally independently of them”

(Kron et al. 2010, 15f.).

3. Pedagogy professionals: the linchpin in the inclusive process

The professionals employed in day nurseries are the linchpin when it comes to achieving inclusion. Their personality, their attitude, their skills and their interventions have a significant influence on the implementation and the success of inclusive processes in groups of children (see Garai et al. 2010, 47).

Attitude of pedagogues

A conducive framework for inclusion is first of all an attitude of pedagogues that sees diversity as providing enrichment for all children in the group and for their learning. Such an approach recognises the right of every child to participate and have experiences with different people: with boys and girls of different ages, with children that have different developmental trajectories, abilities, interests, languages and other characteristics.

Specialised knowledge

Specialised knowledge relevant to inclusion concerns pedagogues' knowledge about children's basic needs and conditions needed for their development in the first three years of their life and childhood education processes, individualisation and provision of support.

“The widely held view that learning processes should be initiated by the children themselves and that adults should primarily shape the environment or stimulate and assist with the interaction is particularly highly compatible with the stipulation of individualisation and child focus in inclusive pedagogical concepts” (Laewen & Andres 2002 quoted from Seitz et al. 2012, 11).

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Taken as a whole, the role of the professional in day nurseries therefore appears closely linked with key aspects of pedagogical work and the shaping of inclusive processes.

3.1 Pedagogical interventions

Inclusive pedagogical interventions aim to offer every child in the group reliability and guidance, ensure his or her participation in activities and support his or her learning and development processes.

Aspects “that can be seen as particularly relevant for pedagogical work with developmentally challenged children under three years of age are contacts of the same age, attachment and relationship and encouraging development through individualisation in social integration” (Seitz et al. 2012, 24).

Further reading on the aspects of attachment and relationship:

Behr, A. (2010): Kinder in den ersten drei Jahren. Qualifikationsanforderungen an Fröhpädagogische Fachkräfte. WiFF Expertise 4. Munich: Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V. Weiterbildungsinitiative Fröhpädagogische Fachkräfte (WiFF).

Seitz, S.; Finnern, N-K.; Korff, N. & Thim A. (2012): Kinder mit besonderen Bedürfnissen – Tagesbetreuung in den ersten drei Lebensjahren. WiFF Expertise 30. Munich: Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V. Weiterbildungsinitiative Fröhpädagogische Fachkräfte (WiFF).

Encouraging childhood development through individualisation

Individualisation

Every child is to be assisted and supported in the day nursery according to his or her individual development and needs. Individual requirements can be influenced for example by culture or gender or by a disability or medical condition.

Pedagogical measures in terms of individualisation are not to be equated with encouraging, supporting and educating a child in individual situations outside of group activities. Rather, it is more about adapting a pedagogical approach in groups to the point of departure of the child, his or her abilities, interests and educational and support requirements.

Learning opportunities integrated into everyday life

Individualised support (provision) can largely take place in the day-to-day activities of everyday group life due to the individual experience and learning processes of the child being integrated into the daily routines and also in the contact with other children and adults and the activities pursued together with them. Learning opportunities are there in group activities and in play. The respective child may

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need the support of the professional in daily routines, in play and in contact with other children.

“In this way, there are many learning opportunities for the child throughout the day where, in natural, motivating contexts, the child can practise individual skills or acquire new ones. These learning opportunities integrated into the daily routine complement the individual support that the child receives outside the group, at home or in a support or therapy situation” (Sarimski 2012, 44).

Supporting and assisting each individual

Some children need more time, things to be repeated or encouragement. Supporting the child may also be a matter of providing different material or special aids, intensive instruction, individual support or simplification of a task. Children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic condition may need more time and dedication when it comes to their provision or care. Periods during which a child receives provision and care are significant situations of relationship-building, particularly with small children.

Picking up on the child’s interests and preferences

Individualisation also means planning and implementing activities that pick up on the interests and preferences of the child. For this purpose it is necessary to observe the abilities and support needs of each individual child, set individual support goals in the group team and consider what activities in everyday group life and what pedagogical strategies are suitable for the support (provision) (see Sarimski 2012, 39).

Adapting activities

In the everyday life of the day nursery, regular planned group activities take place, for example weekly gymnastics sessions or special activities such as trips. For this it is worth planning in advance what measures or adjustments to the procedure are needed for individual children so that all children can take part. This can for example be an “emergency plan” for special events or an additional accompanying adult on a trip.

Further reading:

Serrano, A.M. & Afonos, J.L. (2010): Individualisierte Unterstützungsstrategien der inklusiven Bildung und Erziehung. In Kron, M.; Papke, B. & Windisch, M. (Ed.), Zusammen aufwachsen. Schritte zur frühen inklusiven Bildung und Erziehung (pp. 62-67), Bad Heilbrunn: Publishing House Julius Klinkhardt.

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Supporting children in their contact with each other and in their learning processes

The child's experience and learning processes are reliant on a level of social interaction from the outset. In addition to opportunities for shared activities, children also need other children and adult caregivers to respond to their behaviour and their learning progress. In heterogeneous groups, there are opportunities for diverse social contacts and experiences.

Research into integration pedagogy has “worked out how all children can benefit from being with children who have different levels of competence in terms of learning and social skills” (Seitz et al. 2012, 14).

Encouraging and supporting children to interact with each other

However, interaction and learning processes among children under three years of age do not necessarily arise from children merely being together. Rather, they require the motivation, active assistance and support of an adult. Contacts and cooperation are encouraged in everyday group life through initiation of situations in which all children are playing and learning together and also through tasks that two or more children do together. Individual support situations can be designed in such a way that they are also of interest to other children and they can be involved. Activities that a group engages in together provide opportunities for children to have recurring contact with each other.

Fostering mutual understanding

If there are children in the group whose behaviour irritates other children, the professional is required to encourage mutual understanding. For this he or she can “interpret unknown signals and behaviours for other children” and “reveal the meaning of strange and challenging behaviour to show that it is perfectly normal” (Kron et al. 2010, 222).

Overall, there is still considerable need for research into how interaction among children can be encouraged and maintained by pedagogy professionals (see Seitz et al. 2012, 11).

3.2 *Creating a conducive environment*

In order to implement the described interventions in groups with children under three, it is necessary to create appropriate framework conditions. This can include measures for structuring group activities and the creation of the learning environment.

Structuring group activities

From an inclusive education point of view, the structuring of the group activity is associated with the “principle of balancing similarities and differences that in its method is a successful coordination of individualised and group-orientated phases” (Seitz et al. 2012, 11).

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Criteria for ensuring quality of structuring

- *“The pedagogy professionals ensure reliable temporal and spatial structures and processes, caregivers who can be counted on to be available (reliable) and recurring contact(s) with other children.*
- *The pedagogy professionals create shared situations and rituals in the course of the day in which all children can take part. This is especially applicable to recurring situations (e.g. arrival, meals).*
- *The pedagogy professionals create (play) situations in which all children can take part and assist with these continuously if needed. They initiate and support communication between and interaction among the children” (Seitz 2008, 37).*

Shaping the learning environment

Setting up opportunities for retreat

The professionals in the day nurseries also have to make pedagogical decisions regarding the design of group spaces. The rooms should offer areas where the children can meet, have experiences and learn, that on the one hand benefit general aspects specific to development and on the other hand satisfy each individual child’s current stage of development and needs. Basic equipping of spaces also includes providing opportunities to retreat to quieter and smaller adjoining rooms or niches. These areas should be easily accessible for all children.

Allowing independent and group activities

Overall, creating and equipping a space should enable a high degree of independence and arouse children’s interest in activities and doing things together.

The availability of toys and material that invites participation in social activities has a lasting positive influence on the active social participation of children with disabilities in the group (see Sarimski 2012, 31).

An important requirement for every child in the group to be able to feel comfortable and like he or she belongs is an environment in which there is room for his or her individual characteristics and peculiarities. These are represented for example by photos of the children and their families. The interests and abilities of the children are valued by the fact that pieces of work that they have completed themselves are visible.

“If children are encouraged in who they are and what they bring, then they are more likely to be active. If they experience respect and approval for their family and their family culture too, then they can create a connection between themselves and the learning environment in the preschool and participate confidently in activities. If children are encouraged in their personal and peer group identity, then they can learn better!” (KINDERWELTEN [children’s worlds] project 2005).

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Representing individual characteristics and diversity

Henkys & Hahn (2003) highlight the following: “It is particularly important in the designing of spaces and material in day nurseries for all children to encounter representations of people who share their own external characteristics. They should, for example, find their gender (male, female), their skin colour (dark, light), their hair colour [...] and also other characteristics such as prostheses etc. represented in the play materials and on the wall pictures” (Henkys & Hahn 2003, 2).

All children in the group experience individual appreciation and cultural diversity if the picture books, dolls and other material in the group represent people of a different gender, different skin colours, people with a disability and other aspects of diversity. The approach of prejudice-conscious education developed by KINDERWELTEN¹ explicitly incorporates the aspects of identity formation and diversity in its shaping of the learning environment.

Supporting the development of all children

The spaces should be equipped and the material chosen in such a way that the development of all children is encouraged and supported early on. For children under three years of age, there is a particular need for things to be designed in such a way that addresses and encourages the development of their senses (sense of touch, proprioception and sense of balance/equilibrium), thereby supporting the training of all other skills. Children with special developmental trajectories also need an increased amount of support to stabilise their senses so that they are able to develop their language and motor skills in the best way possible.

Stimulating the development of the senses

Suitable materials for activities in this context are for example shaving foam, sand and mud, paste and beans. Proprioception involving deeper layers of skin, muscles and joints is addressed by movement on inclined planes or by carrying and pulling heavy cushions filled with peas, corn or beans. Playing in chestnut or ball pits and swings in a hammock in the prone position are conducive to training children's senses. Children can train their sense of balance by jumping on a trampoline.

Suitable equipment such as inclined planes and ceiling hooks for hanging hammocks or swings should be present in every group room, in adjoining rooms or any space where there is space for movement and be able to be used by children on a daily basis. Professionals in day nurseries can obtain specialist advice from occupational therapists about equipping the rooms.

3.3 Communicating and cooperating

Pedagogy professionals cooperating with other people involved is a significant aspect when it comes to creating inclusive processes in groups of children under three. The requirement to cooperate encompasses both working together with one's own team and with parents as well as working with external professionals and institutions.

¹ www.kinderwelten.net

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Characteristics of quality with respect to cooperation

The Westphalia-Lippe Regional Council (LWL) has put together some guidance on characteristics of quality with respect to cooperation in the context of the pilot project “Support (provision) for children with disabilities under three years of age in day nurseries”:

- “Pedagogy professionals [...], through cooperation, continuously ensure the necessary conditions for all children to participate and develop.
- Pedagogy professionals enter into close dialogue with caregivers and experts prior to the child being admitted and in the adjustment period [...]
- Pedagogy professionals know and use available consultation systems in relation to the child’s participation processes in the daily routine of the day nursery and individual aids to support participation [...], medical aspects, required aids.
- If needed, pedagogy professionals know and use (legal and organisational) opportunities to create the conditions in such a way that the right of all children to participation can be fulfilled or they know and use relevant advice and support on offer” (Seitz 2008, 37).

Implementing pedagogical planning in the team

Successful inclusive processes require the team to communicate with each other about the guiding principles of the work and how to implement them in practice.

This includes dialogue about the diversity of children’s everyday worlds and the resulting questions/issues to think about for shaping the inclusive education work. Both the planning of general pedagogy and the planning of individual support should be implemented using teamwork.

Discussing guiding principles and questions/issues in inclusive education work

Within the team of professionals, there is also an opportunity for discourse on possible uncertainties, areas of conflict and concern that may be connected with the inclusive education work. The pedagogues involved are on the one hand required for example to accept individual differences in development among the children, on the other hand it is important to recognise possible risks to that development early on and introduce any action required. Caring for a child with a disability can also lead to questions on the part of the professionals that require debate within the team. External advice or support in the process can be a helpful option for the team.

Trust-based cooperation with children’s parents is of particular importance when it comes to caring for children under three. Conversations between professionals and caregivers are helpful when it comes to understanding the needs of children who cannot communicate verbally. Conversations with parents provide information about the work in the facility and about family aspects that are essential for caring for the child at the facility.

Cooperating with parents

In the context of a child’s possible developmental delay or disability, it is important to deal with the parents with special sensitivity. The need for support, which professionals focus on, may be countered by parents’ fears and disappointments about the child’s development (see Seitz 2009, 48).

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Early intervention centres are among the facilities that day nurseries cooperate with primarily. With the increase in full-time day care and in the context of inclusion, early intervention that is integrated into the daily routine of the facility is becoming more important. In the context of the care of children with a disability or an impending disability, collective planning of assistance and support involving parents, professionals at the day nursery, the early intervention centre and other specialised services or therapists is wise.

Inclusive guiding principles and values must also be reflected in the work that the facility does together and with external centres and experts if pedagogy professionals want to cooperate successfully and act in an inclusive way.

3.4 Reflecting on one's own actions and the practice of the facility

An inclusive practice requires the pedagogues involved to examine their own beliefs and values influencing their work. Inclusive processes can only be successfully created if these are also considered as a personal development task of each individual professional and the whole team (see Seitz 2009, 26).

Occasions for self-reflection and reflection on practice

Occasions for self-reflection and reflection on practice in the context of inclusion

- *The perceptions of childhood educational processes*
- *The understanding of individualisation and support (provision)*
- *The understanding of normality, threat to development and disability*
- *One's own acceptance of differences*
- *The appropriateness of one's own professional actions (such as pedagogical interventions, verbal interaction, cooperation with parents).*
- *The existence of prejudices in relation to certain groups or characteristics and the influence on professional actions*
- *One's own social affiliations, cultural influences, experiences with diversity and their impact on the professional role*

Self-reflection and reflection on practice is also related to one's own personal and professional skills that are important to review and continuously develop. Sulzer und Wagner (2011) name the following as skills for inclusive early childhood education: expertise, skills in reflection and analysis, methodical and didactic skills and skills in cooperation.

Developing personal and professional skills

Expertise includes knowledge about children's basic needs and conditions needed for their development in the first three years of their life in order to align the pedagogical work with it. This also includes basic knowledge of any specific needs that children within the group(s) have, including knowledge of the families' cultural

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backgrounds. Inclusive education expertise also includes knowledge of dimensions of heterogeneity, dominance and inequalities and also effects of exclusion.

Analytical skills relates particularly to the “perception and assessment of the life situations and educational processes of children and their families” (Sulzer & Wagner 2011, 27).

Expert methodical skills include knowledge of observation methods and their application, support planning and the didactic design of pedagogical situations. The inclusive design of the learning environment and cooperation with parents are also relevant in this context.

Cooperative action is of central importance in the day nursery. The requirement to cooperate is relevant not just to cooperation with parents but also to the team and external specialists. Cooperation skills of early childhood professionals are characterised by respectful and child-orientated cooperation. This is required for appropriate pedagogical and therapeutic provision and support.

Taken together, these skills lead to value-focused (action) competence on the part of the pedagogy professionals and have a significant impact on the success of inclusive processes (see Sulzer & Wagner 2011, 49).

In this sense, competent professionals are sensitised to diversity, opportunities to participate and situations of exclusion in the daily routine of day nurseries. They are able to continuously review the practice of the facility, to communicate about it within the team and to develop strategies for their inclusive education actions.

Combining skills in a team

It is not up to each individual professional to bring to the table all the skills that are necessary in terms of inclusive pedagogy. Rather, the abilities of the team members in the facility and subject-specific knowledge of other professionals involved are combined to implement inclusive processes.

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4. Summary

Pedagogy professionals are challenged to have their work with children under three years of age guided by inclusive guiding principles against the background of the current social, political and legal environment.

Inclusion can be understood as a process that aims to achieve an appropriate environment for every child to develop. Children who are particularly at risk as far as their development and participation are concerned need special attention and support.

An inclusion-based pedagogy does not therefore differ completely from general pedagogy and is not to be understood as an additional programme to be introduced as new. Rather, inclusion in day nurseries requires the work to be consciously and continuously guided by inclusive guiding principles that are reflected in all dimensions of the facility and that are supported by all pedagogy professionals.

Setting up the work to be intentionally and continuously inclusive

5. Questions and further information

5.1 Questions and tasks for working on the text



TASK 1:

Gather together the characteristics of diversity that can make up a child's whole personality.



TASK 2:

Describe what characterises the attitude and skills of a pedagogy professional that are seen as particularly relevant to inclusive pedagogical processes.



OPTIONAL TASK 1:

Using one or two children as an example, reflect on how individualised provision of education and support is implemented in your own facility. Who is involved in this and what is your own role? What statements are made about individualisation in the design of the facility?



OPTIONAL TASK 2:

Analyse the diverse individual characteristics and affiliations that the children in your own group have. Examine how they are reflected in the design of the material and spaces.

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5.2 References and recommendations for further reading

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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5.3 Glossary

Heterogeneity: different, but on the same level. Heterogeneity is linked to distinctions that are made based on certain characteristics (age, gender, language, cultural affiliation, stage of development etc.). There is the risk of hierarchical evaluation and discrimination associated with specific characteristics relating to these differences. In the context of inclusion, the egalitarian meaning of the term heterogeneity is emphasised (see Prengel 2010, 20).

KiTa Fachtexte is a collaboration between the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences, the FRÖBEL group, and the professional development initiative for early childhood professionals WiFF. KiTa Fachtexte wants to support lecturers and students at universities and professionals in day care centres and day nurseries by providing the latest specialist texts for study and practice. All specialist texts are available at: www.kita-fachtexte.de

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