

Professionalisation of Early Childhood Educators

by Heike Wadepohl

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ABSTRACT

The debate surrounding the quality of full day childcare centres in Germany is increasingly focussed on the demand for the professionalisation of early childhood educators. This text will examine the demands that education professionals face in their daily work with children as well as the competencies they need to acquire to meet these requirements.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a clear trend in full day childcare centres away from caring functions and towards an educational mission. This has been accompanied by a change in the demands made on early childhood professionals, in particular with regard to the way they organise and structure interactions with children. In the context of the debate surrounding good quality in full day childcare centres, the educators face a number of demands that they need to meet professionally in their work, in order to give children the best possible opportunities to learn and develop, and thus to maximise the childcare centre's impact as a place for early education.

This text deals with the demands on early education professionals working with children today and the competencies these professionals need to acquire – both by reflecting on their own practices as well as through ongoing training and professional development – in order to be well-equipped to act professionally in their day to day work and, hence, to help improve the quality of full day childcare.

2. Competencies required to work with children

2.1 Debate on quality of early childhood education

In recent years, more importance has been ascribed to early childhood (institutional) education, which has led to extensive discussions in society, politics and academia.

Scientific studies reveal that German full day childcare centres rate poorly in international comparisons: the level of quality is merely average. In particular, the early childhood education professionals' support for the child's educational and learning processes is deemed inadequate (OECD, 2000, 18ff, 2006, 170ff; von Suchodoletz et al., 2014, 513ff; Wildgruber et al., 2014, 188ff).

Based on the fact that a high-quality childcare centre is positively associated with the child's cognitive and socio-emotional development – a positive influence that is still detectable at school age – improving the quality of childcare centres is considered an important way to increase the educational chances of (young) children (Burger, 2010, 140ff; Anders, 2013, 245ff). This must be viewed against a backdrop of social developments, such as children entering childcare at an earlier age and the rising number of children who take advantage of their right to subsidised childcare. In addition, there are debates on whether it is possible for high-quality childcare to compensate for less educationally stimulating home environments (for example, due to psychosocial, socio-economic or socio-cultural risks), and, as a result, help foster more equal opportunities in early childhood (e.g., NICHD, 2002, 200ff; Ahnert, 2007a, 60f).

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Several different indicators are used to assess the quality of pre-school institutions (Tietze & Viernickel, 2007, 27ff; Kuger & Kluczniok, 2008, 160ff). In this discussion, the quality of interactions between professionals and children is thought to have a significant influence on child outcomes (Mashburn & Pianta, 2010, 243ff; Hamre et al., 2013, 462ff). The level of professionalism of teachers in their teaching activities has proved central to children's growth and learning (e.g., Sylva et al., 2004, 15ff; b, 154ff; Anders, 2013, 253ff; Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011, 8ff, 2014b, 5ff).

2.2 Professional-child interactions

Redefining the requirements for working with children

The introduction of education and orientation plans for early childhood education in the different states that make up the Federal Republic of Germany has clarified the statutory educational mandate of early childhood education institutions and, to some extent, redefined the requirements education professionals must meet in their daily interactions with the children in order to comply with the German early childhood education triad¹ (e.g., Ministry of Culture of Lower Saxony, 2005, 8ff; cf. also the education and orientation plans of the other federal states). The specific actions expected of education professionals are not only listed in the education and orientation plans, but can also be found in checklists and plans for teaching practice (Betz, 2013, 260). The plans and lists may cover the educational work with children as a whole (e.g., DJI [German Youth Institute], 2011, 78ff; Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014b, 227ff) or may instead define specific requirements or challenges from a particular perspective (for example, dealing with cultural diversity and inclusive education; e.g., Albers & Lichtblau, 2014).

Complexity of interaction situations

In principle, however, it may be stated that interactive educational situations are generally complex, ambiguous, unpredictable and ever-changing, and that such situations demand a high level of flexibility and self-management from the education professional (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 13ff). In their daily work, the professionals must satisfy the needs of children of different ages in parallel and must be proactive on several levels (Völker & Schwer, 2011, 72ff).

Spheres of activity in interactions

In interactions with children, three major spheres of activity for education professionals can be identified: these have been empirically substantiated by the research group led by Pianta (Pianta & Hamre, 2009, 110ff; Hamre et al., 2013, 463ff) and link back to similar concepts from classroom teaching research (Klieme et al., 2006, 127ff).

¹ This triad, or three-part mandate, is comprised of *Bildung*, *Erziehung* and *Betreuung*. While it is fairly straightforward to translate *Betreuung* as "care", the words *Bildung* and *Erziehung* are often translated as "education", though there are differences between the two terms: *Bildung* generally refers to "education" in the sense of someone who is educated, learned or cultivated; *Erziehung* tends to refer to "education" in terms of conduct, upbringing or even socialisation. And so, the "triad" is actually a "duo" in English, namely, the "early childhood education and care mandate".

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Establishment of relationships

Establishing a strong and stable relationship and providing emotional support for each individual child is one of the central tasks of educational professionals, since small children learn above all through social relationships (Ahnert & Gappa, 2013, 113ff; Koch, 2013, 96ff). Studies show that professionals who establish positively nuanced attachments which make children feel secure also provide greater support in children's learning processes (Wadepohl & Mackowiak, submitted) and have a definitive influence on children's socio-emotional and cognitive development (for summary, see: Lamb, 1998, 73ff; Glüer, 2013, 110ff).

Classic attachment theory (Bowlby, 2006) is usually cited when describing the process of establishing relationships through professional-child interactions because its fundamental principles, which are based on the analysis of mother-child relationships, also apply to relationships between professionals and children (Ahnert, 2007b, 32ff).

Attachment theory assumes that from a very young age children establish relationships with other people – usually their parents – in order to find security, protection and regulation in uncertain situations. The attachment figure represents a “secure base” from which the child can explore his or her environment and to which he or she can return for reassurance if he or she feels insecure or threatened. This figure also satisfies the child's (basic) needs (Lengning & Lüpschen, 2012, 9ff; cf. also Kirschke & Hörmann, 2014). The attachment figure's sensitivity to the child's signals, i.e., his or her ability to perceive, correctly interpret, and promptly and appropriately respond to the child's signals, plays a crucial role in establishing secure relationships (Ainsworth, 2011; Remsperger, 2013).

One precondition for the establishment of a positive, learning-friendly (social) environment is a committed, respectful attitude on the part of the professionals, an attitude that is expressed through active attentiveness, awareness and interest (Ahnert et al., 2006, 666; Ahnert, 2007b, 33ff; Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2011, 16; Remsperger, 2013). Professionals must keep an eye on the needs of the group as a whole and on the needs of individual children. They must bear in mind the balance required between strategies that enhance a sense of belonging and those that support the child's need for autonomy, and must fine-tune this balance to the needs of each individual child (Booth et al., 2003, 84ff; Ahnert, 2007b, 33f; Lengning & Lüpschen, 2012, 12).

A detailed description of the professional-child relationship can be found in the KiTa-Fachtext paper by Hörmann (2014).²

Support for learning processes

Since the introduction of the education and orientation plans in recent years, individual support for a child's learning processes has become the focus of

² As for now, the referred text is not available in English.

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early childhood education work. In addition to providing a stimulating playing and learning environment, the emphasis is above all on the necessity of organising learning processes cooperatively or co-constructively (Wyrobnik, 2014). This enables professionals to communicate together and on equal terms with the children about phenomena or learning objects. The literature describes several forms of interaction that promote learning (Wannack et al., 2009–2010, 11f; Schelle, 2011, 23ff), with interactions activating cognitive processes being considered of particular significance (Hardy & Steffensky, 2014, 111f).

If interactions with the children are to promote learning, the professionals must first recognise the (educational) potential of a (playful) situation, act on it, start a conversation with the children about it and engage with the children's perspective (Wannack et al., 2009–2010, 10). Moreover, they must be aware of the child's current developmental status and the steps he or she needs to take in order to help he or she reach the "zone of next development" (Vygotskij, 2002).

In concrete interactions with the child, the professionals can help him or her find solutions, not by solving tasks the child finds too difficult, but by "scaffolding" (Wood et al., 1976; van de Pol et al., 2010), i.e., simplifying or taking on aspects of the task and thus making it possible for the child to manage it. During the problem-solving process, the educator is involved in a conversation with the child, picks up on topics of the conversation and encourages the child in his or her activities. In addition, the professional can activate the child's cognitive processes, for example by encouraging him or her to examine the specific qualities of situations or materials, to think about connections or to posit theories and check them (Moos, 2013, 175ff). Another – especially worthwhile – form of interaction consists of sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al., 2004), which may be observed for example when thinking up stories or solving problems (König, 2009, 253ff; Schelle, 2011, 23f).

Alongside the different domain-specific educational topics (e.g. the learning of language, mathematics, science and art and aesthetics), emphasis is placed on the stimulation of socio-emotional learning processes such as the ability to cooperate and resolve conflicts.

Classroom management and organisation

The term classroom management has its origins in classroom teaching research and refers to the management of framework conditions governing interactions within a group to provide optimal conditions for individual children to develop and learn (Seidel, 2009, 137f). The management of behaviour is frequently emphasised, with professionals moderating children's disruptive behaviour either preventively through omnipresence (= the ability of a professional to be aware of what is happening in the group at all times; Kounin, 2006), or by intervening with the use of disciplinary measures (Seidel, 138).

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However, through classroom management, professionals can also maximise children's learning opportunities by ensuring that the childcare centre's routine is varied and stimulating and runs smoothly (Pianta et al., 2008, 43ff). In early childhood education, the term classroom management is often replaced by the term organisation, which includes the help given by the professional to organise play (for example, by providing materials and finding playmates) as well as the aspects described above (Wadepohl et al., 2014, 74).

Research into the quality of interactions using the CLASS tool

Research into the quality of interactions in full day childcare centres using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System

The working group led by Pianta developed the "Classroom Assessment Scoring System" (CLASS, Pianta et al., 2008) observation instrument based on their three-part division of teacher-student interactions. The tool enables observers to assess the quality of interactions in the three areas of emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support.

Whereas in the US the instrument is used nationwide for evaluation and research purposes, in Germany there are as yet only a few publications (cf. for example Kammermeyer et al., 2013; von Suchodoletz et al., 2014; Wildgruber et al., 2014).

In summary, German surveys reveal the following main outcomes:

- ▶ *With regard to emotional support, the professionals demonstrate moderate to high qualities.*
- ▶ *In contrast, the professionals achieve only low levels in their support and guidance of children's learning processes.*
- ▶ *As regards classroom organisation, the professionals achieve moderate to high levels.*

For the most part, these results concur with studies using other instruments to assess the quality of interactions (cf. for example Tietze, 1998; König, 2009; Tournier et al., 2014; Wadepohl & Mackowiak, submitted).

Need for qualifications

If they are to meet the demands of the areas described above, professionals must be in possession of diverse knowledge and skills and be able to call on these in practice, apply them and adapt them to the specific situation (Betz, 2013, 260).

In the course of the discussions about the quality of teaching in full day childcare centres, demands have been made for the appropriate professionalisation and (further) qualification of early education professionals (Betz, 2013, 264ff; Kucharz et al., 2014, 12ff). In response, extensive professional development opportunities and programmes, such as the Professional Development

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Initiative for Early Education Professionals (*Weiterbildungsinitiative Frühpädagogische Fachkräfte – WiFF*) have been created in German-speaking regions. Furthermore, there are calls for parts of the profession to be made more academic, as has happened in other countries, since studies from English-language regions report a positive association between the level of education and the quality of pedagogy (EPPE study: Sylva et al., 2004, 01ff; REPEY study: Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, 95ff).

Results from the PRIMEL project – which examined, among other things, the influence of the educators' level of education³ on the quality of teaching activities – clearly reveal that the professionals' level of education is not necessarily reflected in their teaching activities (Kucharz et al., 2014, 99ff). One possible explanation for this is indicated by the analysis of the requirement profiles of different training courses undertaken by Fröhlich-Gildhoff and co-workers (2014b, 35ff). The authors found that training at German universities and colleges of education do not differ significantly as to content. However, training at the colleges of education is more practically oriented to practice, whereas the academic training emphasises research work and the capacity for reflexion. Moreover, the academic training frequently enables students to acquire additional competencies in the areas of HR management or project management. These competencies are relevant above all when looking to qualify for directorship of a centre, but are less pertinent when working directly with the children (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014b, 227ff).

3. Professional competencies

The daily requirements of other activities, as well as their work with the children, demand of education professionals strategies that are influenced by diverse factors. The term competencies includes the knowledge and skills that early childhood education professionals need specifically to manage the daily activities they undertake and hence to achieve the highest possible quality of pedagogy with the goal of promoting the children's education and development (Betz, 2013, 260).

3.1 Definition of competencies

In the context of pedagogy, there are numerous definitions of competencies, although most of these definitions refer back to that of Weinert (2001).

3 In Germany, it is common to learn to be an educator in a three-year degree programme in a college of education in order to become an early childhood educator. For a little over 10 years, there has also been the option of studying early childhood education at a university during a traditional ca. 3.5-year university degree programme. The aforementioned study compared these two educational options.

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Weinert's definition of competencies (2001)

Weinert (2001) defines competencies very generally as the "cognitive abilities and skills available to or acquirable by individuals that enable them to solve particular problems, as well as the associated motivational, volitional and social willingness and abilities to apply solutions successfully and responsibly in variable situations" (Weinert, 2001, 27f).⁴

Disposition vs. performance

Weinert's definition indicates the multi-dimensionality of the term competencies and, in particular, emphasises the interplay of disposition and performance.

Disposition refers to a person's inherent qualities of mind and character, whereas performance refers to the implementation of an individual's abilities and skills, i.e., what they actually do in a concrete situation (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2011, 11; Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 19).

Learnability of competencies

It is assumed that professional competencies can as a rule be learned and thus acquired through training and professional development; furthermore, they develop continuously in the course of educational practice and through reflexion (Anders, 2012, 9). The different facets of competency are defined more precisely and set in relation to each other in competency models.

3.2 Competency models

Types of models

The goal of a competency model is therefore to "systemise the components, facets and levels of competency that are regarded as significant for the successful management of complex tasks and demands for specific reference groups" (Frey & Jung, 2001, 6). The model may differentiate between components or facets that differ as regards content (component model) or may aim for a gradual improvement at each level of competency (level/development models). Process models, in contrast, take the teaching situation (the process of action) as their starting point and depict the demands for action made of the professionals via different content components and/or levels. In recent years, a series of so-called mixed models that integrate characteristics from several model types have established themselves in early childhood education (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011, 14ff, 2014a, 20ff). However, it must be admitted that, although the available competency models are multifaceted, they are usually not based on empirical evidence, since (as yet) not enough knowledge is available about the connections between the different facets of competency (Betz, 2013, 262).

⁴ All quotations from German source texts have been translated *ad hoc*.

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3.3 General competency model

General competency model

The General Competency Model, by Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Nentwig-Gesemann and Pietsch (2011; cf. also Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a), is the model most commonly applied to early childhood education, since it is specifically tailored to the professional activities of early childhood educators. It focuses on the acquisition of the competencies that make it possible for professionals “to organise themselves and in complex, ambiguous, unpredictable and ever-changing situations to act on their own responsibility on the basis of professional expertise” (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 21).

The model differentiates between disposition and performance, and describes the individual facets of competency as regards content whilst also establishing (chronological) links between the individual facets of competency based on practical actions in a concrete situation. Hence it depicts the process and can thus be classified as a mixed model (cf. Figure 1).

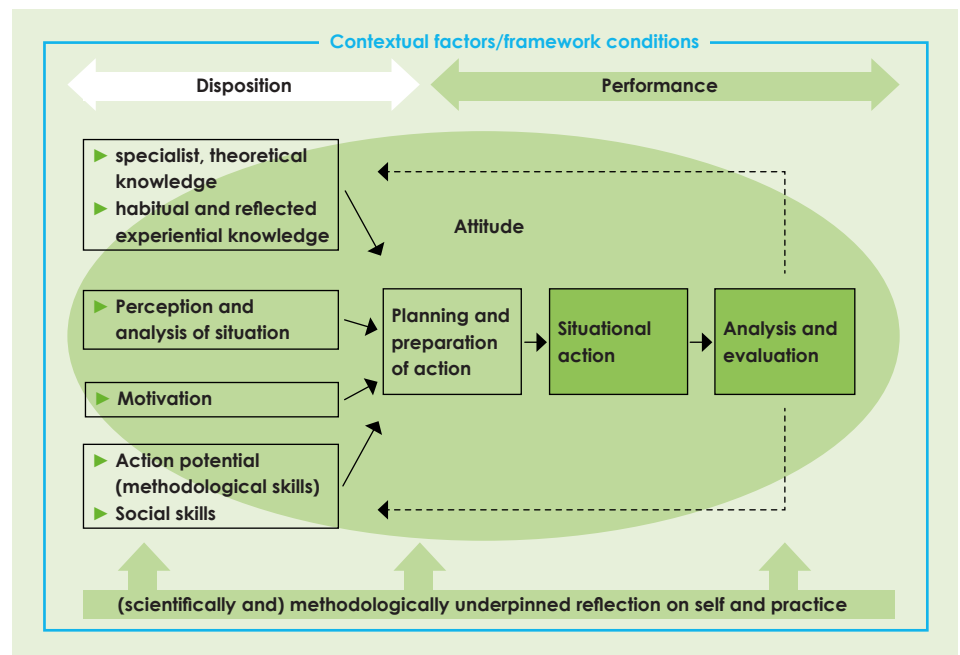


Figure 1: General Competency Model (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, Nentwig-Gesemann & Pietsch, 2011; revised version, 2014)

Disposition

The authors examine in more detail the individual facets of competency as related to disposition, with particular emphasis on specialist, theoretical knowledge. If an educator is to act professionally in a specific situation, they must possess both specialist knowledge (e.g., in the different areas of education) and general pedagogic expertise (e.g., principles of developmental psychology) (Anders, 2012, 17f). These stores of theoretical knowledge are supplemented by implicit experiential knowledge, which should be transformed into reflected experiential knowledge in professional contexts. This means that the

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professionals can access their own previous experience, for example in dealing with groups of children or providing educational opportunities. These stores of knowledge influence the manner in which professionals perceive and analyse a situation and, for example, the educational potential they identify in that situation.

Here, the (current) motivation of the professional also plays a crucial role in whether he or she acts in any given situation and, if she or she does act, on what grounds. In their explanations of the competency model, Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., (2011, 7ff, 2014a, 21ff) describe this facet only vaguely. The term motivation could cover basic attitudes of the professional, for example, regarding their own preferences or abilities in an area of education. On the other hand, it could refer to situation-specific, changing motivations to act (which might, for example, be diminished because of fatigue or exhaustion) (Anders, 2012, 17ff; Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2011, 18, 2014a, 22; Wadepohl et al., 2014, 52ff).

Action planning and preparation

In the phase of action planning and preparation, the professional will access – in addition to the components already listed – their available repertoire of methodological skills (forms of observation, didactic principles) and their social skills, such as the ability to see the other person's perspective or show empathy, and will develop a situational plan of action which aligns with their own disposition (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 22). The process of planning such action often takes place automatically and very quickly, so that the person taking action may not necessarily remember having gone through a conscious decision-making process.

Situational action

The plan of action is implemented through concrete actions in a specific situation. The competency of the professional is demonstrated in the final instance by their (observable) professional behaviour in a situation in which the professional ideally develops a plan of action based on his or her disposition and implements it (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 22f).

Evaluation of a specific action

Subsequently, the action is evaluated. The professional may receive feedback from the children or from colleagues during the course of, or after, implementation of the action, or may themselves undertake an evaluation of the outcome of their action (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011, 2014a, 23).

Professional attitude

This implicit – or, in the case of a more conscious evaluation and/or reflection, explicit – feedback regarding the action in turn affects a person's disposition and enriches his or her experiential knowledge. Furthermore, the evaluation could have an influence on other dispositional factors (e.g., on one's own self-efficacy expectations or on theoretical knowledge, if this is extended post-acquisition by reading up on a particular subject).

This process, which usually happens very quickly, can be thought of as the cross-section of a person's professional attitude, representing an essential

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frame of reference for their thinking and actions. There is no single standard definition of the term "attitude" (Schwer & Solzbacher, 2014). The authors of the competency model apply it above all to fundamental pedagogic values and/or as a guide for professional actions (e.g. oriented on a particular idea of a human or on the principle of co-construction), which remain relatively stable and are not situation-dependent (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011, 17ff, 2014a, 23).

Attitude is shaped by personal and professional experiences, but can be changed both by the acquisition of knowledge and by reflexion on practical experiences (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2011, 30ff).

(Self-)reflection

(Self-)reflection at all levels of the process is indispensable for the development of professional competencies. It is essential if the professional is to analyse a situation from different perspectives, based on a solid store of knowledge, and hence further develop their own professional skills (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 23f).

Context and framework

In the final instance, the professional actions of educators must always be considered in the context of the existing framework conditions (structural quality): their influence on the professional's actions should not be underestimated (in summary Viernickel & Schwarz, 2009, 12ff).

Subject-related differentiation

The General Competency Model represents a framework model for professional competencies in early childhood education and makes it clear to education professionals that they "can use both their store of theoretical, specialist knowledge and their reflected experiential knowledge to adapt their actions to the specific conditions and requirements of each situation" (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2014a, 21). The subject competencies required of the professional within each process step are always dependent on the concrete action demanded of the professional. For a differentiated list of the competencies required of early childhood education professionals with respect to their work with the children, see, for example, the WIFF guide to education no. 4 (DJI, 2011, 78ff).

4. Conclusion

Overall it is becoming clear that the work of early childhood institutions poses a number of (new) challenges for education professionals. These challenges are set to increase in the next few years due to developments in Germany (increased care of children under three years of age or children who have a migration and/or socially disadvantaged background). This renders the further academic development of competencies and the professionalisation of educators through lifelong learning (e.g., in the form of further training, professional development and supervision) a necessity and forms the basis of quality assurance in early childhood education institutions.

5. Questions and further information

5.1 Questions and tasks for reviewing the text



QUESTION 1:

How do you think it is possible to improve the quality of full day childcare centres, in particular with reference to the professional competencies of early childhood education professionals?



TASK 1:

Observe the actions of an education professional during free play and note the individual activities.

Allocate the activities to each of the three areas of interaction (emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation) and compare the three areas.

What do you notice?



TASK 2: {Miller, 2008 #1254}

Imagine the following situation in a kindergarten:

For several days you have observed how three children in your group make a pattern from variously shaped pieces of wood in every period of free play. You notice that the children always work alone and repeatedly lay simple patterns that they have long since mastered.

Think about the following and justify your conclusions:

1. Would you intervene? Why (or why not)?
2. What educational opportunities do you discern in this situation (e.g. areas of education)? What concrete objectives could you pursue with your intervention?
3. What specific competencies do you need in order to pursue your objective? Describe these using the General Competency Model (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2011/2014).

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5.3 Glossary

Professionalism is characterised by theoretical underpinning and reflexion on the part of the professional and by his or her ability to adjust and appropriately adapt his or her actions to suit a specific situation.

Competency describes the knowledge and skills education professionals must acquire to enable them to act professionally. Competency is thus demonstrated through performance (in action), but is composed of several components that are related to each other.

Competency models aim to describe systematically the individual components, facets or levels of competencies. Several different model types can be distinguished.

Zone of next development To give support in the “zone of next development” means that the support given by the education professional is adapted precisely to the transition point between the child's current and future level of competence.

The series *KiTa Fachtexte* is a collaboration between Alice Salomon University, the FRÖBEL Group and the professional development initiative for early childhood practitioners *Weiterbildungsinitiative Frühpädagogische Fachkräfte (WiFF)*. The series aims to support teaching staff and students at universities and practitioners in crèches and childcare centres by presenting the latest articles for study and practice. All the articles in the series are available online at: www.kita-fachtexte.de

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