


INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: GERMANY

1. Abstract

Proposal of an example of IECE provision in Germany (Hessen) to be visited by a project team:

Integrative Kindertagesstätte Am Gänsberg

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Figure 1. Integrative Kindertagesstätte Am Gänsberg

The Integrative Kindertagesstätte Am Gänsberg is a day-care centre for children from the age of three until the start of primary school provided by the Lebenshilfe Rheingau-Taunus-Kreis e.V., a non-profit association. It is located in Idstein, a small town with 25,000 inhabitants, 40 kilometres northwest of Frankfurt am Main in the federal state of Hessen. The day-care centre was founded in 1994. Even then it already focused on providing a vast variety of opportunities for all children. When the day-care centre opened, it was the only place in the locality that integrated children with disabilities. Prior to this, they were forced to go to special facilities in other municipalities.

Until 1999 the terms and regulations for day-care centres looking after children with and without disabilities, focused on one type of structure and were very strict in the federal state of Hessen. There were groups with 15 children, with one third having



physical or intellectual disabilities. In 1999 a new law encouraged integration for every child in its neighbourhood and regulations became wider. Currently we offer four groups with 20 children each. The amount of children with disabilities differs between two and ten children in the whole day-care centre, depending on the amount of children with disabilities living in our locality. Currently, we take care of five children with different disabilities. This number approximately matches the statistic of children with disabilities in early childhood. The number of children with an immigrant background matches the local statistics on immigrants and ranges between 15 and 25%.

The important thing is that all children living in Idstein have the opportunity to come to our day-care centre without selection. We welcome well-developed children as well as children with developmental problems, children without and with disabilities, children with all kinds of different cultural and personal backgrounds, and children from wealthier and poorer families. To this variety of children we offer the opportunity to be included in all activities and to improve their holistic development and give them the chance to learn and experience something new every day. Our attention centres on common development and common, co-constructive learning and growth. To this extent, our concept is a snapshot that repeatedly changes and develops further with new children, new people, new challenges and requirements.

Our staff members meet the statutory specifications. They are fully educated as well as qualified to work in our facility. This includes recruiting employees with immigrant backgrounds, as well as male colleagues.



Figure 2. Children in the Integrative Kindertagesstätte Am Gänsberg

2. Inclusive features

For our work area of elementary education in agreement with the Hessen education plan, we subscribe to an educational concept that focuses on social learning and developing the personality. Even more so than in later stages of life, living and learning in the elementary area are directly and indivisibly linked with one another.



Everyday activity and social interaction with other people, adults and children, the co-construction of life practice, language and knowledge are the central elements of this educational process. This in no way excludes the use of learning programmes.

Education and upbringing in our day-care facility are successful when we are able to provide the children and their parents with a solid foundation from which they can face the challenges of the future with a spirit of optimism and confidence.

In the following sections we attempt to outline the basis of our work.

Being welcome

Every child without exception is welcome. This also applies to their families.

We do not ask whether we can care for a child, but instead what we need to do to create the conditions that would make it possible for us to meet this child's needs. In this way, special needs, gender-specific requirements, the cultural and domestic initial situation, existing social contacts, families' wishes, etc., are already incorporated into our planning and taken into account to the greatest extent possible prior to acceptance.

As every child and every family is different, the introduction process must be structured just as individually. Transitions are phases of accelerated and condensed learning that place special demands on all participants, be they children, parents or educators. We therefore pay special attention to the introductory period and dedicate a high degree of care density to it. Because we do not yet know the children at this time, estimations and possibilities, as well as direct communication with parents, provide the central points of orientation for us.

Feeling comfortable

Feeling comfortable and having fun form the basis for openness to developmental stimuli and create the basis for making learning easier. Feeling comfortable does not mean that everything is easy and painless at all times. Anger, rage, tears, sorrow and pain are important building blocks of any development. They are part of life and must of course also have their place in a day-care centre. Nevertheless, our principal attention is devoted to well-being.

Feeling comfortable encompasses a variety of sometimes conflicting facets: the experience of being held with a parallel development of confidence in one's own possibility, one's competence for taking action; to accept help and at the same time learn to cope with challenges appropriately and independently; to participate and at the same time retain one's own identity and be able to continue developing; to be appreciated and respected; to be respected for one's strengths instead of being measured by one's weaknesses. This list in no way claims to be complete, but it



adequately outlines the field of tension involved in work in a day-care centre. We therefore see a central challenge for all employees in our institution in designing and accompanying the environment and the social interactions in such a way that children can feel comfortable accordingly.

For us, the children's well-being is indivisibly coupled with the well-being of the adults in our institution. Although the children are the focus of our attention, we also work towards maintaining a view on the situation of the parents, of external co-operation partners, as well as on our employees' working conditions. We are convinced that employees who feel comfortable in our team and are largely satisfied with their work situation can better fulfil the requirements of their position.

Feeling secure

Security is another central aspect of early childhood development. A good, stable bond in turn forms the basis for developing a sense of security.

Although this requirement is of primary relevance within the family, a reliable complementary bond in the day-care centre and elementary education, is also of utmost importance. We see the establishment of a viable bond with the individual children in their group, and then releasing them from this bond with a view to their development and the change to school life, as one of the most important tasks for the professionals in our institution.

The relationships of the children among themselves also play an incredibly important role, which increases in importance throughout the kindergarten period and over the course of the personal development process. Here we see our task as creating the structural prerequisites, for example, within the framework of group structures or free and undisturbed possibilities for play, but also the continuous accompaniment and support of the children in their interactions with as much sensitivity as possible.

Diversity

We unreservedly understand dealing with the diversity of human life in our day-care centre as an asset. It is an important resource and reveals great potential for learning. However, diversity does not only refer to the children. We also welcome differences in the staff team and the enrichment that it brings to our education work. Diversity also presents the staff with special requirements in dealings with the children. Not doing 'the same for everyone' but instead making 'each to his own' possible is the goal of our educational work. This requires a high degree of internal differentiation, which makes it possible to structure the everyday routine, as well as the offers and projects in such a way that impetuses and chances for development



are created for everyone. The starting points are always provided by the children's strengths, interests and inclinations, in order to allow them to have experiences of self-efficacy. However, dealing with diversity also involves accepting one's own limits. With regard to the promotion of children with disabilities, sometimes therapeutic aids extending beyond educational support are necessary and require the expertise of and co-operation with external specialists, such as early childhood intervention services.

Involvement

The concept of involvement describes inclusion in a life situation. It is nothing new in the field of education. Many reform educators, in particular Janusz Korczak, already referred to the right of children to design their world at the beginning of the last century. Janusz Korczak sees appreciation of and respect for children as the vital prerequisite for making participation and involvement possible. It also forms the foundation of our work. Offering children a variety of possibilities to reach decisions concerning their lives in the day-care centre is thus self-evident for us. This is reflected both in the individual interaction with the child, but also in the structural design of the daily routine. Over the course of their time in kindergarten, the children have the possibility to gain experience with democratic processes.

A particular challenge in this area is presented by the involvement of children who, due to their disabilities, cannot actively reach decisions or take part in decision-making processes. This also applies conditionally to the involvement of children with communication problems. In this case, assistance, empathetic interpretation or an advocate of their interests is needed. This task usually falls to the professional, but we have also had good experiences with children who assume this task sensitively and empathically. Joint consultation on the respective child's interests can offer a good possibility and provide a broad learning field for all children.



Figure 3. Musical activities



3. Inclusive highlight

Our inclusive highlight is that there are no highlights. We are as usual as inclusion should be.

We are a regular day-care centre, which is proud of being accessible to all children living in our town. We never say no to a child who wants to join our institution. We do not ask whether a child will fit in our day-care centre, but focus on what we have to do to make them feel comfortable and welcome. We try to ensure that all children are able to develop as well as possible.

Therefore we have managed to establish core values in our team, with class diversity being positive in principle and a benefit for all. We support our team members' personal development, as well as their further professional education, especially focusing on managing diversity. We also concentrate on maintaining our co-operation with organisations and professionals that focus on children with and without special needs, such as paediatricians, early childhood intervention service, therapists, schools, organisations that deal with immigrants, etc.

We believe that every child is different and needs individual care and support. We continuously work on balancing a child's individual needs and the needs of the whole group of children. Inclusion is never completed. It is a challenge that we take up every day.



Figure 4. Activities in the Integrative Kindertagesstätte Am Gänsberg



4. Other evidence of quality IECE

Quality development

Within the framework of municipal quality development, we participated in a two-year quality development process moderated by the Pädagogischen-Qualitäts-Informationen-Systeme gGmbH (PädQuis). The foundation of this process is provided by the results of the National Quality Initiative in day-care. The instruments of this process continue to be used in the educational routine.

Parallel to this, we were decisively involved in the development and implementation of the parent survey at the municipal level, with which we continue to be regularly involved, and which we use to continuously improve the offer in our day-care centre.

We also see ourselves as a learning organisation, in which informal processes are of central importance for the quality of continuing development. Of primary importance here is everyday exchange with our users, the children and their families. Beyond this, we work intensively on the networking of our institution (state working group of Frühe Hilfen e. V., sub-working group on kindergartens of the LIGA der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege, the kindergarten and migration working groups of Lebenshilfe Hessen, the inclusion working group of the district, the Idsteiner Netzwerk für Familien, to name a few), co-operation with primary, special needs and professional schools (for example, in the context of the state of Hessen education and upbringing plan or childcare worker training) and co-operation with the regional early childhood intervention service, therapists, etc.

Our participation in various committees provides important impetuses for development. These impetuses are continuously reflected upon and adapted where appropriate.

Training and internships

Well-trained specialists provide the foundation for successful educational work in our institution, as in elementary education in general. This is why we see training as an important field of activity for our day-care centre. Continuing training measures for the staff are therefore requested.

Furthermore, each year we offer one or two students the opportunity to complete the practical component of their training as a teacher or childcare worker in our institution. We in no way see this as only an additional requirement, but are instead convinced that we also benefit from it.

We are committed to maintaining the principle of retaining qualified employees in day-care centres. At the same time, we are open to the training of lateral entrants



and are also active in this area within our financial boundaries.

In the context of recruitment for our vocational field, we co-operate with the secondary and special needs schools on location and offer appropriate pupil internships in our day-care centre.