

The UN Disability Rights Convention and its implications for teacher education

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Integration in Austria - a good basis for inclusion

Since the mid-1980 the Austrian education system is realizing „integration“ of children with and without disabilities – first as school pilot projects (*„Schulversuche“*). The legal basis was set in 1993 and 1996 and it enabled integration in primary school as well as on the level 1 in secondary education.

Today about 50 % of pupils with an assessment of special needs (*„Sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf“*) attend primary schools or secondary modern school.

But the “integration movement” - a joint effort of parents, teachers and representatives of the educational administration – that was typical for the earlier years, has lost much of its impetus.

However, there is a sound basis to be built on in order to implement the requirements of the UN Convention regarding an “Inclusive School System” in Austria.

The UN Convention – general frame-work

On 13 December 2006, the 61st General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the *“United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”* (abbreviated to *“UN Disability Rights Convention”*). Austria was among the first countries to sign the UN Disability Rights Convention, the ratification took place in summer 2008, it came into effect on 26 October 2008.

Since then the federal government (national level), the Länder (regional level) and local authorities (local level) have been equally obliged to implement the Convention in Austria.

A national monitoring mechanism was established in order to supervise the implementation process.

Education is one of several areas (human rights and anti-discrimination, access to labour-market, health, etc.).

Since February 2011 the Austrian government is also developing a National Action Plan for people with disabilities led by of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection, in close co-operation with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Arts.

The UN Convention Article 24 “Education”

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Article 24 Education

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

....

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of

education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

The implementation of the *UN Disability Rights Convention* aims at the establishment of an inclusive education system that allows equal access and participation for all pupils.

The intention is not only to avoid the exclusion of pupils from education but to strive for active inclusion: everybody shall be supported in the best way to develop his or her own individual potential taking into account a broad range of interests, abilities, talents and creativity.

The implementation of inclusion in the education system

In order to achieve the overall aim of inclusion, we can (of course) build on a wide expertise that mainly has its origin in the field of special needs education.

But we must also link this knowledge and experiences with many other – more general or universal – questions of the education system. In particular we need a closer connection with equity and quality issues and their expression in the structural changes within the system.

The core projects – “Neue Mittelschule”, “Initiative 25+”, “Whole-day school” and others – they all intend an improvement of the teaching & learning culture through competence orientation and personalized learning in an increasingly heterogeneous environment.

Moreover, we have to identify synergies with specific discourses about

- the reduction of early school leavers (as addressed by the European Commission through the “Benchmark on Early School Leaving”),
- the challenges and disadvantages for migrant children (as recently addressed by the European Commission based on OECD research),
- the performance gaps between male and female pupils and
- other targeted approaches that ask for cross-sectoral strategies.

Teacher education

Linking the debate on “Inclusion” with the current educational reforms steered by the Ministry of Education – last but not least – I want to focus on teacher education – some say it’s the “leverage point” for changes in the system.

In the course of the preparatory work for the “PädagogInnenbildung NEU” – and especially when it will be implemented – the many aspects of “inclusion” are playing a prominent role.

The need for discussion will arise from the following areas:

- Access of persons with disabilities to pedagogical professions
- Consideration of key competences in all curricula (dealing with differences, competences in diagnosis, development of tailor-made support measures – in German: “Professionalisierungsdomäne Differenzfähigkeit und Förderkompetenz”)
- Development of a new curriculum for teachers of special needs education (including professional attitudes and values, team-work, knowledge/science based learning, ...)
- Status of Special Needs Education in the concept “PädagogInnenbildung NEU”.

A profile of inclusive teachers – a first feedback

I am very happy about the joint endeavour “Teacher Education for Inclusion” which was undertaken by the Pädagogische Hochschulen Vorarlberg and Oberösterreich, together with colleagues from 25 European countries guided by the experts of the European Agency.

The *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* is a valuable document with great potential to stimulate and support the ongoing discourse about initial teacher education of all teachers aiming at an adequate preparation for working in inclusive environments.

The four values preparing the basis of the *competence model* seem to be well chosen:

- valuing the diversity
- support of all learners
- collaboration and teamwork and
- continuous professional development.

Together with the three elements – attitudes, knowledge and skills – they contain the description of a “modern teacher’s habitus”.

The presentation of the underlying *general principles* is useful, e.g.

- the clarification of the requirements for all teachers,
- the role of specialists,
- the focus on competence,
- the suggestions for implementation in close cooperation with all stake-holders
- etc.

The *areas of competence* developed from the core values are reasonable and offer a well-balanced basis for deeper discussion. E.g. the description of teachers as “reflective practitioners” in a life-long-learning process stimulates further thinking about supportive conditions and practices.

Though the collection of thoughts about the *implementation* of the *Profile* may be neither complete nor specific, but it indicates important aspects that need to be considered in further discussions.

I am looking forward to the professional dialogue we will start here at this meeting and I hope we will all benefit from it today but also in the coming months and years as partners on the way to an inclusive education system.