



**INCLUSIVE  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION**

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**Case Study Visit Report:**

**Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, Idstein, Germany, 20–22 June 2016**

**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
ECE:	Early childhood education
ECI:	Early childhood intervention
EU:	European Union
HBEP:	Education and Development Programme for Children in Hessen
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAG:	Project Advisory Group
SEN:	Special educational needs



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Thanks also go to Hubert Lorenz-Medick, principal of Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, the kindergarten's educational and support staff, and the children and parents, all of whom gave up their time to meet with us in Idstein.

Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role of the PAG members and national experts who took part in the visit and provided additional support.



## PREAMBLE: THE IECE PROJECT

This report on the case study visit to Idstein and Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, Hessen, Germany, is part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project includes a total of eight such visits in different European countries.

The project's overall goal is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children from three years old to the start of primary education.

Thus, the project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the school group's local community.

The project started off with a focus on the five thematic areas for improving ECE that were raised by EU and OECD working groups for this field (EU, 2014; OECD, 2014):

- Access to quality ECE for all children. From the perspective of the project, this principle refers to facilitating access for all children in the community, with particular concern for the most vulnerable, such as children with disabilities and SEN, immigrants and newcomers, and other at-risk children and families.
- Workforce quality. This principle calls for the employment of appropriately trained staff with access to continuous training and adequate working conditions, appropriate leadership, support staff inside and outside the school, and adequate resources and positive parent, interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration.
- Quality curriculum/content. This principle underlines the need for a holistic and flexible curriculum and pedagogy that promote child wellbeing and learning in all aspects of development – cognitive, social, language, emotional and physical – and enable children to be meaningfully and actively engaged in a safe but open and stimulating environment.
- Evaluation and monitoring. This not only refers to how children's development and learning is monitored, but also to the ECE provision's level of effectiveness to meet established quality standards that ensure a quality learning environment for all children.
- Governance and funding. This principle considers how public funding and leadership models are used accountably to ensure that a quality ECE service is



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available to all children and is managed with a constant focus on enabling each child's holistic growth and learning.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on ECE.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in inclusive ECE for all children at national level.
- European practitioners' perceptions of and practices for inclusive ECE: an analysis of descriptions of 32 examples of inclusive ECE provisions.
- Detailed reports of the eight selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- Recommendations designed to meet policy-makers' needs: the project synthesis report will draw on evidence from all project activities; the key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in ECE will be analysed and translated into recommendations.
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for the ECE setting.



## 1. INTRODUCTION: SELECTED CASE STUDY VISIT OF THE IECE PROJECT

This report provides information about the case study visit that the Agency team conducted in Hessen, Germany, in June 2016.

Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, Idstein, was selected, along with seven other sites, from examples of inclusive practice in ECE submitted by national experts and Agency Representative Board members. The eight selected examples were willing to be visited and studied by a project team in order to understand the quality features of inclusive ECE provision.

In order to support the countries in identifying examples of inclusive practice in ECE, the Agency team, in collaboration with the PAG members, established criteria that the example provisions were expected to meet. These criteria, which were also used to select the eight examples, were:

- Relevance of the site
- Clarity of the information provided
- Evidence of the following:
  - respect for diversity;
  - promotion of participation and engagement;
  - holistic curriculum;
  - skilled workforce;
  - collaboration and partnership;
  - smooth transitions;
  - quality assurance;
  - self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The selected examples also needed to reflect diverse geographical locations across Europe.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited Idstein and Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, from 20 to 22 June 2016. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about developments in the city and the kindergarten's ECE provisions, to observe classes and to interview different stakeholder groups: principal, teachers, support teachers, parents and children. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the eight project case study visits. In addition, relevant documents on national and regional policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All visiting project participants provided first impressions at a forum on the last day of the visit and



then submitted written feedback about the inclusive features of the ECE provision at Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report.

An analysis of all the above data led to the identification of three main themes in how Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten is enhancing the inclusiveness of its ECE provision:

- 1 Living and learning – child-centred education
- 2 Shared vision of inclusion
- 3 Ensure quality provision.

These are described in detail in Sections 3 to 5 of this report. Section 2 gives an account of the background of inclusive provision within inclusive education in Idstein and Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten, Hessen, Germany.



## 2. THE CONTEXT

### 2.1 Inclusion in early childhood education in the Federal State of Hessen, Germany

In Hessen, early childhood intervention (ECI) institutions work closely together with childcare facilities to help them fulfil their educational mandate.

According to the Education Plan for Children aged 0–10 Years – concerning children with special needs (2014, 53):

*The first support for families is frequently offered by early childhood intervention services: early childhood intervention development support, assistance as well as the encouragement of learning processes.*

*The services also offer consulting and support provisions to childcare facilities and, in this way, help to integrate all children into the educational system.*

*Furthermore, they provide support within the transition period from the family environment to the day-care centres and take responsibility for co-ordination tasks and networking.*

ECI in Hessen includes: 41 regional ECI services, 13 special ECI services (for children with hearing impairments and with visual impairments – belonging to special schools and institutes for children with autism) and 7 social-paediatric centres.

Most of the services are provided by non-profit organisations (independent welfare).

The provisions of ECI services for day-care centres include:

- Counselling in the context of early detection of at-risk children
- Referral to other special services (e. g. educational counselling) or diagnostic clarification
- Counselling within the transition period into the day-care centre concerning application for integration measures, SEN and others
- Counselling during integration measures to support the staff and encourage the child's participation
- Joint planning of support and treatment measures and realisation in the day-care centre by the ECI service staff.

According to the Law of the Federal State of Hessen, there has been an agreement for the 'integration of children with disabilities of the age of one year until the beginning of school in day-care centres':

- Common education of children with and without disabilities in childcare centres close to their place of residence is the rule.

- Since 2002, there are no longer to be institutions solely for children with disabilities.
- Financial aid (social welfare) is to be given to the childcare centre if the following conditions are fulfilled:
  - reduced number of children in this group: age 3–6: 25 to 20 children; age 0–3: 12 to 11/10 children;
  - increase of qualified staff: age 3–6: + 15 hours/week; age 0–3: + 13 hours/week

The process of integration/inclusion of children with disabilities in Hessen's childcare centres has followed different phases:

- After World War II: educational institutions solely for children with disabilities
- 1980s: 'integrative groups' (10–11 children without disabilities, 4–5 children with disabilities) and the individual integration of children with disabilities in regular childcare centres developed
- 2002: closure of institutions solely for children with disabilities.
- Extensive staff training on integration in childcare centres ('Quint')
- Individual integration became the rule; integrative groups exist.

The Federal State of Hessen has contributed to the integration/inclusion of children with disabilities through a number of projects. The Education and Development Programme for Children in Hessen from 0 to 10 years of age (HBEP) provided for:

- a pedagogical frame of reference for all education and learning locations;
- education as a child-centred process;
- diversity as a pedagogic principle, seen as a benefit and an opportunity;
- diversity in many aspects: development, social-cultural experiences, intellectual and linguistic skills, motivation, emotional development;
- an integrative, inclusive, integral approach.

It has been implemented since 2007 through an extensive qualification and advanced training programme. Since 2014, application has been flanked by the provision of state funding. The programme and trainings will be adapted to one key aspect: inclusion.

On 1 December 2015, the Federal State of Hessen and the German Children and Youth Foundation (DKJS) launched a pilot project entitled 'Inclusion in Early Childhood Education – day-care centres open up to social spaces of municipalities'. It will run for two years and 23 municipalities are participating in it.



Its aims are:

- to support day-care centres and municipalities in developing inclusive local strategies in the field of early education;
- inclusive education in day-care centres and support of local networks;
- to incorporate HBEP trainings;
- a broad understanding of inclusion addressing various kinds of differences;
- professional assistance for each municipality, network meetings, working group.

State law (§ 1 Abs. 3 Children and Youth Welfare Code of Law-HKJGB) established that youth welfare institutions shall work towards fostering inclusion in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The law which introduced this regulation is currently being evaluated as to its effects.

(More information about the German inclusive education system is available in the country report, in the description of the example and in Germany's national overview: [www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/Germany](http://www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/Germany)).

## **2.2 Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten**

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. When it opened, it was the only place in the locality that integrated children with disabilities. Prior to this, they had been forced to attend 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, the day-care centre offers four groups with 20 children in each. The number of children with disabilities varies from two to ten children in the whole day-care centre, depending on the amount of children with disabilities living in the locality. Five children with different disabilities are currently attending.

The important thing is that all children living in Idstein have the opportunity to come to the day-care centre without selection. It welcomes typically-developing children, as well as children with developmental difficulties, children with and without disabilities, children from all kinds of different cultural and personal backgrounds,



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and children from both wealthier and poorer families. The day-care centre offers this range of children the opportunity to be included in all activities, to improve their holistic development and to learn and experience something new every day.

The staff's qualifications meet the statutory specifications. They are fully educated and qualified to work in ECE. The centre also strives for staff diversity, including both males and females, as well as employees from an immigrant background.



### 3. THE SETTING'S HIGHLIGHT (THEME 1): LIVING AND LEARNING – CHILD-CENTRED EDUCATION

In accordance with the Federal State of Hessen's education plan, Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten subscribes to an educational concept that focuses on social learning and developing the personality.

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.

#### 3.1 Being welcome

Every child is welcome in this kindergarten – **without exception**. This also applies to their families.

The kindergarten does not ask whether it can care for a child, but instead does whatever is necessary to create the conditions that meet the 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 the planning and taken into account to the greatest extent possible prior to acceptance.

Recognising that every child and every family is different, transition into the kindergarten is organised individually. No more than three new children start on the same day to ensure an easy and smooth transition from the home or crèche environment.

#### 3.2 Feeling comfortable

Feeling comfortable and having fun form the basis for openness to developmental stimuli and create the basis for making learning easier. The focus is on wellbeing. 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 kindergarten. The kindergarten therefore sees a central challenge for all its employees in designing and accompanying the environment and the social interactions in such a way that the children can feel comfortable.



The children's wellbeing is indivisibly coupled with the wellbeing of the adults in the institution. Although the children are the focus of attention, the kindergarten also works towards maintaining a view on the situation of the parents and of external co-operation partners, as well as on the employees' working conditions.

### **3.3 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. The kindergarten sees the establishment of a viable bond with the individual children in the group, and then releasing them from this bond with a view to their development and the transition to school life, as one of the most important tasks for the professionals in the institution.

Such requirements could of course be decreed, but whether they would ultimately be productive remains doubtful. The requirement of the professionals therefore consists of offering the children a relationship and creating a basis upon which they can accept it. At the same time, by employing at least two professionals in a group, the children have several options. This is an initial situation that clearly improves the chances for successful work with relationships.

The children's own relationships with their peers also play an incredibly important role. This increases in importance throughout the kindergarten period and over the course of the personal development process. Here, the kindergarten sees its 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.

Besides the social factor, the kindergarten also considers structural aspects that can convey a feeling of security. With the group structure, it offers the children a reliable framework that helps to endow them with a sense of belonging.



## 4. THEME 2: SHARED VISION OF INCLUSION

‘It’s normal to be different’. The principal explained that this statement has formed the foundation of the Am Gänsberg day-care centre’s work since its opening in 1994; a place for pre-school upbringing, education and care for all children.

### 4.1 Respect for diversity

The kindergarten understands dealing with the diversity of human life in the day-care centre as an asset. It represents an important resource and reveals great potential for learning. As already mentioned, the day-care centre is completely open to all children. However, diversity refers not only to the children. It also welcomes differences in the staff team and the enrichment that this brings to the education work.

However, 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 the 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 developments are created for everyone. The starting points are always provided by the children’s strengths, interests and inclinations, in order to allow them to experience self-efficacy.

### 4.2 Respect and involvement of children

Appreciation of and respect for children also form the foundation of the kindergarten’s work. Offering children a variety of possibilities to reach decisions concerning their lives in the day-care centre is thus self-evident. This is reflected both in the individual interaction with the child, but also in the structural design of the kindergarten’s routine. Opportunities are thus planned on a daily basis in which the children can decide for themselves, what, with whom, for how long and where they want to play, or even with voting processes within the group. The current situation is discussed within the framework of the daily meeting of the individual groups. Suggestions and complaints are incorporated; joint plans are made, voted on and decided. Over the course of their time in kindergarten, in this way the children have the possibility to gain experience with democratic processes. Within the context of the pre-school project in the last year prior to entering school, democratic voting processes are of central importance and, to a great extent, determine the group’s work.

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



inadequate communication possibilities. These children are generally dependent upon assistance, empathetic interpretation or an advocate of their interests. This task usually falls to the professionals. The kindergarten has also had good experiences with children who assume this task sensitively and empathically.

The visit participants were impressed by the fact that one educator asked a child's permission before looking at their portfolio. This indicates a deep respect for children and a chance for them to have a say.

Another example of the children's involvement in decision-making relates to the naturally designed play area of approximately 2,000 m<sup>2</sup>. A redesign decisively influenced by the children took place several years ago. Many of the children's ideas were realised. For example, there is now have a permanent play shop and a difficult climbing course. The outside grounds offer a variety of possibilities for play. Overall, it is designed and equipped in such a way that it gives all children the possibility to be self-efficaciously active. In particular, the play equipment is built in such a way that, for the most, children with motor disabilities can use it independently. At the same time, it provides challenges for children with well-developed motor skills. The play area's design also creates spaces for unobserved, independent play.

#### **4.3 Collaboration with parents**

The parents' council is elected to represent parents' interests. It is an important instrument for ensuring the appropriate degree of parent participation in the context of the upbringing partnership. It has the right to be informed and heard with regard to all important matters of education, upbringing and care.

The parents' council is elected in the first two months of each kindergarten year. It should consist of two representatives from each group.

All parents have the opportunity to participate in the kindergarten routine as an observer, following consultation.

Parents are involved in the design, organisation and carrying out of celebrations and parties of the entire day-care centre.

The same applies for assistance with caring for the garden and the upkeep of the day-care centre. The funds saved in this way can be invested in the day-care centre's other operations.

Active communication and discussion with the parents of the children in the day-care centre is a central element of successful educational work. The kindergarten therefore attaches a corresponding level of importance to it.

From the discussions with the parents, the visit participants learned that direct everyday discussion – the so-called 'word in passing' – is highly valued. The staff



planning is oriented to ensure that such discussions can take place to the greatest extent possible in accordance with needs. In addition to this, discussions with parents are possible by appointment at any time in the framework of the weekly opening hours. Deviations can also be agreed upon in exceptional cases.



## 5. THEME 3: ENSURE QUALITY PROVISION

### 5.1 Quality development

Within the framework of municipal quality development, the kindergarten participated in a two-year quality development process moderated by the Pädagogische Qualitäts-Informationssysteme 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, the kindergarten was decisively involved in the development and implementation of the parent survey at the municipal level, with which it continues to be regularly involved, and which it uses to continuously improve the offer in the day-care centre.

The kindergarten also sees itself 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 the users, the children and their families. Beyond this, it works on its networking. This includes participation in various committees (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 Netzwerkes für Familien, to name a few), co-operation with primary, special needs and professional schools (for example, in the context of the Federal State of Hessen education and upbringing plan or childcare worker training) and co-operation with ECI services, therapists, etc. All of these, along with continuing training measures for the staff, etc., provide important impetuses for development. These are continuously reflected upon and adapted where appropriate.

### 5.2 Training and internships

Highly trained specialists provide the foundation for successful educational work in the institution, as in elementary education in general. This is why the kindergarten sees training as an important field of activity. Each year, it offers one or two students the opportunity to complete the practical component of their teacher or childcare worker training in the institution. The kindergarten does not see this as just an additional requirement, but is instead convinced that it benefits from it.

It also offers social assistants the opportunity to complete the practical component of their training programme in the facility.

The kindergarten seems to be committed to maintaining the principle of retaining qualified employees in day-care centres. At the same time, it is open to the training of lateral entrants and is active in this area within financial boundaries.



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In the context of recruitment for the vocational field, it co-operates with the secondary and special needs schools on location and offers appropriate pupil internships in the day-care centre.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The inclusive policy of early childhood education in the Federal State of Hessen has had a very positive impact on Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten's inclusive educational practice. In Idstein, the visit participants observed a significant example of a pre-primary school with very successful integration practices. This kindergarten, with its child-centred activities and organisation of the school environment, manages to prevent problems from arising and facilitates pre-school attendance for all.

Participants were greatly impressed by the open-door policy and the fact that the front corridors were used for bicycles and other toys for developing fine motor skills. Children were free to leave the classroom to relax or take a break from an activity. This helped to avoid tantrums and created a more enjoyable learning environment. The idea was more to create space to promote independence. Moreover, the group benefits from partial reduction. The kindergarten was a very welcoming, cosy place.

Another impressive element was the outdoors playground and whole organisation behind it. Even a learner with difficulties in participating in the classroom could enjoy free play and co-operate with peers in creating relationships. The use of water, shovels and soil to create a small river and the provision of waterproof clothes and boots to all children, so that they could participate in free play without any restrictions or worries, was remarkable.

All participants were impressed by the positive atmosphere and the very warm relationships between educators and children and parents; the interest of the youngest children is stirred by mixing with the older ones. The mixed ages for 3- to 6-year-olds encourages children to work together and help one another and does not segregate them by age.

Children were very calm and unstressed. They seemed happy in their environment; inclusion feels 'natural'.

As one parent said: 'This is the best institution in the city'.

### 6.1 Areas for further discussion

As Kita Gänsberg Kindergarten strives to continue improving its services, the visit participants made some proposals for further reflection on key areas related to inclusion:

- Needs identification: Needs identification seems to be done by a single doctor who, at the end of a process, is responsible for the expertise/assessment towards the funding agency. Regardless of their experience and expertise, a single-person approach has the power to



determine a child's future, both in terms of education and other aspects. The doctor takes into account the existing diagnosis, as well as information provided by the parents. This is complemented by the expertise of the early childhood intervention service, which is involved in most cases.

Nevertheless, it would be better to focus more on multi-disciplinary team working and collaboration with a range of professionals to make the initial decision.

- Transition to primary school: Hessen's school law stipulates that parents have the right to decide whether their child attends a mainstream school or a special school. The special school provides counselling services to support the process between schools, parents and other actors involved (day-care centre, early childhood intervention service). To support children's transition to primary school, the children spend a day at their new school and teachers come to the kindergarten to spend time with the children. Kindergarten staff also carry out a follow-up visit one to two months after the children have settled into primary school. Both staff and parents considered children's transition to primary school level as an aspect that needs improvement. There are only a few hours of support in primary education, with more issues there and parents are unhappy with how things are organised at that level. There is a shortage of special teachers in primary education. As the framework conditions in the mainstream school system are often insufficient for an inclusive setting, the counselling services play an important role in finding solutions.