



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: AUSTRIA

1. Abstract

Our integrative special education kindergarten is situated in St. Isidor, in the township of Leonding close to Linz, Austria. Children aged 2.5 to 6, both with and without disabilities, attend the kindergarten. The children are from the city, as well as from the political district of Linz. A criterion for admission of children is that their bus ride to the kindergarten must be of a reasonable duration.

In general, the kindergarten is open to all children, ranging from those with severe disabilities to highly gifted children.

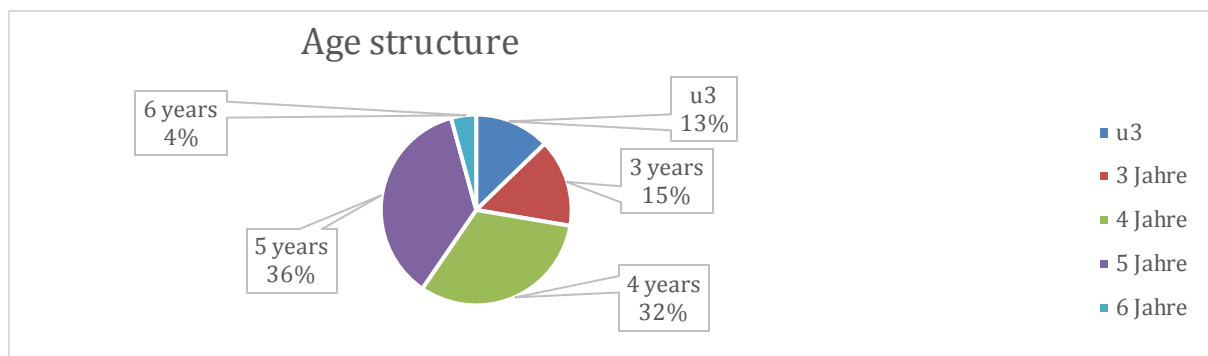


Figure 1. Age structure of children in the kindergarten

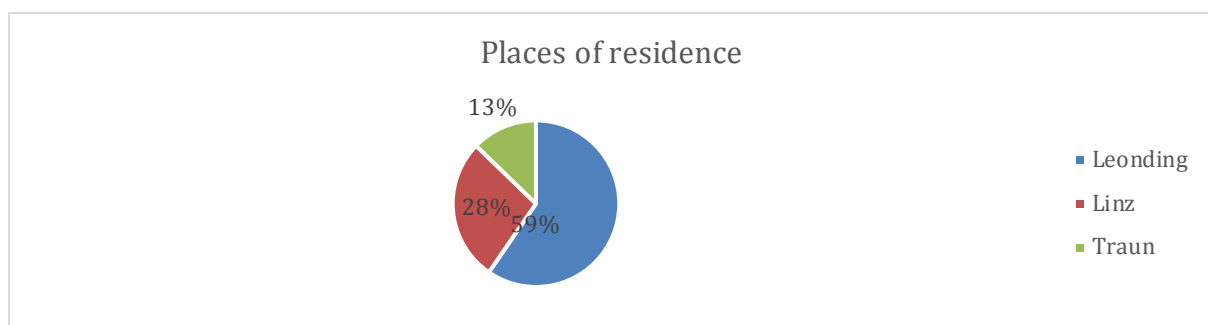


Figure 2. Places of residence of children in the kindergarten

A characteristic of our institution is the heterogenic composition of the groups of children. The families involved are from 12 different nations, and 17 children do not have German as their mother tongue. In two of the families, the parents have different nationalities. Apart from these socio-cultural and socio-economical differences, the children cared for also show a wide spectrum of individual differences. In our kindergarten one can find more than 12 different types of disabilities.



The basis of the pedagogical work is the educational concept of Early Excellence (please refer to the Appendix). This resource-oriented concept fits very well with the multiple challenges in our particular support setting. On the one hand, it focuses on an accurate development support through its high degree of individualisation, while on the other hand, it secures high-quality pedagogical work through its economically founded methods.

2. Inclusive features

The kindergarten is generally open to all children, regardless of their disabilities or giftedness. Nevertheless, children with severe disabilities can only be admitted as long as the structural framework allows for it, in terms of staff and organisation. Our goal is to enable these particular children to join our kindergarten, and we will try in any case to provide the necessary structural framework.

The children with disabilities have general development delays or delays in some specific areas (motor skills, language), have intellectual disabilities, or suffer from physical disabilities, behavioural problems or psychosocial disabilities. Almost all these children have multiple impairments. Their developmental age usually does not match their chronological age.

The situational analysis revealed the following trends:

- More and more children are from the immediate neighbourhood.
- The number of children who live in the residential group of St. Isidor is declining.
- There is a rise in children with severe disabilities, in children with serious behavioural disorders and in children from families that require support.
- In over 50% of families, either both parents are working or they are single-parent families and since the kindergarten is free of charge, childcare during lunch hour and in the afternoons is increasingly in demand.

Due to the fact that each child has different needs, advance registration, the intake interview and initial contact are crucial.

Upon advance registration, parents are invited to have a look at the kindergarten, to ask questions and to find out more about our institution. The time and date of this appointment is chosen to meet the parents' needs. The main criterion is the age of the child. Older children are preferred, but if there are places available we also admit children under the age of 3. The situation differs if there are compelling educational, social or familial reasons for admitting a certain child. Siblings should be able to attend our institution together.



The intake interview provides the opportunity to get to know each other. As well as acquiring data from the child's biography, the transfer of medical results and a conversation about our kindergarten rules, we put special emphasis on an appreciative and favourable encounter. The parents are the experts. It is important for us to talk about their expectations, worries and fears concerning our institution. The building of mutual trust is the basis for productive co-operation in the future, in the child's best interests.

During initial contact with the child, the leading special kindergarten pedagogue strives to primarily convey acceptance and safety. In play situations, the pedagogue pays particular attention to the child's needs, abilities and skills. This pedagogical observation facilitates targeted planning for admission into a certain group. Once the suitable group has been decided upon, the child can join the group for a first try-out session. The pedagogue will call the parents to make an appointment. Above all, the pedagogues will try to establish a relationship with the child, offer initial orientation and support the children in getting to know each other. After brief feedback with the parents, the organisation of the initial kindergarten phase will be discussed. It is essential to address all aspects that still need to be defined, especially regarding organisation, in order to guarantee a smooth process for parents, children and pedagogues alike.

The basic pedagogical attitude is defined by three focal points:

- Resource orientation
- Integration
- Social space orientation.

These focal points become visible in dealing with all people involved in the children's education process, i.e. the children themselves, the parents, the staff and everyone else.

Resource orientation

Use of observational methods and documentation systems that show a clear resource orientation and intensify the focus on the same. The Early Excellence approach provides a basic pedagogical concept for work with children and their families. Also, the integration and promotion of staff is focused on individual skills and aptitudes. This is evident in the staff's extensive and varied further education and training and in their related personal focuses, among other things.

Integration

In general, all children can attend our kindergarten. The families in our educational institution show many individual differences in their sociological characteristics.



Therefore, addressing issues such as disability, migration and membership of different societal groups is an integral part of our pedagogical work.

Social space orientation

An important part of our work is considering the social space of our institution and of our children. We involve the parents more than usual, with the goal of encouraging their self-efficacy and their independence. We seek and maintain co-operation with all persons and institutions relevant for early education. We support the introduction of early education and care by the Linz Soroptimists service club, which is implemented in co-operation with the 'Langholzfelds' kindergarten.

Important aspects of our pedagogical work

Love and respect

In our kindergarten we strive to create an atmosphere of appreciation and mutual respect (not only towards the children, but also towards colleagues and parents) – that is, an atmosphere in which each child feels at ease and accepted. Self-confidence can grow in a place where we experience ourselves and learn to listen to ourselves, so that we can develop our distinctive identity.

Liberty and limits in the kindergarten

Limits are an integral part of our lives; they are not confinements in a negative sense, nor do they have to do with conditioning; they are simply circumstances of life as such. Only children who learn to take responsibility for their actions and to make their own decisions can become self-determined and independent adults.

When defining limits, the following points are important to us:

- There should be consistent rules and limits to provide continuity and stability for the children. However, the limits and rules shall never be applied rigidly. They have to be changeable if so required and have to be adapted for the groups' particular needs. Moreover, they should be able to grow and extend with the groups and with the children's age.
- The limits always have to be directly connected to the situation, so that the children experience them as a logical consequence.
- We reject the withdrawal of affection for the setting of limits.
- The children experience that there are limits and rules for adults as well. We are equally involved in the existing framework of regulations and structures.



The principle of holism and complexity of the group

We accept the children in their individuality, with their strengths and their weaknesses, their dispositions and talents, at their particular stage of development, accept them as a whole with their individual, unique movements, language, thoughts, expressions, perceptions and abilities. There is no isolated view on a particular area.

Self-determined and self-acting development of the child

We let the children act in a self-determined manner, as long as they will not endanger themselves or others. Each child receives our maximum trust, for example to use certain rooms without direct supervision. This way, the children are supported in developing their own personality. We want the children to select their activities from a variety of choices, with their own will and to thereby learn to judge real-life situations, to develop initiative, make decisions, face difficulties, take responsibility for their actions, trust themselves and establish a relationship with others.

Responding to the children's interests – co-determination of the children

Reflection and observation allow us to really respond to the children's interests and to not make plans without them having a say. We discuss possible activities and projects, and there is room for personal wishes, ideas and propositions and for the exchange of experiences. Due to this opportunity for co-determination, the children feel accepted and respected and moreover practise mutual communication, learn to listen to each other and to express their own opinion. Children who cannot express themselves verbally can use expressions and gestures to convey their ideas. These group conversations can be further extended to become regular children's conferences.



3. Inclusive highlight

We are equally open to children with severe disabilities and highly talented children.

Our institution works towards implementing early education and care in the first public facility with a special education focus in the German-speaking world.

In one of our special education groups we have implemented the 'kindergarten with 4 paws' project.

Working with a therapy/assistance dog meets the requirements of fostering a focus on the individual. The specially trained dog perceives the child's emotions; it is flexible and easily adjusts to the child's needs, resources and current emotional state. The dog joins in as a sort of co-pedagogue in everyday life.

Uses for a therapy/assistance dog in the kindergarten's daily routine

- The dog as a bridge to the educator and to the other children
- The dog stimulates social interaction and communication (non-verbal as the dog knows commands and signals)
- The positive experience of physical contact and touch (and the transfer of this experience to oneself and to others)
- The dog as motivator for independence and perseverance
- Confidence enhancement and building of trust in themselves and in others
- Dealing with emotions and entering into a social relationship as an integral part of everyday life
- Developing empathy and taking on responsibility
- Opportunities for social competence, self-competence and technical competence.

4. Other evidence of quality IECE

External recognition

Family prize of Upper Austria for the children's hotel.

Children and families

Our basic conditions are of particular importance for improved learning. We provide additional rooms such as a ball pool and Wesco building blocks, a workshop, a restaurant, etc.

The premises in St. Isidor are ideal, since we are embedded in a village. Our children/groups make regular use of the numerous green spaces, playgrounds, forest areas, fun court, tobogganing hill and outdoor swimming pool.

The St. Isidor integrative horse farm provides a special experience for people with different disabilities.

- The encounter, as well as the movement with the horse, is stimulating and relaxing at the same time and conveys emotional warmth and closeness.
- The horse 'lends' people with walking disabilities its legs; this provides a new and different sense of movement.
- By establishing contact with the horse, socially isolated people also experience a feeling of belonging and acceptance.

Members of staff

To us it is essential that our staff avail of up-skilling. Currently, one member of our team is studying elementary education at Salzburg University, and another is attending a training course on autism spectrum disorder (TEACCH Approach). Some staff members have attended various training courses on sign language and other further training at the Private University College of Education of the Diocese of Linz (talents at nursery age, transitions in theory and practise, early language training, resource orientation in pedagogics).

Our assistants have just completed a four-module training course on 'Strengthening the action competence of assistants in integrative special education kindergartens and after-school care centres'.

Further training of all staff members at individual level, and staff development overall, are important concerns of 'Caritas für Menschen mit Behinderungen'. According to official regulations and to the system of remuneration, certain days are defined for further education, depending on the extent of employment. The employees also get monetary support. Staff development is an integral part of our



management work. In our yearly staff appraisals, executive staff members reflect with our educators on focal points and goals, and hence specify relevant further training.

Teamwork

The broad spectrum of our parental work

- Registration: parental work for us starts with the first contact with the parents, so even before the child starts attending the kindergarten. Parents' first impression of our kindergarten is crucial for further co-operation.
- General information evenings, that concern the whole kindergarten.
- Excursions with the families – to get to know each other and to encourage mutual exchange.
- Group-specific parents' evenings or afternoons, during which we display group reports, do project work and discuss ideas and pedagogical topics.
- Joint celebrations for parents and children, with active parental involvement.
- Regional integration: district festival, Christmas market, integrative holiday weeks, theme evenings that parents from the nearer surroundings can also visit. For this purpose, the premises have been especially remodelled – the meeting place.
- Parental conversations at the kindergarten: our common objective is to exchange information on the children and to support each other. To begin with, the kindergarten pedagogue can make use of special services (e.g. psychologist, therapist, doctor). During each kindergarten year, there should be at least one conversation with each child's parents.
- Conversations 'in passing' usually serve organisational questions.
- Parents can sit in on classes: open parental work can also mean that the parents participate in the kindergarten's daily routines. This gives the parents the chance to see their child from a different point of view and to get to know other children from the group. They can experience our pedagogical style and recognise the value of play. Sitting in on classes, as well as joint activities, bring family life and kindergarten life closer together.
- Written information in the form of information letters for parents, kindergarten newspapers, notice boards and communication books.



Interdisciplinary co-operation

We co-operate with the following groups:

- St. Isidor outpatient clinic

The goal of the interdisciplinary therapy concept is optimal development support for children with disabilities. The services include: occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy as well as psychological diagnosis, counselling and treatment.

- Integrative horse farm

Services: hippotherapy, therapeutic vaulting (also integrative), therapeutic riding/riding for people with disabilities, integrative horse riding days as well as special projects for children with perception and concentration problems, visual impairment, etc.

- Psychology and counselling

Our primary task is preventive and advisory support for people with disabilities with psychological problems. The offer ranges from diagnosis to counselling and treatment.

Further forms of co-operation

- Yearly logopaedic serial examination by the Upper Austria state government.
- Dental health programme of the PGA (Association for prophylactic health work), which visits each group twice per year.
- Vision therapy – early intervention centre of the ‘KH der Barmherzigen Brüder’ (hospital of the Merciful Brothers), department of orthoptics, pleoptics and neuro-ophthalmology.
- Institute for sensory and language neurology at the ‘KH der Barmherzigen Brüder’ (hospital of the Merciful Brothers), outpatient department for communication problems.
- Special experts: if children are in institutions other than those mentioned here, we contact them in order to exchange information.

Interdisciplinary team

Sometimes it makes sense for pedagogues, parents, therapists and other experts (doctors, social workers, etc.) to communicate with each other. Based on each expert’s observations, the collection of new clinical reports and the mutual exchange of information, it is possible to define new goals and support measures for



the child's individual areas of life.