

## **The inclusion of diversity in a comprehensive pedagogy: experiences from Berlin**

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Tim is two and a half years old and living together with his mummy. His daddy left the family one year ago; since then Tim has met him twice and needed some days afterwards to overcome his confusion. Some other children in the group are living together with single mothers, one girl with her lone father. On most days of the week Tim's grandmother picks him up from the kindergarten because his mother is still at work then. On Thursdays Tim is taken home to his friend by Lukas' father. Tim enjoys that very much.

The pedagogy that we stand for is the context orientated approach "Situationsansatz". This situation approach claims such complex and contradictory life situations of children and their families are the starting point and content of pedagogical activities. The situation approach expressively refers to Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

The pre-conditions of Tim's life affect his view of the world and influence his self-image. He links what he learns with what he already knows. His questions and answers, his interpretations of the world, his interests are grounded in his experiences.

What the key situations for children are is supposed to be explored in an egalitarian dialogue with children, parents, professionals and other experts.

Dialogue with children does not mean sitting in a morning circle with a group of fifteen children under three and talking about daddies leaving the families or what it means for them to live together either with their father or with their mother. An egalitarian dialogue with a young child requires the professionals to carefully listen to the child and to closely watch the signals given.

Maybe Tim's mother is not at all able or willing to talk about her private life - maybe she talks about nothing else. Probably the issue turns up in a discussion of mother and educator about Tim's development. The mother herself decides how far she will go in sharing information. Perhaps the grandmother is much nearer to the kindergarten than the mother. Maybe she wants to share information. The educator adds her observations, interpretations and her open questions. Her colleagues adjoin their perspectives.

Thus all stakeholders – child, mother and professionals - commonly are analysing the situation. Maybe a book or an article in a magazine illuminates the findings with background information.

On the basis of the different perspectives and the collected information the professionals decide about the goals they strive for and which action to undertake - in order to support the children in developing ego-competence, social skills, knowledge and the consciousness of being a competent learner.

In Tim's case the professionals decide to support him in developing a positive self-esteem: They work with family walls that show the whole range of diversity within families. Children's books are reviewed to make sure that Tim will find single mothers in the stories and can make a link to his own family life. This also supports the other children living with lone parents. And the children in the group living with mother and father will broaden their idea of what makes up a family.

The only man in Tim's world is Lukas' father whom Tim likes very much. Therefore the professionals decide to look for possibilities to open the childcare centre for male attachment figures: the next student practitioner will be a man, fathers and grandfathers will be invited to play and work with the children, staff take the children to shops and to craftsmen in the surroundings. Again this will be interesting and inspiring for other children, too.

As Tim's mummy may be heavily loaded with the responsibility for her son and for earning the family living the practitioners think about supporting her - this will also help Tim in his every day life: An open discussion group exchanging about early childhood education may facilitate peer consultancy. Mutual visits of the children are initiated; a babysitter service is offered through cooperation with other services. These offers are open for all parents.

The planning as well as the realisation are shared with the families especially by documentation of the work in the centre. Written documents are completed by photos, drawings or videos. Teaching and learning stories allow looking back together with the children: children will get an idea of the fact that



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they learn, what they learn and how they learn. To talk about the common experiences in the group or about individual learning processes promotes language stimulation as well – in particular because this review opens the chance to use past tenses in the conversation.

Documenting also enables sharing information with parents. Moreover it helps the practitioners to reflect their own work and to verify whether goals striven for have been achieved or not. What went well, what wrong? Are new questions and new goals appearing?

Thus based on exploration and analysis of key situations the professionals decide on the goals of their work and on the action to take. Reflection helps to assure and to develop quality further. In doing so reflection is merging into the exploration of the key situation on another level.

For identifying and analysing a key situation children and parents are supposed to name their world, to express their knowledge and their feelings concerning a special situation. Also the educators are related to the situation or to the issue. I once met a professional who was not able to even think about the situation of children like Tim: she immediately started to cry because she herself was a lone parent and she and her daughter still missed the father badly.

Louise Derman-Sparks reminded us of the necessity that we as trainers who work with educators and teachers should start with naming our world – especially concerning diversity issues.

Key situations are generated by “generative themes” – themes that more or less affect the whole society on a longer term. Concerning the example of Tim and his family an inherent generative theme might be the changing images of families and diverse forms of partnership. Another theme of influence might be the role of fathers (and men in general) in bringing up children. Both issues are at present intensely discussed in Germany. To have the societal implication of the key situation in mind prevents for example Tim’s educator from blaming Tim’s father for having left the family. Not having an eye on the fact that a huge percentage of families are one-child-one-parent families today might induce Tim’s educators to shift the blame on his mother. To support the child would be nearly impossible while considering the parents guilty.

Another generative theme in Germany is the reunification followed by a lot of diverse consequences. Some weeks ago professionals from small villages in the eastern part of Germany - i.e. in the former German Democratic Republic – identified as a key situation that affects all of them as well as the children they are working with: a lot of families and nearly all young people leave the region. They then discussed possible actions. Their idea was to show the children how beautiful the region is. Their goal was to prevent the children from leaving the region when they are growing up. The message is obvious: Who leaves does not love the home country.

Looking more closely further issues probably would have been identified: the number of children is decreasing extremely; the existence of the kindergartens is highly endangered; most of the inhabitants are old people; the only prosperous man is the truck owner who helps people moving away. A more political point of view might have focused on the extremely high percentage of unemployed people – and on the high number of people that leave their home desperately hoping to find a job further away.

Often enough the investigation of key situations and inherent generative themes leads to an awakening of critical thinking. Recently, a key situation had been that children and families were no longer allowed to enter the organic farm they regularly visited for years. The reason was the bird-flu: an infected bird had been found nearby and thousands of birds had been killed on a farm in the neighbourhood. Generative themes in the background are for example: ecology; healthy food; keeping of animals in their natural environment; how the human race deals with animals...

The political implication of the situation approach is also stressed by the superior goals autonomy, solidarity and competence. Autonomy is always linked to solidarity: to identify and follow the own interests without negotiation with others and without support for those who need support is nothing else than self-centred.

To act or become able to act as self-determined as possible needs competences. Even though competence is always seen in a holistic way we analytically distinguish in ego-competence, social competence, knowledge and a positive self-image as a competent learner. These competencies are itemised and the diverse items give an orientation for the pedagogical action of the professionals. As



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we all are working on ourselves and on our competencies our whole life long we have to concede this: the children will not be “ready” when they leave the kindergarten and start their school career – therefore school-readiness tests make no sense. On the other hand we advocate for evaluation of the pedagogical action. The professionals are to be pro-active to support children in developing the diverse aspects of these competencies. So the evaluation focuses on their activities and whether they create an atmosphere where children can actively learn, where they can develop a positive self-esteem, where they develop social skills like solving conflicts, negotiating with others or being empathetic.

How the professionals act is predefined by the image of the child as an active learner. The child is determining his or her own development. The child has rights from the very beginning.

This image of the child consequently leads to democratic structures in the childcare provision. And childcare centres are obliged by law to educate children towards living and participating in a democratic society. Children can only learn to participate as active citizens when they have the chance to try this – and when they observe how the adults realise participative structures. How the professionals create every day life in the childcare centre supports democratic thinking and action even more than specially planned group discussions or participative decision making exercises, when the children in every-day life have no choices at all. What this means for very young children is beneath other issues the focus in our project “Living Democracy”.

A pre-condition for acting in a democratic way is the mutual respect and reciprocal recognition of all stakeholders or – how it’s formulated by DECET – equity and respect for diversity.

Equity and respect for diversity have always been part of the situation approach. Nevertheless the exchange and cooperation in the DECET Network helped us to sharpen the profile. The DECET Mission Statement expressively states that DECET strives for childcare settings “where everyone feels that he or she belongs.” Feeling to belong is undoubtedly the very condition of learning and developing or of - what we call in German language - “Bildung”. Also at the other end of the world, down under in New-Zeeland, the curriculum “Te Whariki” states belonging to be connected to having and showing interest.

The situation approach always claimed that everyone must have the feeling to belong. DECET leaded us to focus more and more on how to realise that everyone can feel belonging – and which mechanisms are obstructive. On one hand it is necessary for all to have access to the childcare setting. On the other hand it is not enough to formally be part of the setting. You need to feel welcome, to feel that someone is interested in you, in your opinions, in your wishes and fears. You need to feel perceived and acknowledged in all the diverse aspects of your individual and group-identities. All this needs a lot of changes in every day practice – and in attitudes!

Concerning children the feeling to belong is absolutely connected to their parents, how they feel and what they express. If the professionals do not accept the parents the children will never feel belonging. It is part of the professional role of the educators to pro-actively invite the parents, to create an atmosphere of equity and to develop an attitude of respect for diversity.

This is also the issue in one of the DECET work packs: to exchange on the DECET goals and principles and how they determine the pedagogical role and action of the professionals.

DECET also strives for childcare provisions “where everyone can participate as active citizen.” Even though this is already part of the situation approach the discussion within DECET has opened new horizons: especially the vision of a positive self-image as a European citizen was not at all evident in the German pedagogical discussion before we started to cooperate with our DECET partners.

Since two and a half years we are supporting childcare provisions no longer only by projects and consultancy. In Berlin, we have founded a providing organisation and taken over childcare centres from the municipality. The conceptual basis for all our kindergartens is the situation approach. INA.KINDER.GARTEN now is responsible for 18 childcare settings with an enormous variety: kindergartens in all parts of Berlin, in the city centre and in the outskirts, with a high percentage of migrant children or with no migrant children at all, with families of high or of low income, with exclusively either academic or unemployed parents – and two kindergartens situated in completely different surroundings of only some hundred metres distance that shall be developed towards



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integrated centres. All our childcare centres are explicitly welcoming handicapped children and children with all kinds of cultural and social backgrounds.

As a consequence of German history all decisions on education are decentralised. Thus the German federal states – the German “Länder” – have the authority to decide. We, the International Academy at the Free University of Berlin, as pedagogical experts, have been assigned by the Senate of Berlin to develop an educational programme based on the situation approach and including equity and respect for diversity. Since August 2005 to work accordingly to this programme is an obligation for all about 2000 childcare settings in Berlin and a condition for the Berlin authorities to provide finance.

The Berlin Educational Programme gives professionals an orientation for creating every-day life, supporting play, creating an inspiring environment and running pedagogical projects according to the interests of the children. Other issues are the partnership with parents, transition from kindergarten to school and democratic structures. A brief overview for parents has been launched besides in German also in Turkish, Arabic, Russian and English.

For Hamburg and Saarland, two other German countries, we developed an adapted version of the Berlin Educational Programme.

An internationalised version in English language has just been released. Hopefully it will give a more detailed insight in the comprehensive pedagogy “situation approach” and the link with equity and respect for diversity.



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