

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR GIFTED CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT

In psychology as well as in education, the topic of gifted education is regarded as "stepchildren". Only a few academics have dealt with this topic at all. Most of their research focuses on the development of identification and giftedness models, diagnostic instruments, causes of problems and the best possible support for the development of giftedness. The target group is predominantly highly gifted school children. Giftedness cannot be learned, it is genetically determined. As a result, support for highly gifted children should not only take place in the school sector, but already in early childhood. The literature on highly gifted young children is sheerly lacking. In this respect, no one is surprised that kindergartens, and explicitly kindergarten teachers, are poorly educated about giftedness. Giftedness does not feature in the training curricula of educators, but there is a focus on disabilities in young children. Just as impaired toddlers need targeted support, gifted children often need individual support. One could also speak of a "positive disability". In order to provide support for gifted children, educators need basic knowledge, resources, tools and methods. It is essential to identify giftedness so that educators do not feel insecure that it could be a developmental advantage. Furthermore, educators need to be made aware of possible problems that can arise when children are underchallenged. Furthermore, kindergarten concepts must not be disregarded, because not every concept is suitable for highly gifted children.

Keywords: Support for the highly gifted in kindergarten, kindergarten concepts, diagnostics, educator training.

1 INTRODUCTION

Kindergartens in Germany do not have a fixed curriculum as schools do. The focus is on ten basic competencies that are to be taught in everyday kindergarten life. The competencies are to be taught in the linguistic, artistic, scientific, mathematical, sporting, ethico-religious, media, ecological, social and health areas. The implementation, topics and depth of content are left to the educators. Unfortunately, the lack of quality assurance in Germany makes it impossible to verify the extent to which educators devote themselves to all competences.

Furthermore, there are no generally binding pedagogical kindergarten concepts that can be applied. Thus, a multitude of pedagogical kindergarten concepts could develop and partly establish themselves in the educational landscape. Most kindergartens, especially state, non-profit and denominational kindergartens, work according to the situation-oriented approach. In Germany, there are also Fröbel facilities, kindergartens that work according to the open concept, Reggio facilities and forest kindergartens.

There is plenty of literature on the individual concepts to deepen one's knowledge. The following analysis to examine the suitability of targeted support for gifted children in relation to kindergarten concepts is a completely new field of research. And can be further explored in

relation to other educational concepts such as Montessori education, Waldorf or Peter Petersen education.

This institution-related analysis alone is not sufficient to support gifted young children in an equitable manner. For this, interested and motivated educators need to further educate themselves in relation to giftedness and reflect on whether their institution has suitable framework conditions for these children.

2 METHODS

For the further training of educators for the gifted, a detailed theoretical basic knowledge serves as a basis, which can be implemented later with recommendations for action. A model of giftedness should be used as a basis for an environment that promotes giftedness. The "multi-factor model" according to Mönks (1995) is recommended. This states that only an interaction of several factors (family, friends, school/kindergarten, motivation, creativity, above-average abilities) can lead to high performance. The social environment of the young child, the kindergarten, friends and family are the conditions that influence the triad. Thus, according to Mönks, giftedness develops in the interaction between the individual and his or her environment.

2.1 What is giftedness anyway?

Science defines intellectual giftedness when a person has well above average abilities in one or more areas, compared to their age group. Special abilities could be shown, for example, in the linguistic, mathematical, scientific or technical areas. Only 2% of the population with an intelligence quotient (IQ) of or above 130 are considered highly gifted. Roughly speaking, there should be a highly gifted child in every second kindergarten group. In order to determine the intelligence quotient, a test diagnosis by well-trained psychologists is necessary. For targeted support, a test diagnosis is not absolutely necessary if educators have dealt with the topic of giftedness sufficiently and can recognise gifted children accordingly.

2.2 Problems of highly gifted kindergarten children

Five problems and consequences in particular have emerged in research:

1. Disappointment over too low offers, underchallenge (Feger; Prado, 1998)
2. "Underachievement" - pupils perform at a level that does not correspond to their cognitive level (Reichle, 2004).
3. Highly gifted children experience less support from educators and classmates and accordingly seek less support from others to solve problems. Perception of one's own otherness (Stapf, 2004)
4. Nerd Anxiety and Camouflage (Reichle, 2004)
5. Psychosomatic and psychological problems, such as depression (Mönks, Ypenburg, 2005)

2.3 Recognising giftedness in the kindergarten

The targeted observation of children is of central importance in the kindergarten. For this purpose, standardised procedures can be used, such as observation and development sheets, e.g. KOMPIK (Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, n.d.), which records the children's interests and competences.

For individual case observation, educators should know the characteristics of gifted children in order to identify them as early as possible.

2.4 Characteristics of highly gifted kindergarten children

If a child shows a quick perception, has a very good memory, a high learning speed, competences in language, reading & arithmetic, recognises laws & connections, interest in older children & adult topics, perseverance & motivation as well as a high sense of justice & power of observation, this could indicate a possible giftedness.

2.5 Promoting giftedness in the kindergarten

Vock (2009) has formulated several aspects for good support for gifted children in kindergarten. Two areas of support are essential: Acceleration and Enrichment. The child's level of competence is in the foreground and educators should no longer focus on age norms. Possibilities of acceleration in kindergarten could be, for example, that gifted children participate in preschool programmes even if the age is not appropriate, allocation of groups with older children or an earlier enrolment in school. Enrichment could be implemented by adapting teaching programmes to the level of competence of these children rather than by age. The individual needs of the children must be perceived and taken seriously (allow heterogeneity and promote it in a targeted way) in order to avoid over- or under-challenging. To this end, the educator should provide additional stimuli and offers (challenges). Targeted support through play materials, books, tools, equipment, etc. is essential. For this purpose, the child's ideas should be taken up and made usable for the whole group (project work & small group work). Joy of learning and thirst for knowledge must not be suppressed (e.g. allow reading & arithmetic). The task of the educator is to show understanding, to look for solutions and to offer them and to value the "otherness". Through positive reinforcement of these children alone or within the group, their intellectual abilities and competences are valued. The educator should not point out possible deficits in social interaction and communication, but rather provide assistance (e.g. "translating" what is said) and support in finding adequate play partners. The exchange with parents about the children's strengths and weaknesses should take place at regular intervals.

3 Are all pedagogical concepts suitable for the gifted?

In order to answer the question, a matrix was created and all the focal points of the individual concepts were entered; the evaluation was carried out via MAXQDA. Furthermore, a problem-centred interview was conducted with an educator.

The analysis showed that only one concept (Reggio pedagogy) includes and focuses on "strength promotion". All other pedagogical concepts focus on the "weaknesses" or on supporting weak children. Fröbel's pedagogy would not challenge gifted children with its standardised play materials and would tire them quickly. The same applies to forest education with a daily routine that is always the same.

The problem-centred interview confirmed a critical view of the situation-oriented approach. It is not possible to verify whether educators actually respond to the children's wishes and ideas. The children's independent action could not be confirmed in this case either, as template work is used on a massive scale in this institution. This shows how important a quality check should be introduced in kindergartens.

4 RESULTS

In Germany, particular attention is paid to the promotion of socially disadvantaged, weaker children as well as migrant children. When heterogeneity and diversity are mentioned, the focus is on these target groups. The UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda also explicitly speaks of sustainable education in terms of inclusion and equal opportunities for disadvantaged children (UNESCO, n.d.). However, heterogeneity, diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities also mean integrating highly gifted children and providing them with targeted support. Every child is entitled to holistic support (BMBF, 2015). Nevertheless, highly gifted children in the elementary sector are not even addressed in the federal states or by UNESCO. In addition, science also regards this topic as "step-motherly". Therefore, it is not surprising that pedagogical kindergarten concepts usually do not offer any support for gifted children.

There are not many framework conditions that a kindergarten in Germany has to fulfil. Except for very one-sided pedagogical concepts such as forest education, all of them could introduce gifted education without hesitation.

Unfortunately, giftedness is not a topic in the training of educators, so educators have to continue their education on their own.

This is where the federal states should start and create further training opportunities for educators. The current training courses on giftedness are mostly very time-consuming and cost-intensive. Educators have to take part in annual training courses. The first and easiest way would be to include the topic of giftedness in the training portfolio for educational staff.

The German government's and UNESCO's focus on equal opportunities, diversity and heterogeneity must apply to all children and be taken into account. Another important factor in the promotion of gifted children is the subsequent return on investment in society. To ensure this, early identification of gifted children is crucial. In the evaluation of MAXQDA, it became clear that all kindergartens (independent of the concept) regard challenging and supporting children as an essential part of their pedagogical work, but in a direct comparison, only the concept of "Reggio pedagogy", which lists the promotion of strengths, was found.

The critical view of the mostly implemented concept of the "situation-oriented approach" could be confirmed in the interview. This makes the introduction of quality control in kindergartens all the more important. At present, no one in Germany can objectively evaluate the pedagogical work in kindergartens. Thus, early childhood education is up to the pedagogical motivation of each individual educator.

5 DISCUSSION

The six pedagogical kindergarten concepts analysed with regard to the promotion of gifted children were the situation-oriented approach, the open work approach, Reggio pedagogy, Fröbel pedagogy, denominational approaches as well as forest and nature pedagogy. The aim of the study was to find out through an analysis of the individual kindergarten concepts whether such concepts are suitable for highly gifted kindergarten children and if not, which pedagogical framework conditions are necessary for a kindergarten to implement them. The research clearly showed that explicit support for gifted children was missing in all kindergarten concepts (Berger, 2000; Fischer, 2022a; Kita Router gGmbH, n.d.; Egghi, 2016; Petri, 2001; Schaffert, 2004; Spitz-Güdden, 2010; Von der Beek, 2018). When choosing a strength-based pedagogical

concept, only one concept, Reggio pedagogy, pointed to this (Reggio Deutschland, 2019). In order to obtain a holistic overview, it would be useful to conduct research on other pedagogical kindergarten concepts with regard to the promotion of giftedness. For example, Montessori pedagogy, Pestalozzi pedagogy and Peter Petersen pedagogy could be used for this purpose. The interview with the pedagogical specialist confirmed the criticism of the situation-oriented approach written in the literature, to what extent educators actually work oriented towards the child and develop projects from this. In particular, Spitz-Güdden (2010) pointed out this problem. Through the analysis it becomes clear that a quality review should take place in kindergartens.

Literature refers to heterogeneity and equal opportunities (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2018; UNESCO, n.d.).

Kindergartens interpret these terms to mean that there is an orientation towards socially disadvantaged and weaker children (AWO Kita Kaleidoskop, 2021; Ministry for Children, Family, Refugees and Integration of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, 2019, UNESCO, n.d.). The recognition of heterogeneity and equal opportunities for gifted children receives little attention. This results from the lack of education and training on the topic of giftedness. Due to this lack of knowledge and experience, highly gifted kindergarten children can develop massive problems that can manifest themselves into adult life. For this reason, educators and pedagogical specialists should also be trained in this topic. However, this also requires researchers who not only deal with the problems of highly gifted school children (Feger & Prado, 1998; Huser, 2007; Mönks, 2005; Preckel & Vock, 2021; Reichle, 2004; Stapf, 2004) but also focus on highly gifted kindergarten children.

Further research in German-speaking countries such as Switzerland as well as Austria, the research focus in the gifted sector is largely in the school sector (Stiftung für hochbegabte Kinder, n.d.; Begabungsförderung CH, n.d.; Österreichische Zentrum für Begabtenförderung und Begabungsforschung, n.d.).

A scientific examination of the topic of highly gifted kindergarten children is thus fundamental in all German-speaking countries in order to make kindergartens aware of this topic.

This is the only way to identify highly gifted kindergarten children and provide them with targeted support in the future.

6 CONCLUSION

Based on the two analyses, which framework conditions a kindergarten must provide for suitable support for gifted children, as well as the investigation of whether every kindergarten concept is suitable for gifted children. The evaluation shows that not every kindergarten is suitable for highly gifted children at the present time. However, further research on suitable kindergarten concepts should be carried out in order to obtain an overall view.

Suitable framework conditions for the implementation of an institution that promotes giftedness must be brought to the attention of educators and kindergartens. This requires that cities, municipalities and federal states expand the annual training series for educators on the topic of giftedness.

In order to recognise giftedness in children and support them accordingly, educators must be explicitly trained.

The principle of equal opportunities must not prevent those with higher performance from having to orientate themselves towards the average. Prolonged underchallenge, just like constant overchallenge, leads to developmental impairments at all ages. Kindergartens with a concept for the promotion of highly gifted children are especially important for kindergarten children who cannot cope in an "ordinary" kindergarten. Many of these kindergartens are even catch basins for "learning failures". Children who suffered from constant underchallenge in kindergarten and refused to engage in exploratory learning could be motivated again to participate in projects appropriate to their level by switching to special kindergartens.

The German education system pays particular attention to reducing heterogeneity in terms of age and cognitive performance. The PISA and IGLU studies have shown that differentiation and sorting according to cognitive performance do not succeed in the school system in most cases. Sorting is (un)consciously done according to social, psychological stability and ethnic origin.

In order to get a grip on this problem, educators and teachers should be trained in a more targeted way in their training or studies. They should learn to respond to the children more individually and according to their abilities. This applies to all children and young people and not only to the highly gifted. Education policy plays an important role here. Appropriate further training and seminars should be offered for educators. Finally, educational staff must free themselves from traditional guidelines such as age norms.

"Encourage or demand? Encourage and demand? Encourage by demanding!"
(Maria Montessori)

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