

Introductory lecture: Sexual and gender diversity in the context of inclusive educationⁱ

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On the understanding of inclusion and inclusive education

Ever since Germany ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, thereby committing the country to implementing the demand for inclusive education, the debate on inclusion has influenced the discussion among early childhood education professionals as well. Petra Wagner, director of KINDERWELTEN, has pointed out that inclusion aims at the participation of all, and that educational workⁱⁱ This applies to both access to educational institutions and to the use of learning programmes. The inclusion index

The term inclusion is frequently applied to children with special needs, thus creating a connection with the theme of disability and impairment. In fact, this notion of inclusion comes from the American civil rights movement of people with disabilities, who use the term inclusion to claim their full rights to individual development and societal participation. Thus since the 1960s, the term has been strongly associated with inclusive education, and especially with the call for children with and without disabilities to learn together. The 1994 Salamanca statement of the UNESCO World Conference* on Special Needs Education also spoke
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which was also taken up in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* enacted in 2008.

However, since the human right to education is universal and applies to all children, the understanding of inclusion has changed in the meantime: When we speak of upholding the right to education, it makes no sense to limit it to a single characteristic such as disability. In this broader sense of inclusion, it is a matter of including all children and thus of diverse markers of social affiliation. With regard to inclusive education, Annedor important characteristics that play a role in connection with experiences of inclusion or exclusion, such as age/generation, social stratum/milieu, gender, culture/ethnic group, disability/ability, sexual orientation, region or religion.* If we keep these various dimensions of difference in mind, they can help us in our efforts
e, and why not? How
can we identify and remove the specific barriers to participation?

The very first paragraph of the Berlin Kitafördergesetz,* which regulates ECEC centres, also mentions diversity dimensions as the basis of a democratic society, for which ECEC centres should prepare children. The law explicitly mentions gender, sexual identity, disability, ethnic, national and religious affiliation and individual abilities and impairments with regard to coexistence in equality. Thus it presents a legal mandate

diversity in pedagogical work on the basis of equal rights and dismantling existing disadvantages. In its new, 2014 version, the Berlin Programme will also explicitly address gender and sexual diversity.

Where do the diversity dimensions of ‘gender’, ‘gender identity’ and ‘sexual orientation’ become visible in ECEC?

people may see no connection with ECEC or everyday life in ECEC centres, it is worth taking a closer look at how gender, gender identity and sexual orientation manifest themselves in this context.

A growing number of children do not come from traditional nuclear families, but rather from a diverse range of family forms. In addition to patchwork or single-parent families, these also include so-called rainbow families, that is those in which at least one parent is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Colleagues in ECEC increasingly speak of having children in their facilities with two mothers or fathers at home.

Gender-variant children are children who differ from the majority of other boys and girls with respect to their biological sex, gender identity or behavioural role. This applies on the one hand to intersex and transgender children, and on the other to those who do not behave in conformity with gender roles.

Finally, there are also children attending ECEC centres who will later identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, or for whom the experience of falling in love with other children of the same sex is already a reality.

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look at the societal context in which gender and sexual diversity exist.

Societal attitudes toward gender, gender identity and sexual orientation

In our society, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation are perceived and assessed in a certain way, refers to the

assumption that there are only two sexes and that these two sexes are clearly and unambiguously distinguished from one another as well as immutable. For that reason, intersex and transgender people represent problem cases for the heteronormative gender order, since they embody the ambiguity and mutability of gender. Moreover, the two sexes exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another: Masculinity/maleness is more highly valued than femininity/femaleness. Finally, the heteronormative gender order regards sexual desire as normal only between, not within, the sexes: Heterosexuality is considered natural and normal. For that reason, same-sex love also appears to be a problem from this perspective. Our perceptions of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation are shaped by the dominant heteronormative point of view. We need to consider this when dealing with rainbow families, gender-variant children and same-sex orientations.

Children from rainbow families

Frequently, rainbow families are not accepted by their environments as families of equal value and are instead regarded as somehow deficient. This is evident for example in the assumption that the children lack something, or have difficulty developing clear ideas about gender roles. Such hypotheses are rooted in a heteronormative understanding of the family. Concern for the welfare of the child is largely based on the assumption that children need a mother and a father living together for their healthy development. This unquestioned thesis disqualifies all family models that do not conform to the traditional father/mother/child(ren) structure. A societal and pedagogical problem then arises when the absence of one parent is repeatedly conveyed as a deficit. This applies for instance to children who grow up with a single parent. Rainbow families are repeatedly subject to comparisons with classic families and role models. The children are regularly confronted with social situations in which they are expected to provide information about or even justify their family constellation.

The most frequent stigmas and discrimination experienced by children from rainbow families are verbal insults from peers but also threats of violence, damage to property and actual physical violence. A recent comparative study* found that children from rainbow families suffer most from the absence of their own way of life in educational institutions. Here we see a need for ECEC centres to take action by conveying a positive image of family diversity to children. This makes sense not only when there are children from rainbow families in the group; rather, it is an asset for all children, because it reflects a respectful attitude towards all types of families.

Gender-variant Children: Intersex children

Intersexuality remains a social taboo. Parents with an intersex child have usually internalised this taboo. For that reason, even today parents still agree to cosmetic surgery for babies and children with the purpose of binary gender order. In nine out of ten cases, the body created is female, since this procedure is medically simpler. The children subjected to these gender-assignment operations have not agreed to the procedures, and generally experience them as highly traumatic and a life-long burden. For several years now self-help and representative organisations, human rights organisations and political actors have been fighting for the rights of intersex people. Thus, for example, in a recent resolution of October 2013, the European Council called upon its 47 member states to ensure that no-one is subjected to unnecessary medical or surgical treatment that is cosmetic rather than vital for health during infancy or childhood [to] guarantee bodily integrity, autonomy and self-determination to persons concerned, and provide families with intersex children with adequate counselling and support if we recall the traumatic experiences of surgery particularly need a protected framework. The current changes to the Law on Personal Status* stipulate that from

* recommends taking trans-identified children seriously in their gender identity, respecting what they say and supporting them in dealing with their questions of identity. The pressure to conform to prevailing gender norms harms the development of trans-identified children, while sensitive support and protection from a hostile outside world help them.

Gender-variant children: Children who do not conform to gender roles

The world is full of blue- and pink-tinted gendered messages. Girls and boys learn from an early age which colours, toys and activities are considered suitable for their sex and which are not. Children who do not dress or behave in a manner consistent with their role are often reminded quite early and sometimes harshly to behave and express themselves differently. Such restrictions have a negative impact on personal development. In a report of July 2011* UNESCO pointed out the dangers of heteronormativity for children deemed by others to be too effeminate or young girls seen as tomboys endure teasing and sometimes the first blows linked to their appearance and behaviour, perceived as failing to fit in with the heteronormative gender identity keeping with gender-conscious pedagogy, ECEC centres have to give children the space they need and encourage their individual interests and abilities beyond gender clichés.

Children who identify, or are identified, as lesbian, gay or bisexual

Approximately 10 per cent of all young people are attracted to members of the same sex. In the 2010 Australian study cited above, more than 3,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual (-sex attracted) youths between the ages of 14 and 21 provided information on the age at which they realized that their feelings differed from those of most of the people around them. Ten per cent of the youths with same-sex feelings Certainly, these children have no words or explanations for their feelings at the age when they are in ECEC, but the feelings are a reality that they will remember later in life. By the age of 10, 26 per cent already knew, by the age of 13, 60 per cent, and by the age of 15, 85 per cent of the surveyed young people knew of their same-sex orientation. For fear of rejection and marginalisation, children and youth are generally not open about being lesbian, gay or bisexual, but hide this elementary aspect of their identity. For children with feelings towards their own sex, it is important to experience positive attitudes towards same-sex love and relationships in ECEC as a counterweight to the omnipresent negative attitudes they encounter, particularly in the form of abusive language.

Promoting diversity from an early age

Quite early in life children experience inclusion and exclusion, very frequently in connection with social group affiliation and the diversity mentions outlined above. ECEC centres therefore need an inclusive pedagogical practice from the beginning, which is aware of exclusions and works to counteract them, while at the same time appreciating and encouraging diversity. Addressing the diversity of family forms, ways of life, gender roles and identities in a respectful way rooted in equality does everyone good: An early, positive depiction of different life-worlds gives children a chance to learn from an early age how to deal confidently with social diversity, leaving them well prepared for life in an increasingly diverse world.

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ⁱ This introductory lecture was first published in Sozialpädagogisches Fortbildungsinstitut Berlin-Brandenburg und Bildungsinitiative QUEERFORMAT (eds.) (2014), *Vielfalt fördern von klein auf. Sexuelle und geschlechtliche Vielfalt als Themen frühkindlicher Inklusionspädagogik*, Berlin.

ⁱⁱ The literature and references marked here with * can be found in the bibliography.