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# Training programmes for Kindergarten Educators II

by Hanna Vock, Germany

The May 2003 issue of ECHA News contained the concept for the ECHA-Certificate "Specialist in Pre-School Gifted Education", a curriculum to enable kindergarten educators to support highly gifted children appropriately. In accordance with this concept and with the financial support of the *Imhoff Stiftung* (Imhoff Foundation) a first course, enlisting 12 educators from Cologne, has been conducted since March 2003. Further courses are being planned by the ICBF Münster as well as by the newly founded *Institute for Pre-School Advance of Gifted Children Bonn* ([www.hochbegabte-vorschulkinder.de](http://www.hochbegabte-vorschulkinder.de)). The following article deals with selected pieces of experience from that first course and introduces a yet farther reaching concept to be put into effect in another course being launched for the first time in October 2003.

The twelve Cologne educators participating in the first course come from different kindergartens. An initial questionnaire among them showed one half of the participants assessing the administrator's<sup>1</sup> attitudes towards the subject and the course as anything from sceptical to disapproving. Ten of the twelve participants are paying for the course out of their own pocket in part or entirely – in spite of the low salaries for educators in Germany. So far 4 out of 12 sessions of the seminar have taken place and each of the participants has handed in 3 to 4 of the 10 assigned written papers.

The seminar has so far focused on the following questions:

- How can we detect far beyond average talents and intellectual gifts?
- Which possible ways of advancing the highly gifted in a kindergarten setting are conceivable?
- Which difficulties and correspondingly which solutions do we recognize in communication between educators and highly gifted children as well as between the latter and their more average peers?

One major feature of the concept is the close connection between theory and practical work. One half of the written papers prepared by the participants are theoretical, the other half practical in nature.

During the seminar the theoretical input (oral presentations and mandatory reading) is connected with the practical work documented in written assignments.

The concept itself starts out as follows: "The second year... serves to apply the first year's contents in a more profound way under the guidance of the instructors. During this stage, seminar units are used to develop practical exercises, to advise and guide the participants during the implementation of these exercises in their own kindergartens..."

This was modified during the final preparations for the first course, shortly before the start, so that already after the first sessions the participants were assigned their first practical projects, which have been completed successfully throughout. These assignments dealt with the task of choosing one child and finding out exactly what its specific talents and gifts were. The instruments by which this was conducted were the *observation chart*, the *questionnaire on personal interests* and the *parental questionnaire* (all as proposed by Joelle Huser<sup>3</sup>). These had been discussed in depth during the seminar. The participants then drew conclusions from their findings right away and implemented them in their practical work. This quick transfer of observations into practice is intentional and serves to enable the group to discuss and deepen the resulting experience during the seminar.

Proceeding in this manner the participants have already achieved a highly individualized perspective of the gifted children in their groups in the first third of the course. The angle of their pedagogical work has swiftly changed from working on the children's developmental deficits towards promoting their specific talents and interests.

The participants have expressed their astonishment about the high level of abilities and interests of their subjects and their own so quickly improved ability to perceive these qualities in the children. There have even been reports of positive changes in the children's behaviour and increased contentedness at this early stage.

With respect to the individuality of the children observed and the specific priorities set by individual educators on the course, participants have now begun to take their own specific learning paths. It therefore appeared logical not to assign the third practical project to all participants indiscriminately, but rather to comply with the differing priorities of interest.

One participant for example is concentrating primarily on communication with the parents of highly gifted children. Another is implementing the different instruments of observation on average children in order to sharpen her perception of high ability. Yet another participant has been focusing on the reading ability and interest of "her" subject and is now gathering opinions and attitudes of parents of specially gifted children, as well as of kindergartens and schools on the pro's and con's of the introduction of early reading in kindergarten. In another case one participant is conducting a rather demanding cognitive project with some children, documenting their reactions. And, as a last example, one participant is incorporating the ideas put forward by one of her highly gifted children into the organization and guidance of a circus project.

**Certain stages of learning have been defined in the concept for the course:**

- Stage 1: *Gather knowledge.*  
Compile information and relevant questions on the issue. / Recognize already existing experience.
- Stage 2: *Understand / conceptualize.*  
Throughout the course related experience and related reading is being clarified. New insights are being explored.
- Stage 3: *Integrate knowledge.*  
New insights are being evaluated and integrated in the individual system of competence. Already existing knowledge is either being confirmed or modified.
- Stage 4: *Experimenting and implementing in practice.*  
Try new procedures and methods. / Creative implementation of newly acquired knowledge in accordance to individual situations. / Promote insights towards colleagues and parents in more persuading terms  
(Stage 4 is to be achieved by all participants who want to attain the ECHA Certificate<sup>4</sup>)
- Stage 5: *Change of practice.*  
Planning and implementing, preferably in cooperation with the staff, structural changes in the actual working environment.
- Stage 6: *New structures.*  
Organize individual knowledge and ability in new structures. Take up activities to instruct others (lectures, workshops, advancement training), offer internships.

Some participants are already concerned with tasks related to stages 5 and 6. They report having intensive thematic discussions among their colleagues resulting in perceptibly increasing openness towards the issue of advancement of high ability. Two participants are taking part in conferences with representatives of school boards and local governments and are preparing to engage in public discourse.

Above all, participants are growing increasingly aware that the kindergarten's offerings would need to be adapted to the gifted children's actual developmental stages. However, participants still often find it difficult to put their new insights into practice. This comes as no surprise to those who are aware, that in kindergarten educators' training – and consequentially in kindergarten pedagogics – explicitly cognitive advancement has been underrated for the longest time in the context of integrated children's pedagogics. In addition it has not been common usage, and it still isn't, to even consider differences in giftedness in kindergartens let alone act upon the consideration to further the children accordingly.

This is precisely what will be focused upon in the upcoming phases of the on-going ECHA-Certificate course.

The next phase of the seminar, for example, will involve the cognitive advancement of specially gifted pre-school children and especially the introduction to scientific thinking. In this

context one priority lies in the realization that highly gifted children need other highly gifted children in order to satisfactorily put into action their complex ideas for playing with others. Such fortunate playing scenarios are not easily put into practice in kindergartens with only few if not single cases of high ability.

For this reason the *Institute for Pre-School Advance of Gifted Children* will, in addition to the certificate "Specialist in Pre-School Gifted Education" offer another project recognized by ECHA: "Creating Special-Needs Kindergartens for Gifted Children" (Schwerpunktkindergärten für Hochbegabtenförderung). In October 2003 two kindergartens will be starting to operate accordingly. This project is to make it possible for several highly gifted children to be looked after in the same group with average children.

The entire team participates in the project not the single educator. It is therefore necessary for the administrators of the kindergartens to be positively inclined towards the idea of pre-school advancement of the highly gifted.

**The project encompasses three features which will temporarily overlap:**

- 1) The participants take 2.5 years to acquire the same competences as are developed throughout the certificate course.
- 2) They incorporate their new insights into the concept of their kindergarten and make sure that the kindergarten is presented to the public with its new profile as a Focus Kindergarten for Advancement of Gifted Children.
- 3) In the course of developing towards the status of an integrated focus kindergarten the participants will receive consultations and support by the teaching staff of the course.

**The following paragraphs contain the concept of the project.**

The objects and contents concerning the participants' training are identical with those of the certificate course and have therefore been omitted here. They can be found in the May 2003 issue of the ECHA News magazine (vol.17, no 1, ed.).

**Excerpts of the concept for focus kindergartens:**

*"The project is a combination of*

- an in-service training programme for educators working in pre-school education,

and

- a support of the development of pre-school institutions that want to include the special needs of gifted children in their conception.

The programme is organized by the "Institut zur Förderung hoch begabter Vorschulkinder, Bonn."

The contents of the course programme have been approved by the European Council for High Ability (ECHA).

Project manager is Hanna Vock, pedagogue MA and instructor for pre-school educators with an ECHA Diploma."

*"Provided that all tasks of the programme are completely accomplished and the individual requirements are met, participants will receive:*

- a Certificate, entitling them to use the following professional title:  
'Specialist in Pre-School Gifted Education / Fachkraft für Hochbegabtenförderung im Vorschulbereich.'
- in addition, the kindergarten will obtain a certificate attesting to the successful participation of that institution."

*"The overall objective of the project is to create the first local network of integrated special-needs kindergartens for gifted children.*

The project will start with especially motivated kindergarten teams. By means of comprehensive training and consulting, they will be assisted on their way to develop a focus on high ability support in their kindergarten. Families with gifted children will obtain an appropriate offer of support, education and care for their children.

The process of development of these special-needs kindergartens is to be guided and accompanied on a scientific basis.

Depending on the size of the individual institutions, three to four kindergarten teams should be trained at the same time in order to allow for the experience of learning within the group and to provide the possibility of an intensive exchange of experiences.

Co-operation with the respective organizations and institutions financing the participating kindergartens is necessary."

*"The project described here focuses on the training of teams and can in part take place in the participating kindergarten institutions. The concrete conditions under which the process of development of the special-needs kindergartens evolves are an important aspect of the training programme and will find their place in the project.*

A fundamental part of our conception is the idea of integrated kindergarten groups composed of gifted children and children of average potential in equal proportions. This method is well-tried: It has also been employed in the only two kindergartens in Germany that have been supporting gifted children up to now (one in Hannover and one in Nuremberg).

There are two kinds of advantages to this form of integration:

- The (trained) educator can develop complex projects and small-group activities that are challenging for gifted children, without neglecting the rest of the group.

Experience of the integrated kindergartens in Hannover and Nuremberg shows that all children, not only the gifted, benefit from these activities.

- The gifted children get the possibility to interact with children that are "alike", and so (re)discover their specific characteristics also in others. By doing this, they can live according to their needs: play more complex games, communicate more complex ideas and develop according to these. The problem of being an outsider can be alleviated."

*"At the beginning of the second year the specific admission of gifted children into the participating kindergartens up to half of the groups' sizes will be planned.*

The process of admission of these children will be accompanied thoroughly in the context of the project. In addition to the seminar units, the kindergartens can dispose of consulting time with the project management (6 hours per month and kindergarten).

Thus the kindergarten teams can make appointments for consulting with the project instructors. This can take place on site at the individual kindergarten or by phone. This consulting time is an important element of the project.

Its function is to foster the following processes:

- the admission of gifted children,
- the development of a methodology for the support of ability in the kindergarten group,
- the analysis of concrete situations that occur in kindergartens,
- the solution of problems which appear during the introduction of the new conception,
- development of individual support plans,
- the preparation of conversations with parents and of parent-teacher conferences,
- co-operation with elementary schools,
- the presentation of the conception in the public sphere.

During the last six-month period consulting time will be reduced to 3 hours per month and per kindergarten.

At the end of the project, a closing seminar will be held.

This seminar will evaluate the quantity and quality of the integrative support of gifted and average children in kindergarten that could be realized by the project."

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<sup>1</sup> Kindergartens in Germany are run by various administrative bodies, for example municipalities, parishes or parents' councils.

<sup>2</sup> I call "highly gifted" the top 2-3 % of children in an age group, achieving the highest scores in intelligence tests; "talented far above average" I consider the following top 12-13 % of high achievers. The term "specially gifted" refers to both groups as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> Joelle Huser (2000), Lichtblick für helle Köpfe: Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich.

<sup>4</sup> The participants of all following courses, now to be conducted by the *Institute for Pre-School Advance of Gifted Children*, will receive a certificate which is acknowledged by ECHA as being equivalent to the ECHA Certificate.