



nifbe-Themenheft Nr. 5

Individual Promotion in Kindergarten and Primary School

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Schutzgebühr 2 Euro

Gefördert durch:



**Niedersächsisches Ministerium
für Wissenschaft und Kultur**

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Abstract:

Individual promotion seems to be the appropriate way of enabling each child to use her or his potentials and transform them into achievement. By 'individual promotion' we mean all educational activities that have the intention of supporting the development of the talents as well as the learning development of each child, whereas the gifts themselves can be understood as potentials for abilities and not as skills or competencies as such. In kindergarten individual promotion can be found as a basic educational concept, whereas in primary school it consists more of a range of specific activities and methods that are applied to support every child depending on her or his development and achievement. Central aspects are the creation of the learning environment as well as educational relationships. If one succeeds in helping children – after suitable preparation – to organize their learning themselves, then there is time and energy to attend to individual children in an environment such as in primary school and kindergarten that directs its educational activities towards groups.

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Each child must be in a position to use her or his potential and transform it into achievement through individual promotion

1. Introduction

If we assume that every child is endowed with gifts and that these gifts are not only different but also manifold, then educational activities must take this fact into account. Individual promotion is a suitable means of supporting the development of gifts. If the development of each child's personality is at the centre of considerations, then each child must be in a position to use her or his potential and transform it into achievement through individual promotion (see Solzbacher/Behrens 2010).

Therefore for several years individual promotion within the context of 'education for everybody' is nationally and internationally an indicator of the quality of educational reforms. It is part of the educational mission. In the meantime the improvement of individual promotion has been fixed as a central guideline in education plans and in decrees and school laws in many of the German federal states.

The present debate concerning individual promotion in educational policy is buoyed by great optimism. However, such an approach is also a great challenge to its implementation and has its limits. This is often lost from sight. In the following text the results of our research will be presented in excerpts. Our main question was how, as seen by the kindergarten and primary school teachers involved, individual promotion in kindergartens and primary schools is organized and how they should be supported in future so that a country-wide implementation of individual promotion is simplified. The differences of both institutions, kindergarten and primary school, are taken into account as well as how the transition from one institution to the next can be structured and continuity be secured.

2. The Concept of Individual Promotion in Kindergarten and Primary School

On the basis of our 2009 survey of kindergarten teachers as well as primary school teachers in 2010 and 2011 we defined individual promotion like this:

For us individual promotion means every educational activity that has the intention to support the development of the gifts and talents and the learning of each individual child, which includes the discovery and consideration of the specific potential, the specific (learning) conditions, (learning) needs, (learning) paths, (learning) aims and (learning) opportunities. An important starting point is the personal situation of the child.

Part of these activities is the professional review of the meaning of the relationship between the educator and the child, as well as the reflection of the process of the development of the social-emotional and cognitive traits of the personality. This includes learning environments and learning processes that are promoting and challenging and that have to be created together with the child.

3. Individual Promotion as a Promotion of Gifts and Talents

Generally speaking gifts and talents can be characterised as ‘potential abilities’ (Heller/Perleth 2007, p. 141), which does not describe skills and competencies themselves, but the possibilities to develop them. This means that gifts and talents must be seen as dynamic, as it can be assumed that they can be developed, trained and shifted during the lifetime (Solzbacher/Behrens 2010, p. 46).

In many publications dealing with individual promotion it’s remarkable that there is the very high aim of the optimal unfolding of gifts and talents and the exploit of chances (Klafki 2002; Bönsch 2004; Braun/Schmischke 2006). Still, from the point of education policy – partly also from the sciences – there is a lack of establishing what that means. In schools, for example, there is still the trivial as well as long-lived division into three tiers according to the capabilities, that means the ‘low achievers’ are positioned opposite the gifted (and not the high achievers). The so called average achievers are mentioned; however, as far as promotion is concerned they are often not taken into account. In kindergarten, though, the ‘noisy ones’ and the ‘quiet ones’ as well as the ‘active ones’ and the ‘passive ones’ are often put opposite each other. Here, too, the spread between the two poles is ignored because of the prevailing classifications. Where individual promotion is seen as the basic orientation of educational activities and is reflected again and again among colleagues, there is in contrast greater success in dealing more individually with the different needs of the children and in creating learning environments as well as learning challenges suitably flexible.

Individual promotion as a basic attitude in educational practice

4. On the Incidence and Objective of Individual Promotion

First of all, on the basis of our research we find that individual promotion is already widespread in kindergartens and primary schools in Lower Saxony. About 90 per cent of the primary school and kindergarten teachers questioned said that in their workplace individual promotion takes place.

A closer look at what is understood by individual promotion in each case shows significant differences in understanding by kindergarten and primary school teachers. On the basis of our research it can be said that in kindergarten the direct look at the individual child is important for kindergarten teachers. This view is the starting point of the daily educational work. It must be stressed that concentrating on an individual child leaves room for different educational approaches. However, a constructivist view of the child predominates. Today most kindergarten teachers see a child as an active creator of his or her development. With this background individual promotion appears as an educational approach and not a method or a specific collection of methods. In this regard the understanding of individual promotion by kindergarten teachers is different to that of the primary school teachers we questioned. Their answers show much more that the majority of them see individual pro-

*Different understandings
of individual promotion in
Kindergarten and primary
school*

motion as specific actions or methods applied to support each child according to his or her level of development and achievement.

These different views of individual promotion lead to different aims. In kindergarten the aim of individual promotion is tied to the development of the personality of the children. Asked for the most important aims of individual promotion kindergarten teachers quite often mention the strengthening of the children's self-confidence, next to the promotion of specific skills.

From the point of view of primary school teachers the most important aim of individual promotion is a different one, to be specific the support of weak pupils. Besides, many of them see the support of pupils according to their learning capabilities as an aim, as well as the support of able pupils. The aim of individual promotion that is seen in fourth place is the improvement of the motivation to learn and to achieve as well as the forming of the personality. There is great consistency among teachers that individual promotion supports the development of children, that it is important to balance deficits versus abilities and that it stems from the right of the child for optimal promotion.

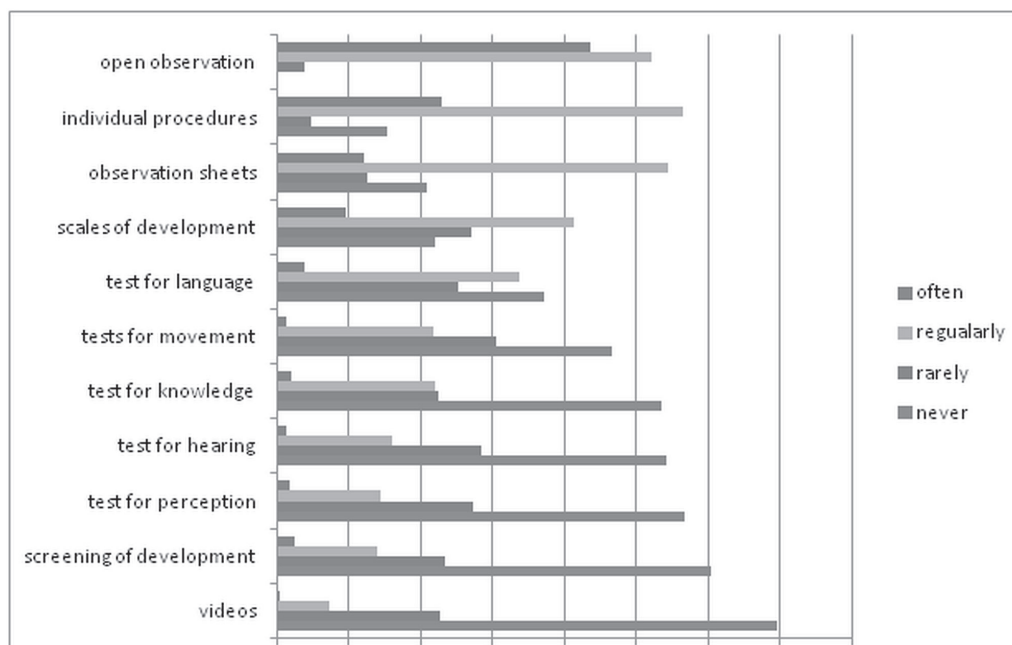
The opinions of kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers in both groups differ as far as individual promotion can be realized. Less than half of the kindergarten teachers who took part in the online survey assume that the individual promotion of each individual child is not possible in their institution. Another quarter of those who answered is not sure. Just slightly more than a quarter (177 kindergarten teachers) definitely answered the question whether it is manageable with 'yes'. Scepticism among primary school teachers is just as high. About 60 per cent of primary school teachers think that individual promotion puts unrealistic demands on the school. The opinions of the other 40 per cent is interesting; they see the feasibility of individual promotion as a smaller problem. For them the planning and organizing of lessons geared towards the aims and processes of individual promotion means only little more preparation. Our research shows that teachers who build their lessons on the principles of individual promotion must prepare more exact and differentiated plans, however, in the end they often finish their preparations faster because they can look more systematically for suitable materials and contents for the children. Furthermore they have less work while they are teaching. If the children succeed in working self-organized because the lessons are prepared to that effect time and energy remains for feedback and consolidation with individual children. In our research we found that the burden for teachers during the lessons themselves turned out to be less if the planning was based on the principles of individual promotion. As the offers for the children are more suitable the teacher needs to explain less during lessons, needs to give less support when difficulties turn up and has to intervene less because of idling children who learn faster. All in all, our research shows, there is less unrest.

5. Methods of individual promotion in kindergarten and primary school

One must remember that in both institutions, kindergarten and primary school, individual promotion takes place within groups. Creating a suitable learning environment in kindergarten and differentiated learning challenges in primary school are therefore ways of coping with different needs and abilities, especially in groups.

As stressed above, for kindergarten one must say that individual promotion describes more of a basic attitude. Therefore one central result of our study is that individual promotion in kindergarten takes place independently of the educational concept or how the group is organized. It must be understood as a basic approach of educational practice with the individual child, which – next to the creation of the learning environment – is mainly based on the shaping of a relationship. Starting point for every case of individual promotion is observation. When working in kindergarten, next to open observation there is a wide variety of methods for systematic observation:

Creating a suitable learning environment in kindergarten and differentiated learning challenges in primary school are ways of coping with different needs and abilities

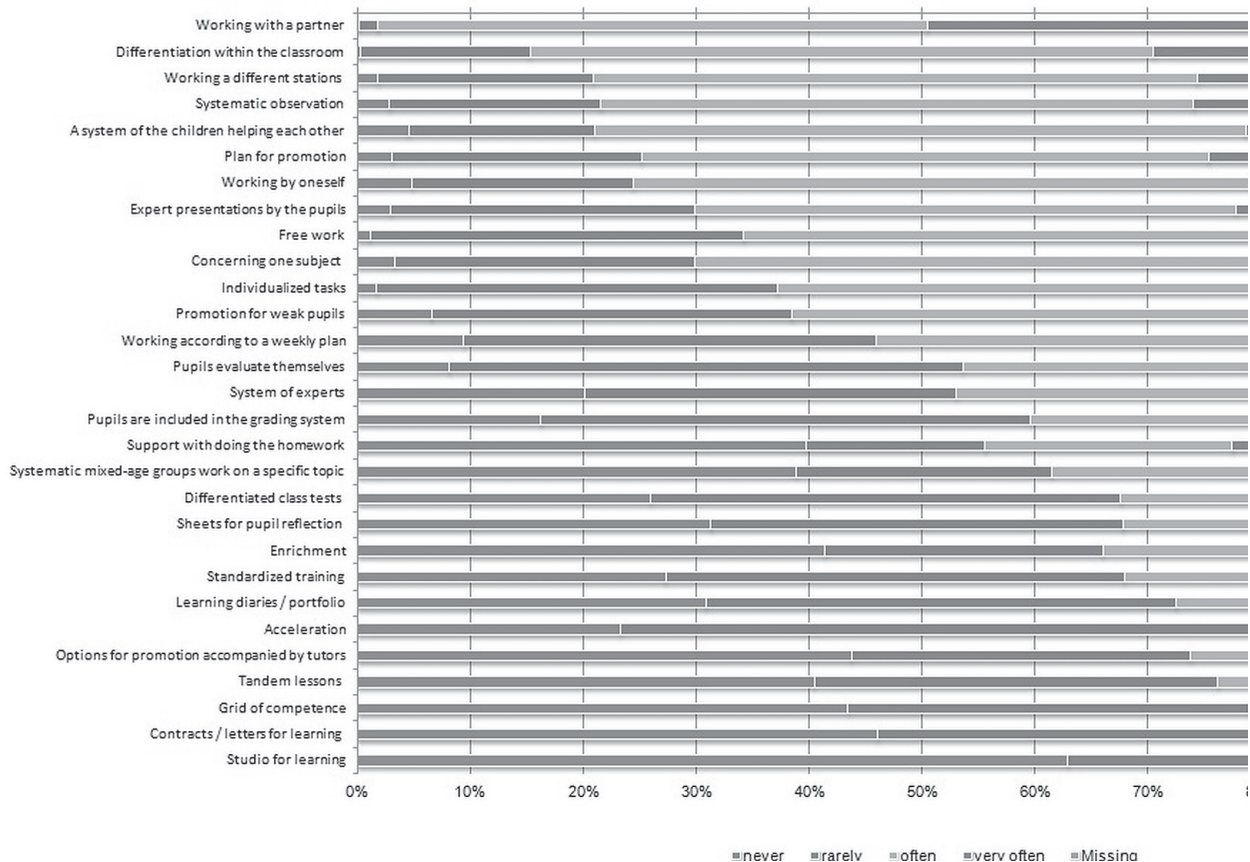


Although kindergarten teachers are asked to use systematic methods of observation, open observation is most wide spread. There are different reasons for that. First of all large-scale standardized methods are sometimes incompatible with the job of a kindergarten teacher and being close to the child. Secondly many of the well-known methods are based on an orientation towards deficits, and this does not tie in with the kind of observation kindergarten teachers need, because the aim is to design support measures based on what is observed about the abilities and needs of the child. Thirdly standardized methods of observation require more resources and time, and therefore do not fit into the everyday work of kindergarten. Our research shows that the widely used open observation is often embedded in the reflection of observation within a kindergarten team, which is a central part of early educational work. In this way open observation gains a quality that makes it comparable with systematic methods.

A large pool of different methods of promotion which in the beginning look at least partly unconnected

In primary school individual promotion has access to a large pool of different methods of promotion which in the beginning look at least partly unconnected and which are spread quite differently and which aren't really used systematically. Compared to that educational diagnosis which takes place before promotion has a tendency of taking a back seat:

Abb. 2: Use of instruments for individual promotion in primary school (N = 699)



When looking at this overview of the instruments used it must be taken into account that behind the descriptions there are very different forms of putting them to use. One can see, though, that the methods are used in many different ways. Especially methods that are helpful for a differentiated approach geared towards the individual child are used by only a few teachers.

Individual promotion in the sense of a differentiation of heterogeneity is only used by a small number of teachers. Knowing this it is not surprising that differentiation within the group is mentioned as a method used, however in reality the method used most often is that two pupils work as partners. The special gifts of pupils or of those able to learn fast are therefore often used to support slower or weaker pupils. For example, able pupils often are put into the role as an 'assistant teacher'.

The use of diagnostic methods as well as instruments of individual promotion show that the chances and possibilities of promoting individual gifts have not been fully exhausted yet. At least, this applies if it is understood in the sense of a diagnosis that is differentiated and based on resources and the formulation of individual learning paths and aims. Some of the problems will increase when inclusion is implemented in all the schools, as planned.

6. *Team reflection as a framework*

The effective and comprehensive implementation of individual promotion in each kindergarten and primary school needs unconditional coordination within the team or the staff. As far as coordination in kindergartens is concerned it can be said that on the one hand common reflection on the observed behaviour of each child is the core business of elementary educational activities. On the other hand, however, there are no reliable structures yet to carry it out. The results of our online survey show that in only half of the kindergartens there is time set aside for consideration and the discussion of individual cases. In the interviews it became clear that it is not unusual to have these discussions privately during the time off in the afternoon after work. This shows the need for action on the part of those who run the kindergarten. The following statement shows the benefit that can be gained from a discussion time that is given to reflect on what has been observed:

“Again and again we notice how much we know about children when we share our knowledge. There is so much information to easily have a talk with the parents Our experience is time and again that during or after the talks with the parents they say ‘What a great child we have.’ So basically it’s much more important to explain to the parents what the strengths are because then they support their child by seeing his or her strengths so that they can accept their child the way he or she is.” (from an interview held within the study on individual promotion in kindergarten)

This quotation is important for three reasons. First of all a time allocated in the timetable of the institution is helpful to gather as much information on a child as possible. Secondly it facilitates preparation for talks with the parents. Thirdly it makes it possible to focus explicitly on the strengths (abilities) of the child, which has a positive effect on the relationship between the parents and the child.

For the last couple of years the implementation of cooperation within the staff of a primary school has been accompanied by a number of education policy measures e.g. the request to develop an individual educational programme for each school. In order for these requirements dictated by educational policies to have a practical effect on individual schools, teachers must be included as stakeholders with equal rights. It is not enough to look at teachers as executors of innovative ideas. Their responsible creativity is asked for, the way it is laid out within the framework of the autonomy of schools. However, this freedom of professionally creating is beset by quite a few contradictions of educational policies, which are seen as a dilemma by teachers. For example teachers see measures (of control) as a restriction of independence and at the same time as a contradiction of the demand to individually promote children. These measures do not use individual but social norms to compare children. Our results show that measures such as the inspection of schools or comparison tests are not seen as supportive but only as instruments of control. Therefore their significance as far as individual promotion is concerned is seen as negative by the majority of the teachers. Obviously teachers do not experience administrative requirements of this kind as a contribution to the development of schools and learning. The function of these instruments for the improvement of quality is obviously not clear enough so that the chances they could have on principle to develop the qualities of individual schools cannot be fully used.

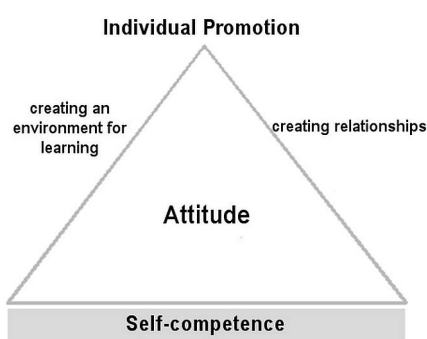
Implementation of individual promotion in each kindergarten and primary school needs unconditional coordination within the team or the staff

The eye of the needle for turning the results of external evaluation into the improvement of individual promotion lies in the development of schools. The staff in each school must discuss the results, work out a catalogue of measures built on the results and establish a culture of committee work for the systematic promotion of children. However, such a comprehensive change still seems to be in need of development in many schools. For this extension of tasks heads of schools are needed that have been chosen and appropriately trained, who need to be more or less free of teaching responsibilities, have sufficient personnel for administration and are paid accordingly, because they play a central role in managing the development of quality in the individual school. The resources and freedom of time and money that have been put at the schools' disposal are obviously not enough, especially in primary schools.

In order for the management of schools to be able to push the development of quality towards more individual promotion they also need colleagues who can take over responsibility – and who also have the time to do so. These resources seem to be most important to get teachers closer to their personal ethos of an education geared towards the child. This way the demands of educational policies and the individual attitudes of teachers towards the well-being of children can be harmonized and add to the teachers' contentment in their jobs.

7. View on promotion of self-competence and shaping of relationships

The following diagram shows the relationship between individual promotion and self-competence:



Self-competence and individual promotion here are dependent of each other. Starting with an attitude built on self-competence the educator creates the framework for learning as well as the relationship with each child based on educational reflection. If that is the way individual promotion is understood the child can develop his or her self-competence in kindergarten and school. This in turn leads to the child being better able to use the offers for individual promotion. In order for this model to work the relationships as well as the classroom must be designed accordingly.

Relationships take place in groups and under the pressure of time

In educational relationships in schools and kindergartens educators usually work with a group, in which the needs of all children for contact and learning must be taken into account. This also means that again and again the individual needs of each child have to fit in with the needs of the group. Therefore one has to decide continuously how much attention can be given to each child. The results of our research in primary schools show that the decisions of each teacher can be extremely different, but that behind the decisions there are different concepts of fairness. These concepts decide on which didactical principles are preferred. In primary school for example there is the widespread preference to pay most of the attention to “the weakest”:

“I can really only look after those who are very weak and not after those who are in between as well”. (from an interview with a teacher in the study of individual promotion in primary school).

In kindergarten it is the especially conspicuous or inconspicuous who is seen as needy by the kindergarten teacher.

“When the new children come then there are [...] specialists [...] who are extremely conspicuous and then we quickly say: ‘Well, we need to have a look.’ Or ‘I noticed something that we need to look at.’” (from an interview with a kindergarten teacher in the study of individual promotion in the kindergarten).

In both cases attention is experienced as something that is scarce, that must be shared according to a fair assessment of needs. Those who have the greatest need for attention from the perspective of the educators get it.

Another example of fairness is that of the “fairness of achievement”: Maybe this idea of fairness of achievement can be found in the opinion: “Individual promotion must be wanted by the child”. 67.2 per cent of the primary school teachers taking part in the online survey agreed with this sentence. It can be assumed cautiously that with the increasing age of the children fairness of achievement becomes more important. In a similar research project carried out with teachers at secondary schools 90 per cent answered that individual promotion must be wanted by the pupils (Solzbacher 2008, p. 34).

A third idea of fairness relevant for our research is the one of “fairness of distribution”. The following quotation shows how the demand for fairness of distribution can be seen in view of the attention of the teacher with the aid of individual promotion in the form a conscious creation of a relationship. It can be found in the presentation of the culture of feedback practiced at the school in third and fourth year when handing out grades for the school report. At this school two grades (here: third and fourth grade) are taught together in on class room.

“The school reports are written individually as ‘word reports’. We would prefer not having to write reports using figures, but unfortunately we have no influence on that. What we do is we continuously talk with the children. [...] The good thing about two years in one classroom is that we have more time to look after the children, because the children work autonomously with weekly schedules and therefore know exactly what to do in which lesson. This is why I can take children out one by one and talk to them. [...] That’s the same when I return the results of a test. I never return the tests to the whole class at the same time, but I talk to each child individually, talk about the test and then I see what grade it is. And then I also ask: why did you answer the maths problem that way? Can you explain it to me?’ Simply to see how the child reacts

The individual concept of fairness decides which organisation of the learning environment and which didactical principles are preferred in primary school

towards the maths problem now and how he or she reacted in the special situation of the test.” (from an interview with a teacher in the study on individual promotion in primary school).

The feedback on achievement needs reflection on how to shape the relationship, because an insensitive feedback can have a negative effect on the pupil-teacher-relationship (Solzbacher / Kuhl 2011). From the point of view of this teacher it is interesting that the learning progress of all the children basically seems to be equally important. The structure of the lessons creates free spaces and times to learn and it has two aims: On the one hand the handing out of grades is put into context and in that way a child can understand why she / he is given a certain grade. On the other hand the teacher uses the one-on-one interview to understand how the child thinks. This way the teacher has the chance to become aware of competencies and knowledge of the children that can be used for further individual promotion.

In kindergarten the question of fairness in giving time to children shows up in a different way. This question turns up in staff discussions when it has to be decided which child to talk about. In every day situations the decision which child to attend to must be taken under the pressure of time, in planned sessions, however, every child must be in focus, as the following quotation shows: “[...] for the reports on learning stages we also observe the children and now we write such a report once a year for every child. It’s the third year now that we have done this. In the first year we started by writing a report [on the development of learning] for those about to start school. We had to practice [...] how to organize the time for that. (Taken from an interview with a kindergarten teacher for the study on individual promotion in kindergarten).

At this point it becomes clear that the requirement to be fair in giving even time to each child can only be fulfilled when the instrument – in this case the documentation of a child’s education and learning – is competently mastered. One must also be realistic in looking at one’s own resources and those of the colleagues and to give the new instruments a chance for some time to work.

In kindergarten the question of fairness in giving time to children shows up in a different way

The promotion of self-competence needs the individual responsibility of the child and the adult

The basis for regular and intensive attention towards each child is allowing the children go and work independently. Only then does free time appear that can be used to care for each child intensively.

It’s not only the children who have to learn to take personal responsibility for their studies, it is also the responsibility of the educators.

“There are so many small things [...] Then the child says: ‘What’s the time?’ [...], then actually it would be better to say ‘Look, where is our clock? There, look at it.’ [...] Last year I did very much myself and the children were just sitting there. And I was really harassed. [...] Now I have learned that it’s a good idea to put the children to work. They are proud and I am constantly sending them on trips. [for example if they have] no football: Formerly I would have gone to get one. But now I say: ‘No, you go to Mr. XY’, that’s our caretaker. Then: ‘What do you ask him?’ And then the child says it and I say: ‘Yes, exactly, and politely, please.’ What I really want to say, this is happening all the time. This learning by oneself or teaching to learn by oneself” (from an interview taken within the study on individual promotion in primary school). This quotation makes it clear that there are many small opportunities that can be seized if one wants to boost the personal responsibility necessary for

If the children work independently, free time does appear that can be used to care for each child intensively

learning. In doing so, the primary school teachers can rely on the promotion of self-competence that was started in kindergarten. For example, in many kindergartens the children learn to choose what is on offer, according to their interests, to finish these tasks, to collect the materials they need themselves or to have breakfast together with their friends and to stick to the time frame given. Not all the children are equally good at it. Still, the children have often developed abilities that the school could later build on much more.

8. *Thinking in education biographies*

In the end individual promotion means thinking in education biographies. Regarding individual promotion in the transition from kindergarten to primary school, in terms of a successful handing over the 'baton', educational stakeholders need to meet at 'eye level'. What is needed for this is next to having knowledge of each others field of work, mediation and support through structural measures.

If the structuring of the transition from one institution to the next is seen as a common task by all those involved and if the forms as well as the intensity of cooperation are the measure for the individual support of the child when coping with this task, the results of our study can be summarised thus: The transition between kindergarten and school is formed by many forms of cooperation. The bases are mandatory rules. Many educators are already on their way to overcoming traditional concepts of education and discrepancies between the institutions. However, it depends very much on the personal commitment of kindergarten and primary school teachers how far-reaching the cooperation is. Structural specifications are still the exception.

It is striking that there are extreme differences in the intensity of the cooperation between kindergarten and primary school. This concerns mainly the question of how much they know about each other and understand what the other institution does.

Only on the basis of appreciating each other's work, can the transition from one institution to the next be designed for the children in a way that continuity and discontinuity are in balance, and then the transition can usually be mastered well. Forms of cooperation such as (early) language support for children about to start school, as it takes place in Lower Saxony, are especially interesting because it is possible to agree upon adequate and shared instruments of diagnosis and concepts of promotion. In this way the cooperation also supports the development of the quality of both institutions.

There is another field important for individual promotion where cooperation is absolutely necessary: the question of the 'proper' preparation for school. It is an issue beset by contradiction and problems when designing transition. Our research shows that here an agreement on what should be promoted is decisive. After this dialogue was initiated by education policy it must be further supported to implement it country-wide. Therefore it is regrettable that the project 'bridge year', provided with resources, will come to an end.

For a successful transition between kindergarten and primary school, educational stakeholders need to meet at 'eye level'.

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Impressum

V.i.S.d.P.:

Niedersächsisches Institut für frühkindliche Bildung und Entwicklung /
Forschungsstelle Begabungsförderung

Leitung: Prof. Dr. Claudia Solzbacher / Prof. Dr. Julius Kuhl

Translated by Dr. Annette Heinbokenl

Osnabrück 2014

The Research Centre for Promotion of Abilities is part of the Institute for Education and Development in Early Childhood of Lower Saxony (nifbe), founded in 2007. It is chaired by Prof. Dr. Claudia Solzbacher (educational science) und Prof. Dr. Julius Kuhl (psychology).

The research centre works interdisciplinary and deals with questions of the promotion of abilities in elementary as well as primary education and approaches these questions from the perspective of education science, psychology and social science. The present focuses of research are ability and relationship, self-competence and the development of self-competence as well as individual promotion. The methods of research comprise videography, quantitative techniques (questionnaires and on-line questioning to be analysed with SPSS), qualitative procedures (investigation with expert interviews, group discussions and other forms of personal interviews procedures of analysis along the analysis of content and grounded theory).

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