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Promotion of Self-Competence in Kindergarten and Primary School

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Abstract:

We assume that every child is endowed with gifts and needs support to develop these gifts. This text illustrates how kindergartens and primary schools can create a motivating space where learning can take place, in order to support the development of the children's self-competence. Another main issue concerns the forming of a professional educational relationship, as we think that only an educational activity that focuses on the emotional as well as the cognitive processes serves the development of self-competence. Furthermore the theoretical construct of self-competence is shown to be part of the field of psychology and education. A working definition and seven important elements of self-competence will be presented. Finally the type of (structural) framework that can either hinder or support the promotion of self-competence will be described.

Content:

1. Introduction

Self-competence, sometimes called ego-competence or personal competence, is one of those expressions that incorporates many ideas, constructs and assumptions. It is often assumed that when this expression is used it is understood by everybody in the same way. But if one listens carefully it becomes clear that the concept of self-competence encompasses a field of enormous breadth.

Apart from this confusing basis, in the end most kindergarten teachers and educators agree that self-competence is important. However, there is disagreement and insecurity concerning the question 'to what end'. How does self-competence develop? And what exactly is it? What does self-competence achieve? In which way is self-competence effective? And from the educators perspective: What can I do to promote self-competence?

In this brochure we want to explore these questions and try to give answers by first having a look at the expression 'self-competence' and then clarifying its meaning for learning and the development of the personality. Then we will describe important self-competences and their practical relevance in everyday life. Last but not least we will describe a model of how self-competence evolves, how it can be promoted and which requirements are needed on the part of educators.

2. Every child has potential

Children's gifts are as manifold and different as the children themselves.

This assumption is the basis of our research at the research centre of the Niedersächsische Institut für frühkindliche Bildung und Entwicklung (nifbe), from an educational as well as psychological point of view. The gifts of children are as manifold and different as the children themselves. It is the task of educators when acting professionally to recognize this and to take it into account in the daily routine. Furthermore it is their task to inspire, elicit and promote every child's gifts by organizing and preparing the learning environment. Essential for this is a successful relationship between the educator and the child which is based on respect for the child's personality.

3. Development of potential

This is another expression that is important in our research and illustrates that it is not self-evident that everybody uses or is able to use her or his gifts. To turn gifts into individual achievement (and here we also mean different achievements in many areas) a large number of conditions must be fulfilled. Related to that, environmental factors as well as personality factors are of vital significance. Therefore from our point of view the development and promotion of self-competence takes a prominent position, as it favours the unfolding of gifts by offering the chance of action, creativity and the regulation of emotions. Before we trace the meaning of self-competence in kindergarten and primary school and define our latest research on this, the expression and its history will be outlined.

4.   Self-competence – a collective term

Although in educational science the discussion concerning competence is still very important, the expression is not well-defined yet. As it has many facets we want to get closer to the construct of 'self-competence'.

The term "competence" is used in diverse scientific disciplines, e.g. in constitutional law, the science of communication, psychology, the social and educational sciences. In every discipline a specific definition is needed, but even within each discipline the expression 'competence' is not used in the same way. A formal and / or normative use is just as common as a use referring to facts or content. In all those definitions there is an implicit hint to quality – the quality of human behaviour. Therefore competence refers to concrete ways of acting and the processes that precede them as well as the possibilities that underlie them. With the orientation towards competence the focus is directed at real achievement. The point is the mediation between knowledge and ability – always within a certain context.

The expression 'competence' used in the educational sciences goes back to the 1970s, following the need or the necessity to widen the concept of "key competences". This approach, related to this specific field, should be supplemented by aspects that are interdisciplinary and more related to the individual (see Rohlfs et al, 2008). The question which competences are seen as relevant is necessarily dependent on the context. Competences are tied to specific moments of activities. They refer to the link between knowledge and ability in coping with the required action (see Klieme, 2004). For the science of education the construct 'competence' offers a suitable possibility to turn the professional focus on "acts of learning in the serious situations of social life and work" (Brödel, 2002, p. 39), because in that way the ability, the willingness, the concrete situation and the transferability to many situations will be highlighted. The development of competences is the result of learning processes and therefore the subject of educational research.

Competences are tied to specific moments of activities. They refer to the link between knowledge and ability in coping with the required action

In the psychology of motivation the construct 'competence' is based on the assumption that the individual organises the production of certain basic abilities her- or himself (see Erpenbeck/Rosenstiel 2007). This is the point where it is linked to education. Because if the individual produces achievement by her/himself that means nothing else than that the individual or to be more precise the human being has learnt something. In this case processes work that have been started deliberately, that means they require motivation and are based on interest. What is not meant here is the process of maturation which happens by itself and automatically, the same way that the crawling of a child is followed by running. If competence is related to interaction then an effective exchange with the environment is needed.
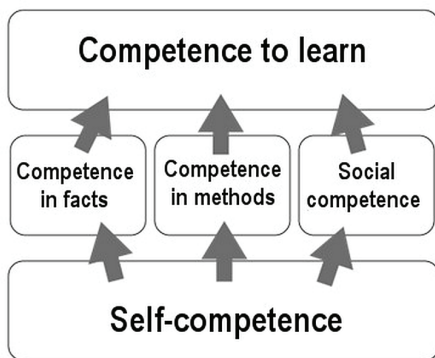
5. Self-competence and the competence to learn

In the tradition of education, self-competence is understood as one of four competences, which together form the competence to learn (see Czerwanski / Solzbacher, 2004). In modern society the aim of education and cultivation is not the transmission of fixed knowledge, but the possibility of participating in society and the strengthening of the personality, these are preconditions that must be fulfilled. The central aspect is life-long learning. To prepare for this, the goal is to introduce children early to organising their processes of learning themselves. Weinert describes the competence to learn as a 'fundamental aim of education' (Weinert, 2000). Usually the four subdomains social competence, competence in facts and methods and self-competence have equal rank. They cannot be separated from each other. For example, it doesn't make much sense to teach the competence of methods without relating to facts (see Czerwanski / Solzbacher 2002; Engres, 2007). However, in our opinion self-competence is not on the same level as social competence, competence in facts and methods but can be seen as a basic competence (see Solzbacher / Behrensen / Sauerhering, 2011 In: Kuhl et al.: Bildung braucht Beziehung, p. 41).

6. Self-competence in psychology

Self-competence is understood as a bundle of individual competences

In the field of the psychology of the personality, which is orientated more or less towards experiments, individual competences and areas of competence are described and researched. In this sense self-competence would be understood as a bundle of individual competences which are important for the development of the personality and for learning in the broadest sense. Part of these personal competences is for example the ability to motivate oneself as well as the ability to cope with failure. With these competences the core is the ability to handle ones emotions, one could also speak of the regulation of affects or of oneself (Kuhl / Künne / Aufhammer, 2011; Strehlau / Künne, 2011). This is important, as every action, learning step and aspect of behaviour is basically coloured by affects, that is it is connected to emotions or releases emotions. From the point of the psychology of the personality, self-competence is based on the regulation of emotions; from this individual competences are formed such as motivating or calming oneself. These individual competences are the basis for the competence to learn, as a child can learn and develop especially well if, for example she/he is able to motivate her/himself when tasks are difficult or frustrating, and when she/he can handle mistakes or failures in a constructive way. A model which shows these connections clearly is described by Heller and his colleagues in the Munich model of intelligence/ giftedness (Heller et.al, 2007, p. 143).

7. The definition of self-competence we work with

We have seen that the use and the definition of the expression self-competence are not standardised, therefore we present the following definition:

The development of self-competence must be seen as a life-long process. Self-competence describes the ability of being able to act in a motivated and active way in changing circumstances. The individual's ability to act depends essentially on the ability to connect knowledge and emotions. For the development of self-competence (professional) educational relationships are just as important as the designing of the learning environment. Most important is the ability of the educator to reflect on her/himself.

The central point is that we understand the development of self-competence as a process. The foundations of self-competence are acquired in the early phases of childhood, however, they can still be developed at a later stage. This happens mostly on the basis of successful educational relationships and conditions, which enable children to effectively influence their lives, but at the same time challenge their experiences of self-efficacy. This happens when the content of learning has a personal meaning for the child, arouses her/his curiosity or the child feels that she/he can grow with the task and extend her/his experiences. It is the task of the educators to design the learning environment in a way that the child can actively learn on her/his own accord. Besides the relationship with the child plays a decisive role. On the basis of knowledge (concerning specific conditions for development and learning) professional relationships can be created which are characterised by authenticity and appreciation. In order to promote the self-competence of the child, the self-competence of the educator is a necessary pre-condition.

Self-competence describes the ability of being able to act in a motivated and active way in changing circumstances.

8. Important elements of self-competence

During the last years psychological research has gained many new insights into self-competence and how it is connected with the regulation of emotions (see Kuhl 2001). One important differentiation discovered in this research is the one between "ego" and "self". In this tradition the "ego" is understood as a conscious instance that has clear objectives, draws logical conclusions and focuses its attention, e.g. towards a concrete task. The "self" is seen as an archive of enormous proportions of personal experiences, wishes, needs, preferences, worries and much more. By now psychological research can describe this "self" and partly offer explanations how it works (see Kuhl 2011; Kuhl / Künne / Aufhammer 2011), however, these explanations would go beyond the scope of this brochure and go too far into theoretical detail. It is possible, though, to deduce seven important elements of self-competence from the mechanisms of how it functions, as described in research (Kuhl 2001; see also Storch / Kuhl 2011). These will be explained, as they offer first approaches to promote self-competence.

The important differentiation between „ego" and „self".

The "self", as opposed to the "step-by-step-logic" of the "ego", is able to take into account different pieces of information at the same time (i.e. simultaneously) and therefore determine decisions and actions in a way that it can do justice to many different needs, values and abilities (ones own and those of others). The seven important elements of self-competence will now be described. In the following figure they are clearly summed up in the form of a house.

A feeling of trust in oneself and the world

(1) An important element of self-competence is a feeling of trust in oneself and the world which from the point of the psychology of development develops from a safe relationship (or bond) and enables the child to enter the world openly and confidently and always to feel a basic safety. Based on this safety a child can be open towards new spaces and activities and explore her/his surrounding (see Ahnert 2011 and others).

Sense of self

(2) When developing further a child learns to become aware of her/his inner condition and gets feedback from others (e.g. the mother mirrors the sad face of the child). This perception of self provides the child with information on how she/he feels and what she/he needs or does not need anymore (Kuhl 2001).

Emotional expression of self

(3) At the same time the emotional expression of self must be mentioned (Petermann / Wiedebusch 2008, chapter 2). Here the child expresses her/his emotional status towards an attachment figure by mimicking, with gestures and physically. From the reactions (see point 2) she/he gets feedback on her/his status and in that way the child learns to differentiate and starts to regulate feelings and emotional statuses (see conditioning of systems).

Self-motivation and self-pacification

If the regulation of emotions and emotional statuses succeeds more and more autonomously, then in the course of the development one can speak of **(4)** self-motivation or **(5)** self-pacification. Both abilities basically describe the autonomous regulation of motivation (e.g. of putting oneself into a suitably good mood in order to remain motivated or to start on a difficult task) or pacification (e.g. of being able to calm oneself inside and outside or to regulate one's own level of tension in a way to remain able to act).

Holistic processing of feedback from the environment

(6) The processing of feedback from the environment is not that easy. Often the feedback arrives verbally and purely "brainy" in the "ego", which cannot really handle feedback. Feedback is best processed by the "self" which has already been described as an archive (see above). In the "self" feedback (criticism as well as praise and appreciation) can be stored and processed holistically. That means feedback does not remain just a verbal "well done", but is stored as a whole parcel with feelings, physical signals and impressions of the situation. Only then can feedback have a lasting effect (Storch / Kuhl 2011).

Integrative competence

(7) Integrative competence of the "self" must be named as the last element of self-competence. This competence makes it possible to bear contradictions and to finally integrate them. For example a child learns that her/his mother can sometimes be in a bad mood, but is not basically bad, but is – as everybody else – sometimes in a good and sometimes in a bad mood. If in the course of development the child succeeds in integrating this, the mother remains a positive person she/he can trust, even if she is sometimes in a bad mood.

Of course this applies to fathers as well as to every other attachment figure. During the time before this ability to integrate is developed, children always experience adults in a certain moment: if an adult is in a bad mood, she/he is thoroughly bad. In return it follows from a good mood that the adult is good. Only when the development has progressed, the "self's" integrative competence comes into being and makes a further and more relaxed view possible, e.g. concerning contradictory emotions: How can I be in a good and in a bad mood? It works if I know that there are different situations, different catalysts for moods, the daily form and much more that I can take into account. This taking into account of all kinds of conditions one can think of constitutes the integrative competence of the self. With its help it is possible to adjust the other six elements in a sensible way so that a child is successful in moving in her/his world and to take into account her/his abilities and needs as well as the possibilities, expectations and needs of the people in her/his social and cultural environment.

The House of self-competences

This image of a house of self-competences helps somewhat to have an overview of the complex area of self-competences. Starting at the bottom one can imagine how the different self-competences build upon each other. Next to this structured overview the house offers a practical aspect, it can be used to assist observation to see which areas the child can already fill and where we can support it. That means the child can know a lot about her/himself (self-perception), grow up in secure relationships (safe basis), use her/his stuffed animal to become calm (self-pacification) and voluntarily help to clean up a mess (self-motivation). She/he notices how other children react towards her/him and learns from it (application of feedback) and is able to understand that adults are sometimes in a good and sometimes in a bad mood (integrative competence).

However, it is noticed that she/he doesn't really show her/his feelings, one often doesn't know how she/he feels. The emotional expression of self is an important component of self-competence and not yet well developed. Now one could encourage the child to talk about her/himself. Some good ideas will certainly come to your mind or you would already have become active in everyday life because you intuitively felt that the child almost never talked about her/himself. In this or a similar way the house of self-competence can assist observation or be a starting point for a discussion with colleagues or parents. Have a go at trying it!
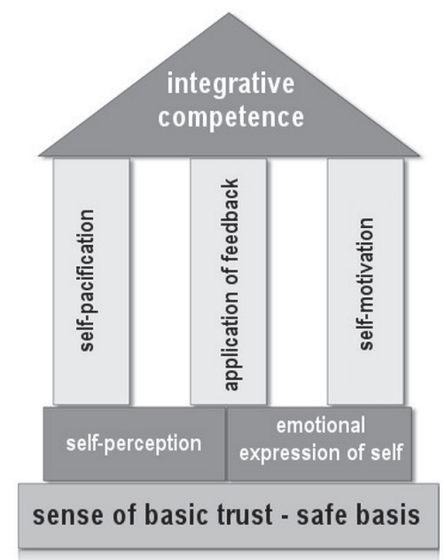

Figure 2:
The House of self-competences

9. Promoting self-competence

The basis for acquiring self-competence can be found in the early phases of a child's life, however, it can still be built up in later life (see Martens / Kuhl, 2004). As our working definition (see above) makes clear, the promotion of self-competence is a decisive factor in the professional educational relationships of for example kindergarten and other teachers. In educational everyday activities situations can be created in which children can experience themselves as self-competent. This can happen when children are accompanied with sensitivity when coping with difficulties, but not when they are presented with solutions or when problems are solved for them.

Relationships and learning environments as determining factors

The promotion of self-competence is mainly influenced by two components: on the one hand by the shaping of the relationship between the educator and the child, on the other hand by the creation of a motivating learning environment. In practice, these two areas cannot be separated from each other. Acting as a professional is characterized by the way an educator succeeds in establishing a good balance between these two components. Here the self-competence of the acting educator is of importance.

The development of self-competence is also determined by the fact whether learning is experienced as self-efficient. Self-efficient learning is only possible when success can be experienced within a frame of interesting and adequately challenging tasks (only these are motivating learning environments!) which require perseverance. Therefore the approach of the necessity of being active oneself is stressed again and again, because that is the only way in which self-efficacy can be created. In settings like these the child is asked to create her/his goals and to take responsibility for them. The design of the learning environment can have a positive influence on the development of self-competence, when there are concepts which encourage the children to be active on their own and which are combined with sensitivity and in the end do not leave the children alone. The sensible use of suitable methods in the everyday life of kindergartens and the daily arrangement of lessons can open opportunities for children in which they can experience success and learn to cope with failures (e.g. when they work on a project or according to a weekly plan). Then it is possible to connect with the interests and abilities of the children, that means creating a personal focus on what has to be learned, that will have a decisive influence on the motivation of the children and finally on the ability to persevere. The latter develops especially when the children have been active themselves, the result has been positive and they have been guided with sensitivity. Even before entering school the first self-competences such as the ability to persevere can be measured, e.g. by the task to draw a picture which is then interrupted by a puppet. Children that kindergarten teachers have assessed as self-competent will later more often than not repeat tasks that were interrupted by the puppet (see annual report 2008 of the Research Centre for the Promotion of Gifts and Talents). That means children who are self-competent develop a goal (as stated above) and assume responsibility, which leads to the wish to voluntarily repeat the task that was interrupted in order to finish it that time.

Self-directed autonomy and self-efficacy

Self-competence is mainly learned in a dialogue. Respect and appreciation are the attitudes of those interested in a promotion that is sensitive concerning relationships. Respect, warmth, mutual consideration as well as a complete emphatic understanding and authenticity as well as honesty create trust and respect as an important basis for a successful relationship between teacher and pupil (see Tausch and Tausch, who in the 1950/60s conducted many studies concerning the behaviour of teachers) as well as in the relationship kindergarten teacher – child. The experience to be valued is especially crucial in influencing the trust in ones potential and in that way also has a bearing on the conversion of ability into individual achievement. This is positively supported by concepts or settings in which children receive positive feedback concerning their development (to learn). A decisive attribute here is the orientation towards resources. Schools can use certain reforms of the assessment of achievements such as reports on the development of learning, portfolios, diaries describing learning, pupils assessing themselves or each other etc.. In connection with these instruments there can and should be a dialogue with the children aiming at respectfully giving necessary information on the development of their learning. The child feels: "It's about me". On the level of the development of self-competence the children and young people learn in a way that their achievement is appreciated, that it is important to the educator to set ambitious tasks that are transparent and can be fulfilled and that they are interested in their achievement. For example, in reports on the development of learning it can be made clear that frustration tolerance is worthwhile and appreciated. Methods such as feedback, interim reports and conversations in between can be experienced as appreciative and motivating and help the child to "carry on". An encouraging culture of feedback is an important part of a culture of appreciation and as mentioned above an important part in the house of the seven self-competences (6).

Respect and und appreciation as an educational attitude als

Orientation towards resources

In schools it is essential to develop a culture of learning and a learning environment that makes it possible for pupils to acquire self-competence and to try it out in complex learning arrangements. This happens on the basis of an appreciative professional relationship between teacher and pupil. In day care centres for children the building and forming of relationships belong to the core of the educational work that must be accomplished. However, in kindergarten the importance of relationships must be explicitly reflected in view of learning and education, as they can quickly be lost from sight because of the demands and the increasing pressure.

Positive feedback culture

The aim is the development or consolidation of a culture of appreciation that is determined by principles of appreciating each other, of the rejection of discrimination and the aim of integration and participation. At present it is not possible to resort to approaches of promotion that have been evaluated, so that kindergartens and schools have to design and try out a structured promotion that is sensitive concerning relationships.

The starting point is the interest in the child, her/his development and gifts. Only if there is an authentic interest in the child, accepting the child in her/his individuality can succeed. The interest in the child is closely connected with the quality of relationships.

The starting point is always the interest in the child

10. The framework and pre-conditions (for developing) self-competence

The promotion of the self-competence of the child is in close alignment with the self-competence of the educator, as professional educational relationships can only be formed, reliably sustained and creatively shaped on this basis. It necessitates an educational attitude that is based on the sound knowledge of infantile conditions of development and learning and is continuously reflected upon. This reflection encompasses the dimension of constructing relationships as well as the knowledge of the individual child and her/his specific conditions of development and learning. This professionalism of the expert and her/his potential of reflection is supported by corresponding forms of the cooperation of the staff.

In order to achieve this teachers and kindergarten teachers need a corresponding institutional framework that leaves time to create relationships for the choice and application of suitable methods and instruments as well as the necessary training and also for the cooperation of the staff. Kindergarten teachers and teachers need a culture of appreciation, too.

Kindergarten teachers and teachers need a culture of appreciation, too.

11. Appreciation of diversity as a basis for forming relationships

Our studies of individual promotion in day care centres and primary schools made clear that educational action is definitely based on the perception and appreciation of the personality of the child. All the kindergarten teachers that we questioned continuously stressed the major significance of a successful relationship with the individual child as an essential prerequisite for her/his ability to learn in kindergarten. This attitude is also widespread among the primary school teachers we questioned. The challenge is on the one hand to offer to the child a reliable relationship and support, but on the other hand to do so only for a limited time. Handling the resulting ambivalences is interdependent with the professional self-concept of educators.

Educational neccesity versus institutional constraints

Educational action is influenced by the knowledge that children can behave quite differently in the institution and therefore need different forms of address, support and closeness. In elementary education the forming of relationships, taking into account the diversity of the children, is a key matter. For example there are elaborate programmes of acclimatisation that help the children with the transition from the family to the institution. In school the teacher-child-relationship plays an important role for the educational action of the individual teacher, however the relationships must be built within formalised structures. From a formal point of view the role of the teacher is focussed on imparting knowledge and assessing achievement. From an educational point of view the resulting restrictions are quite often in the way of the necessary work on the relationship. The individual primary school teacher must align the compliance with the educational mandate with her/his self-concept as an educator.

Indeed, in our research the stakeholders in both institutions, kindergarten and primary school, name the institutional framework as debilitating for creating a culture of relationships as a basis for improved individual promotion. This could become a stumbling block for individual promotion, as it influences the forming of genuine (professional) relationships. Our studies support the assumption that the educator-child-relationship is strongly influenced by "institutional consternation" (Bönsch 2001, p. 898), that is day care centres or schools as institutions effectively form the culture of relationships within the institutions. We know from research: overtaxing and pressure weaken the quality of relationships (see Bönsch 2001). Relationships partly take place and are experienced in just a formalised way – which has consequences for the educator and the child.

Overtaxing and pressure weaken the quality of relationships

It has to be assumed that the culture of relationships in kindergarten and school is formed to a large extent by how educators perceive the institution in general and the possibilities to work in it professionally. Therefore one has to see to it that educators who are confronted with the many new and partly contradictory demands get the most support and the highest respect from educational policy makers and scientists. Then educators can experience themselves as self-competent and support the children when building their self-competence.

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