

Swiss school system at the limit – everyone is losing out

Personal report of a teacher

by Vanessa Pestalozzi,* Switzerland

A lot of time and money, energy and personnel are invested in integrating children with behavioural problems or special needs in schools. A whole army of professionals takes care of them. For children without special needs and without behavioural problems, there is not much time and energy left; integration "at any price" is usually at their expense. And at the expense of teachers who coordinate the special settings.

1 – Abdul

When Abdul stays at home sick, the class heaves a sigh of relief. This is going to be a good day. The whole group of children feels more at ease and so does the kindergarten teacher. Abdul's tantrums are feared, the remedial teacher then needs to run quickly and stop Abdul from biting and punching other children or throwing around some building blocks. Abdul screams at a high pitch and can hardly be restrained. The remedial teacher leaves the classroom with Abdul, who is lashing out, and goes next door. Everyone is relieved.

Now, Abdul quickly calms down again, he has the remedial teacher's full attention, she strokes his back, and he plays with Lego bricks. If Abdul returns to the classroom after some time to calm down, he can go berserk again within seconds, and everything starts anew.

Abdul has an IEP status (individual education plan under the responsibility of the primary school) and is entitled to remedial education support and integration in a normal class. Support diagnoses are made for Abdul, support plans are written, assessment meetings are held, and agreements are signed.

2 – The IEP meeting

Abdul's mother and the interpreter sit at the head of a long table. His father is banned from the

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*A lot of time and money, energy and personnel are invested in integrating children with special needs in schools.
(Picture KEYSTONE)*

area, he is not allowed to approach his son. If the father were to stand in front of the kindergarten, it will be a matter of calling the police.

Sitting around the table are the kindergarten teacher, the principle as well as everyone involved in the special setting built around Abdul (and other children), consisting of: the DaZ teacher for German as a second language, a psycho-motorics therapist, a school remedial teacher, a speech therapist, and a school psychologist.

The "elephant" round drags on, everyone has something to say about Abdul and his behaviour, the interpreter translates, the mother nods. Then the mother speaks, the interpreter translates, everyone nods. Difficult circumstances, yes, we know that, and we also have a lot of sympathy. Abdul needs one-to-one support; everyone agrees on that.

A lot of important things are said, recorded and included in Abdul's individual education plan. The school psychologist is of the opinion that Abdul should be tested again and that a play therapy might be helpful. Everyone nods exhausted. At the end, agreements are signed, it is written down who is responsible for what:

For example, it is the mother's responsibility that Abdul does not always appear in the same tracksuit in the morning, but also sometimes dressed "properly". It is also the mother's re-

sponsibility that Abdul learns to go to the toilet, everyone agrees on this.

It is the responsibility of the kindergarten team, especially the remedial teacher, to ensure that Abdul learns social behaviour in small steps, the long-term goal being impulse control. (How do you know that Abdul has reached his development goal? "He is able to play with other children without freaking out at any moment.")

It is also the responsibility of the remedial teacher to write a new support plan for Abdul, consisting of observations, competences, hypotheses, development goals and their implementation in practice.

Each agreement is translated by the interpreter and hastily signed by the mother. She looks as if she would like to run off; no one can blame her.

Then a date is set for a new assessment meeting, as soon as possible, we must "follow Abdul closely", we have to "stay tuned, observe closely and communicate transparently". Everyone should always be kept up to date about Abdul's progress. This is the kindergarten teacher's task.

3 – The kindergarten teacher

Not only does she have to teach more than twenty other children and support them according to their maturity levels, she has to conduct countless meetings with parents – no, she also has to coordinate the whole special setting around Abdul: arrangements with the speech therapist, meetings with the remedial teacher, telephone calls with the school psychologist, with the school social worker, with the school management; meetings with the school team and staff meetings with her class assistant.

In addition, there are further tasks she has to fulfil (thanks to "Curriculum 21"): Collaborating in various project groups, helping to organise school sports days and parents' evenings, buying presents and writing cards for colleagues who are celebrating birthdays, retiring or have a newly born, providing snacks for team meetings and so on. When she has fulfilled her daily duties, another mother is sure to call to tell her that her child is afraid of Blerim or Abdul and therefore no longer wants to go to kindergarten, what could she do, what would she advice ...

4 – Blerim

Blerim has severe behavioural problems but does not have a "status" yet. He awaits testing

by the school psychologist. In his free time, he plays shooter games and likes to "kill" everyone who gets in his way. (It goes without saying that it is difficult to rouse Blerim's interest in Easter Bunny stories). Recently, Blerim showed up at the kindergarten with a jack-knife; his older brother had given it to him. There was a great outrage everywhere, followed by parents' meetings, school meetings assessing an individual education plan, testing by the psychologist and agreements with the school social worker. Many agreements were signed.

5 – The class

In every kindergarten class, at least in the Zurich agglomeration, there is an Abdul and a Blerim. The choice of names is just politically not correct. Experience shows that children with a migration background from certain regions have and cause above-average problems.

In the class reported here, there are also twenty other children; nine of them attend DaZ (German as a second language) language classes, at varying levels – some did not speak a word of German when they entered kindergarten (although their parents have lived in Switzerland for years; but this is another topic). Another child in this class also has an IEP status; it has a physical and mental impairment but is not behaviourally challenging.

There is hardly any quiet moment in this class. There is a constant coming and going. There is the remedial teacher who comes by the hour and provides integrated support for her protégées, there is the DaZ language teacher who also comes by the hour and provides integrated support, there is the speech therapist who comes to pick up two children, the ergo therapist is also at the door, and then the school psychologist comes to observe the social behaviour of the children being assessed.

6 – Jacob and the "buffer girls"

When people talk about children with special needs and integrated support, they talk about Abdul and Blerim – among others. However, nothing special is provided for children without any special needs!

Every teacher is happy and grateful that they are part of the class: the quiet children, the friendly and creative children, the "normal" children. This is a pleasant fact and fortunately they do not need much attention.

They are children like Jakob, for example, who can spend hours quietly entertaining himself with picture books or drawing and colouring – such children are a gift for every kindergarten teacher. Besides Jakob, there are also the “buffer girls” (in rare cases “buffer boys”). The “buffer girls” are sweet and well-behaved, they look forward to kindergarten, are open minded, creative, and inquisitive and enjoy playing with other children.

“Buffer girls” are placed between Abdul and Blerim so that they cannot go at each other’s throats. Initially, a “buffer girl” likes this task because it is an important one. Increasingly, however, she becomes uncomfortable; the tension on both sides is high, and the teacher’s attention is usually on the left or on the right of the “buffer girl”, not on the girl herself – who at some point only wishes to sit next to her best friend.

7 – Benefit for all?

The advocates of integrated education and inclusion like to emphasise how great the mutual gain is and how much all children would benefit from it. In what way do the “buffer girl” or Jakob benefit from the integration of children with severe behavioural problems in the normal classes? Mind you, we are not talking about children with physical disabilities or developmental delays, but about children with a considerable aggression potential already in kindergarten, children who hit, spit and bite.

Many of the “difficult” children actually do not have any behavioural problems but simply lack a proper upbringing. Kindergarten will sort it out, or school and after-school care, that is the tenor. However, a teacher, no matter at what school level, should be allowed to teach and educate

and not have to bring up the children. Upbringing is basically the responsibility of the parents – and you don’t need an IEP to establish this. Integration and inclusion are nice theories – in practice they often work at the expense of the “normal” children, i.e., the children without special needs. Aren’t these children also entitled to the time, energy, and attention of the teacher? The focus is always and consistently on the difficult cases.

Is the concept of integrated education a win-win situation? No! Many are losing! The children without special needs lose, the quiet ones lose, the inconspicuous ones lose, and the “buffer girls” lose anyway. The children with severe behavioural problems also lose because it is no fun always being the troublemaker, and not being asked to play by anyone is even less fun. And the kindergarten teacher also loses, because an ever-increasing part of her work is to coordinate all the special settings and to promote and “make transparent” all the agreements among all the specialist teachers – well, this is not how she expected it to be!

The reintroduction of small classes for children with severe behavioural problems (or early entry into a curative education school) would be a logical admission that the project of “integrated education at any price” has failed.

It is not about “locking away” children with behavioural problems in “small classes” – for once it is about doing justice to many “normal” children. Teachers should once again be allowed to devote themselves to these children and give them their time and attention – that alone is challenging enough!

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