

3. Working Paper on the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Education System: Inclusive Regions

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Preamble

The objectives and the development of an inclusive education system is very closely linked to the current reform agenda on learning quality in the context of individualisation and competence orientation. Hence, this development is not regarded as an isolated concern of special needs education, but rather focuses on improving the overall education system. Many development trajectories converge in an education system that not only permits heterogeneous social groups but rather accepts them as a reality. Such education system promotes cooperation and teamwork. Within it, individual development to reach one's specific performance horizon staked off by one's talents and interests is not just possible but desirable. Therefore, many different concerns meet in this focus and supplement each other, such as the integration of persons with migratory backgrounds, the promotion of highly gifted children and adolescents, measures to prevent children from dropping out of school, the development and sustainable safeguarding of key competences, the promotion of lifetime learning and the tasks of inclusion. The development and differentiation of the New Secondary School (Neue Mittelschule), the implementation of European benchmarks, the initiatives to standardise teacher training (Teacher Training New), to professionalise teaching (EPIK - Development and Professionalisation in an International Context), and to improve the qualifications of headmasters and administration officials, increased autonomy, school development and quality assurance policies will benefit the realisation of an inclusive education system. Even the educational-political paradigm shift towards an outcome-oriented system, which for the present is expressed in the Austrian Education Standards, focuses on the sustainable development of competences and thus guides the way to individualisation and personalisation within the education process.

This working paper shall provide support for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Austrian Education System.

The paper was created through an academically guided, participative process together with representatives of civil society (associations, umbrella organisations, lobbies and organisations of persons with disabilities), experts from the ministry and the school authorities, experts in teacher training and everyday teaching practice. Around 200 persons participated in discussion rounds in October 2011 and January 2012. Many conferences, information and discussion meetings have supplemented the process to design the road to a school for all. The goal of the process was to describe the complex situation with its manifold interests and points of view, and to identify ways and measures for its implementation. The scenario of the "inclusive region" is defined as a concretion of previous general considerations. It serves as a starting point for the nationwide further development of inclusive education in Austria.

This working paper was written by Dipl. Päd. David Wohlhart and Univ. Prof. Barbara Gasteiger-Klicpera. Its orientation is based on the considerations of an editorial group encompassing academic representatives from the Ministry of Education and the school authorities.

Introduction

The implementation of the UN Convention in Austria aims at an inclusive education system which permits all children and adolescents to learn together at their individual pace and to receive the necessary support to do so. To attain this aim, the legal bases of inclusion must be expanded to all educational institutions, school types and forms. The systemic conditions and the competences of individualisation and support of the general schools must be significantly expanded, while existing special schools are to be converted into inclusive educational institutions step by step. Moreover, the organisation forms and frameworks of inclusive educational institutions must be expanded in a way that even critical situations can be overcome without excluding children or adolescents.

A central concern is the pooling of available resources in a persistent continuum which provides measures that promote inclusion at an early stage and according to the demand. This continuum encompasses systemic measures at educational institutions, low-level access to support, a newly created focus on “prevention”, which is to be established in order to tackle problems in learning and development or critical situations without excluding children, and a guaranteed and competent support of children and adolescents with disabilities.

These expanded competences of general school require an upgrade of the support provided by regional centres of inclusion, which are not schools by themselves. Their legal, personal and material framework allows for dynamic resource allocation, evaluation and standardised processes for the application of inclusive measures at general schools.

In order to guarantee the required individual support, appropriate measures are to be set, among them the expansion of personal assistance, the recognition of the Austrian Sign Language and Braille as communication means in education, the involvement of interpreters and the provision of accessible learning and teaching material.

What is decisive for success is the expansion of the competences of teachers to promote individualisation through ongoing and further training, but in particular through a reorientation of the basic training of all educators with regard to inclusive education, self competence, ability to differentiate, professional teamwork, counselling, individualisation, diagnosis and support, and the admission of persons with disabilities to teacher training.

The universal implementation of inclusive pedagogy in the Austrian education system can be achieved through a process that step by step establishes the foundations for the future participation of all children and adolescents in the general education process. In this process all regional actors in the field of education cooperate with each other, supported by academics.

The gradual establishment of inclusive regions is the beginning of an implementation process, which started in 2012, and which by 2020, at its end, will have disseminated the inclusive competence of the general school system all over Austria in a way that no more children and adolescents with disabilities need to attend special school institutions, which means that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be regarded as having been implemented in the education system.

Inclusive Regions

The best way to put an inclusive education system into practice is to use regional concepts. It would be myopic to do educational and organisational development only at the basis, i.e. the individual institutions, because it is not possible and reasonable to provide all competences required for individualised and adaptive learning and all forms of support at each and every institution. Just changing the federal and provincial laws without launching regional initiatives would very likely have too small an impact on the education system.

An inclusive region is a region which pursues the goal to fully implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in particular “Article 24 - Education”, in its sphere of influence. The central focus of such inclusive region is placed on increasing the quality of the educational institutions in the region within a defined time with regard to inclusive education to an extent that special institutions such as special schools or special nursery schools are no longer needed.

The term “region” does not specifically refer to a geographic area. In general, an inclusive region covers several school districts. Several Austrian provinces have already introduced (educational) regions of this magnitude or plan to do so. If such educational regions have already been established we recommend to upgrade them to become inclusive regions. The reason for going beyond the districts is that such inclusive regions should have the most important professional competences for the development of an inclusive education system and for individual support available. It is the Federal Provinces’ decision to define the regional coverage, taking into account that developments in the course of the administrative reform and the redesign of the school authority to efficiently pool resources and administrative structures should be included in the whole concept.

The inclusive regions are set up according to a defined schedule with stages. The first stage is the development of inclusive model regions which can build upon favourable conditions to create role models for the establishment of the structures outlined below. The experience gained from the model regions is collected, systematised and put into a development concept which can be applied to further inclusive regions all over Austria.

The Austrian provinces liaise with the federal government to commission a consortium with the development of a regional action plan. The consortium shall represent regional actors and interest groups from inclusive education alike. This creates ownership within the region. Regional actors are, without being exhaustive, institutional actors such as Special Education Centres, district school authority members, inclusive schools, inclusive assistance teams, counselling and support institutions, sponsors of educational institutions, but also NGOs. Moreover, supra-regional actors such as Teacher Training Colleges, universities or support centres that operate nationwide, are to be included in the process. But also persons with disabilities, or their representatives, for example their parents, must participate in this development process.

The consortium creates a regional action plan for the establishment of an inclusive education system in its region. This action plan encompasses all educational institutions, from kindergarten over school to vocational and professional training. It describes the gradual development of inclusive competences within a project term of three years. The action plan defines indicators to attain these targets. Significant indicators are the reduction of segregation and the boosting of the quality of inclusive education. The latter is measured by the quality of individual support, the inclusive quality of collective educational offers, the systemic quality of inclusive educational institutions and the quality of internal and external support.

These newly developed action plans are currently implemented in the first model regions. In 2012, the federal government and the provinces discussed and decided which regions could be created as models. An external evaluation team assesses the objectives and feasibility of the concepts and then first selects those regions that have a possibly different structural environment and different starting conditions. The federal government provides a project coordinator for the selected regions. After a successful project term this office can be permanently transferred to the management of a regional centre of inclusion, funded by the federal government.

Since 2013, each school year, the establishment of further inclusive regions has been agreed on by the federal government and the provinces, with the goal to have involved all regions in Austria by 2020.

The model regions are accompanied and evaluated—from their concept to the end of the project—by an external academic team. The evaluation results contribute to a federal action plan, which is to be considered in the further design of the regions and in the conception of other inclusive regions.

In the following, some structural elements of inclusive regions are sketched out, which are to be considered in the regional action plan.

1 Support Systems

The only way to achieve that children and adolescents, with and without disabilities, can attend an inclusive educational institution together is to make sure that such schools have the required competences available. They must employ specifically trained teachers, acquire further competences by means of in-service and further training, but also obtain external support.

At a first glance, the best solution for the development and support of all children and adolescents seems to be employing more teachers, who together have all necessary competences, at each school. However, since the requirements of individual educational care are most diverse and Austrian schools are generally small, a static allocation of experts of all kinds would be utterly inefficient and impossible to put into practice due to a lack of suitable staff, even if the financial means were unlimited. It would likewise be unrealistic to compel all teachers to acquire each and every required competence by themselves.

A good inclusive school needs a stable teaching staff who educate with competence in an individualised way, and who are willing to continuously expand their abilities and skills, and a management that promotes inclusion. This is how everyday school life can also be organised for a very heterogeneous target group. Moreover, educational institutions must have access to external support systems if there are tasks that lack local resources.

Regional Centres of Inclusion

An inclusive region requires a central institution that provides drive, control and support, and whose task it is to increase and maintain the special educational performance of the regional education system in a way that approaches of external differentiation are no longer required. In the following, we outline some requirements for regional centres of inclusion.

1. A centre of inclusion is a federal institution which cooperates with the educational institutions and administrative bodies of the region.
2. The management of such centres requires sound educational training on university level, and practice in teaching and management.

3. The centre hosts teachers and other experts who at least cover the fields of learning, language, behaviour, sensory, physical and psychological disabilities, and who have counselling and development competence to work at inclusive educational institutions. Depending on the applied concept, these centres either employ these experts, or make cooperation agreements with them.
4. In all topics related to inclusion, the centres of inclusion cooperate with all educational institutions, from early education over kindergarten, to all school types and forms on primary, lower and upper secondary level, and vocational institutions. The range of tasks encompasses all individual support needs, from educational work with children and adolescents with psychological disabilities to the promotion of highly gifted children and adolescents.
5. The centre coordinates supportive measures and inclusive development tasks at the educational institutions in the catchment area. The centre team provides counselling to educational institutions, parents and affected persons, and—if required—also personal and material resources.
6. Resource allocation is based on individual or systemic support and development plans, which are created and continually evaluated together with the centre. At the centre of inclusion, educational institutions can apply for experts, who cooperate with them and the children's parents to diagnose the support need, to assist in creating the development plans and to regularly monitor the success of the measures taken.
7. The centre provides teachers with a network at the educational institutions in the catchment area, supervision and coaching, and coordinates and organises demand-oriented training together with the Teacher Training Colleges and the universities. It initiates, guides and accompanies institutional inclusive development processes.
8. The centre of inclusion acts as a hub and network agency for educational institutions, Teacher Training Colleges and universities, parents' associations, associations of persons with disabilities, providers of job integration, therapists, social institutions and others who provide individual support and assistance.
9. The centre of inclusion closely cooperates with an academic coordination body which accompanies the process with advice and evaluation.
10. All existing support systems, such as Special Education Centres, inclusive assistance teams, ... and their resources are incorporated in the regional centres of inclusion or through cooperation contracts, which on the one hand increases the overall support, development and counselling competences, and on the other hand reduces inefficient redundancies.

Beyond that, the organisational structure of the regional centre of inclusion is not predefined. During the project term, different variations which comply with the objectives and conditions listed above are to be tested.

2 Institutional Development to Become An Inclusive Educational Institution

Inclusive education is education without segregation by means of external differentiation, by putting children and adolescents into special institutions, by separating them permanently from other groups within an educational institutions, but also through the exclusion from a collective education process in its social and functional dimension. The required educational development trends which are to be put into operation in the regions, assisted by regional centres of inclusion, are outlined in the following, without being exhaustive:

1. Inclusive educational institutions: the cause of inclusive education cannot be limited to individual classes or groups. Through focused management and institutional development in cooperation with the centre of inclusion it must be guaranteed that the entire educational institution, including its administration, parents, children and

- adolescents, feels responsible for inclusive education and thus focuses on solving problems and promoting development.
2. **Accessibility:** constructional measures must be carried out to avoid exclusion caused by barriers which are technically or constructionally conquerable. Moreover, accessibility refers to access to educational means, the language of instruction and the communicational environment. Part of the portfolio of inclusive educational institutions is the application of technical and media-related means, and the deployment of Austrian Sign Language interpreters.
 3. **Appropriate provisions:** children and adolescents with disabilities need support in manifold different ways to be able to participate in the education process. This individual support must be defined, implemented and regularly adapted together with the centre of inclusion. If necessary, personal assistants shall be deployed to guarantee this support and to enable all children and adolescents to fully participate in the education process.
 4. **Crisis management:** in the context of inclusive education, individual children and adolescents or groups or classes might face problematic situations which could be called crises. These crisis situations often lead to exclusion. Through focused institutional development, an expansion of competences and the breaking up of inflexible organisation forms, an inclusive educational institution creates room for the handling of such crises.
 5. **Personalised learning:** the objective of inclusive education is the greatest possible participation of a heterogeneous group in a collective education process. Measures of internal differentiation, but also complete individualisation largely dissolve the social context. More appropriate for heterogeneous groups is therefore personalised learning, where children and adolescents face more open learning exercises, which can be done on different levels of approach in a collective social context, and which are also more sustainable with regard to the development of competences. Teachers therefore must expand their competences through focused further training and school development.
 6. **Focused support:** through focused support backlogs can be caught up and learning levels can be improved. Support is particularly effective if problems are diagnosed rapidly, or if support measures are set preventively as soon as risks are perceived. The prerequisite for focused support is a precise diagnosis, suitable support concepts and their competent implementation. An inclusive educational institution should bundle sufficient competences to diagnose problems and cooperate with the centre of inclusion to trigger appropriate measures. Support must be given by persons who have had appropriate training according to the current state of research.
 7. **Admission of teachers with disabilities:** an inclusive educational institution also admits (in some cases partly qualified) teachers with disabilities. Within the specialisation and professionalisation of “Teacher Training New” the scope of work of teachers must be redefined in any case. These scopes of work are to be designed individually, so teachers with disabilities can fully develop their qualities, and their commitment is not impeded by the inflexibility of their work place. In some cases, also teachers can get support from personal assistants.

The regional action plan should contain concrete measures to improve the systemic, educational and supportive quality of educational institutions in the catchment area, and indicators for such measures.

3 Demand-oriented Support

The labelling of children and adolescents as “disabled” or “student with SEN (special educational need)” does no justice to inclusive pedagogy. Such categorisation cannot be made on the basis of the learning performance or the learning success, both central facts of

education. On the one hand, the performance of, for example, children with physical or sensory disabilities is often outstanding, on the other hand, there are children and adolescents without disabilities who do not make full use of their potential due to volitional or emotional conditions. The attribution of a disability with regard to learning, as it happens, for example, in the definition of the SEN, in contrast to the identification of support needs, is hardly ever an educational necessity but often a reason for segregation. Inclusive education takes the difference and individuality within a group of children and adolescents seriously, however heterogeneous they might be. In the context of inclusive education therefore a system of permanent promotion and support is to be established, where each and every child and adolescent gets the very material and personal help and support he or she needs to fully participate in the education process.

1. **Individual Support:** an inclusive educational institution takes care that children and adolescent can participate in the collective learning process on their respective level. It provides a network of support measures which form a support concept. These support measures refer to learning backlogs, individual problem situations and crises. Support measures are applied involving and informing the legal guardians.
2. **Preventive Support:** when a risk to the education process is found which cannot be encountered with individual support measures, actions must be taken without delay. The access level to focused support must therefore be set low. Inclusive educational institutions must have diagnostic competences and appropriate diagnostic procedures available at their location to identify such risks. Together with the centre of inclusion a support plan is made which is put into practice rapidly and intensively for an agreed term. The support measures are carried out by competent persons; their success is evaluated together with the centre of inclusion.
3. **Continuous Assistance and Support:** this level is open for children and adolescents with or without disabilities who require long-term assistance and support to be able to participate in the education process. The identification of such support need is done on the basis of a comprehensive diagnosis. The required resources are permanently provided through the centre of inclusion. The support needs are annually assessed.

In the following, the system is illustrated.

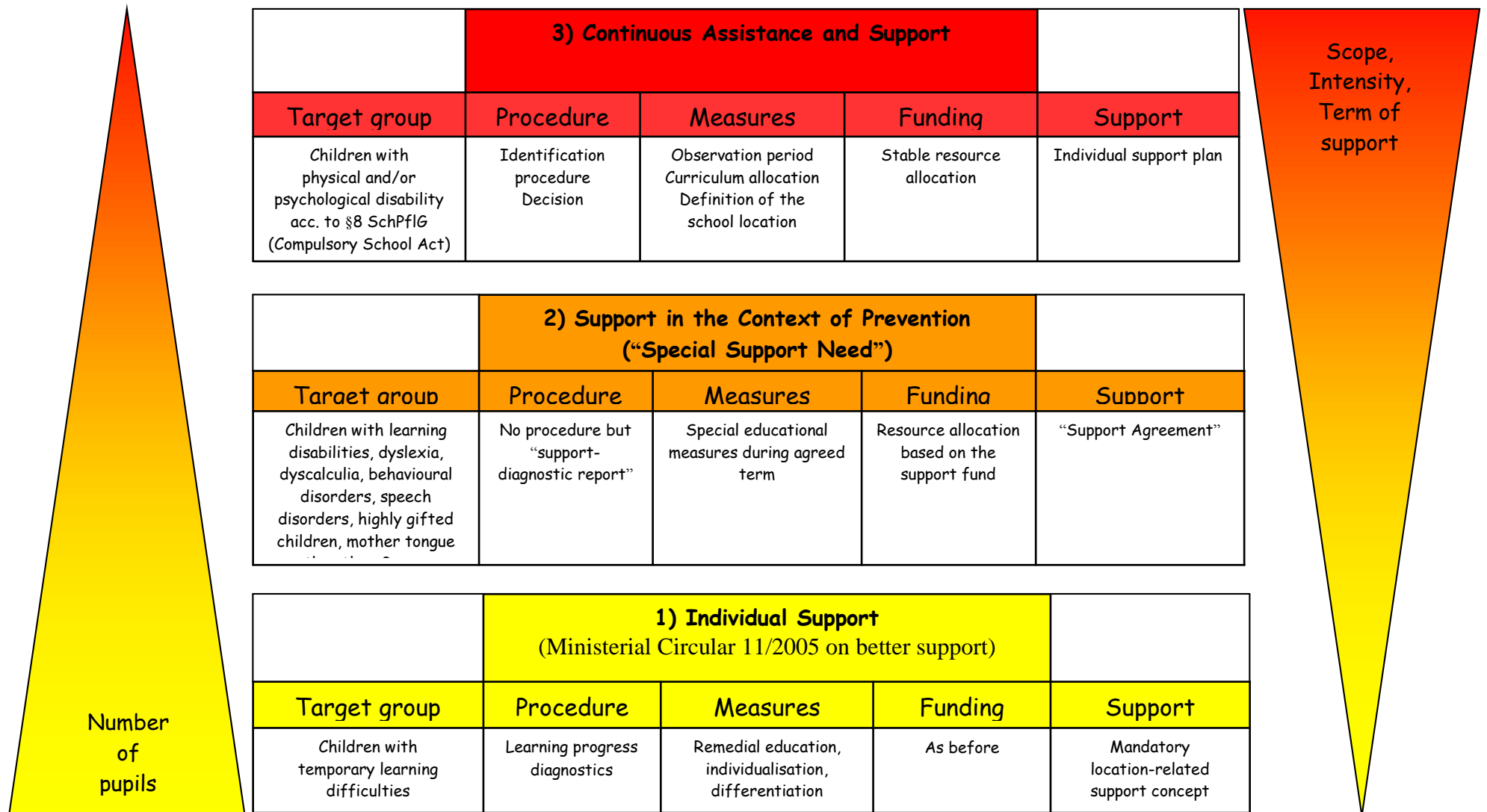


Fig. 1: (On the basis of Specht et al., 2007, pg. 65, Stufe 3 "Special Educational Need" was renamed to "Continuous Assistance and Support". DW)

Stage 3) roughly covers about 2.7 % of the student population; stages 2) and 3) together about 10 %, and all three stages about 15 %.

The regional action plan defines in which way the three outlined support stages are established and steadily applied in the educational institutions, and how support is provided according to the demand.

4 Accessibility

An inclusive education system distinguishes itself through accessibility. Attendance at an educational institution must not fail because of constructional barriers or insufficient equipment. But accessibility is not all about constructional measures. Accessibility in all dimensions as described in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also includes—in the educational context—access to educational contents in all ways they are presented, i.e. to the language of instruction, educational media and material, and to communication with teachers and fellow students.

1. Accessible educational institutions: implementation of the building regulations for public buildings, provision of suitable classes and auxiliary rooms, adequate material equipment of inclusive educational institutions
2. Access to communication related to instruction: deaf children and adolescents have the opportunity to communicate in Austrian Sign Language with the help of interpreters or teachers who have command of it, or even deaf teachers. Blind children and adolescents can learn Braille at an inclusive educational institution and use it in their communication. Mute children or adolescents can communicate through computers, special devices or symbol-assisted communication systems. The usage of simple language must be part of the communicational portfolio of teachers. Children and adolescents who do not (yet) have command of the language of instruction must get the opportunity to learn it adequately, while also communication in their respective mother tongue is part of an inclusive teaching and learning culture.
3. Application and development of accessible education media: in cooperation with publishers, media departments and special institutions, accessible and adequate media of education (school books, material, software, online material) must be provided to children and adolescents.
4. Accessibility for parents: this also applies to the communication with the parents, in particular if they do not sufficiently speak German themselves or use other means of communication due to a disability of their own. Also in this field, the deployment of interpreters is a natural practice of an inclusive educational institution.

The regional action plan shall define how accessibility for educational institutions and the education process is created and sustainably secured.

5 Initial and Further Training of Teachers

Inclusive education requires competent teachers. Each child, each adolescent shall be perceived in his or her being, and be assisted and supported in the development of his or her personality and performance with the respectively adequate measures. This means for all teachers that a basic competence of inclusive education is acquired during their initial training, and secured by further training. This quintessence of inclusive education at least encompasses a pedagogy aimed at heterogeneous groups, the development of social cohesion, appropriate competences of learning diagnostics, individualisation and personalisation of learning processes, individual learning support, alternative communication, orientation in the field of support, team work and the basics of inclusive school development. Moreover, experts in systemic inclusive school development as well as experts in diagnosis and support in the fields of learning, language, socio-emotional development, sensory and physical disabilities and psychological disabilities are needed. Depending on the regional

situation also specialists with categorial training to work with children and adolescents with physical and sensory disabilities are required.

Personal assistants, who assist children and adolescents in their self-determination in educational institutions and support them in their learning processes, also require a pedagogic training which enables them to integrate the required support into the respective learning scenario to achieve the best possible participation. In order to communicate with children with physical and sensory disabilities further professionals are required who can communicate on an adequate level to generate progress in the education process and who have sufficient basic educational competences to integrate these forms of communication in an inclusive way in the learning processes.

The regional action plan shall contain a personnel development plan. In cooperation with the Teacher Training Colleges, universities and other educational institutions, this plan shall make sure that all teachers get basic knowledge of inclusive pedagogy step by step and that through measures of focused employment of new teachers, through cooperation agreements and/or further training the required expertise is made available in the region.

6 Academic Research Assisting in the Implementation

The implementation of inclusive regions requires assistance by education science and research. The federal government is willing to put together and finance an international team for the project term, which assesses concepts, provides consulting for the implementation and evaluates the inclusive regions.

1. In order to keep the evaluation possibly free from political and institutional influence, it is recommended to commission a renown research institution with international participation with the superintendence of the academic assistance given.
2. Since the tasks of assistance, consulting and evaluation mainly take place locally and require sufficient continuity, operative work should be carried out in cooperation with regional research institutions, for example, with universities, Teacher Training Colleges and institutions of educational research.
3. This program should be accompanied by related research or PhD degree grants and by resources of research sponsorship.

The regional action plans shall outline in which way research and development competence is available in the region for the project term and how this availability can be secured in the long term.

7 Supplementary Elements

Among the above mentioned contents, the regional action plan must cover the following fields:

1. Consortium: members, areas of work and responsibilities
2. Description of the inclusive region: catchment area, educational institutions, cooperation partners, structure of cooperation
3. Applied resources: funding, sponsorship, terms
4. Point of departure of the region with regard to inclusive education
5. Potential analysis: institutions, competences, preparatory work, parallel developments
6. Target definition: aspired targets and indicators for their attainment