Reportage

with Help from Outer Space

A school for everyone. Inclusive teaching is particularly important at a time when there are so many refugees, Prof. Dr. Clemens Hillenbrand believes. The special needs educator and his team take to the classroom to research and test how to make lessons work for everybody.

Leon* moves from table to table, a look of deep concentration on his face. The eight-year-old who was born with Down Syndrome hands out pieces of a puzzle to his fellow pupils. The gir- 

Leon has handed out all the pieces of the puzzle and taken his seat again. Then the special needs educator Carolin Reinck gives the go-ahead and each group fits its pieces together to complete a puzzle. Leon works along- 

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torates at Oldenburg University and now works closely here with Prof. Dr. Clemens Hillenbrand. Hillenbrand is conducting research on teaching children with learning disabilities at the University’s Department of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation. The special needs educator knows that the new diversity in the classroom can entail a number of challenges. “Every now and then situations arise that can be very difficult for teachers to control,” he says. Hillenbrand is re-

Lubo’s classroom visit demonstrates how this works. The children in 2a are a little too old for hand puppets but after Lubo landed here several times last year all of them were keen to see him again. Lina remembers it well: “Each time we spent an hour with Lubo. We talked about being brave and things like that.” Today Lubo has brought along lots of coloured puzzle pieces for the children to put together. A task which requires them to work together. Each group places its puzzle in the middle of the class-

The idea is that the children show Lubo how to make friends here on Earth. In this situation they are the experts who share their knowledge. “That’s the trick. They are called upon to share their skills, and this is very good for learning,” the pedagogue explains. Lubo has now become a highly suc-

ferring in particular to children with challenging behaviour, such as aggres- 

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Until a few years ago children like Leon, Igor, Kimberly and Niko would have attended a special needs school. Today girls and boys with disabilities or challenging behaviours form a normal part of ordinary schools – the buzzword here is inclusion. It means that every-

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Imagine you’re in the cor-

Research in the classroom: Clemens Hillenbrand observes the goings-on in a school class.
rider and someone pushes you. How do you feel and what do you want to happen?" asks the special needs educator, Theresa. She knows the feeling and points to the appropriate Lubo picture. "I feel angry and I want them to say sorry," the teacher nods in approval. The cuddly little alien has helped the children become aware of their feelings and shown them how to solve a potentially tricky situation.

The success of the Lubo programme has been proven in a number of studies involving some 700 pre- and primary school children. "We observed a positive impact especially when it came to solving social problems and prosocial behaviour," Hillenbrand explains. The results also show that children with risk factors benefit even more than others. "It seems that we reach precisely the children who need it the most. As special needs educators this is of course music to our ears."

A targeted approach to promoting learning

Of course, Lubo is just one of many building blocks. The Oldenburg researchers are also focussed on targeted teaching support so that no one falls behind in class. Here they make use of the so-called "Advance Organiser" – a learning method that orders new information according to existing thought structures and thus aids memory retrieval. "It is based on cognitive psychology," Hillenbrand says. Carolin Reinck is applying the method today in a religious education class to teach children about the Creation story. While she recites a passage from the Bible the children place corresponding objects, words and pictures in the middle of a circle of chairs. When God creates the sea, Leon lays down a bowl of water. A little later Niko is allowed to add some small wooden trees, and Theresa takes care of the cows which repre- sent "the animals of the earth". The objects help the children remember the Creation story later on – especially those who are less confident readers and would have problems with a print-ed text," Reinck says.

The researchers also use other Oldenburg projects for assisting learning: they teach kindergarten children a basic understanding of numbers using the children’s book "The Hungry Caterpillar" or, once children have transitioned into class, they use "Olympic Number Games" to train basic arithmetic skills. Progress is charted using questionnaires, teachers’ assessments and targeted parent surveys. Here, too, Hillenbrand says that if the methods are right, in particular children with learning difficulties benefit significantly. A further key point for Hillenbrand is that they should learn in a group rather then be singled out and " schooled" separately. "What’s the best way to learn? Not with a work sheet but through interaction with others," the pedagogue emphasises.

Learning as part of a heterogeneous group – for Hillenbrand the idea has never been more relevant than it is today. He is thinking in particular about the children with a refugee background who are currently being integ- rated into the German school system. "Many of the children initially end up in so-called "welcome classes" where they are meant to learn German. This strikes me as problematic in the long term," the expert says. The problem is that these children are supposed to make an effort to learn a new language, but unless they have contact with German speaking children the idea will remain completely abstract, he observes. According to Hillenbrand, after a brief, intensive practice period the refugee children should be inte- grated into normal classes as quickly as possible. He even regards their learn- ing German as enriching for the rest of the class. "When the teacher points out specific features of the language, incorporates a grammar or vocabulary exercise here and there, all the children benefit."

Extending inclusion to refugees

Learning together – the underlying concept of inclusion – also applies for refugee children, Hillenbrand says. "The general structure is there after all." In many primary schools special needs teachers teach reading, writing and arithmetic to children with learning difficulties. The general structure is there after all, he says. Hillenbrand is confident that the German education system will be able to meet the challenge of “schools for everyone”. Recently he visited a class in Oldenburg where refugee children sat next to children with learning difficulties. He was very encouraged to see how well the pupils worked together. "One of our students works there voluntarily. She is Kurdish and can translate for them. She doesn’t understand all the children but if need be they translate among themselves. For me that shows that it’s always possible to find a way to put good ideas into action." (bb)

Many secondary schools are not even able to provide this basic support," Hillenbrand explains. The govern- ment of Lower Saxony has now taken initial steps to address the shortage of teachers, considerably increasing the number of places on courses at Oldenburg University’s Department of Special Needs Education and Rehabili- tation. In a few years’ time three times as many young people will be trained as special needs educators here as have been up to now. And nine new pro- fessorships are being created to help teach them. This is one of the reasons why Hil- lenbrand is confident that the German education system will be able to meet the challenge of “schools for everyone”. Recently he visited a class in Oldenburg that offers basic special needs support in which refugee children sit next to children with learning difficulties. He was very encouraged to see how well the pupils worked together. "One of our students works there voluntarily. She is Kurdish and can translate for them. She doesn’t understand all the children but if need be they translate among themselves. For me that shows that it’s always possible to find a way to put good ideas into action." (bb)

The researchers teach in various con- tinuing education courses. In a focus project for North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, they train teachers to be "inclusion experts" who then pass on their knowledge to their colleagues. "We have already trained 300 teachers, and a further 150 are currently in the process of obtaining their qualifi- cation," says Hillenbrand. They also offer special courses for head teachers in Lower Saxony, who are likewise con- fronted with the challenges of inclusion, in issues such as legal matters. "We were teaching to the converted in schools. There seems to be a huge de- mand for a more objective approach to the issue and concrete support," Hillenbrand says.

Schools come under additional pressure due to a general shortage of teachers in Germany. In many places there are simply not enough trained professionals – and special needs teachers are in even shorter supply. Hillenbrand points out that in Lower Saxony since the education act on in- clusion was passed in 2012 most pri- mary schools are obliged to make basic teaching provisions for children with special needs. "But this is just an extra two to five hours maximum with a spe- cial needs teacher – in primary schools.

* The children’s names were changed

How do you feel when another child pushes you?

Better together: the children solve tasks in teams.