

Situational Approach¹

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1 Summary

The Situational Approach originated in the 1970s and was developed in collaboration by academics and practitioners. In the Situational Approach, the situations of children and their families are the basis for educational work in Kitas². The Situational Approach is not static but continues to develop in line with social change. Current discourses and findings from theory and practice shape the Situational Approach.

2 History, dissemination, and basic orientation

The Situational Approach was developed in the early 1970s by the working group on preschool education at the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (DJI, German Youth Institute, under the direction of Jürgen Zimmer). Practitioners from Kitas and vocational training in West Germany collaborated on the development of the approach. Even then, the core idea was that children can learn and develop competencies by dealing with questions from and in their lives. The aim was to take children seriously and strengthen their autonomy, whilst at the same time making them aware of and encouraging them to act in solidarity. The result was the didactic series "Curriculum Soziales Lernen" (Engl: "Curriculum Social Learning"). Within the different volumes, "key situations" of children were explored, and ideas for action developed. Topics included: "Children alone in the city", "Children in hospital", and "Children of guest workers". The series included the four planning steps that laid the foundation for pedagogical action:

1. Exploring
2. Finding goals
3. Acting
4. Reflecting

In the following years, the Kitas deepened, utilized, and further developed the approach. In the 1990s the next big project brought new ideas and development: "Child Situations" (under the direction of Jürgen Zimmer and Christa Preissing) in the then-new federal states in East Germany. Once again, societal topics were analyzed in terms of their impact and significance for children. Together with children, practices were developed to work with these topics. Key situations included: "And who are you?", "Do something", "This is where life happens"; "Who decides here?".

¹ This text was translated from the article "Situationsansatz", <https://www.socialnet.de/lexikon/Situationsansatz>, published 2022/09/15.

² We choose to use the German expression Kita. It is short for 'Kindertageseinrichtung' and actually the most common word for ECEC settings in Germany. Kitas cater for children from two months of age until they start primary school, when they are about 5 to 7 years old.

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In 1996, the International Academy Berlin gGmbH was founded, to which the **Institute for the Situational Approach** (ISTA) also belongs. Finally, there was an institution where the Situational Approach could be systematically developed and disseminated. Aspects of the Situational Approach were then worked in various projects in greater depth:

In the project "QuaSi - Quality in the Situational Approach" (2000-2006, directed by Christa Preissing), the team bundled the theoretical and practical knowledge around the work in the Situational Approach into five theoretical dimensions and 16 conceptual principles that guide the pedagogical work in Kitas. In addition, the project team developed a procedure for internal and external evaluation in Kitas that corresponds to the basic tenor and aims of the Situational Approach (Preissing and Heller 2009).

This **approach to quality development** is still in a constant process of dynamic change by the team in the Quality Development & Evaluation Department at ISTA (headed by Katrin Macha). Hereby, new findings are continuously integrated. Additionally, the approach forms the foundation, for the development of quality manuals for various providers such as the city of Cologne (Stadt Köln 2019). Quality is not static as it always has to be renegotiated with all the different actors (see Moss 2016; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2007). This means that all perspectives are obtained and brought into dialogue with each other to decide what the goals are for Kita's respective pedagogical work. As of 2016, ISTA has included children's perspectives in all of its projects.

In the "**Kinderwelten**" projects (2000-2010, directed by Petra Wagner), the staff transferred the theoretical and practical knowledge of the anti-bias approach by Louise Derman-Sparks (Wagner 2013) to Germany. In doing so, they focused on injustice, diversity, and the appreciation of all living conditions. To this day, the staff of the "Fachstelle Kinderwelten" continue to develop the approach of *vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung*© (Anti-bias education) and focus on various aspects of diversity, power structures, and discrimination.

Other ISTA projects deepen the discussion and knowledge of participation: "Living Democracy in Day Care Centres and Primary Schools" (2002-2006, directed by Evelyne Höhme-Serke) focused in particular on participation processes in Kitas for young children, age birth to three years (Höhme-Serke, Priebe, and Wenzel 2012). In the project "KiKiBe - Kinderperspektiven im KitaBeirat" (2021-2023, directed by Katrin Macha and Alexandra Ulrich-Uebel), the attitudes and findings from the work with the Situational Approach for surveying children's perspectives are transferred to the institutional participation instrument KitaBeirat (in Rhineland-Palatinate).

In addition to the projects, the ISTA sees its mission as strengthening educators, leaders, advisors, and providers through further education and training on the Situational Approach and *Vorurteilsbewusster Bildung und Erziehung*©.

Over the years and decades, many educators and Kitas participating in projects and professional development, have worked with the Situational Approach and in turn given impulses for further development of the approach.

In addition, there are a large number of Kitas in Germany, an estimated ¼ of German Kitas, that cite the Situational Approach as a point of reference in their pedagogical concept.

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3 Theoretical dimensions

The Situational Approach has the characteristic that it is continuously evolving. There is no set model, but the core and essence is that knowledge of the world changes, and therefore educational responses to it must also change. In almost 50 years of existence, the sequence of planning steps has proven itself in pedagogical practice., This is repeatedly evident in the outcome of a thorough analysis and exploration of differentiated goals and the appropriate action steps that follow. Reflection or looking back at what has been implemented ensures that all participants take on the role of teachers and learners simultaneously.

The Situational Approach is shaped by current discourses and findings from theory and practice. The **discourse on the concept of education that** took place in Germany at the beginning of the 2000s has brought new insights into the Situational Approach, as has the debate on Vorurteilsbewusster Bildung und Erziehung©, structural disadvantages, and inequalities.

The presentation of the approach is currently still based on the theoretical dimensions developed in the **QuaSi** (Quality in the Situational Approach) project (2000-2006).

3.1 Life-world orientation

As described above, Situational Approach educators take the realities of the lives of children and their families seriously and include how these affect them. This life is what drives children and it is the centre of the pedagogy. This life-world orientation characterizes action. Educators always relate everything they do in the Kitas to the children's life-worlds – for and with the children.

Educators are interested in how children perceive the world in which they live and what they speak about or show. This is typically reflected in the close cooperation that educators have with the families and the great respect they feel for their circumstances. Thus, educators know the working conditions of the parents or caregivers and their family situations. They notice when something changes, they support families in their relationship with the child by giving advice or referring them to support systems.

3.2 Bildung

In the Situational Approach, education starts exactly in the areas where children are affected in their own lives and where values, knowledge, or actions are important to them. Children do not only learn what adults make available to them in structured learning opportunities., but also everything they need to navigate through and shape their world. The Situational Approach also focuses on learning that happens outside the typical educational sphere: If children are not listened to, they may learn that they are not important. If this happens continuously, it may have an impact on the child's self-image. If children's opinions are taken into account in everyday situations, they are likely to learn to speak their minds in other situations as well.

This does not mean that adults do not give impulses or introduce new things to children. On the contrary, children are usually very interested in learning new things when they feel comfortable and well and they need impulses for this. However, in the Situational Approach, it is important to connect adult impulses with children's interests and topics, to keep them engaged and give them the space to explore the topic themselves. To give an example, it is not about (elaborate) experiments that are

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shown to children, but about materials that are made available to children for them to develop their methods or strategies. This may mean that educators set up a workshop area in the washroom and children experiment with colours (and their whole bodies). Or that children are given water, flour, and sand, and the educator simply observes what the children do with it. Or that children are given a new doll, that sits in a wheelchair, and the educator observes how they play with it and what kind of dialogue they use.

3.3 Participation

In the Situational Approach, participation means that children may also decide not to take part in something because they want to do something else. Or simply because saying "no" is a current topic. In the Situational Approach, respect for children's autonomy is very important. The main point here is that children should be able to make decisions for themselves as often and in as many relevant situations as possible. This is especially important when working with young children because they may need support in more ways due to their physical abilities and the fact that they are dependent on adults who can easily override their will. There is no question that working conditions often make it difficult to respect the child's will. If the educator who changes the child's nappy is on holiday, the remaining educators and the child have to find a way to solve this, ensuring that the child feels comfortable, and their needs and rights are met. In the Situational Approach, it is central that adults as often as possible become aware that seemingly small and everyday situations in which they do something for a child may "quickly" have a significant impact on children. By negotiating with one another children and adults find ways to solve a problem or deal with a situation. This recognition of the child's autonomy is the foundation for the solidarity that children develop towards others. Children can accept and understand the needs and interests of others if they also experience this themselves. In the context of participation, educators must open up spaces for collaboration and agreement to create possibilities for children's self-determination. In the crèche, ensuring participation means focusing on the autonomy of children and the perception of their needs and those of others.

3.4 Equality and difference

In the spirit of equality and difference, the different characteristics, priorities, or values of families and children must be considered and taken seriously. Children are not all the same. They already differ due to their appearance or their family cultures. Children perceive these differences from an early age and link this to the development of their self-image and their image of others in the world (Wagner 2013). In the Situational Approach, this means that families and their values and processes are perceived and valued in their diversity. This is sometimes not easy for educators when the family culture is very different from their own. However, the child's experience that their family is fine the way they are is an important prerequisite for getting involved in life within the Kita/or creche. Working with this dimension also means, among other things, that there is a very diverse range of play materials so that children can discover their family cultures and their appearances. In addition, as a matter of course, they are given the possibility to experience many different types of families, cultures, and appearances from the very beginning. This refers, for example, to dolls with different skin tones and hair structures, crayons with different skin tones, books with diverse family forms, and protagonists who can do different things and may also look different.

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3.5 Unity of content and form

The dimension unity of content and form refers to the level of adults in the Kita system. How do different people in different functions work together in different places? This also includes being aware of the goals for pedagogical action within the pedagogical concept and how these goals can be implemented and made visible in everyday life. A concept should be there for a team to agree on certain behaviours and how they do not wish to work. This sets a framework; the concept additionally provides a good structure for all newcomers to find their way around. For educators, the concept is a good tool for orientation to look at their development, as perhaps not everything is working as intended. This also makes the adult's understanding of work visible within the Situational Approach: educators (actually all people throughout their lives) are learning at the same time. This means that they are aware that they do not know everything, that mistakes happen, and that they are in a dynamic developmental process that never stops.

Conclusion

Many educators in the Situational Approach have dealt with pedagogy for many years, exploring and working on a wide variety of situations with children, families, and their teams. From this experience, they develop new and ever-different insights for themselves and their pedagogical approach. The Situational Approach means that each person considers and contemplates the different dimensions over and over again, adapting their actions to their needs and experiences and thus adapting and developing their understanding of the Situational Approach over and over again. This mirrors children's learning processes: working intensively on a question over and over again, to analyze, try out, and learn something new - and then be able to look at the research question again at a later point in a different way, to experience further and gain new insights. In conclusion, we are never finished and thus we can always start and enter into the Situational Approach.

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More information on the Situational Approach

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