

EU-Mail – European Mixed-Ability Individualised Learning

Heide Koehler

How teachers in Finland support their pupils

A first-hand experience account commissioned by the COMENIUS-2.1 project EUMAIL

How can teachers promote individualised learning in heterogeneous groups?

This question is dealt with by a three-year COMENIUS-2.1 project which is organized and supported by FESCH (FORUM ELTERN UND SCHULE/FORUM PARENTS AND SCHOOL – a further education institution of the GGG NRW). The project is subsidized by the European Commission in Brussels – General Board of Directors Education and Culture. In total, 14 partner institutions and organizations from Finland, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden and Germany (here only from North Rhine-Westphalia) are taking part. The partners are teacher training institutes, further teacher training institutions, universities, schools and school boards of control.

The name of the project, „**EUMAIL**“, stands for

***EU**ropean **Mixed Ability Individualised Learning** –
Individualised learning in heterogeneous groups in Europe.*

The two aspects

Learning by the individual and Heterogeneity of groups of learners

are regarded as highly relevant

- for the educational-political discussion
- for everyday practice in schools as well as
- in teacher training and further teacher training

by all participating countries.

Most recent findings by research of learning as well as international research show that many teachers have not yet been sufficiently qualified for promoting individual learning processes in heterogeneous groups of learners and for accompanying them professionally.

The broad range of abilities and learning predispositions of boys and girls, members of different ethnic groups, children from different social backgrounds requires different ways to qualified educational degrees and to enabling them to unaided and life-long learning.

For this purpose, the above-mentioned partners from the five countries have met in order to work

- on the systematic research of factors favourable for successful individualised learning processes and
- on the development of modules for the training and further teacher training and, possibly, for heads of schools

for three years.

The aim of the *EUMAIL* project

Education and the capability of life-long learning have become the central prerequisite for the capability of development of the individual and of society at large. The results of the PISA study noted Europe-wide show that learning results can be distinctly advanced if teachers succeed in considering the special needs of individual pupils in their groups of learners as specifically as possible and in accompanying their individual learning processes.

The partners involved in the project want

To get to know, compare and evaluate the ideal approaches (best practice) by systematic and scholarly founded observations of lessons and interviews with teachers and pupils in the partner countries.

The starting basis is a **survey phase from February 2004 until January 2005**.

Two experts each from each of the participating countries will observe the learning situations in lessons and compare the respective teacher training during five-day visits in each country. The first visit took place in May and took the director of the teachers' training centre Essen and me to Finland. Visits to Great Britain in September, to Sweden in October and to North Rhine-Westphalia (Düsseldorf, Essen, Hagen and Wuppertal) in January 2005.

The observations will be accompanied and visualized by video documentation.

During the conception phase (February to August 2005) modules for teacher training and further teacher training and for further training of heads of schools which are to be tested and evaluated during the **realization phase (September 2005 until March 2006)** will be developed. A documentation is planned for August 2006.

My experiences in Finland

From 1 to 8 May, 2004, I stayed in Jyväskylä, a university town in the midst of the Finnish Lakes in central Finland, 270 km to the north of Helsinki.

Since the publication of the PISA study, Finland has become the destination of many delegations from the whole world, especially from Germany. They want to get an impression of the Finnish school system. As reasons for the excellent results of Finnish pupils in the PISA study, the following, among others, are given:

- the Finnish comprehensive school system,
- the decentralization of school administration and the ensuing methodological responsibility of schools with regard to achieving centrally set goals of learning,
- the comparatively high social standing of teachers and
- the individual support of weaker pupils within schools.

Which of these did I find in the two schools visited by me together with a Swedish professor?

Both schools are comprehensive schools which are also attended by pupils with various disabilities. This is standard.

Due to a radical reform, the **nine-year comprehensive school** has been *the core part of elementary education in Finland* since the beginning of the 70s and is a compulsory school. During

EU-Mail – European Mixed-Ability Individualised Learning

the course of time, differentiation according to performance has deliberately been dispensed with in order to grant equality of education opportunities for all. It is being held that in a modern society, everybody is important for something and good in some field. This basic attitude, which is deeply rooted in the Finnish populace after more than 30 years of practice, has the consent of all parties political.

The **sizes of classes** vary between 20 and 28 pupils. Disabled people have a permanent place in these classes but often have a more or less qualified female assistant to support them. This assistant intervenes only when these children need help. Children with severe learning disabilities learn under guidance in a separate room for hours. This room is their home at school. From here, however, they also attend various lessons of a class assigned to them.

In a 7th-grade class, I witnessed how three of them took part in a Science lesson. They appeared at the beginning of the lesson, took their seats and were integrated in the lesson activities within the scope of their abilities both by the teacher and their classmates. Obviously, the class themselves were able to assess which of these can read, who can help with collecting and arranging material. This unprejudiced way of dealing with each other has greatly impressed me. In Germany, we are far from this.

One of these pupils, at the age of 12, is on the learning level of a 2nd-grade pupil. She was able to read a text from the Biology book of the 7th grade fluently and – as my Finnish attendant (a student as translator) assured me – without mistakes. Time and again I found that all children can already read small books after four to five months in first grade.

Reading is a highly cultivated ability in Finland. Each school has a mostly freely accessible library and moreover, there is a public library in the immediate vicinity. Jyväskylä – a town with 80,000 inhabitants – has a library of three floors with an enormous range of books and reading niches in front of each subject. Beside Finnish books, there is a wide range of books in English and French, newspapers and magazines from all over the world and, of course, free Internet access points which are available for use for 15 minutes each. In the middle of the week at about 4.00 pm, the library was visited by people of all age groups and ages. In the school it is self-evident that the pupils complete six to eight readings per year beside their extensive homework.

In Finland, a **school day** normally begins at 8.00 pm and, differentiated according to age, ends at 3.00 pm at the latest. On Tuesdays, in all schools the end is regularly at 2.00 pm, as the weekly teacher conference takes place. These conferences of various content are compulsory for all teachers. Moreover, each teacher has to take part in two to three further training days per year; with regard to this, they prefer subject-related topics to methodological ones.

In Finnish schools, very often there is **no bell-signal**, no gong. Nevertheless, everybody is punctual for lessons. In every lesson I attended, two to three minutes before the end, the homework was given and noted down by the pupils.

At the time of school entry, parents are obliged, mostly in writing, to see to it that homework is done. In the copy-book, feedback from the teacher to the parents is noted, if necessary.

Like in Germany, pupils receive a **report** after every half-term but only from 7th grade on with marks. Moreover, in the middle of the half-term, a learning level description is given which is handled differently from school to school. I found the following procedure most impressive: The pupil receives a form with all his/her subjects and marks by a horizontal, rising or falling arrow whether, in his/her own opinion, his/her performance has improved, deteriorated or remained on the same level. Only then do the teachers mark their own assessment and possibly add remarks on the back of the form. This form is then passed on to the parents for their information and

EU-Mail – European Mixed-Ability Individualised Learning

signature. In urgent cases, the parents receive an invitation for a consultation in the school, together with the note. Apart from this, at some schools there is a parents' consultation day per half-term and, when required, educational parents' evenings.

Thus, parents are clearly involved – with regard to their own children – in the school processes, the more so as the teachers and the heads keep close telephone contact with them.

The **lessons visited** were no presentation lessons, were not distinguished by any especial wealth of ideas on the part of the teachers. However, remarkable were the fact that the teachers' activities were put in the background in favour of the work of the pupils and the high art of the teachers to make the pupils continue working by eye contact. I would like to add that on two tours on which we were guided by two pupils (*school-guides*), I appeared in the lessons unannounced.

- There was always a high work discipline. There were no disruptions of the lessons.
- The lessons took place in short intervals and with the clear concentration on a clearly set and announced goal. Here the teachers absolutely accepted a reduction of special aspects in order to take them up in following lessons.
- The teachers guided the pupils to the respective core of the topic of the lesson in a very short period of time to make them work on it unaided.
- At first, pupils worked in pairs (*pair work*) to subsequently check or complement their results achieved in a modified assignment (*pair check*). For this, they were able to use aids laid out, among others answer sheets, or to call the teacher to their table. A comparison of the results in the class as a whole did not take place. The means of control was the homework which was also mainly compared and evaluated by the pupils responsibly.

This is to illustrate two things: Learning has nothing threatening about it, nothing of a forced event, is, however, something so natural that nobody evades it. As in the punctual appearance for lessons, in my opinion, here a **high degree of responsibility and great confidence in the school** are shown.

Like in Germany, the quality of education and quality development are also much discussed in Finland. Discussions of evaluation and standards of education are natural in the Finnish system.

Unlike in Germany, the Finnish people have used the results of the PISA study to draw their own conclusions and develop concrete solutions. They work on the weak points revealed by PISA. To them, these are the big differences in performance between the individual regions and schools and the different literacy of boys and girls. This is therefore regarded as a challenge in order to meet the obligation to equal opportunities.

The **A-level** which is nowadays taken by about 60% (as in Germany, by more girls than boys, by the way) is a central A-level. Herein it is to be ascertained whether the pupils have acquired the knowledge and abilities stated in the curriculum for secondary school and whether they have enough maturity in the sense of the aims of the secondary level. (The tasks are published in the newspaper on the following day, by the way.)

In **compulsory school, the nine-year comprehensive school**, there have not been any compulsory national tests so far. However, there are voluntary tests which additionally serve as orientation for teachers and illustrate what the individual pupil or the age group is capable of. Marks can be improved by it but not be lowered. Tests are not used for disciplining. The average mark at the end of the nine-year comprehensive school is undisputed; it qualifies for admission into the three-year secondary level or for training at a vocational school.

EU-Mail – European Mixed-Ability Individualised Learning

The performances of Finnish pupils are not enforced by obligatory goals but by the culture of learning in the Finnish school. No school and no teacher can send off children or teenagers to another school form because they allegedly are not fit for this or that school. An equal share in education opportunities and a commonly borne responsibility for the course of education create confidence. Acceptance of the heterogeneity in classes and groups of learners as a chance for the advancement of all children and a general consensus with regard to the right way in education get teachers great respect. They in their turn are altogether distinguished by a pupil-orientated and pupil-supporting attitude.

What insights have I gained from my visit?

My predominant expectation that it is particularly important for the success of a school system to establish a friendly school motivating pupils and free of fear and aggression was fully confirmed and corroborated.

The schools were directed very well in a close exchange between heads and teaching staff. In this, they are supported by the parents. The co-operation of the parents cannot be valued highly enough and I am glad that it is firmly rooted in our German school.

The knowledge and abilities of the groups of learners impressed by a high standard. The personal self-assessment and the self-confidence of the pupils was remarkable. Partner work as well as team work showed that they are used to co-operative learning, i.e., to helping each other and to work relatively autonomously. Their work discipline and concentration were considerable. Their basic attitude is: "*it's cool to learn*". Such an attitude makes it easy to practice mutual respect and consideration.

It falls to the teacher, however, to offer a wide range of various exercise materials and exercises in a very clearly structured lesson. Together with an enormous extent of *positive* feedback and *individual* support, this seems to me to be particularly worthwhile for our schools.

I hope that the various tests impending on German schools will serve also here for self-evaluation, not be degraded to disciplinary measures and certainly not be misused for a ranking. Instead of selection of the best – as Finland has taught me – a friendly learning atmosphere, mutual esteem and the endeavour towards an individual advancement of all promise more learning and teaching success.