

EU-MAIL visit in Finland 02.05. - 08.05. 2004

Report from

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In this web version of the document all names that could lead to a direct identification of pupils, teachers and schools have been removed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The school observation week in Finland was the first in the series of observation weeks that will be part of the EU-MAIL project. This report does not give specific information on the project per se nor does it discuss the methods or the goals of the project. Reading this report should therefore not be done without a basic acquaintance with the means and ends of EU-MAIL project. Necessary information on the EU-MAIL project is available at <http://www.eu-mail.info>

Observation sheets are not included in the report. The questions that were posed to pupils will be found in the text. The text which will also show what was on the agenda in our interviews with subject teachers and with head teachers.

Please observe that in this report dates are given in the way they are normally given in Norway, i.e. day/month/year.

A lower secondary school in a municipality outside Jyväskylä was visited 03.05.04 and 04.05.04 and another lower secondary school, located in Jyväskylä, was visited 05.05.04 and 06.05.04 by Garry D. Hall (halg27@talk21.com) (England) and Steinar Wennevold (Steinar.Wennevold@hiof.no) (Norway)

We both contributed to the general report from the school visit, but the latter is solely responsible for this report.

A comment on the use of the concepts *student* versus *pupil*: Which of these two words should I use? I prefer pupil and act accordingly in my report. Pupil comes closest to the concept *elev* (*the person who is elevated by learning*) which is the word used in Norway. In Norway one does not become a student until entering tertiary education.

The report is edited so that for each observation day observations of lessons, interviews/ conversations and comments are numbered and put in chronological order. The report is based on catchwords written during lessons and also on somewhat more extensive notes taken during breaks or taken each day after observations. It is not a full and thick description on what was going on in all the classes we visited. It concentrates on phenomena considered to be relevant for the EU-MAIL project.

Going to Finland I brought with me a caveat on observation: *'Moving to judgement too quickly is one of the main characteristics of poor observation.'* (Hopkins 1996: 77) Keeping observation from judgement neither easy nor always possible, but anyway it is wise to keep Hopkin's words in mind when setting off to observe what goes on in a school, not least when the school is located in a foreign country. As will be seen this report contains a lot of judgements, but I have tried to keep apart my descriptions and my judgements. Most of my judgements should therefore be found under subheadings like comments and impressions.

Of course caveats on observation can be found in other and older sources, e.g. in the Matthew Gospel it is said that *'with their ears they hear poorly, they have their eyes shut so that they may not see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart.'* (Matthew 13.15) Still I will to my best, hoping to reach the next stage of observation skills: *'But blessed be your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.'* (Matthew 13.16)

The education system of Finland is described by a chart at this site:
<http://www.edu.fi/english/SubPage.asp?path=500,4699>

School visit reports in the EU-MAIL project should normally include recommendations on activities which we observed and which we recommend to be videoed. As videoing had already been done in Finland when the report was written recommendations are not included in this report. This is a practicality that should not be interpreted wrongly. Therefore I haste to assure that everything we observed had a potential for being used for EU-MAIL's video purposes.

As a participant in the EU-MAIL project I appreciated the openness, friendliness and welcoming attitude we as observers were met with in the schools we visited. In the report anonymity is given to the individual teachers and head teachers as well as to pupils This choice was not taken on necessity: Each one of them did their jobs well and their names might very well be publicised. Anonymity was chosen because that usually is the case in reports like this.

Teacher training students Olli-Pekka Pihlaja, who accompanied us the two first days and Maria Ruotsalainen, who accompanied us the two last days of observation, deserve words of thank for their helpful and friendly assistance as interpreters and informants. They were knowledgeable and could give informative answers to our questions concerning school and society in Finland.

Thanks also to the local organisers of the school visit week in Finland. Petra Linderoos deserves specially to be mentioned for a well done job as a coordinator.

A small list of books from my faculty library is included even if most of them have not been used for citation purposes in the report.

2. OBSERVATION DAY 1: MONDAY 03.05.04

The first school we visited was located in the central settlement of a municipality northeast of Jyväskylä in central Finland (Keski Suomi).

2. 1) Interview/conversation with the principal (female, age 45)

She has held her position as a principle for the last four years. She worked as a teacher in mathematics, physics and chemistry before she took the position as a principle. This year the school has approximately 360 pupils at the lower secondary level. The lower secondary comprises grades 7, 8 and 9 i. e. ages 13-16. It is colocated with an upper secondary school, but the two are administratively separated.

The school is a comprehensive school taking care of pupils with mixed abilities. About one in ten of the pupils are receiving special education. About one half of them are integrated in ordinary classes and are given special education in some subjects. Two small groups, consisting of pupils across the age levels, are in special class. There is also a special unit for a small number of pupils with severe behavioural problems. A few pupils with special needs have an assistant.

Her own observation is that the number of pupils with diagnosed severe problems is increasing and that there seems to be a cumulative effect: Problems attract each other, accumulate and the result is multi problem pupils. A negative Matthew effect seems to be present.

There is a school nurse working every day and a doctor comes once a week. A social worker can be called upon if his/her help is needed.

The principal says: Our school is a typical one and represents an average for Finnish lower secondary schools located outside the more urbanised areas. A high degree of inclusion is what she wants all stakeholders in the school community to value and to work towards.

A parents' board is primarily a forum for discussions concerning the school's present and future activities, but has political influence by presenting and representing the school's interests when municipal authorities are going to make administrative or political decisions.

2. 2) Observations before start of lessons (with due respect to lack of fluency (sic!) in Finnish)

We arrive early and are nicely received by teachers with their *huomenta* (Morning) and even *hyvää huomenta* (Good morning).

Teachers in the staff room are talking to each other and exchanging information concerning the teaching to come and their own work this warm day of early spring.

When the teacher and the pupils have arrived in class the school day starts with a local broadcast of messages/information from principal, teachers and/or pupils. Content and form of the broadcast varies from important to less important and from serious to humorous.

Rooms are locked before start of school day, in breaks and even during lessons, i. e. except at beginning and end of breaks. School personnel have keys - and use them.

**2. 3) Two consecutive lessons observed. Class: 7th grade. Subject: Mathematics.
Teacher: Female, below average age.**

Classroom: In the older buildings of the school complex, therefore it looks traditional. Windows high on the wall lets sunlight in, but no one can look into the room from the outside and no one inside can see activities going on outside the room.

The room has an ordinary green 'blackboard', walls are extensively decorated by pieces of pupils' own artwork. Along lower part of walls there are cupboards for keeping materials both for teacher and for pupils.

Rules for accepted behaviour are found on a poster on the wall and rules are formulated this way: We arrive in due time. We behave nicely towards each other, we...

Käyttäminen oppitunneilla
Tulejoissa tunille
Anna toisille työrauha
Pyydä puheenvuoro viittaamalla

Pupils: In all there are 14 pupils in the class - 7 girls and 7 boys. This low number leaves many chairs and tables of the classroom unoccupied.

Content of lesson is concentrated on measures of length - from millimetre to kilometre: mm, cm, dm, m, dam, hm, km and how to calculate from one to another measure.

Structure of the first lesson

- a) The teacher hands out activity sheets and shortly explains what is expected in this lesson.
- b) The pupils work in pairs or individually.
- c) The teacher writes down answers on the board, asks questions, encourages students, talks with them, trying to make them reason on the subject.
As can be expected in a mixed ability group some are less attentive, maybe due to Monday tiredness? Some boys make sounds trying to attract - or rather distract - other pupils' attention - really without much effect.
- d) Largest part of lesson is used for activities where the teacher circles the room giving general or special support to pupils supposed to be working individually with assignment in textbook. Some students organise themselves in pairs or in trios. If their activity is on task, the teacher does not insist on separating them/does not demand individual work
- e) Lesson concludes with the teacher pointing to content of next lesson

The second lesson is held after the lunch break and is, as regards content, a continuation of the first.

- a) The teacher asks questions from the whole class - refreshing pupils' memory from first lesson - concerning measures of length.
- b) The teacher directs questions to different pupils - trying to check out that they understand change of scales/measures and showing and repeating rules which are to be applied when working upwards or downwards in scales.

c) New content and new concepts - perimeter of different geometric forms and area of squares - are introduced by the teacher. After her introduction the pupils start working on assignments in the textbook.

2. 4) One more lesson was observed before lunch break. Class: 8th grade. Subject: English. Teacher: Female, below average age

Class environment: Open, spacious classroom, windows high on the wall, resulting in absence of distractions coming from pupils looking out at activities going on there or from anybody looking into the class room.

Pupils: 14: 10 boys/4 girls. All were placed in rows of two and two.

a) The teacher hands out papers from earlier assignment - marked/graded by her.

b) Pupils are expected to write in their exercise book a self evaluation concerning last theme. Our helper and translator - teacher training student Olli-Pekka Pihlaja - translated the questions found in the self evaluation section of the text book. These were the questions:

- 1) What is the thing you remember best from the preceding period?
- 2) What things were new for you?
- 3) How many new words were there? ..many, half of them, a few, none
- 4) What about the grammar? Do you cope with it? ..really good, fair enough, somehow, it needs refreshing
- 5) What about the content of the period? ..really nice, interesting, OK, boring?
- 6) Which grade would you give to yourself?
- 7) Draw a logo that describes the period.

c) New theme in English textbook is introduced. Teenage trends are on the agenda now. The teacher gives concise instructions and the pupils are rather well tuned in. Some activities are:

One pupil after the other reads a word - the others repeat after her/him.

Pupils sit back-to-back - their task is to tell each other which clothes the other one wears.

Listening to a cassette recording and repeating words from this text.

Pupils are regrouped into new pairs and given the assignment of reading a 'model dialogue' from the textbook and doing a conversation on their own - based in the model dialogue.

2.5) General impression of this lesson

Varied activities are used. Activities are based on different types of material:

Textbook/resource book, exercise book, cassette recordings with spoken English and music.

During the lesson there is an increasing degree of individualisation. The assignments give the pupils possibilities of working according to their abilities.

2. 6) After the lunch break (13.15- 14.00). Class: 8th grade. Subject: History Teacher: Male, above average age

1) The teacher tells the pupils that today's first theme is EU and recent developments in EU. In this part of the lesson the teacher asks questions to the whole class and pupils indicate their willingness to give answers by raising a hand. As can be seen in any mixed ability (and even in a tiered) class and - which is very common in history classes - some pupils are prepared to answer all questions while others do not show willingness. Obvious reluctance is not observed. The teacher takes time to comment answers and he puts answers into a larger context.

2) New theme: The first astronauts

The class is now given a reading task from the textbook. When the reading is finished the teacher questions the class, receives answers and comments on them. The teacher uses the class textbook as a point of departure for his questions and asks questions which demand that pupils command a high level of factual knowledge. Teacher walks around using his own mastery over the historic content and creates necessary questions 'here and now', i.e. not all questions are pre planned. At least that is my impression and I am pretty sure it is correct.

3) Third theme in today's history lesson is the Cuba crisis in 1962.

Pupils are instructed to read from the textbook and work individually on the text.

2. 7) General reflections based on this lesson

This teacher uses what is commonly characterised as a didactic way of teaching. Compared to the lessons observed in mathematics and English a larger part of the pupils are less active during the lesson, i. e. visibly active - active in a way that is easy to observe. One important question remains: Which amounts of and types of learning do really result from different styles and forms of teaching? Does teaching methods requiring that pupils are physically active produce more and more lasting learning than teaching methods requiring that pupils sit relatively quiet at their desk? Do we really know if there are measurable differences? My own answer is that we do not know. We even do not really know if there are immeasurable differences!

When comparing rather different teacher personalities using rather different teaching methods and requiring that the pupils use rather different learning activities, my personal reflection is that - not at least for the sake of the pupils - it is important to preserve the principle of the teacher's freedom to choose her/his own teaching methods. I consider the teacher's freedom to choose her/his own teaching methods to be one of the most - if not the most - valuable and priceless principles in teaching. Just as the pupil population of a school or in a class represent a wide variety of personalities, interests and abilities, the teacher population represent the same sort of (and may be even amount of) variation. Trying to reduce that variation by forcing all teachers into using the same methods and approaches would not be the wisest thing to do, I think.

2. 8) Conversation with the two female teachers whose classes were observed

Conversation took place 03.04.05 14.00 - 15.00

Their main reaction to our questions concerning mixed ability (MA) is that their classes really are very mixed. The amount of variation is large between classes as well as between pupils in classes. Their comment on individualised learning (IL) is that the degree of individualisation in teaching depends very much on the teacher personality. Individualisation and self directed learning is the goal, the ideal, the teachers say. Practising the principle is not as easy as expressing it!

We asked about their experiences with self evaluation as an instrument making the pupils aware of their own learning/their own development as learners. The answer was that self evaluation is positive when it makes the individual pupil aware of her/his own learning and makes pupils think about their own learning activities and the effectiveness of using different learning activities. On the other hand - answering some types of self evaluation questions found in textbooks can easily turn into a routine activity; into a ritual done without much thinking involved.

Work directed towards 9th grade assessment does not interfere too much in the pupils work in 8th grade. Teaching to test is therefore not a real threat for the teachers at this grade. Every class has one class teacher and each class has at least one class hour per month with this class teacher, but normally a class teacher has a much larger number of lessons in the class where she/he is the class teacher.

2. 9) General reflections on learning in the classroom (during/after observations)

Learning in the classroom (as well as anywhere else) is a paradoxical and an ambiguous phenomenon:

- ▶ On one hand learning is a very personal and private matter going on inside our head. Seen this way learning can be defined (generally) as a mental activity that can go on in a mind that is (relatively well) concentrated on a (relatively well defined) task.
- ▶ On the other hand we know very well that performing learning can be immensely helped if and when the learner communicates with others during the learning process. Seen this way learning is a very social activity and not a purely private and individual activity.

Pupils as learners placed in a classroom have to share their attention between

- The teacher and his/her language, actions, mode of conduct, expectations, ..
- the subject taught and the content of the lesson,
- the teaching/learning material they have at their disposal (or lack),
- a number of other pupils at different distances (some of them being more relevant/important/significant than other pupils)
- parents' expectations
- and a series of other factors

Which of these factors demand most attention?

Which of these factors receives most attention?

Which are the most important factors working as distractors?

Why is it so? Does it depend (more or less) on:

Teacher's authority, presence/distance

Teacher's choice of method

The sheer number of other pupils, their support, threats, demands, exchanges,
language, physical actions

The content of or the goal of learning

Factors mentioned above make up what Kincheloe (2003:108) describes as '*the interactive intricacy of a classroom*'. On the background of this intricacy Kincheloe (2003:163) discusses the fallibilities of observation and says that: '*Literally thousands of unmentioned factors have a significant influence on what happens in any classroom.*' And he reassures us that it will always be impossible for an observer not only to observe everything that is going on in the classroom but also to account for all variables affecting what is actually being observed and recorded.

How do we organise activities in a class so that they become real learning activities? And do we manage to do so when we know that the context of learning is a complex of different factors. Not a full answer but an important part of an answer to these questions is this:

Pupils learn more when they are aware of, conscious of, their own learning; when they do metalearning. Metalearning is done when you are talking to yourself about what you are doing, how you are doing it and why you are doing it. Teachers have to encourage pupils to do metalearning and do so by teaching them how to do metalearning. Metalearning can only be accomplished if the pupil is able to self evaluate herself/himself. Metalearning requires being able to look at one self from outside, to observe what oneself is doing and not doing. Metalearning can be learnt and has to be learnt.

3. OBSERVATION DAY 2: TUESDAY 04.05.04

This is the second day at a lower secondary school outside Jyväskylä.

3. 1) Class: 8th grade. Subject: English Time: 09 - 10. Teacher: Female, below average age.

Classroom and teacher: Known from English lesson yesterday.

Activities:

- 1) Throwing a ball between teacher and pupil. The teacher pronounces a word in Finnish, throws the ball to the pupil who is challenged to answer with the same word in English. Whether or not the pupil can give a correct answer the ball goes back to the teacher who continues with another word to another pupil.
- 2) The pupils repeat words from the textbook. Teacher pronounces each word first, the pupils repeat.
- 3) Listening to 'broadcast' versions of texts from the textbook. Today's theme is the birth of the youth culture, illustrated by the 1950-ies (The Wild One) and the '1950-ies (All You Need Is Love)
- 4) The pupils are asked to explain *what the main content* was of the excerpt they just listened to.
- 5) The teacher explains in Finnish as well as in English which activities the pupils are expected to engage in; how they are expected to work (alone or in pairs) and for how long they are expected to continue the activity (10 minutes).
- 6) Teacher checks results by walking around asking questions to pupils, answering questions from pupils and encouraging pupils during the activity.
- 7) New theme introduced: School uniforms
- 8) Homework given: Write at least 7 sentences about school uniforms

3. 2) General comments on this lesson

The teacher uses a mix of Finnish and English during the lesson. Some teachers insist on using only the foreign language during lessons, this one does not. This seems to be a wise choice: Some of the pupils are not *that* good at English.

The lesson is very varied. The content varies from the easy to the demanding. The teacher differentiates by not expecting the same extent and type of outcome from individual pupils.

The teacher accommodates her own reactions well to what pupils do: Meets humour with humour, meets unacceptable actions or language by addressing the pupil who misbehaves.

3. 3) Second English lesson, this one with 7th grade (which, as yesterday, has a 'civil worker' present as an assistant). Same teacher as above.

1) The teacher gives instruction concerning the lesson activities, partly in English, partly in Finnish. The pupils are then given a range of activities among which they can choose. An explicit condition underlying the free choice is that it will be easy for the teacher to see which activity each pupil is working on.

The teacher picks two pupils who are to listen extra to the 'broadcast' presentation from the textbook. The intention is that listening to spoken English will increase their vocabulary and improve their own pronouncing of the language.

Pupils are more or less engaged in their lesson activity.

2) A new task is given midway in the lesson.

Pupils are to cooperate in pairs - questioning and answering each other from a task sheet. Organised this way the activity also means - and is intended to be - a repetition.

3. 4) Mathematics lesson observed after lunch break (12.25 - 13.10) Teacher: Female, below average age (known from yesterday)

Theme: Geometric forms

1) Pupils are given tasks concerned with classification based on geometric form. Overhead projector used in instruction, illustrating forms/areas. The teacher asks questions to pupils to check their understanding. Answers to tasks are worked through.

2) Tasks changes from forms to volumes. Teacher works through methods of calculating the volume of different geometric figures/forms.

Both activities are relatively closely connected to the pupils' textbook

Assignments for home work are given from textbook.

3. 5) Conversation with two boys from 8th grade (Teacher training student acts as translator when necessary)

1) What helps you learn?

To read helps us learn (The answer surely implies reading of textbooks, but not only?)

2) What hinders your learning?

Negative attitudes from pupils as well as teachers will hinder learning.
It is impossible to be always positive!

3) Tell us about a time when your learning/work was brilliant!

English lessons/work sheets are given as examples.

4) A question about help from parents: How do parents help your learning?

Gets help from older sister. Gets help from father on practical issues.

5) How do you like teachers to help you?

They prefer asking the teacher for help when help is needed, but also ask classmates for help.

6) Do you learn learning strategies?

They say that they learnt more about learning strategies/how to work with their own learning in mind in primary than in lower secondary.

7) Tell us about your own development in a subject of your own liking

Examples given are: Increased/better understanding through own engagement in playing games on PC

3. 6) Conversations with boy and girl from 7th grade

1-2) What helps you learn and what hinders your learning?

When your own private life/family life is stable, it is easier to learn/concentrate on learning. If hobbies and private interests are compatible with schoolwork, it is easier to learn/concentrate on learning.

Teachers, who get closely acquainted with each individual pupil and therefore know each pupil's strengths and weaknesses, can support the pupil. Teachers get well acquainted with the pupil through the three years in lower secondary school. The team teacher will know the pupil well.

3) Tell us about a time when your learning/work was brilliant!

Has been reading about volcanoes and volcanism - found it engaging for me, one of them says. Historic events are interesting, mentions the other one. Mathematics is a favourite subject.

The content must be interesting. The teacher can do much in making the content interesting, especially if he/she is a good narrator. The subject content can also be interesting in itself, so that one wishes to 'conquer' it even when it is difficult. Motivation must primarily come from the pupil's own inside - and support is important for developing a continuing interest in learning.

5) How do you like teachers to help you?

Teachers have to give keys/clues/hints that can help me find the right track to follow.

6) How do your parents help your learning?

Get more help from older siblings, but also some help from parents.

7) Do you help your fellow pupils and do they help you?

Yes, we use brainstorming as a learning strategy.

8) What do you do when you don't understand the teacher?

Uses classmates as helpers, asks them questions when in doubt on an issue.

9) Do you think that you have been able to influence what you are learning?

This question seemed to be too difficult and no straightforward answer was given.

10) What have you really learnt?

Languages, home economics which both are new subjects at this level.

11) What do you expect from school (at the level you are now)?

We expect to work more in depth in each subject than we did in primary school, but now we have a feeling of being midway between primary and upper secondary school.

Time spent on homework: 15 - 30 minutes per day, on an ordinary day.

Favourite subjects: Arts, Finnish, English, Chemistry, Gymnastics

Free time activities: Fritidsklubb (Club for off school activities), Ice hockey

3. 7) Comments on this conversation with the 7 graders

During observed lessons the boy that we talked with seemed rather absentminded/not concentrated and expressed through his body language low interest and was even openly uninterested, but during the conversation he showed high aptitude in expressing himself on the subject of learning and gave precise answers to our questions.

What should a school observer learn from that? At least this should be learned: *Don't jump to judgements! Don't let your verdict fall too quickly and easily!*

4. OBSERVATION DAY 3: WEDNESDAY 05.05.04

First day at one of the Jyväskylä lower secondary schools

4. 1) General impression upon arrival at the school: This is a relatively new school. It is located in a Jyväskylä suburb which was said to have a relatively high level of single parent families and families with immigrant background. The school had nice rooms, spacious corridors and everything inside the school was well kept.

4. 2) Conversation with the principal

The female principal gave a thorough briefing on the school system in Jyväskylä municipality and also informed us on ongoing work concerning a new curriculum for Finnish schools.

See also description on 'Comprehensive education and upper secondary education curricula to be reformed' at <http://www.edu.fi/english/pageLast.asp?path=500,571,28326> (16.12.2004)

General information in English on education in the municipality of Jyväskylä can be found on this address: <http://www.jyvaskyla.fi/opetusvirasto/english/> (16.12.2004)

On the organisation of special education she told us:

Pupils at our school in need of special education are usually in a special, small group for about two months and then go back to their former class. She explains that this practice is economically defensible according to the resources available and adds that in her opinion a lasting placement in a special education group is not the most positive solution for the pupil - if it can be avoided. By keeping pupils in a special group for a short period and by changing the pupils who are in the group, it is possible to confront the pupils with explicit demands - and a larger number of pupils get the specific education and help they are in need of. Pupils with severe behavioural problems can stay in special institutions for more than half a year. Who will get special education? Teachers, special needs teachers, principal/vice principal, health worker (school nurse) and social worker meet to discuss and decide which measures are to be taken in each case. Parents are, as much as possible, drawn into the decision process. Resources for special education available here are two special needs teachers. In addition there are three assistants. At times when there are more pupils requiring it there will be more assistants.

On evaluation of the pupils and their school work:

Graded evaluation is given twice a year. This school uses report cards showing both present and past grading and which therefore can show pupils as well as parents the direction of the pupil's development. A high number of days absent from school can be compensated by having to attend school during summer holidays.

Each pupil will receive a monthly report showing days absent from school, showing if homework was not registered as done, if books are forgotten, etc. This report has to be signed by parent(s) and returned to the class teacher.

Future plans of special interest:

Improving the practice of self evaluation will be a target next year. Self evaluation as a method to enhance learning will be stressed.

Our conversation with principal continued next day (06.05.04)

Themes from that conversation are given here:

The school takes part in national, centrally given tests. The school also takes part in other types of subject tests, e.g. tests organised by the mathematics teachers' organisation. These kinds of tests are done in order to have comparable data across schools.

Pupils with non-Finnish background are given extra tests in Jyväskylä.

The national curriculum is basically also the school's local curriculum. It not regarded as necessary to rework the national curriculum to be able to use it as the local curriculum.

4. 3) Informal conversation with teachers being in their restroom

- With a teacher in religion who reminds us that in a system based on subject teachers a teacher in a small subject with a small number of lessons per week - like religion – then the teacher in his/her job will meet a large number of pupils, really all the pupils in this case. The number of lessons the teachers give per week varies between 18 (Finnish) and 24 (Physical education).

- With the teacher responsible for teaching entrepreneurship (Ung företagsamhet):

Entrepreneurship is met with positive attitudes both from the political level and from pupils.

4. 4) Lesson in English 12.25 - . 8th grade 22 pupils: 11girls/11 boys (all except two sit in pairs) Female teacher, below average age.

1) 'OK, time to start. Take out your homework.' These are the words that start the lesson. The teacher instructs - telling pupils what they are going to work with in textbook and in exercise book: They are going to work with the past tense: 'had broken, had opened', etc.

2) The teacher is activating pupils by asking questions, receiving answers, commenting on the answers and by writing at the blackboard sentences which are to be changed from present to past tense.

3) Then a coming test (due 14.05.04) is worked through in this way: *What* will be the content of the test and *where* - in the textbook and the grammar - is this content located. Apparently the pupils are expected to write down (make their own notes of) this message.

4) Next activity is future tense, use of modal verbs will and shall. Teacher shows and explains - system and rules. Pupils are activated by being questioned and having to form sentences using will or shall - as an oral activity.

5) Pupils write sentences in their workbooks.

6) Extra assignments are given.

6) Homework given.

4. 5) Comments on this lesson

What we have seen here is teaching which clearly is done with a consideration to mixed ability, but is there also a space for individualised learning? The teacher adapts her teaching to pupils considered to be lower achieving, but all are given the same assignments. This type of individualisation is usually called differentiation by outcome.

The teacher walks around, talking to most of the pupils and is helping some of them more than the rest. This *can* be regarded as ‘doing MAIL’, but *can also* be regarded as ‘doing only MA’, i.e. doing a bit of differentiation in teaching, but not more than is obviously necessary due to the variation between the abilities of the pupils.

This raises an important question concerning EU-MAIL:

Are explicit measures differentiating between pupils according to their abilities, learning styles, etc a necessary condition for characterising a lesson as giving space for individualised learning?

This observation may be unimportant, but...

Rooms are locked, therefore teachers walk with their keys visible and audible - you can hear the rattle of the keys even during lessons. What does that signal to the pupils, I wonder.

4. 6) Lesson in mathematics, 13.20 - 14.00, 8th grade. Teacher known from observation 4.4, see above.

1) Two pupils are asked to write down answers to homework on the blackboard. Afterwards the teacher comments on the homework and the answers that were given by the pupils.

2) Most of the lesson time is directed towards a test set for 11.05.04. The teacher tells what to concentrate on and where in the textbook to read and prepare for the test.

3) Pupils work individually and in pairs preparing themselves for the test. Teacher helps and counsels.

Question to teacher about self evaluation after class. She answers that self evaluation is not an integrated part of the mathematics curriculum, but that the new curriculum is expected to stress self evaluation. This is just the same as the principal told us.

4. 7) My own very personal reflections after three days in two Finnish schools

Finnish pupils are getting high scores on international comparative indicators. Why? Very personal and very tentative answers from my own point of view, when comparing Finland and Norway, are these:

- Because a lot more of time in class generally is used on preparing for tests in Finland than in Norway? We can observe that full lessons are used for preparations during the last days before a test, i.e. teaching to tests seem to be a reality. Pupils who are more and better prepared for the tests they will be participating in should get better results, shouldn't they?

- Because a larger part of each age group of pupils (than is the case in Norway) are not in ordinary classes? My impression is that classes in Norway show a larger degree of variation between pupils than is the case in the classes we have observed in Finland. If inclusion is comprising a larger part of the children going to school, if mixed ability is more fully realised as a principle of organising children in schools, it should be expected that a country with a lower degree of inclusion (in casu Finland) will fare better in tests than a country with a high degree of inclusion (in casu Norway), shouldn't it?
- Finland has a comparatively lower percentage of pupils with immigrant background and therefore does not have to spend equally large amounts of teacher resources on relatively basic education.
- The subject teacher system may produce better results in tests than the Norwegian general teacher system. This point of view is a contested one in Norway, where the general teacher education system still has many adherents. May be appropriate investigations would show that there are different teacher cultures and teaching cultures?
- There may also be other cultural differences between the two countries. The learning culture may be different? But how can we discern cultural differences?

4. 8) Just published: Results from the 2003 PISA

The above remarks (4. 7) were written during the school visit week. Some months later - in December 2004 - and after the second wave of impressive Finnish PISA results, on the home pages of the Ministry of Education one can find an official message concerning PISA. *Background for Finnish PISA success* is the headline.

<http://www.edu.fi/english/page.asp?path=500,571,36263> (16.12.2004)

The text goes like this:

'Why did Finland do so well in PISA? Some explanations are found in the main principles for comprehensive education in Finland:

Equal opportunities for education irrespective of domicile, sex, economic situation or mother tongue

Regional accessibility of education

No separation of sexes

Education totally free of charge

Comprehensive, non-selective basic education

Supportive and flexible administration – centralised steering of the whole, local implementation

Interactive, co-operative way of working at all levels; idea of partnership

Individual support for learning and welfare of pupils

Development-oriented evaluation and pupil assessment – no testing, no ranking lists

Highly qualified, autonomous teachers

Socio-constructivist learning conception

For more information about the Finnish PISA results, please have a look at the press release of the Ministry of Education. '

At the web address given above you will find a number of links to articles on the Finnish PISA successes.

A short and frank evaluation from my point of view: Of the eleven different factors mentioned by the ministry I think that only the last five are of any importance in an explanation of the relatively large differences between Finland and Norway in the PISA results.

5. OBSERVATION DAY 4: THURSDAY 06.05.04

This was the second day at a Jyväskylä lower secondary school.

5. 1) Class: 8th grade. Subject: History. Teacher: Male, above average age

The history lesson is the first lesson of the day.

1) The teacher informs about a history test coming next week.

2) The content of the lesson is on the fall of the Soviet Union (SU/USSR)

The teacher narrates, comments and asks questions about the fall of the SU. He is trying to find out what the pupils know and tries to fill out their picture of what the Soviet Union represented.

3) The pupils read in textbook about the states of Eastern Europe and the effects of the fall of the SU on and in these states.

4) The teacher and the pupils together construct a scheme (an overview) showing consequences of the fall of the SU.

Valtio (state) *Tapahtumat* (consequences) *Aika* (time /when)

e.g. Germany West and East joined 1990

The pupils fill in their workbooks what the teacher writes on the blackboard. The teacher uses ample time discussing with the pupils before deciding what to write and how to phrase it. The activity is time consuming.

The teacher's own comment after class: *'This is the way I do it: A one man show.'*

5. 2) My personal comments on this lesson

As observers we have seen this class at the end of the day before with another teacher. At that time a number of the pupils minds were somewhere far beyond the mathematics lesson. Looking at and listening to what went on in the class at that time resulted in that picture in my mind.

The class is much quieter this morning than yesterday afternoon. Why is that so?

Is it because the pupils know that the male teacher is demanding respect/silence in class?

Is it the time of the day? School is hard work, pupils get less concentrated during the school day and will make more fuss at the end of the day than in the morning?

A relatively large part of the lesson we observed was dominated by the teacher doing what is called frontal teaching. We saw a teacher who expected that the pupils had prepared well, that they knew the content and that they had read their home work in the textbook. This type of teaching is often criticised and considered methodically as wrong. Most often it is criticised by people who care more about teaching than about learning.

What I saw here was that *this teacher* asked questions in order to find and to stress the most important parts of complicated historical processes. Finding and formulating the answers to the questions was done by the teacher in co-operation with the pupils. If the same questions were given as a task to be solved by the pupils individually, in pairs or in groups I am pretty sure that the quality of the answers would be much lower.

An important follow up question here is of course: Do we retain more of what we find out by ourselves than we retain of what we are told by others? Some like to give yes as an answer to this question. I don't think that questions like this can be answered by yes or no. And why do I think so? Because there are such a lot of contingent factors that will influence learning wherever it occurs. See my remarks on the intricacies of teaching on page 10.

Maybe the teacher could have used more time on discussing and on deciding why it is important to be informed on historical processes in the close past? If doing so is considered important, it would require using more time in class covering today's subject. Doing more demands more time. And time as a resource is at least as scarce in school as anywhere else!

5. 3) Class: 8th Grade. Subject: English Teacher: Female, below average age

- 1) 'Who wants to be interviewed by the EU-MAIL representatives?', she asks.
Willing pupils raise their hand and the case is quickly decided.
- 2) Textbook lesson 14 starts with listening to a story on Incredible things.
The story gives assertions/claims concerning people, things, states - and reactions to these assertions/claims.
- 3) Music: Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong with his 'What a wonderful world' (no singing in!)
- 4) About West Side Story - a short version; what happens in the play.
Teacher works through the plot and illustrates with cuts from the music.
Afterwards the pupils read the text in English and translate it to Finnish.
Teacher comments and gives examples of English wording, e.g. how verbs used in the text are inflected.
- 5) Pupils are given assignments: Write sentences using the text on West Side Story as a point of departure.
- 6) Homework given.

5. 4) Comments on this lesson

Generally the pupils show better behaviour today compared to the day before. Why? Is it because we today meet the class earlier in the morning and yesterday met the class after lunch?

Still there are some boys who do not behave too well. I as an observer think their intention is to disturb the teaching and attract other pupils' attention. Making strange sound is one of the means they apply. Even so most of their class mates do not react to their behaviour. Why is that so? Are they accustomed to it, observe it, but overlook it? The teacher reacts in the same way, i.e. mostly ignores that kind of behaviour. Paying attention to it would probably increase the disturbance.

One aspect that puzzles me:

Why are some pupils so much better in English than others? Why do some, especially boys, pronounce English with a very Finnish accent - and seem to do so very consciously. The teacher confirms that this is the case: They seem to cultivate pronouncing that way, turning the language into a kind of '*Finglish*'.

And another puzzling aspect:

What causes the same class to be friendly/polite/not stressed/not stressing in one setting and quite the opposite at another time of the day and in another setting?

That this is a real and significant fact springs to the eye of me as an observer! Time of day seems to be an important factor accounting for part of the difference. Another factor seems to be the degree to which each teacher makes herself/himself respected. And we observe that there is a wide variation in the forms of discipline used by the teacher and the forms of discipline accepted by the pupils.

A comment on the extent of observations.

As observers we have exchanged views on the extent of observation. How many lessons do we need to observe? My view now and here is that it seems necessary to observe a class more than once and during two days. Why do I think so?

- Individual pupil behaviour changes during a school day. Therefore we not should observe a class at only one time of day. Especially important is not to observe only in the morning.

- We can observe that each class as a unit behaves differently with different teachers.

Therefore we should observe one class with at least two different teachers.

- The presence of observers matters less the second day. Answers from pupils to our question about it confirm that this is the case: Our presence does not influence their behaviour too much the second day. If naturalistic observation is an ideal situation, our presence disturbs the 'naturalness' less on the second than on the first day.

5. 5) 11.00 - 11.45. A Special Education group of 2 pupils. Teacher: Male, average age, special education teacher (who was formerly a subject teacher)

The two girls sitting here have been in a special group since last March – i. e. a couple of months. They spend about equal time in ordinary class and special group. Both have been truants and the truancy is the reason why they are in a special group. They are not weak learners, but generally act as rather reluctant learners.

Both are given normal tasks, are given only a short introduction to their tasks and are expected to work independently and without extensive assistance from the teacher. In this situation it is easy to observe an unintended consequence of having observers in a class: The teacher and the observers engage in conversation, questioning and answering each other and the consequence is that the two poor girls (*tyttö ressuikoita!*) are left completely to themselves!

Observers have a conversation with the teacher who stresses that small groups (maximum 6 pupils) are necessary in order to be able to give each pupil clear and steady structures for their learning. If education in special groups is going to produce positive results, then co-operation with parents and support from parents is also a necessary presupposition, and especially so in case of truancy.

5. 6) After the lunch break. Class: 8th grade. Subject: Mathematics

A stand in teacher does the job. The stand in is a student doing teacher training and has been given this class without much time for preparation.

Observer's comments:

From the observer's point of view a very distinct difference in behaviour compared to the first lesson we saw today. Pupils are much less concentrated, less task-oriented, more easily distracted and diverted by each other - their minds rather dispersed from mathematics. That may be so due to the time factor, see comments one page ahead. During the lunch break many things can happen: In a break there are a lot of social and personal encounters with other pupils that will divert thoughts from their school work.

That the teacher is a stand in is very probably interpreted by the pupils as meaning that this lesson is less important than a lesson with one of the ordinary teachers. This can be observed by the way the pupils organise themselves in this lesson. When returning from the break they stay in the same small groups that they obviously have been participating in during the break. Socially this class seems to be organised in one gender sets/groups of 3-4 pupils. Each group is in some way homogenous: Some groups are formed on the basis of common interests, some groups are formed on the basis of the participants' own school achievement - high as well as low.

5. 7) Interview/conversation with 4 pupils from 7th grade (three girls - one boy)

1) What helps you learn?

Having professional teachers who are able to create good working conditions in class and for the class. When you make your own notes during lessons, it is easier to learn. The same is the case when parents help you with homework.

Self evaluation, assessing own work, comparing oneself to other pupils in class.

Teachers who are not breathing you down your neck.

2) What hinders your learning?

When other pupils are making fuss, disturbing the class.

3) Can you tell us about instances of brilliant learning?

Can happen especially in mathematics - when one suddenly sees/understands how things have to be done. Also happens in history - you become interested in what happened and learning becomes fun.

4) What do you do to overcome difficulties in your own learning process?

Do extra home work and ask for help from parents and/or siblings

5) Do your teachers encourage you to co-operate and help each other?

Teachers do not often talk about this. When sitting in groups and in pairs we help each other.

6) *What is the average extent of time used on homework?*

15- 30 minutes a day, more when tests are approaching

7) *Do teachers change your seat-ordering?*

Usually a certain extent of regrouping goes on after breaks and holidays.

8) *What do you do if/when you do not understand the teacher?*

Usually asks a group partner first, before asking the teacher for an explanation

9) *What do you expect from school?*

We expect that the teachers are helpful - especially helping pupils with learning difficulties.
We expect that teachers take actions against bullying.

10) *Has our visit had any influence on what has been going on in class yesterday and today?*

Some influence on both teachers and pupils. All behave a bit differently.

11) *Which kind of activities do you engage in after school?*

Football, riding, playing piano, hanging around with friends

5. 8) Finnish lesson. Subject: Advertising Teacher: Female, average age

Classroom: Pupil drawings showing pictures of figures from the Finnish national epic Kalevala are seen on the wall: Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen. They remind me of Norwegian trolls.

The lesson started with a film/a video clip taken from a film sent on television.

An assignment was given on how to analyse elements of the advertisements in the film just seen: The language that was used, the use of sound, the forms of presentation used and so on. Pupils are very active in contributing answers.

The next assignment was writing about advertisement as a genre in each pupils work book. Teacher made a list on the blackboard showing aspects which should be touched when writing. The list was extensive and looked demanding from the observator's point of view. This might very well be so due to his lack of knowledge in the lesson subject. Some of the elements are language (kieli), approach (kuvat) and sound (äänet).

Home work: Choose and take out a page with an advertisement from a set of journals which the teacher has brought with her. Write a report analysing the how the advertisement expresses its own message/messages.

6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

6.1 Comments on observation

Observing how teaching is organised and how learning activities are organised is not too difficult in a context like this –even where the observer does not understand the language. Of course there are significant aspects of what goes on that escapes my attention due to my lack of understanding the spoken and written language, but we can (literally) see how both teachers and pupils organise their work, and understand most of their behaviour towards each other.

To ascertain whether the pupils' learning activities produce learning is pretty difficult in this case - when I am unable to talk with them in their mother tongue, when I am unable to understand what they write in their exercise books, and so on. But the most important question is: Is it at all possible to observe learning? We can observe results of learning, e.g., when we observe that a pupil after going through a certain learning activity can perform something he/she was not able to do before. But the mental part of that certain learning activity in itself is very difficult to observe, just because it is a mental activity.

6.2 Open questions concerning the relations between school observations and the goals of the EU-MAIL project

This part of the report contains questions that have come to mind inside as well as outside the classrooms observed. Most of them are only posed and not answered.

Methodological questions

- ▶ Can best practise be inferred from observations?

Are we able to trace and identify best practice based on our short observation visits? Does really a best practice exist? Can good practice be taken out of one context and transported into another context?

I am sceptical towards the concept of *best practice* and tend to agree with Lindblom (1994: 27) who makes a strong case arguing that there is '*no such thing as best*' in applied research. He says: '*A researcher should never claim that his findings of disputed fact, concept of the common good, or policy proposal represents the best alternative ore even his best proposal. Never defend it as best. For if you do, among the other sins you are committing, one is that you in effect claim to know what the best distribution is of gains and losses.*' (idem) And Lindblom continues: '*Researchers should claim no more and try for no more than to produce one or several possible alternatives worth considering among other equally worthy proposals from others.*' (1994:28)

- ▶ Questions concerning validity, generalisability and utility remain a bit fussy in our project. The real value of our observations has to be discussed and to be taken into a thorough discourse.

Objections towards relying too much on observation

- ▶ During each and every lesson going on there are innumerable factors influencing what is going on and how things are going. See some short comments in part 2.9 of the report.

This leads us to a necessary question: Can our observations be used as a basis for recommendations on the content of courses for teachers?

At least they cannot be the only basis. In learning and teaching there are always such a lot of foreground, stage and background factors which an observer will not be able to see!

Does reorganisation change social systems, e. g. schools?

► The Norwegian school system is currently in its third new national curriculum since 1974 and the fourth is expected to come in 2006. Have schools really changed much during that quarter of a century?

Of course there have been a lot of changes, but where do the changes come from? Where do they emanate? Are general social, economical and political changes going on in society as such, more important than curricular and organisational changes taking place inside the school system?

► Do school systems and do particular schools change (very much or at all) by reorganisation, by external wishes (new curricula), due to external pressures (social and cultural changes in society at large), by ever changing pedagogical ideologies that come and go or by other factors?

Learning and teaching

► Are we in the EU-MAIL Project sufficiently conscious of the difference between teaching and learning?

Do we have equal or differing views on what teaching is, on what learning is and on what are the relations between teaching and learning?

Biggs & More (1993: 448) cite Shuell (1986: 429)¹ who says:

'If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes... It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does.'

► Active/socially dominating and passive/withdrawn pupils - are they also active and passive learners?

► Are the pupils who really need help to make their learning activities more effective/rewarding the ones who get the teacher's attention?

¹ Shuell, T. J. (1986) Cognitive conceptions of learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 56, 411 - 36

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