

# REPORT

## EUMAIL-project “Mixed-Ability Individualized Learning”

### School observation week in Germany, January 2005

**Torunn Meyer Melin, Norway**  
**Pirkko Pollari, Finland**

We visited two all-day comprehensive schools, “Gesamtschule”, in Nordreihn-Westfalen. The first school had about 1400 pupils and the second school about 800 pupils. In both the schools the pupils were of different social and ethnic backgrounds. We interviewed head teachers, teachers and pupils, and observed lessons in maths, biology, German and English. The pupils of the observed classes were in the 5<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> grades and they were 12 – 14 years old.

The following list includes our proposals of best practices for individualized learning in mixed-ability groups. The list is based on what we saw and learnt during the school visits. We included only those best practices, which we both agreed on.

### Examples of best practice

#### Classroom arrangement

##### Grouping pupils- “Tischgruppen”/”Sitzgruppen”

**Observation/interview:**

In both the schools the pupils worked in groups (4 – 6 pupils in each group) in different lessons and subjects for a longer period, i.e. not just for one task or lesson.

**Comment:** It is excellent that the teachers form groups in close collaboration with their pupils, i.e. take their pupils’ opinions into account. The groups are also changed regularly in order to teach the pupils how to work with different pupils (different backgrounds, learning abilities and genders) in teams.

#### Instruction

##### Individual work – “Laufdiktat”

**Observation:** The teacher placed a few copies of the text the pupils were familiar with in different places of the classroom. The pupils’ task was to leave their seats, go to the nearest text, learn as many sentences as they could by heart, go back to their seats and copy the sentences down in their notebooks. The pupils could repeat this as long as they had managed to write down the whole text. When a pupil had finished the task, the teacher came to check the text or asked the pupil to compare the text with the original one. For the faster pupils the teacher gave an extra task (adding punctuation).

**Comment:** The pupils enjoyed doing the task, because they could go round in the classroom. This task gave every pupil a chance to do the task at their own pace and according to their own abilities. The task also supported different learning styles (e.g. kinaesthetic style) and gave everyone - hopefully - a feeling of succeeding in doing a task. Many learners completed the task very fast, but some learners spent a lot of time copying the text down.

## **Group work**

**Observation:** Two teachers used group work in their lessons. In the German lesson the pupils planned role-plays on smoking. The teacher gave each a group a task (an invented situation), which they had to act out.

In the biology lesson the pupils had to plan first how to get from their school to the local “Aqua-Zoo”. They used timetables and city maps as help. Then each group was given an envelope where they found a picture of an animal and instructions for drawing up a poster. (The pupils visited the zoo the following day!)

**Comment:** The pupils co-operated very well in groups. When they were given a task, they started immediately to work on the task. They negotiated, took different roles, divided their task into smaller sub-tasks, supported each other etc. These “real-life” tasks also seemed to motivate the pupils. One of the pupils told us that they have been trained to do team work and he personally finds this skill important when you leave school and go to work. For the teachers group work gave an ideal opportunity to help individual pupils.

## **Homework time - “Arbeitsstunden”**

**Interview:** Pupils can do their homework at school during the school day. These homework sessions are arranged 2 – 3 times in a week (depending on which grade you are in) and they usually last an hour. Teachers and/or teacher-trainers are present to help the pupils.

**Comment:** The advantage of this arrangement is that every pupil can get more “individual” help in different subjects.

## **Assessment**

### **Individual feedback**

**Interview:** Two teachers told us that when marking test papers they also write down a few comments or “learning hints” for each pupil in order to help them study better and more effectively.

**Comment:** Giving written feedback takes more time, but also shows that the teacher cares and is interested in every pupil.

### **Peer assessment**

**Observation:** Pupils planned and acted out role-plays on smoking, i.e. how to say “no” to cigarettes. After the role-plays the teacher and the pupils sat in a circle and evaluated the performances they had just seen.

**Comment:** The teacher initiated the discussion and gave the pupils a lot of time and freedom to express their opinions. The level of feedback varied a lot from pupil to pupil, but this peer assessment clearly inspired pupils and everybody wanted to participate – also the slower pupils.

## **Factors influencing individualized learning in mixed-ability groups**

We think that the following factors affect either positively or negatively individualized learning in mixed-ability classes.

### **Positive factors:**

- differentiated tasks
- different versions of the same study materials (e.g. easy-readers) for pupils of different abilities
- co-teaching with a colleague
- help from a special needs teacher for those pupils who have learning problems
- after-school tutoring (remedial classes)
- smaller classes (one teacher per 15 – 20 pupils)
- longer lessons (e.g. 60-minute lessons)
- pupils are given more responsibility of their own learning
- positive and constructive feedback even though your work isn't perfect

### **Negative factors:**

- an extensive use of “teacher-fronting” (a teacher-fronted classroom)
- a teacher correcting pupils' mistakes and errors continuously

## **Suggestions for teacher training**

- In-service –training where teachers are introduced different cases of learning in mixed-ability classes and where they are offered lectures and/or workshops on how to support “unsuccessful learners”. It's essential that teachers are also given a chance to compare different cases/situations and create cases of their own in pairs or in groups and try them out in their own schools. Pairs and groups could be either national or international and communication as well as exchange of ideas could take place on the Internet (e.g. using a web-based learning environment). Every teacher's personal development should be supported with the use of a portfolio.
- A conference on *Individualized learning in mixed-ability classes* for in-service teachers arranged by the EUMAIL- partner countries → presentations of the project outcomes, exhibitions on learning materials, lectures, poster-sessions, discussions, workshops etc.

## **National views**

### **Finland**

The most striking finding of this school visit was for me to see how “mixed” the classes in the schools were. Especially the number of pupils with different ethnic backgrounds was very high in each class. The pupils, however, were very tolerant to each other and everybody respected this cultural diversity. The teachers of the visited schools also confirmed my impressions. Even though I saw that working in mixed-ability groups clearly improves cultural tolerance, I also realized that this multicultural setting is a great challenge for teachers. The teachers of both the schools teach classes of 30 pupils and many (especially ethnic) pupils have inadequate German (reading + writing) skills. According to the teachers and head masters we interviewed the schools don’t have enough resources to deal with this complex variety of different language abilities. Because of insufficient resources there is a lack of teaching staff (special needs teachers and school assistants) and after-school tutoring in the German language. It is evident that you do get help in language matters from your other schoolmates in mixed-ability classes, but it doesn’t seem to be enough. This raises the question: “If you have no language awareness, how do you manage to educate yourself and adapt to society?”

### **Norway**

## **EU-mail Best practises of importance from a Norwegian point of view**

### **Reflections after having visited comprehensive schools in Germany**

The authors of this paper visited different schools but have compared our impressions and experiences of practices from totally four schools. We have focused solely on what we find best practices and have tried to connect these practices to the understanding of the ethos and ideology of the schools.

### **Networking**

The cooperation between the schools (all four of them) and the parents of the pupils made a great impression on both of us, and especially that this was a voluntarily support from the parents. It seemed to us that the support from parents was both practical and ideological. They influenced the atmosphere inside the school and outside it. The school-leaders confirmed our impression in telling that the different areas where parents gave support were of great importance to school and the running of it. Parents were engaged in the cafeterias, in “Arbeitsstunden”, in working and playing groups (housekeeping, science, arts, sports, technology, games, hobbies etc.) and in being present in the different rooms where pupils stayed during the breaks. One mother told that even though her own children had left school, she still kept the contact with the school and did jobs there because she felt good about it.

A cross micro-level contact was made possible by the support and participation of the parents not only in the school but the involvement with its pupils also outside the school, e.g. in the local area and society. We think that this relationship must be of importance for the pupils’ feeling of belonging and sense of security.

### **Respect and accept**

The pupils in all schools showed politeness both to the adults and to their fellow pupils consistently in a way that surprised us.

### **Use of rooms and school areas**

All the interviewed pupils mentioned the breaks among what they liked best at school. They also mentioned different rooms to go to. We conclude that one reason for that might be possibilities they have for activities in different areas of the school – buildings, and rooms adjusted to places of residence. At one school there were a girls` room and a boys` room where pupils of different gender could come to discuss different subjects and themes that might be actual for each gender. We believe those arrangements can be considered as factors that make pupils feel that their different needs are taken seriously and treated with respect. We also believe those arrangements reduce unkind behaviour and rivalry among pupils and against adults.

### **Participation and cooperation among pupils**

The stress upon supporting and helping each other obviously had entailed good results. All pupils interviewed pointed to this practice as something they liked about the school. Practices of the elder pupils helping the younger ones also seem to develop solidarity among them. An example of such practice in the program of the elder ones helping the younger in solving conflicts. The elder are trained by the social pedagogues to do this kind of work, and they have their own offices for that kind of tasks. This practice is an example of how to develop responsibility for the social life, both in school and outside it.

### **Consciousness among pupils about ethos and profile of the school**

We found it remarkably that all the pupils we communicated with so clearly were aware of the philosophy of their school. We doubt that this would be so common in any Norwegian school. We have reflected upon why this is so, and concluded that even though we have a long tradition of comprehensive schools and mixed ability groups of pupils, the ideology behind it mostly is expressed in plan and law documents and in principal speeches. In schools individualized learning/adjusted learning is looked upon as a right one have, while the ethics seldom are consciously considered. Consciousness of ideology of the school is most often merely a kind of external attitude rather than an internalized mentality and a part of common culture. The fact that it is not a matter of course, that children and youth in Germany are pupils in a comprehensive school, may contribute to their awareness of differences between traditional school system, and the comprehensive school system they are part of. It may also be a result of the schools` and parents` policy of openly stressing the ideology among pupils. Anyway we consider this kind of consciousness of importance for the development of mentality and practice. It must be worthy to attach interest in discussion of how to implement a tradition for consciousness among pupils as mentioned here, since it may be a factor that entails commitment to a practice that reflects accept of differences and simultaneously the apprehension of equal worthiness.

These reflections from a Norwegian point of view are co-written by the two delegates to EU-Mail School visit to Nordreihn-Westfahlen February 2005, Torunn Meyer Melin & Ragnhild Andresen.