

Report: research visit to Germany, 24-28.01.05

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Background

Visits were made to **Gesamtschule A** in Wuppertal and **Gesamtschule B** in Essen. In both schools the profile of the student intake is slightly above average and both schools are oversubscribed.

Gesamtschule A is situated in one of the suburbs of Wuppertal, easily reached by the suspension railway. The social background is problematic; the area it serves is one of some social deprivation but it attracts pupils from many other areas of Wuppertal and is oversubscribed in the first year. (400 applications, 180 places). This means that the student profile is better than would be expected from its position alone.

At **Gesamtschule B** the building was new in 1997 and started with 5th grade only. There are integrated classes including physically disabled pupils as well as other handicapped pupils in all grades, 37 in all. The Headteacher feels this is important for the disabled pupils and also for the rest of the school population. There are 29 different ethnic backgrounds. It is an Agenda 21st century school and this influences the school's vision and activities.

Although both schools have been built relatively recently, there is a big difference in the style and concept of the design. **Gesamtschule A**'s innovative design allows a more open environment and ethos than in **Gesamtschule B**, although both schools are committed to an ecological and community approach.

Four lessons were observed in each school and preparatory discussions held with 2 teachers in **Gesamtschule A** and 4 in Essen. Pupils and the Headteacher from each school were also interviewed.

Examples of good practice observed

Relationships between pupils and between pupils and teachers were consistently good and were a very positive influence on learning. All teachers interviewed regarded the classroom climate as an essential element in effective learning.

Group work and cooperative learning were present in nearly every lesson seen and the pupils were used to it. They respected each others' views and were able to evaluate each others' work constructively. Pupils in general said that they preferred to ask another pupil for help first before asking the teacher.

In both schools visited pupils were deliberately trained in techniques of independent learning. Specified time for homework in the course of the school day helped to train pupils in independence. In study time they had to work in silence for 20 minutes and try to figure out any problems they had for themselves, before asking the teacher or another

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pupil for help. Because of this we saw very few instances in lessons where pupils were not able to start a task immediately.

The system of one or two teachers being assigned as form teachers of one class, which had nearly all its lessons in the same form room, and was taught by these teachers for the major part of the week had some significant positive effects on the pupils' learning:

- Pupils' resources and books were in the same room
- Posters/information re pupils were evident in the room
- Teachers got to know the pupils and their learning styles, successes and failures, very well

The teachers with responsibility for the same class cooperated very closely on organising the work of the class and had worked with each other in the classroom.

During the *freiarbeit* lessons pupils were able to work on areas which they had identified themselves as needing improvement, as well as on certain compulsory tasks. In the class we saw it was impressive that they all worked very well, individually or in pairs, in different parts of the classroom, outside the classroom on mats, or in a small adjoining room. They worked quietly and well with minimum teacher direction or supervision. In the majority of lessons seen pupils were very attentive and engaged in the tasks set.

In both schools pupils were given responsibility for looking after the school building, for example, sweeping the floors after lunch, cleaning the tables, picking up litter.

Parents were involved in the day-to-day running of the schools. Their activities included:

- Preparing breakfast and lunch (in Essen)
- Supervising leisure activities during breaks and lunchtimes
- Being responsible for project work

There was also a parents' committee and parents were invited to participate in some in-service training.

Pupil centred learning was important for both Headteachers. In **Gesamtschule A** special lessons took place before school for particular groups, chosen by the subject teacher over 3 to 4 weeks. These groups could be those pupils having difficulty, or those working at a higher level. The "revolving door" project in **Gesamtschule A** allowed able children to start a second language earlier, with an older class.

In Essen there was an assembly every month for each year group where pupils' good work or activities were highlighted. A class meeting, chaired by a pupil, took place every week. Problems with work, teachers or other issues of importance for the pupils were discussed.

Constructive comments about areas for development

In some lessons tasks for the whole class lacked challenge and were not differentiated by resources or outcome.

There seemed to be little sharing of good practice amongst teachers teaching the same subject and therefore it could not be verified if there was a consistency of approach amongst teachers. Few observations take place.

There was no baseline assessment on which to measure progress and it was therefore difficult to assess progress. Grades could mean different things to different teachers – it appeared to be somewhat subjective, with no common criteria.

We saw one example of good practice in group and pair assessment; an English role play was evaluated by the rest of the class, and performed again, incorporating the constructive comments given. This was, however, a rare example and individuals were rarely seen to be given specific advice from the teacher on how to improve.

We saw only one special needs trained teacher, and, as there is a wide range of skills present in any mixed ability class, teachers need more training in the teaching of SEN pupils. If there were more SEN trained teachers, and more teaching assistants, there would be less need to divide the classes by ability from grade 7. Mixed ability classes are not present across the whole system at the current time.

From the Swedish perspective it appeared that there was very little involvement by the pupils in the way they should learn, nor were pupils encouraged enough to have a critical view of the planning of the lesson.

Pupils are not always aware of the objectives of the lesson and are not given time to reflect on what they have learned during the lesson.

Gesamtschule are not truly comprehensive when gymnasiums and hauptschule exist in the same system. Teachers are not teaching the whole ability range and therefore their results cannot be compared fairly with those of the other types of school. At present the system does not allow either school we visited to accept the full range of ability, because some pupils are “creamed off” by the gymnasium.

Topics recommended for inclusion in modules for teacher training

- differentiation: responding to children's individual needs – resources/outcome
- training pupils to be independent learners
- assessment for learning – peer and self assessment, teacher oral and written feedback
- training in SEN
- brain theory/ learning styles
- group work/cooperative learning

Ideas for content of video production

- freiarbeit
- integrated classes
- class meetings
- cooperative learning