

# Report

## EU-Mail project: European Mixed Ability Individualized Learning

### School and classroom observation and interviews with pupils, teachers and leaders during the period 24<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2005

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We visited two (A & B) comprehensive schools (Gesamtschulen) in Nordreihn-Westfahlen. One of the schools (A) had about 1000 pupils shared into two different buildings, one for the elder pupils, another for the youngest ones. We visited the latter. The other school (B) had about 1300 pupils. In both schools the pupils had mixed social and ethnic background. In one of the schools 29 nationality origins were represented. In both schools it seemed after all to be a low quota of pupils with immigrant background. In one of the schools only pupils born in Germany was counted as immigrants.

In the following we describe and reflect upon what we from our point of view found the most interesting traits from the perspective of examples of 'best practices'. In other words we report solely from the examples of mixed ability and individualized teaching which both of us considered being the best. We have chosen to focus on a) the general realization and practicing of the ethos of the schools and b) the practices of mixed ability and individualized teaching and learning in the classroom.

#### 1. Examples of best practice, school A

##### a) Profile / philosophy

It was focused on responsibility, participation and self-reliance. The leaders told they attach importance on both social and global responsibility, further that participation includes activities from the pupils outside the school and that they appreciate participation from the parents in activities related to the school, and that they laid stress on what is pupils were good at, not on their eventual weak points, to let them learn that they were worthy and help them develop dignity.

##### Comments

From newsletters we found that these focuses were expressed by the fact that pupils were active in doing external information and presentations and in representing the school on local happenings in the city. From our point of view encouraging such activities is calculated for developing all three values mentioned. Both during lessons and in the breaks we also found the respect expressed through politeness and friendliness from teachers and leaders showed against the pupils (greetings, compliments, paying them attention) were striking. In this way we are convinced that the adults are good examples for the young ones concerning the relation between responsibility, participation and caring. Another aspect we found striking was the presence of parents in the school. Research has pointed at the importance of participation in social networks and contact between the different micro-levels the young ones belong to (e.g. Uri Bronfenbrenner).

### **b) Lesson / class**

There were 19 pupils, about 12 years of age, in the class, a handful with relatively severe diagnoses. The subject was English. Groups were made up consciously by pupils with different abilities. They were working on a radio report from an accident, and had already written down their material, and were now going to record in the interviews. Pupils had different sequences of speaking/reading according to their abilities. Obviously they were used to evaluate this and to give responsibility to each other according to competence. Not only the class room, but also the hall outside the class room and a smaller room beside the class room, was utilized. When the pupils had finished their recording, they were talking to each other either inside the classroom or in the hall and a separate room for teamwork or were reading some material on their own. There was very little noise.

### **Comments**

Some pupils had special tasks and /or were given special support during the process, but seemed to be well included into the common project of the lesson as well. A special teacher, an assistant and a main teacher cooperated very well all through the lessons. The pupils got much responsibility during the task of project and additional work, and others were given support with great discretion. The groups of pupils seemed to be consciously and carefully put together so that strength and weak traits were compensating for among the group members, e.g. there seemed to be at least one of the pupils in each group to be competent in leadership in the way that she/he was able to keep focus on the task and what to be done without taking over the task of the others. Members of the groups were helping others. The pupils seemed to be used to this way of learning, and showed at the same time both discipline and engagement during the process. Mixed ability learning seemed to be well integrated.

## **2. Examples of best practices, school B**

### **a) Profile / philosophy**

It was focused on interest and caring for the pupils. A second focus was on cooperation between pupils, parents and teachers. Thirdly it was stressed that the pupils shall feel the teachers in common are taking them seriously.

### **Comments**

The school seemed to have a good system for discussion between parents, pupils and teachers. During our observation we saw many parents working in the school, taking responsibility for special rooms, for play and working areas where pupils can go to for periods. The involvement from the parents seemed to be unusual high. We were told that in constructing the school program interested parents and pupils join and support. In conferences held at the school there are always a few parents attending it, also on project days. The parents are asked as soon as it is clear that their son or daughter will be a pupil at the school if they have capacity to help with some task or another. This help from parents was said to be of great importance to the school. In informal communication with a couple of young teachers we were told that in this school there is much more communication about pupils, integration of themes, perspectives and methodology than they were used to in other schools. They told that in spite of the fact that this practice gave them more work, they appreciated this kind of cooperation. During the periods of free time, we observed that both adults and young ones

talked to each other in a strikingly kind and respectful way. The adults also showed they cared for both for the elder and the younger pupils and their different needs. Also pupils we talked with expressed the feeling that teachers were taking them serious, even when they sometimes were “strict and busy”. It seemed to us that the general atmosphere in the school showed that the endeavour of realizing the ethos of caring and cooperation was successful.

### **b) Lesson / class**

There were 29 pupils, age about 12, sitting around totally seven tables. There was not much empty space in the room. The teacher read a report from a circus tour. Then the pupils got a map with numbers that marked the different cities and were given the task of finding their names. They were instructed to use the Atlas. Everybody got the same task. There was given another task to be done if the pupils finished quickly. The teacher was walking around helping the groups and individuals. Some pupils obviously needed more support than others. She stayed for a while at each table, her eyes wandering about to see how everyone was dealing with the task. Most of the pupils were communicating. At one table there seemed to be a kind of competition between the pupils (4 girls); they would not let the other(s) look at what they had written on their sheets of paper, and they barely spoke to each other. The teacher did not break into this quiet quarrel. At most tables it seemed to be good cooperative work; pupils asking and questioning each other, showing each other how they had solved the tasks. In spite of all the talking between the pupils, the atmosphere was quiet. In the end of the lesson teacher asked for the nr 1 right answer. Then this pupil pointed out the next pupil to answer and then this pupil asked another pupil for the next and so on until all the right answers were completed. During this sequence the room was not so quiet any more. Pupils commented and protested against the answers. The teacher commented to us on this. She was sorry about the fact that a handful of pupils did not understand the task or did not manage.

### **Comments**

The teacher was conscious about her contact with the pupils all through the lesson. She showed good competence in keeping an eye on and listen to the pupils. She seemed to be close to them, and the pupils obviously felt confidence in her. Generally there was a happy atmosphere, probably influenced by the teacher’s caring for the pupils and also her sense of humour. Most pupils were engaged in the task they had got and supported each other as a matter of course. Obviously they were trained to cooperate. The relative traditional class teaching had a special character because pupils were organized in groups and were encouraged to help each other. The dilemma of this kind of teaching mixed ability groups and trying to individualise both teaching and learning is a common one: a big number of pupils with different needs in the class and one single teacher to hold out a hand to them. In spite of aspects that could be criticized by the lesson mentioned, there is a central factor to be emphasized as a “best example”. This point is the teacher’s active attitude to meet the needs of different pupils and the feeling she obviously gave the pupils of her taking them seriously. Another factor to stress as a “best example” is the way pupils are trained to care for each other and cooperate. We will also comment on an arrangement at the school that we suppose compensate to a certain degree for the dilemmas mentioned above. The working lessons every second day where the pupils have the possibility to individually do schoolwork according to their interests or needs with supervision of teachers, is a good example of organized adjustment for individualized learning.

### **3. National view on examples of best practices**

#### **Reflections from a Norwegian point of view.**

The authors of this paper visited different schools and 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 and the parents of the pupils made a great impression on both of us, and especially that support from the parents was voluntarily and partly unpaid. It seemed to us that the support from parents was of both a practical and an ideological kind. 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 also the involvement with its pupils 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 consistently showed politeness both to the adults and to their fellow pupils in a way that surprised us. Practicing those norms we consider a result of good examples given by the grown-ups. We consider the attention that was given to the practice of respect and responsibility as an important contribution to a good atmosphere for caring, acceptance of differences among people and development of self-reliance.

#### **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 the possibilities they have for activities in different areas of the school-buildings, and rooms adjusted to places of residence. At one school there was 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 is 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 the 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 the 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 Nordrihn-Westfahlen February 2005, Torunn Meyer Mellin & Ragnhild Andresen