

Visit to Swedish schools

In November of 2004 eight experts of school systems of four countries visited Swedish schools. These visits realized within the scope of the EU-Mail project pursued the objectives of getting information about the organisation of individual learning. This is the report of the ... team.

We visited two schools: an urban primary school in an upper residential area, in which 340 children attend grades 1 – 6, as well as a school in a rural area with 300 pupils from all strata especially working in the agriculture. This school consists of grades 7 to 9. Each school has been visited for two days. Altogether five interviews with teachers and four interviews with in all eleven pupils were done as well as two interviews with members of the heads of the schools. At both of the schools four to six lessons were seen and eight lessons all in all were logged.

Within this report at first we want to point out the similarities that connect the work of the interviewed people, the logged lessons and the work at the schools in general. Afterwards we are going to expose concrete arrangements and aspects that might be interesting for German and Finish schools and work at German and Finish schools.

Philosophy of the schools

There are two special experiences that demonstrate the base of all that distinguishes the work in Sweden:

One of the headmistresses wondered, when she read the central questions of our interview, why we asked “Who or what is the centre of the learning process: students or subjects?” She answered the only thing in the centre of the learning process could be students for they were teaching students.

These focus on the single child implicit a quite natural individualization of schooling. It is the first aim of all what teachers do at school to brace the children and to enable them to become responsible-minded people of the Swedish community. Base of all teachers do at school is a great respect for the each child. The consequence of this base is automatically to check schooling again and again whether it allows an individual development. Respect means each teacher has to notice individual ways of learning and to take serious the pupils interests. At the same time pupils are motivated to accept responsibility for what they do and to become self-confident and autonomous learner asking questions and dealing with problems. Altogether all the teachers agree with the aim of giving the pupils a chance to study interested and motivated.

Another example shows how much the attitude working orientated in strong points has influenced the way of asking. A teacher of mathematics with whom we talked about his handling of pupil's mistakes told us he would talk to the pupil and ask him or her to tell him: „Explain how you thought for I can understand why you did this mistake“. Teachers are asking people, they listen. Mistakes are used productive for the development of the single pupil. The aim is not to find and correct all of the pupil's mistakes but to see which mistakes the pupil should work with.

Pupils should feel safe at school. Everybody pointed out pupils should be „safe and secure“ at school. Learning should mean fun. It doesn't matter whom we talked to, everybody talked of the aim of creating a studying pupils like. One of the teachers called the influence of fun the base of good results.

This attitude within the schools that may be characterized by the ideas of “respect for the individual”, “Trust in the strong points of everyone” and “fun to learn” is not just valid for pupils but for teachers as well.

Individualization is not a method but part of this attitude. Individualization as well is not a methodical trick but a principle that is demonstrated on every level. Below the headlines “organisation of school”, “Classroom-Management” and didactics we want to give a short insight in the bases of studying in which everybody gets the chance to be learning and supported individual and in the problems that might develop.

School-Organisation

The headmistress as well as the headmaster is not teaching herself. Their duty is a kind of management of the school. They organize meetings with the staff of the school and talk about their development; they have got a general view about processes at school, they talk about money with the commune, they engage teachers and are allowed to dismiss teachers of their school. At both schools this worked with the same principle like that being valid for pupils: to work with an orientation by the strong points of everyone, to fetch the other one where he is standing and to help him to develop himself. The guidance of the schools is used to manage the processes, the projects and the modifications. All of this is discussed in schools so that aims, modifications etc. may be borne by everybody. In general for all aspects of school up to the lessons is valid: on the one hand a well-structured and organized scope is created that allows a great certitude of proprieties everybody keeps to. That means organization of information, definiteness and clearness of information boards, as well as organization of the classrooms and materials on the desks. But on the other hand there is a lot of liberty and flexibility for every single person to construct ones learning. One of the headmistresses says that sometimes there was a lot of chaos but as an exact observer you can identify a well-organized situation and learning.

In both of the schools there was a very flexible handling of time. The lessons were of different lengths of time in the primary school as well as in the secondary school. There were lessons of 30 minutes, 60 minutes and even lessons of 80 or 25 minutes. This is very important for the individualization of learning. To organize that is possible first because there are teams of each grade and second because the teachers agree about the different lengths of times of each part of learning. The pupils know about the transitions from one lesson to the over. There is no gong or something like that giving the end or the beginning of a lesson.

Besides teachers there are special educated teachers, assistant teachers and students of the universities in both schools and one school employs in addition to that jobless people of the surroundings of the school. Both schools as well have got a nurse at school.

At both schools nearly all the teachers use all of their working hours for work in one of the teams. A team at the most consists of the teachers of one grade, in smaller schools a team is built by teachers of several grades. In the Secondary school there were subject-teams in addition to the grade-teams. That means, the teachers of math, the teachers of natural sciences etc. met to plan common lessons. In one of the schools there was also a team consisting of all employees working in several grade-teams. The teachers of Art, music and physical education as well as the nurse and some of the assistant teachers were belonging to this team.

Both of the schools organized the employment of the teachers in a way that not many teachers are teaching most of the subjects in one class so that each class has a number of teacher as small as possible.

The two schools were very different in their rooms and equipment. But in both of them there was a classroom as well as some little rooms for each class in which they can study separated in groups. Both of the schools had an own library that were opened all the day for they both were libraries for the whole borough as well. By that the librarians were paid by the communes and the schools in common.

Another basic condition for individualized learning is studying in groups: in both of the schools attention is paid to the organization of groups in a way that one group is able to learn together all the time it attends this school. Using the competences of the former teachers and

educators of the pupils is stressed for the building of groups. Besides the groups that form the class there are groups for special needs. At the primary school there is a project to support reading capabilities in which pupils get special help with reading for four weeks one hour a day. At the secondary school groups are made for learning foreign languages. It seemed quite interesting for us that besides the groups of pupils learning French or German there was one group for those who did not want to learn neither of these languages. This group had an additional English course during that time. This decision for an additional English course made sense because except for two pupils the pupils in this group all were underachievers. The teachers had to think about the two pupils that were no underachievers and how to create an offer of learning interesting for them, too. In the secondary school there was another differentiating arrangement, the so called oasis. Pupils of 7th, 8th and 9th grade could go there if they recognized they needed special support in English, Swedish or Math but it was their own decision to go there or not. The reason for that is the idea that just those pupils can learn that really want to. The offer of the oasis is used especially by pupils of the 9th grade that want to be better prepared for the tests.

Classroom-Management

The classrooms are well-structured and organized, too. Especially in one of the schools the clear structure of information in a class was stressed by lucid information boards. It is important for the teachers and pupils that all the materials are assorted well to assure a regulated drain during the lesson. The only materials the pupils had on their desk were those they need during the topical lesson. The other materials were in the lockers (secondary school) or in the rucksack. The teachers discipline almost never and reasons for disciplinations are almost non-existent. No time has to be used for admonishments and demands. There is a great tolerance towards postures. Pupils that are late behave quiet and go to their desk, and the teachers use to go on with the subject as if nothing happened. Behaviour is just discussed in the class if other pupils feel disturbed because of them, otherwise they are talked about in one of the meeting between teacher, pupil and parents. The arrangement of the desks was different in both of the schools. There were desks in line as well as desks formed to groups. The decision how to arrange the desks is the teachers one.

Didactics

The didactic principle can be shown with a boy disabled in learning that could neither write nor read. The teachers said they had tried any way they knew and even asked experts to help them. To find ways that enable pupils to learn that is what signalizes the didactics of the schools we saw. This didactics explains why teachers of special education have such a great meaning within the lessons and as advisers of teachers.

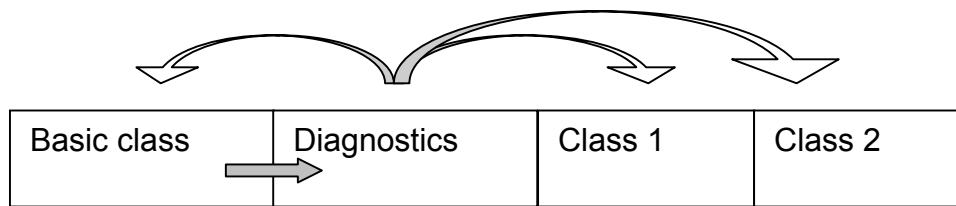
Schooling in the schools we saw featured by the following aspects: definiteness of aims, aim-orientation, clearness of work orders, well-organized setting of learning, concentration and speedy sequences of learning.

We had the chance to watch different forms of schooling:

Lessons in projects (Projektförmigen Unterricht): Pupils are working with a history project. Books, Internet and other media are available for them. They use different methods of studying without any problems, e.g. they start they work with a mind map without any demand of the teacher.

Lessons with books (Buchunterricht): All of the pupils work with the same book. They are working with the same unit as well but the book is structured in a way that allows the pupils to choose different ways and work on different levels. They use to start with the "Basic class". If the "Basic class" is completed the pupils decide by the part of "Diagnostics" whether they wanted to do "Class 1" or "Class 2". "Class 1" has the same tasks like "Class1". Some pupils

might repeat the “Basic class”. Others could start with the part of “Diagnostics” without



having worked with the “Basic class” and then go on working with “Class 2”.

The children could choose on their own, which class they want to work with and then get advised by the teachers if they asked them.

Lessons with questions and development (Fragend, entwickelnder Unterricht): An example of a lesson of natural science: Teacher and pupils worked out a scientific phenomenon. The informations the pupils found out were shown to the teacher, the hypothesis discussed by the pupils.

Lessons with worksheets (Arbeitsblattunterricht): All of the pupils get a worksheet to deal with at school. In the English lesson it was a Story of pictures, in Math a math problem. There are no worksheets on different levels.

Characteristic for each of these lessons was:

- that there was no inner differentiation. Pupils differentiated for themselves in the way they worked with the tasks. Pupils chose on their own, teacher are just their advisers.
- that whenever possible problems were developed for the pupils to solve and that smaller working groups were built especially when such kinds of problems should be discussed and solutions should be found.
- that cooperation between pupils was a natural way of working. Teachers had to point out if they want pupils to work on their own.
- that there is almost none differentiating material but a lot of conceptual formulations that allow each pupil to bring in himself.
- that there was a silent and concentrated atmosphere that was characterized by pupils working with a problem.

Pupils get encouraged to organize their process of learning themselves. Teachers are there to advice, to help pupils to find solutions for problems, to give hints for learning and to discuss aspects of the subjects with working groups. They structure the surrounding of learning and give inputs concerning the content if necessary.

There was homework at both of the schools. Most of the teachers gave homework for parents wanted them to do so, to inform parents, to prepare pupils for the type of working at their next school and to help pupils to organize their processes of learning themselves. In one of the schools there is homework from one day to another but always from one week to the next one to give pupils enough time to plan and arrange their time of studying at home. The level of individualization of homework differs a lot. One teacher did not individualize at all. A math teacher used to give e.g. 12 tasks on different levels and asked the pupils to solve three of them. They could choose on their own which ones they wanted to do. Another teacher told us pupils could deny a special homework and ask for a task more difficult.

Tests / Assessment

We got to know three forms of assessment:

- a) self-assessment
- b) tests done by teachers in the schools
- c) tests done by the Swedish government in grade 5 and grade 9

The common aim of all of these tests is to find out something about the own learning process and to assess oneself and ones progresses in learning.

Self-assessment is very important for pupils. They work with portfolios accompanying them all their time at school and allowing them a wide review. In one of the schools they had to fill in a sheet of self-reflection each Friday to secure whether they reached the aims they planed for this weeks as well as their new plans for the following week.

Tests done by the teachers in the schools: Teachers give tests to the pupils. The function of these tests is a diagnostic one. Teachers want to know which parts of the subjects have to be worked out with pupils during the following lessons to get to the aim of learning they planned to reach. There is a lot of material for teachers on the secondary school level for the subjects English, Swedish and Maths to compare the pupil's achievements to the results of the national tests. By this teachers are able to test their classes at certain point of times to see where there are still problems.

Central tests: Teachers, pupils and parents are very interested in these tests. It would be wrong to say pupils were not nervous because of these tests. In spite of that there is a relaxed attitude towards central tests. A headmistress told us that teachers would have made mistakes if they found out a pupil could not pass this test as recently as he gets in 5th grade.

Feedback: Besides these tests there is a multifaceted feedback to all kind of working and results at school as well as in tests given individually. Important for this is the individual progress. Because of this mistakes are marked just particularly for not discouraging pupils but giving them the chance to concentrate on certain problems to deal with. Another form of feedback is to present pupil's results everywhere at school.

Talks between parents, pupils and teachers: Each half year (sometimes even more often) meetings between parents, pupils and teachers take place to reflect progresses in learning as well as social behaviour and to talk and to agree about the next aims.

Important Aspects of learning for the Finnish and the German school system

Finnland:

- Organization of teamwork and cooperation of teachers that work with the same group of pupils as well as their presence at school
- Reduction of the number of teachers working in one class
- (young) Pupils acceptance of self-responsibility for the own process of learning
- Cooperation between different types of school (primary school and secondary school) with regard to the knowledge about pupils and methods of teaching and learning
- Sufficient professional support for pupils with problems in learning that are integrated in grades and the work in classes
- Arrangement of the rooms; it is important that there are enough places for pupils to work
- Working with orientation to the strong points of the pupils and creating an atmosphere of learning in which pupils like to work

Germany:

- Organization of the teamwork and modification of the presence of teachers
- Forms of differentiation: no differentiation through material but through conceptual formulation
- Creating a well-organized surrounding of learning that is the base for individualization of work
- Reduction of exterior differentiation: not building a new group for each problem and each level of learning
- Fetching Experts in a grade team and making them cooperation partners for a single class
- Understanding homework as a chance of learning
- Working with orientation to the strong points of the pupils as well within the scope of correction of mistakes and feedback of achievements. Understanding tests as a diagnostic instrument that helps organizing the support of pupils

Result:

At both schools you get the impression of a relaxed atmosphere of learning and studying. All of the teachers we talked to told us they loved their job and they loved working with the pupils. Although there were a lot of arrangements they said they had the opportunity to bring their own personality in their work at school. The complete school system as well as the organization of the single schools establishes the basis for individualized learning and a relaxed, silent and concentrated atmosphere in which everybody (pupils and teachers) gets the chance to develop himself individually with a lot of fun at studying.