

EU-MAIL

Report from the Borås (Sweden) school visit week 14-19 November 2004 Observers: Jenny McIntosh (England) and Steinar Wennevold (Norway)

Introduction

We visited two schools: A primary school (years 1 – 6) located in Borås and a lower secondary school (years 7 – 9) in a neighbouring municipality.

We saw a variety of lessons, ranging from Movement with students in Grade 2 (8 years) to Social Studies with Grade 9 (15 years).

It has been a real privilege to observe lessons and to discuss and meet socially with colleagues in Sweden. The visit has certainly provided us with much food for thought about how the Swedish system and practice compares with that we have experienced in Britain and Norway. We will also thank the students we met, observed and interviewed: We felt that they received us with a very nice combination of politeness and friendliness.

Examples of Best Practice

- ✉ A range of practical lessons were observed where all students were able to access a range of activities at their own level. This was seen in Movement and Physical Education lessons at the primary school and in Home Economics and PE lessons at the lower secondary school.
- ✉ The PE teachers at both schools intervened during their lessons to coach individuals and take forward their skill levels.
- ✉ The prime concern of colleagues teaching more academic subjects is to set tasks that do not exclude any students but allows differentiation by outcome. This was seen in a Geography lesson at the primary and in Swedish and Social Studies lessons at the lower secondary school.
- ✉ In both schools, colleagues go out of their way to ensure that students with Special Educational Needs have those needs met. At the primary school we were shown their LUS Reading Programme and observed a class teacher taking the opportunity of having a student teacher to provide one-to-one coaching in mathematics for a student. At the lower secondary school we were introduced to ‘the oasis’, an area where lower ability students receive extra help outside of normal lessons and observed an SEN colleague and the class teacher supporting the work of these students in a Home Economics lesson.
- ✉ Teaching – like any service activity – cannot be exactly replicated and done a second time exactly the same way as it was first done. Still we think that doing video recordings of parts of the lessons like the ones mentioned above would provide valuable material for the EU-MAIL project, but that applies even to other lessons we observed.

Comparison and Reflection

Providing a Level of Challenge

As we note in the **Negative Factors** section, we saw few opportunities to stretch the more able students, set them more demanding goals, and expect more of them in the schools visited. In Britain initiatives to differentiate successfully for Gifted and Talented students have been well-documented and resourced in recent years, though practice varies greatly. We would like to see an awareness of differentiating to meet the needs of the more able being commonly developed across EU countries. This would help to ensure that students reached their potential.

No Student is a Failure

The positive learning culture, the sense of students, teachers and parents all working together compares favourably to current practice in Britain. If we would like to see more challenge in the Swedish system, we would also like to see a redressing of the balance in British schools so that individual achievement is valued and accepted if it is at an appropriate level for the student. The picture concerning failure in the Swedish school system is a bit confusing for us: See comments below on the number of students who leave the compulsory school without completing one or more subjects.

Positive Factors Affecting MAIL

- ✓ All students are accepted at their own level, with a commitment to ensuring that students value their achievements. In both schools, there is no conception that students could fail. This was demonstrated through observations and interviews.
- ✓ The positive attitude towards the achievement of all students has led to warm, friendly relationships between staff and students; this has a positive impact on students' attitudes towards learning and towards school.
- ✓ The informality of the Swedish system – students and teachers on first name terms, lack of uniform etc – aids the development of positive relationships. The emphasis is on co-operation and minimising possible sources of conflict between students and staff.
- ✓ In both schools there was a strong culture of learning. Expectations of staff, students and parents were that the responsibility for ensuring that learning took place was with the individual student. Teachers should advise, give opportunities, assess but in the end it was up to the student to make the most of the opportunities given. This ethos was established in a number of ways. At the primary school all classrooms displayed the three key words which summed up this ethos: Responsibility, Respect and Trust. We saw a Home Economics lesson in grade 9 at the lower secondary school where students were allowed to make mistakes – the ethos being that we learn through mistakes and reflection. Students cannot be forced to learn – they have to take the responsibility to learn.

Negative Factors Affecting MAIL

- The positive culture where students are never seen to fail has a downside: We felt that a substantial number of students had more ability than we saw demonstrated in relatively many lessons. We would have liked to see more stretching work, more demanding coaching techniques being used as the norm in the schools. We felt that this could have been done without sacrificing the positive culture that is reaping such rewards in the schools we visited. One of the students we interviewed referred to wanting to be stretched further.
- In most observations the goal of the lesson was to start/complete a particular task or activity or continue an activity going on from an earlier lesson. It was not always made clear what the students should be learning, rather, the emphasis was on what they needed to do. We agreed that this was a feature of many lessons we had observed in Norway and Britain too. Students would have been helped in their learning if they had had explained to them not only what they were doing but why – where an activity fitted into their overall development. Perhaps a clearer focus on lesson structure would help here, with learning objectives being shared at the start of a lesson and reviewed at the end. One of the teachers at Hestra Midgård talked about this being an area for development – even the youngest students benefit from knowing why they are doing a particular task.
- From the Skolverket report *Descriptive data on childcare, schools and adult education in Sweden 2003* there seem to be inherent problems in the Swedish school system: *'In spring 2002, 25,4 per cent of the pupils who left compulsory school lacked grades in one or more subjects. Nine per cent did not achieve the objectives in one subject and 17 per cent did not achieve the objectives in two or more subjects.'* (page 7) The report can be read at <http://www2.skolverket.se/BASIS/skolbok/webext/trycksak/DDW?W=KEY=1269> (accessed 30.11.04). This situation surely has political and social as well as personal/individual implications? It would be nice if someone could comment on this.
- During our school visit week there were debates going on in the national papers concerning school, teaching and learning. One debate was on the quality of the new and reformed teacher education programmes. Another one was on weaknesses in the core curriculum. It's good to see that school arouses public interest. Schools and schooling should always be debated. But these types of debates also tell us that what really goes on in schools is not easily changed for the better by political reforms and decrees. A lot of the forces needed for making real changes have to be applied from inside the school system.

The Impact of Individualised Learning on the Acquisition of Curricular and Social Competences

This is difficult to comment on as neither of us has a definite idea of what the Swedish national curriculum consists of and we did not necessarily get a clear view of this through the visits. Teachers certainly have their schemes of work and were able

to talk about the standard national tests used; teaching and learning were not as closely connected to these tests as they are in England. Information in English on the Swedish school system is available at

<http://www.skolverket.se/english/system/index.shtml> (accessed 01/12/04).

We have not had time for digging or diving deeply into neither the school law nor the curriculum for the compulsory school system, but only a glimpse at the curriculum shows that among the fundamental values are:

- *'everyone working in the school should encourage respect for the intrinsic value of each person'*
- *'individual freedom and integrity'*
- *'fostering in the individual a sense justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility'*
- *'The task of the school is to encourage all pupils to discover their own uniqueness as individuals'*
- *'The task of the school is to promote learning by stimulating the individual into acquiring knowledge.'*

All the above citations are from the introductory part of the curriculum and they tell us that the notion of individualised learning seems to be well in accordance with the fundamental values of the Swedish curriculum.

Some clear approaches as to how teachers dealt with teaching heterogeneous classes did come through. Most differentiation was by outcome, with students doing the same tasks and teachers expecting and accepting rather different outcomes from the students' work. For some subjects (e.g. maths) students more or less worked at their own pace on textbook-based exercises with little whole-class teaching of concepts.

Implications for the planning of EU-MAIL courses on Initial and In-service Teacher Training

Large parts of each teacher's work goes on outside the classroom: Long term and short term planning with colleagues, individual preparations for lessons and learning activities, talks with students and parents and a host of post lesson activities. Any course or development project concerning mixed ability teaching and individualised learning has to include all these aspects! Two examples are given here:

- Both schools put a high priority on teachers planning together. Time was earmarked via meetings for this. Teachers at both schools talked about how this provided an opportunity to discuss pedagogy. For teacher education courses such meetings should be videoed so that this sort of discussion is modelled for new teachers.
- Examples of teacher evaluation and student self-evaluation ought to be explored through training courses; the visit demonstrated the impact this can have on student learning. Use of these could be videoed to provide concrete examples for training courses.

Attached Proformas Supporting the Findings in this Report

Lesson Observations

Classroom Observations

Teacher Interviews

Student Interviews

Headteacher Interview

(Only one interview was done as one of the head teachers was absent during our visit.)