

## Report on visit to Borås, Sweden, November 2004

Borås, 04.11.2004

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To give some general information: We have been to 2 schools, a primary school (F6) outside Borås, about 350 pupils and a 1 to 9 school in Borås, about 850 pupils.

Both schools are situated in areas with inhabitants (parents) who are well situated, well educated, mostly have got good jobs and work long days. Parents are very involved in the school and in their children's school work. None of the schools have got many migrants living in the area.

We talked to principals, teachers, pupils and many other people working at the schools. We observed only English lessons in both schools so our examples mainly relate to the English subject.

We saw the schools with different eyes, one Norwegian and one German. We looked through a peephole and saw some really heterogeneous groups of pupils. In this way the groups differ from those in the UK. We are and were impressed – on both eyes. To help the reader reproduce this report we will start with what we saw first.

### **The ethos of the schools**

Both schools emphasize on having the pupil in mind and not the subject. There is also a general emphasis on having each pupil in mind individually and in second line the group. We saw evidence of the importance of the building of self esteem. Every pupil in school has got the right to learn and the right to make mistakes.

Pupils say: *“It is never embarrassing to make mistakes or ask for help. Our teacher says that this is a school and we've got the right to make mistakes. We learn from our mistakes and because there is no pressure in the class of from the teacher, we feel safe” (a safe learning environment).*

The qualification of reading and reading comprehension is very much prioritized in both schools.

Teacher says: *“Pupils need to understand why they are in school, why and how they learn and why reading is important”.*

Both schools focus on respect and common courtesy as well as equality. The concern lies on involving the parents in the learning process and in the responsibility for learning. Both schools stress the importance of diagnostic tests and their evaluation, and “demand” that parents are involved in these processes.

Principal says: *“At age of seven there is a reading recovery. If there are problems, the pupil will be offered a ten week intensive reading course. However, this will only be offered if the parents sign a form were they promise to get involved and practice intensive reading with their children at home”.*

The teachers of both schools are aware of the concept of individualized learning, but there is no specified agreement. They do, however, feel that there is an “unspoken code” that implies that most of the teachers in the staff have the same vision on the development and nurturing of the child. Most of the Swedish teachers seem to have a built in sense on how to put this vision into practice, namely by focusing on individualized learning.

Teacher says: *“To be a good teacher and practise individualized learning you need to have a general interest in young people and care about their individual development. And it is fun every day, isn't it?”*

### **How do the visited schools work towards the ethos? (Our ‘pearls’)**

The schools we visited were quite different in architecture, size, atmosphere, location and the usage of space. This means that their aspirations are the same, but the way to achieve the above mentioned goals is very different. This paragraph will show examples of best practice in dealing with mixed ability individualized learning in and outside lessons and factors that influence individualized learning in mixed ability groups positively.

- Either of the schools have bells, so teachers are given the time to focus on making sure that every pupil reaches his/her aim.

- Homework is mainly given as a repetition or for the learning of new words, but one of the schools gives homework in order to guide the pupil to maturity and to taking over responsibility for his growing up and his learning process.
- One of the schools plan their tasks for the pupils on weekly basis, for instance by giving goals on Mondays and checking them on Friday (portfolio), the other one uses the more traditional form of planning from day to day. Both schools do however seem to work towards long term plans as well.
- One of the schools works on finding fields of interest for each pupil as a motivation to learn and they focus on what the pupil is able to and not on their weaknesses.
- We found evidence of individual evaluation of the pupils by using portfolios, log- or learn books. Each pupil has its own portfolio with his/her individual goals. It also includes their way of reaching the goals. This is also where the goals in the curriculum and the syllabus' are moderated to suit each pupil's long term development (IUP – Individual development plan). The structure and lay-out of this IUP is designed to motivate the pupils to reach their goals. Portfolios can also be digital.
- Most Swedish schools have a special program if a pupil, for some reason, fails to reach his / her goals.
- Swedish schools seem to focus on teaching their pupils to respect each others learning abilities, so the teachers try to direct the pupils to do more in the areas where they got good abilities in order to create a natural way of making them understand why some are better than others in different subjects.
- As above mentioned, reading and reading comprehension is most important in Swedish schools and they seem to have succeeded in transferring this idea to the pupils. A quote from the pupil's interview when given the question "What are your favourite subjects? Why?" is:

*"Definitely: Reading*

*We can choose our own books and it is quiet in the classroom when we are reading. We learn new words and new ways of expressing ourselves. We understood that better reading will make us better writers. Reading produces creative skills."*

- According to the observers, the co - operation and interaction between all the people in the class room is an important factor for individualized learning. The pupils we have interviewed have all agreed that their teachers are the most important reasons for liking their schools. They all answered that the teacher is the best person to help them learn because they have the best knowledge of the subjects, they know best how pupils learn and how to help them finding answers on their own. The teacher trusts them to always try to do their best ( motivation). The younger pupils like it when the teachers open up the possibility to walk around in the classroom helping each other.
- We think that an important part of individualized learning is to make sure that the pupils always know what is expected of them, both as pupils at their specific schools and as individuals. The Swedish school do that by using both goal orientated teaching and learning.
- The available resources and the organization of individualized learning are also important factors. In the secondary school there are three classes at each level. In the three core subjects there are always four teachers. The “fourth” teacher is always working with a smaller group of pupils chosen by the three class teachers. The school also has one special needs teacher and a “self learning centre”. To this centre the pupils may go or be sent if they have difficulties to do their task in class. They can also go there on their breaks and after school. In this part of school are also two teachers, working close to the special needs teacher, for pupils who need extra training or individual learning for a longer period. This has to be planned ahead. At the secondary school, pupils have to choose a second foreign language. They may, however, if agreed upon with their teacher, choose to have “extra” English or Swedish lessons instead. We also found many other kinds of using resources for individualized learning, e.g. assistance teachers in the primary school, special needs teachers, parent’s volunteers and other adults helping children in small groups. In addition, the Swedish schools are re – enforcing the system of offering the pupils an “extra” year if they see that the pupil is too immature to keep up with the classes’ progression.

- We noticed cooperation between the teachers in the secondary school. They have cooperation between the four teachers in each subject on the level, conferences each week where all the teachers of each level meet and discuss all topics concerning the level. They also have class meetings with all the teachers in the class. The school has got “idea banks”, where teachers collect ideas for projects, lessons, texts and tests.

The “extra” English teacher (see above) says:

*“There is one meeting each week where the English teachers in this grade tell me if there is anything that needs to be done in English in my lessons” (to keep up the class).*

### **All that glitters is not gold.**

In addition to the above mentioned ‘pearls’ was also evidence that the Swedish school system has some weak aspects.

- We realized that there was also a lack of cooperation, especially between teachers in primary school where the class teacher teaches nearly all subjects and the pupils are not graded.
- There is no common agreement and the term “individualized learning” is not commonly debated among the staff. The school does however have a motto, which is “The pupil in the centre”. Teachers were not convinced that they all felt the same way about individualized learning. We got the impression that introducing this term or way of thinking was hard to follow for some teachers or even not quite understood.
- We were astonished by the fact that some lessons were quite traditional and that weaker pupils were “helped” by giving them extra homework. There was not always much individualized learning inside the class room – pupils were sent out (e.g. in comparison to Norway).
- The affects from the national tests in Sweden are that their goals are not always the same as in the school syllabus. So the teachers may have to change what they teach, but mean that they do not change how they teach (output – orientation). Even so, the National tests in Sweden are quite important because they have to be passed. They are an important part of the pupil’s final grade because Sweden has no final National exams.

## EU-Mail – European Mixed-Ability Individualised Learning

- Our over – all impression is that a way of thinking individualized learning is to lower the level of difficulty in subjects all together. The effect of this might be that Swedish pupils are not challenged, or pushed enough.

To sum up, our look through the peephole showed us that the educational system in Sweden – as far as we know – is very pupil friendly which supports individualized learning. This “natural” way of dealing with individualized learning seems to have a positive effect on pupil’s social skills.

To practise individualized learning and deal with heterogeneous or mixed ability groups, you need to actually have heterogeneous groups. Norway has such heterogenic groups, but they are not that common in Germany because of the segregating school system. Extra resources in Swedish schools have been put in the right places, but as anywhere else, the resources are not enough. The resources given seem less compared to Norway, but they are much more than in Germany.

The national curriculum of Sweden has a goal related grading system, meaning that student achievement is assessed in relation to the goals stated in the course syllabi. Each school, or district, creates their own goals for their syllabi in each subject. This system opens up to a certain amount of freedom within each school to create a syllabus that suits their individual needs.