

## Report on the school visit to England within the EU-Mail project (Brigitte Schumann, Germany and Sture Norlin, Sweden)

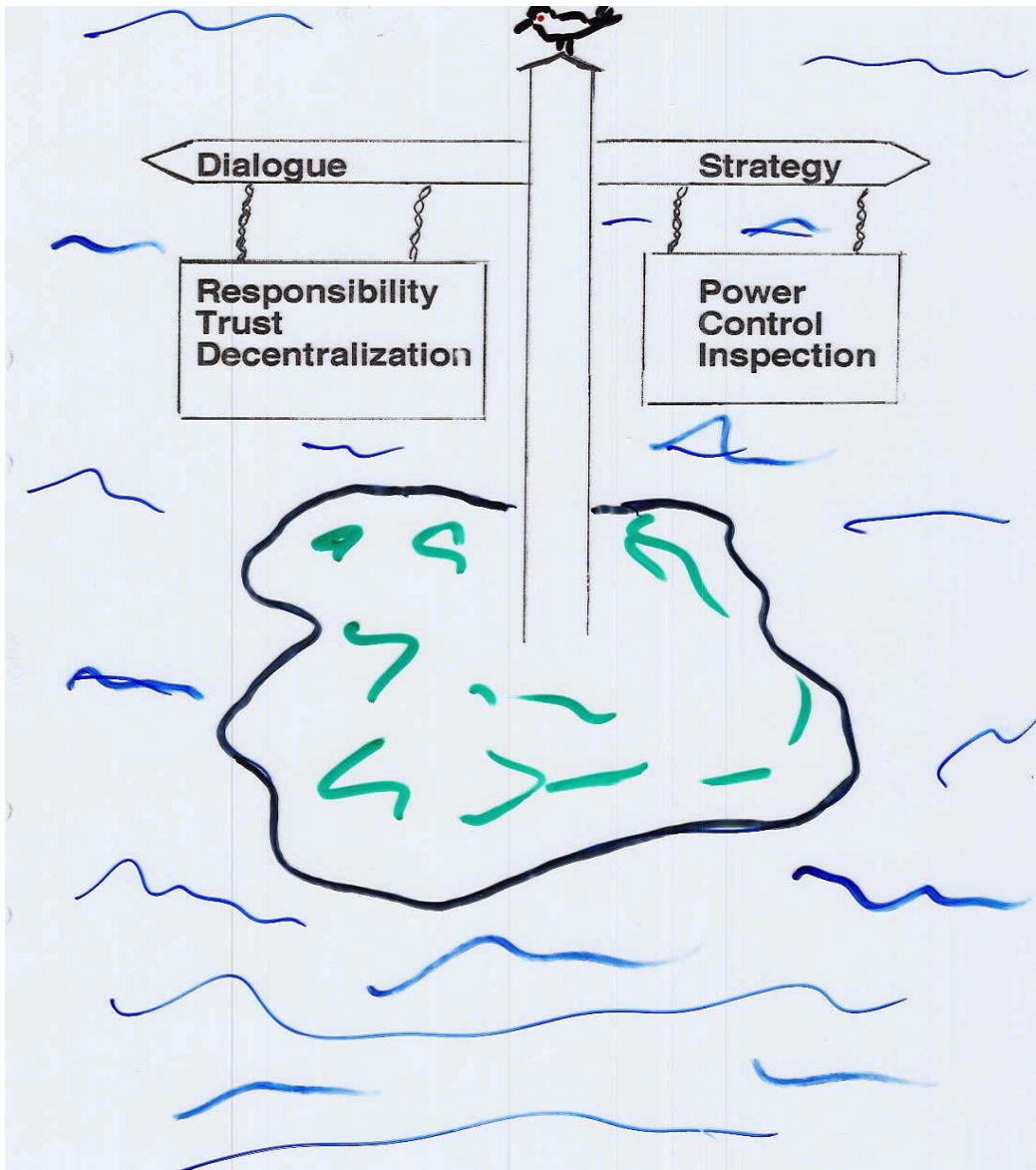
### Statement

Before we present which “pearls” or what best practice of individualised learning we have found during our week in England we want to make the following statement:

We are of the opinion that you have to make a choice what kind of school system you want before you can decide what best practice is. Do you believe in Dialogue which means that you build your relation towards students on responsibility, confidence and decentralisation

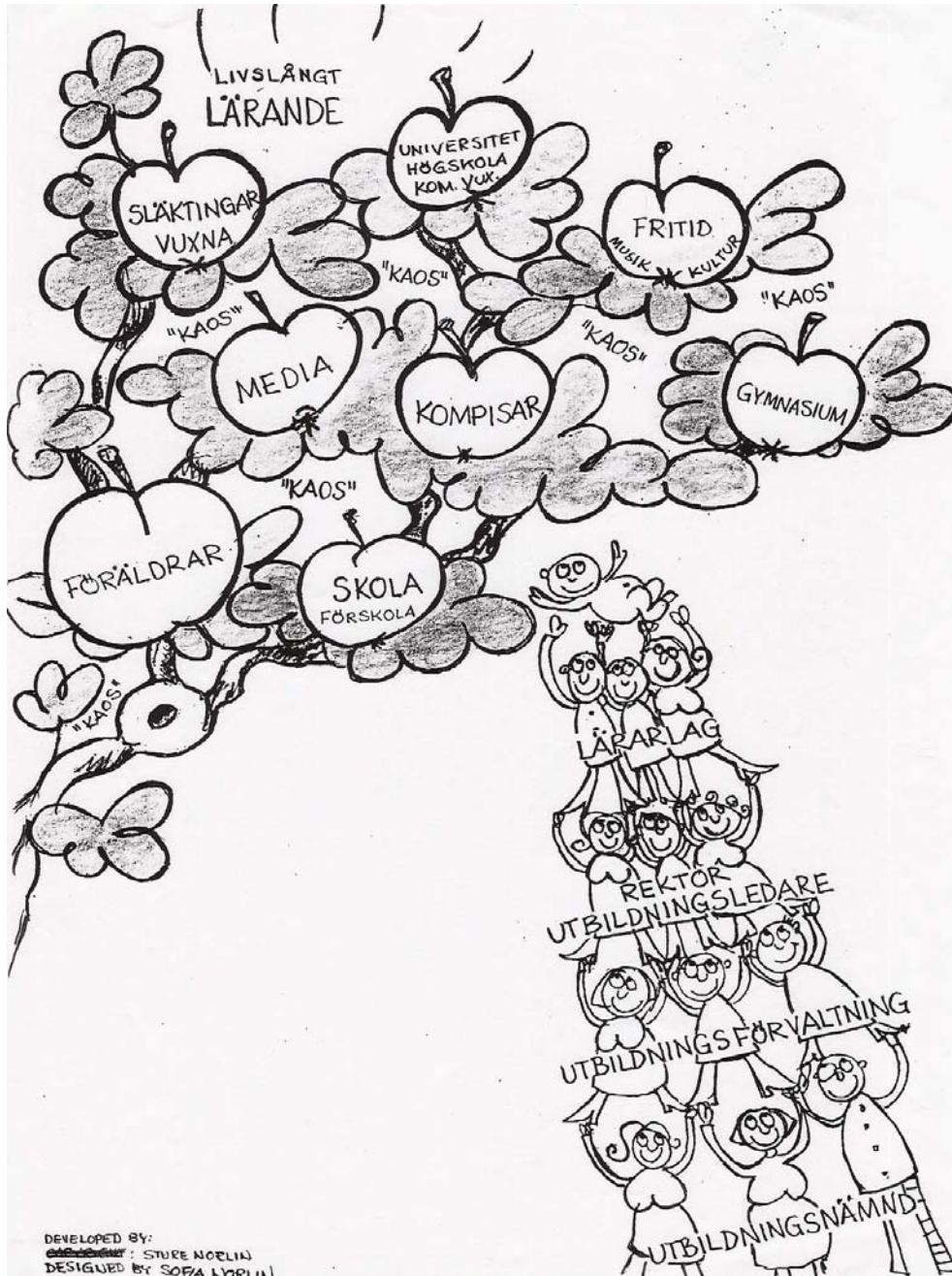
or

do you believe in the Strategy that your relation with students has to be built on power, control and inspection.



We believe that it is very important to choose one of the directions. We don't believe in mixing them. We have chosen the first direction and the following report is based on this.

Within a chaos of impressions the child passes pre-school, compulsory school, upper-secondary school for many years and every day there is new information and advice from parents, relatives, friends, media and organisations during leisure time.



Teachers, principals, politicians are asked to create best quality conditions for each child to "climb in the tree of lifelong learning" and to develop as a human being by learning. The teachers' concern must be shifted from teaching children to enabling children to learn. Schools must address students as active, self-confident and self-directed learners. They have to create a learning culture including all the students.

### **Special factors which influence individualised learning in mixed ability groups in England**

Mixed ability groups are hard to find in England. It's only in so-called soft subjects such as drama, music, arts, ICT and technology that groups are normally based on mixed ability. Most schools, also those we have visited, start with settings in maths and English from the beginning of grade 7. There are three or sometimes even more sets for ability groups. The decision for the appropriate placement in secondary school is mainly based on national test results.

Although schools can eventually decide if they want to do either settings or mixed ability the majority of them feels urged to do settings. Under the pressure of a national testing system every school is focused on output and best results in academic subjects. Taking these conditions and also the size of the average class or learning group into account teachers and headteachers prefer settings. They tend to think that reducing mixed ability helps to facilitate classroom teaching and ensures effective teaching and learning for every child and student.

In the context of national assessments and league tables target setting for each student has become common. The development of the school is measured by the improvement of test results. Consequently each student must improve. Setting individual targets for students in every subject is a way to ensure this. Schools have developed systems of monitoring the progress of each pupil in each subject. They will tell each student what he or she should achieve. Under these conditions learning is in danger to be reduced to academic subject learning where priority is given to output and the individual process of learning is neglected.

In spite of this critical view on the system as such we found on our school visits that there is a lot of potential in the English comprehensive school system for individualised learning in mixed ability groups. Schools and teachers try to use it as well as they can within –according to our view- a rather restrictive national framework of guidelines. In short, we think that the full potential of mixed ability within a comprehensive school system is not yet made use of.

### **Examples of best practice in dealing with mixed-ability individualised learning in and outside of lessons and their effect on the acquisition of curricular and social competences**

#### **1. "Learn to Learn"**

In one school they had just recently started a one- year course with one lesson per week for grade 7 in mixed ability groups with the objectives:

- pupils learn how to learn
- they become independent learners

-they identify in which way each of them learns best

-the focus is not on subjects and sets but on learning in a more self-regulated way and helping each other.

We saw a lesson when the students learned about teamwork by solving tasks in groups. It was easy to learn and obviously fun for all students because the arrangement combined intellectual, practical, emotional and social aspects of learning. The headteacher, who is also involved in giving “learn to learn” courses, believes that this will have a strong positive effect on curricular and social competencies of students.

Subject teachers in this school are informed about the new approach to learning, yet they are not trained for it. It is not known if and to what extent they make use of the “learn-to learn” effects in their own lessons.

**We recommend that teachers are trained in cooperative and other learning methods for regular classroom practice. In addition all students should get courses in “learn to learn”, which enables them to use these methods of learning effectively when needed.**

## **2. Peer tutoring**

We found some elements of peer tutoring in classroom practice, e.g. when a teacher has bright students seated next to less bright ones and encourages them to work together. We also found that some teachers do not approve of this cooperation in classroom at all because they think that it is disadvantageous for both parties. Teachers should know the positive results of scientific research on peer tutoring, which will make them more confident in using it.

**We recommend that peer tutoring becomes part of the above- mentioned training for teachers.**

## **3. Learning support centre**

Nowadays it is quite common for English schools to have learning support centres as part of the school. Special teachers and assistant staff support children with special needs such as social and emotional behaviour problems and learning problems. We have seen it work in two ways: a) Staff support the child with special needs in the classroom and b) the child is taken out of the classroom and is given an extra tuition alone or in rather small groups with a special teacher.

**As we support the idea of inclusive schools we prefer learning support centres to special schools. Priority should be given to classroom integration whenever possible. In this perspective team teaching becomes extremely important and should be an element in teacher`s training.**

## **4. The Follow-Up-System**

At one school the ICT department has developed a computer scheme that enables the teachers to follow the progress of each student as closely as possible. They discuss with students where they are and what they should go for. The department has found out that students feel encouraged and motivated by this. This monitoring system is combined with the scheme of individual target setting, which –in our

view- puts the student under pressure of achieving certain results instead of putting the focus on his or her learning and helping him or her to choose.

**We recommend that a monitoring system should be used as an element of diagnosis in a programme that is only dedicated to tutoring.**

### **5. The teacher as a helper**

We found that teachers have a very positive attitude towards their pupils. They encourage children and give them self-confidence as a learner by looking at the positive aspects of their work rather than pointing out the deficits.

We realized that when asked for help by students after lessons, they would give them advice immediately or tell them when to come again. Students will get extended hours by teachers if necessary, even if this means extra work for the teacher. This positive attitude is reflected in the students' positive opinion of their teachers and this mutual respect is a vital element for the school culture.

Rituals in classroom practice and in school life underline this good relationship. Teachers we observed always finished their lessons with a positive remark about the learning progress made in the lesson.

In interviews they showed their concern for the talented as well as for the underachieving students. They found it important in mixed ability groups to have different material and different amount of time for different students. The computer was regarded as an appropriate instrument to serve each pupil's needs.

**This positive attitude of teachers is the incentive for motivated and self-confident learners. We recommend that in both our countries teachers are encouraged and supported to stimulate the fire of learning in our students.**