

## EU MAIL

### Manchester

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### Report based on the school visit and interviews

By Hans Petter Wille and Pirjo Pollari

We visited **School A** on September 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004 and **School B** on September 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, for interviews and observations.

**School A** has a mixed catchment area: there used to be another school, Hattersley High, situated in a very problematic estate area. The school was closed and a new one built on an area whose catchment area now is both Hattersley and other, socially better-off areas. Thus, the student population has a very mixed social and economic background. However, the student population is nearly completely white: out of c. 700 students only 20 identify themselves as non-white non-British. The school building is new, opened less than two years ago. The school is very well equipped, eg. ICT equipment seems to be state-of-art.

**School B** is situated in a relatively poor area in Hyde. However, the school's national results (eg. GCSE results) are outstanding: the percentage of five A stars to C's is over 60 (including GNVQs which translate into many GCSEs, so the results are not necessarily completely comparable). The school has approximately 1,000 students, out of whom circa 20 percent are of Bangladeshi origin. The school building itself looks quite old and run down, at least when compared to Alder, eg. air conditioning was not good, some classrooms were small and quite dark, building materials looked worn out and corridors were crowded and slippery. Nevertheless, their ICT equipment and resources were excellent (a lot of computer suites, interactive screens in most classrooms, etc.)

Both schools teach their core academic subjects like Maths, English and Science in sets. Both schools have three sets: the higher set, intermediate and foundation/bottom. Students are setted by the school, on the basis of the results, so the student nor the parents have no influence in the sets the students are in. In Alder, subjects like Drama, Art and ICT are taught in mixed-ability groups but the main academic subjects are all setted. In Hyde Technology nearly all subjects, except Learn2learn and such, are setted. Thus, our chances of observing individualized learning in mixed-ability groups were very limited: In Alder we observed Art and ICT taught in mixed-ability groups and Learn2learn in Hyde. The ICT lesson we observed in Hyde was setted.

Nevertheless, even though we did not necessarily find many 'best practices' regarding individualised learning in mixed-ability groups, we found some very interesting practices we think our countries and our teacher training could learn from:

- Students get a lot of support from their teachers. For instance, in the ICT lesson in Alder there were three adults (the teacher and two technicians/assistants/support personnel) who actively participated in the lesson in helping students individually and in a very positive

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way. The students were not particularly ‘difficult’ nor in need of special needs support so one-to-one support of such scale with so many adults present was quite new to us.

- Both staff and students seemed to be quite proud of their schools and the ‘ethos’ and good spirit, (eg the feeling of togetherness, inclusion, and the worth of every student) of the school was encouraged and also emphasized.
- Teaching Learn2learn, ie learning strategies and skills for all students, seemed a very good practice. The objective of this instruction was to teach students skills that would benefit them in all subjects and also in everyday life. Especially weaker students may lack efficient learning skills, so in this respect this instruction gives them more tools than subject teaching. A point worth noting is that because learning to learn does not have any national standards/curriculum nor external testing, the teacher had more latitude in her teaching, and thus also students had more freedom in their answers (no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers). According to the teacher in question, she did not know other schools that would have taught Learn2learn.
- Schools keep very good track of their students. Both schools had very developed, computerised systems of storing and retrieving information about their students. The information was mainly about their result records but also about other things. In Hyde, teachers could also comment on students’ behaviour, success, etc via this intranet system (e-portal).
- The students had constant access to the syllabus of their ICT course. They could easily go back to their tasks, search for help, check the targets and objectives as well as to check how they personally were doing in regards to the targets (also what grade or level they were heading towards, what they should do to get a higher grade/level, etc.)

On the basis of what we found out, the factors that may influence the current system of not having a lot of mixed-ability groups (at least in the schools we visited) seem to be such as:

- External evaluation. External evaluation in its myriad of forms seems to have an enormous effect on schools, their finances, number of students, reputation, in one word, on EVERYTHING. Thus, its effect on learning is not necessarily only positive: schools have to use a lot of energy and resources in considering OFSTED inspections, League Tables, GCSE results and that time and energy may be taken from actual teaching. Furthermore, the washback effect of all these evaluations can lead into ‘teaching for the test’. Looking at external evaluation from a Finnish and Norwegian perspective, its advantages and possible disadvantages seemed slightly perplexing.
- Quite strict guidelines of both National Curriculum/Standards limit the teachers’ freedom in deciding what they teach. At least in some instances we got the impression that when not having such regulated guidelines, teachers felt that they could focus on matters they found important for that particular student group (eg Learn2learn, ICT lessons). Then they seemed to have more time and freedom to concentrate on individual students and their needs as well.
- As most subjects were taught in setted groups (set according to ability, ie mainly former test results), setting of course was a major factor in these schools. Even though from a Scandinavian point of view the whole system of setting seems quite foreign, some things should be discussed. First of all, the students of the lowest set were taught in very small groups (eg. 8-10 students) with quite a lot of individual help available. At least in Finland, groups can be much bigger even if the students are quite heterogeneous, and very often the teacher feels compelled to ‘teach to the middle’, ie the teacher cannot provide as much individual help and support for the weakest, nor tasks challenging enough for the most talented. However, the question of ‘holding back’ very talented students did not seem to be a problem in the highest set.

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When it comes to the effects of individualized learning on the acquisition of curricular and social competences, we have no information about that. The settings of individualized learning were too limited.

Very disabled children not seen, except for a group hearing impaired students at Hyde.