

CLASSROOM PRACTICE REPORT

Austria

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CASE ONE

Integration at secondary level
Dornbirn, Austria

1. The school

Some 400 pupils attend this school and are taught by 51 teachers. With a total of 16 classes, the secondary general school Bergmannstrasse is one of the largest in Vorarlberg. Its catchment caters to several blue-collar residential areas, an upper middle class neighbourhood, as well as to a number of children from nearby mountain villages. Traditionally, the secondary general school Bergmannstrasse focuses on music education. Approximately 100 highly gifted pupils attended special music classes. This orientation contributes largely to the good reputation of the school.

2. Class teacher and SNE teacher

2.1 The current integration class – Background

This school previously had an integration class, which finished in early 2001. During that time, the teachers could benefit substantially from well-organised preparation and monitoring arrangements. Closed meetings were held, offering professional guidance for the team of teachers. They provided an opportunity to address uncertainties or concerns. The teachers were faced with new aspects of work such as the organisation of classroom instruction, which constituted a major challenge in the beginning. One such aspect is teamwork, which developed into a novel and enriching work element. Scientific monitoring was an indispensable support in order to cope with these tasks. Unfortunately, the monitoring function has been phased out.

The financial resources, which are still being used today, were already granted at that time. The school head reports that the municipality of Dornbirn supported the setting up of an integration class, by providing a unique financial support for the installation of each integration class. Today the municipality appropriates a limited annual budget.

2.2 The current integration class

This is a first-year class attended by 19 pupils, of which five have special educational needs. Three children are taught according to the curriculum for severely handicapped pupils, two children according to the curriculum for learning-impaired pupils.

The integration class has two classrooms at its disposal, which are interconnected by a door.

Some of the teachers who had already worked together in the core team (mentioned above) for four years in the integration class, taught the class. This created the staffing and financial conditions required, which the teachers have defined as the two major aspects:

2.3 The staffing situation

The teachers considered their mutual relations as a critical factor: When the integration class was set up five years ago, the head teacher was personally involved in identifying a suitable SEN teacher. From the very beginning, both teachers considered their rapport as important, including concordant views on teaching methods to be used. The teachers clearly agree when it comes to attitudes towards pupils, social values, and the type and design of the learning process.

Teamwork requires an increased capacity for communication and conflict management, for assigning tasks and for consultation with all players. This part of the work is particularly time-consuming. However, teamwork and team teaching are extremely fascinating aspects. The need to work together closer than "normal secondary general school teachers" was a crucial motivating factor for assuming this task. Teamwork and the related exchange of experience are perceived as immensely enriching.

Since the current school year, the team briefing hour no longer takes place, which has elicited criticism: Briefings are indispensable to ensure smooth work in an integration class, which is why several colleagues meet regularly at school or in a private setting. This considerable investment of extra time is by no means compensated for. The co-ordination effort demanded from the head teacher is particularly time-consuming and again no longer compensated. The smooth functioning of an integration class hence hinges on a highly motivated team of teachers who perform their duties in a self-committed manner and out of conviction. It is a fact that the attitude of some teachers in the core team towards their work in the integration class has changed since the briefing hour is no longer remunerated and that strong commitment, at less pay, has dwindled. Arrangements are now discussed during breaks, in a non-structured setting, a fact, which the head teacher deeply regrets, whilst showing an understanding for the changed work attitude of her colleagues.

The head teacher is a qualified SEN teacher, which the secondary general schoolteachers consider of key importance. The secondary general school teachers underwent additional training at the In-Service Teacher Training Institute, which they consider helpful for classroom work: NLP, motivation training, open learning at secondary general schools. The SEN teacher for her part is appreciative of the sound subject-matter skills of her secondary general school counterparts; moreover, the teachers emphasised the important role of personality development: good communication skills, conflict management and moderation, which are indispensable elements for work in an integration class. The need to organise relatively complex structures by the head teacher is not to be underestimated.

The teachers attach particular importance to the following aspects:

- on-going support for pupils
- holistic approach to children
- small teaching teams
- work on interpersonal relations
- recognising the individual child with its particular qualities and needs and providing adequate support.

2.4 Finance

As already mentioned, the municipality of Dornbirn provided financial support for the launch of the integration class; additionally, it appropriates an annual budget. Each year, a fund-raising bazaar is organised on the occasion of the Parents' Day. This allows parents to draw on financial resources needed for the different learning materials.

Other potential financial sources are parents' associations or charities such as "*Gesundes Vorarlberg*".

2.5 Organisation of classroom teaching/assessment

Two teachers teach all 29 of the weekly hours. Three teachers are used for the subjects of German, Mathematics and English. The pupils work according to weekly plans, unsupervised work accounts for 9 hours per week. Regular project instruction is theme-oriented. Much of the classroom teaching is conventional, with interspersed sequences of ex-cathedra teaching. Several organisational forms are hence used flexibly consistent with the educational goals.

The role of the head teacher varies. In some subjects, she is a classroom teacher, in others a support teacher, which she personally experiences as an advantage. In this way, she is in touch with all pupils and not regarded as the "teacher for the children having learning difficulties" by the pupils.

Ultimately, the pupils are assessed according to ability groups, whereas for instruction purposes the group is a heterogeneous one. Children with special needs are taught separately from their peers 4 hours per week, receive remedial instruction instead of two hours of English, have another hour to use flexibly; and have PE lessons reduced by an hour.

2.6 Conclusion by teachers

The teachers experience their work in the integration class as highly stimulating. They observe how the pupils positively interact with less-performing children and receive a positive feedback from the parents of disabled and non-disabled children on their personal commitment and the favourable social climate in class.

Classroom work is developed further in small steps, by modifying individual elements according to the needs and adjusting them to given situations.

2 Comments by people concerned

2.1 Comments by the school head

For the school head, the launching phases of integration classes are time-consuming. Two contacts are vital: the district school inspector, with whom the assigned hourly quotas are negotiated. Here, there is a need for extensive



discussion regarding the children's disabilities. Once the preparatory phase has been completed and the integration class launched, no additional effort is demanded from the school head. The school head is favourable and ideologically open towards integration.

Based on the experiences with the first integration class, he considers a qualified SEN teacher as a prime importance. His assessment of the bases for co-operation among the class teachers differs from that of the teachers. He does not consider strong friendships between colleagues a preliminary requirement for successful co-operation. He also sees the selection of teachers for the core team depending on the teaching methods they use as a problem. He believes that colleagues who represent different teaching methods and educational approaches should be able to work together professionally.

From his perspective, the following aspects deserve consideration:

- teachers face a high burden when working with children with multiple disabilities, additional staff resources (allocated hours) are necessary,
- the number of integration classes at the secondary general school should be limited to two, given the limitation by staffing and spatial capacities,
- briefing hours should be remunerated,
- supervision would be important,
- teachers should report more frequently in staff meetings on the situation in the integration class so as to share information with all colleagues.

2.2 Parents

2.2.1 Father of a severely disabled child

The daughter is retarded in her development and has serious problems in language comprehension and spatial perception. So far she attended four years of special school: first one class of general special school, then a special assistance class.

Since the father considers it important for his child to interact with "normal" children, he had his daughter placed in the integration class. He found that his daughter feels very comfortable at the school. Since the father is a teacher also at the secondary general school, he knows that the general climate and social interaction is exceptionally good in this class.

He expects that the girl will acquire basic reading and writing skills; moreover, he hopes for some development on the social level. The only problem is occasional conflicts with a socially more difficult pupil who bothers his daughter on her way home from school. Whenever this happens, he informs the class teacher who immediately deals with the issue. As the school year draws to a close, he finds his daughter to be more tired at the end of the school day than usual. As a father, the school does not expect any extra effort from him.

2.2.2 Mother of a mildly dyslexic girl without special educational needs

When the integration class was set up, the parents could express if they wanted their child to be taught in that integration class in a questionnaire. Since her child



suffers from mild dyslexia, the mother expected some support from this form of school organisation. There was yet another motivating factor to choose this form of schooling: the family lives in a small mountain village where there are no foreign children. The mother believes that this class setting will prepare her daughter for a multi-faceted social life by learning how to interact with the disabled. Her daughter would, for instance, assist a disabled boy to board the bus every day, which would teach her to become reliable.

In talking with other mothers, she compares the performance of her daughter with that of pupils attending a mainstream secondary general school class and is very satisfied with the integration class. She appreciates the amount of unsupervised work. With respect to her daughter's problem, it is important for her that no ability groups are formed and it is not obvious who belongs to which group.

2.3 District school inspector, Dornbirn district

As district school inspector for the district of Dornbirn he is responsible for 38 schools with a total of 368 classes. This includes 27 classes with full integration, one of which is the year-one integration class at the secondary general school Bergmannstrasse. The district school inspector was closely involved in the launch of this integration class, since it was not a class, which directly transferred from primary school, but a merger of pupils with special needs from three different schools (3 primary schools and 1 general special school). His task was to talk to the parents, the head of the Special Education Centre and the school heads from the sending schools.

Since both the school head and the SEN teacher have been running integration classes for many years, the district school inspector could trust them with these classes once they had been set up. Moreover, support is provided by the Province School Board for Special Education. This minimises the time, which needs to be invested from the district school inspector.

The district school inspector believes that a generally positive attitude towards integration is necessary for setting up an integration class. He tries to ensure that the schools are given the resources they require. For this integration class, for instance, a total of 32 support-teacher hours had been allocated. Thanks to well-founded arguments put forward by the school head and the SEN teacher, this number was increased to 35 hours.

He feels that SEN teachers should in general be financially upgraded. Moreover, he considers it urgent to re-introduce remunerated team briefing hours.

Problems at the school relating to the integration class occurred because of the complex composition of the class, in particular because of the extremely heterogeneous performance levels of the pupils with special needs. He tried to find solutions by talking to all stakeholders and by increasing the allocated quota of hours compared to what was originally planned.



The district school inspector appreciates the highly committed team of teachers in particular and the use of different forms of instruction.

He considers careful planning of the class composition and the involvement of all stakeholders (parents, school heads, teachers, head of the Special Education Centre, possibly school psychologists) as critical elements when setting up an integration class. According to the district school inspector, the voluntary involvement of the teachers working on the team is a requisite for success.





CASE TWO

Integration in a lower secondary school
„Good Practice Model“
2nd form in Hart, area Linz-Land

1. Main character of the school

The lower secondary school Hart is a regular compulsory school with 10 classes. Besides a fully expanded branch of integration (1st – 4th form) this school offers a technical emphasis. The school is fitted with up to date equipment, has access to a computer lab, a library, a mediation room, a gym and a forum for music and events.

1.1 Surroundings of the school:

The location is situated at the outskirts of Linz. The school is part of a school centre (pre-school, primary school, secondary school, special school, pre-vocational school, vocational school) and is connected to the public transportation system of Linz. The site is located in an area, which appears to be socially burdened (foreigners, high unemployment rate, lower income families, single parents). Nevertheless the composition of all classes is socially well balanced. Many children from other areas attend this school, because the reputation of the school regarding inclusion is very good.

In Upper Austria this school was one of the first lower secondary schools, which offered a school pilot project called “Social integration in a general secondary school”. Therefore integration has been taking place for 9 years. Back then the teachers were already experienced in teaching children with learning problems, because there had been school pilot projects in co-operation with the local special school concerning “moving students from the special school to the mainstream school” before integration was officially offered by law.

Pupils of the special school attended a one-year training course to graduate with a certificate of the 4th form of the general secondary school.

1.2 Specialities of the site in the view of teachers, parents and students

1.2.1 School

To run integration classes properly, the school must have appropriate personnel resources and additional rooms. Likewise the number of students is limited to a maximum of 25 children. One has to pay attention to a heterogeneous class composition regarding achievement and social behaviour.

1.2.2 Teachers

Teaching a reform-oriented integration class requires additional personal commitment, time and also money from the teaching team (production of teaching



material, preparation of open learning phases, etc.). A fixed date for the weekly planning and organisation of all teachers, which is planned in the timetable, is considered very important.

1.2.3 Parents:

Parents, whose children are integrated, take high responsibility. Parents' co-operation and co-planning is enormously important for the success of projects. At this location the community did not pay the supply of some training materials. Parents partially had to co-finance according to their financial resources, in order to make ends meet. To enhance everyday instructions, co-operation between teachers and parents, e.g. more frequent parents' evenings, co-operation for projects, co-planning of pedagogical concepts, solving conflicts etc., is of great importance.

2. Framework for integration at this site:

Class design:

24 students visit this class, from which five students have special needs. Most of the pupils are educated in respect to the curriculum for learning disabilities; only one pupil is severely handicapped. One pupil with special needs showed severe behaviour problems but he improved enormously. Thus he could achieve the goals of the general secondary schools' curriculum.

Team of teachers:

The core team consists of the form teacher and the special teacher. This team was formed voluntarily and is running a class from the first to the fourth grade for the second time. Six additional colleagues are teaching several subjects in addition to a pedagogical school assistant who is responsible for the care of three pupils. 27 lessons are taught in a team, in one lesson a week the core team emphasises social learning and common problem solving.

Organisation and design of instruction:

A variety of open and closed teaching methods are offered. The pupils work one third of the lessons with individual weekly plans, subjects like biology or geography are mainly organised in projects, sometimes in a cross-curricular way. Partner and group work dominate the daily work. In German, Math and English students are not separated into three ability levels (3 different rooms) as usual. Most of the time they work together on one topic in a common class according to their abilities. Group rooms, working areas in the corridor and a mediation room are offered for individual needs.

Due to the differences in achievements and curricula it is often difficult to meet the demands of all students. The various weekly plans enable teachers to work with small groups individually to reach certain goals or to carry out training programmes adapted to all sorts of abilities.

2.1 Assessment / individual development plans:

Assessment is designed according to the school pilot project “alternative assessment procedures- verbal description“

Students take tests in several subjects and check their learning goals without being assessed by marks. Each child receives his or her development report at the end of a semester or a school year. Individual development plans are carried out for every child with SEN. Development processes and support measures are evaluated constantly.

Material:

In this class pupils often work with Montessori material, teaching material taken from the official book list, self made products, like individual folders and study files, to complete this substantial collection. Also necessities of everyday life, like shaving foam, clothes pegs, plasticine are used especially for children with severe disabilities.

Co-operation –Teamwork – Co-ordination:

Individual subject teachers and special teachers co-ordinate their work weekly, while the form teacher and the special teacher co-ordinate their work almost daily. At present this team works very effectively, and so very little time is usually sufficient. The special teacher and the form teacher create the basic weekly plans together, the subject teachers complete the plan according to the curricular demands.

Every two weeks the whole team meets to pin down further topics and small projects. Big projects have to be planned twice a year in detail. The special teacher plays a very important role, she is the heart and soul of the co-ordination work, being responsible for fixing dates for co-ordination meetings as well as for the involvement of the pedagogical assistance. The form teacher supports her in all her work. The whole team takes responsibility for written plans, handmade instruction materials or the minutes of meetings, etc. Some team members even meet in their leisure time to do handicraft work or to collect ideas for projects.

Co-operation with parents:

Regular parents’ evenings are organised to create new concepts and to plan future projects or teaching time. The team experienced that the parents’ interest in joint planning decreases with the increasing age of the children. Older students often perceive school as their “private area”, where teachers act as their partners and parents should not have too much insight.

Parents are, however, always welcome at presentations of the students’ work e.g. exhibitions, newspapers etc. Weekly fixed dates are offered to the parents for their queries. Additional dates are arranged to meet individual demands. Last but not least, the special teacher is co-operating with external organisations like the youth welfare service.

2.2 Conclusions



The inclusive class in the general secondary school in Hart is one of the sites in our country, where fundamental integrative aspects are in fact respected: open learning methods, alternative assessment procedures, individual pupil approach and heterogeneous teaching. Integration has been alive from the beginning of the school pilot project; therefore this teaching method is highly accepted by parents, students and also by those teachers who have not taught these classes before, (although this is almost not the case). Most of the pedagogues have experience concerning inclusion by co-ordinating school projects or by covering for colleagues.

