

Country Report

Austria

Visions Alive

If you want to build a ship, don't call for men to collect wood, to lay out tools, to distribute tasks to make work easier, but teach the people the longing for the endless, far sea.

Antoine de St.-Exupéry

1. Framework

The Working Partners of the European Agency carried out case studies on Classroom Practice in various countries.

In order to include the experience of Austrian experts, inspectors and advisory teachers were asked to find a school with a model of a good practice. The responsible inspector in Vienna recommended two colleagues ('Beratungslehrer', advisory teachers) who initiated a project called "Blickwinkel"¹. The objectives of the project are: "to find criteria and strategies to cope with children with emotional and behavioural problems in the classroom." In one primary school, the The "Blickwinkel" team observed that many colleagues and the head of this school had implemented the vision of inclusion into daily life. That is why the school "Prückelmayrgasse in Vienna" was chosen for this case study.

The framework developed by the European Agency was used as a basis for an interview, further adapted to the chosen case study. Most of the interviews were already conducted, recorded and transcribed by the time the co-ordinator for Austria actually visited the school. Agency's co-ordinator for Austria during had a chance to get to know the class teachers, the local inspector and the headmaster. The dialogue convinced the co-ordinator that this school has developed strategies, which can perfectly be used as a model of inclusion of challenging children.

The second site is a special school in Salzburg for hearing-impaired pupils, which was chosen because of their special inclusive provision. On the basis of a school pilot project, this special school opened the doors for the non-handicapped to implement the ideas of inclusive education in their institution.

2. Multi-Level Instruction to Include Children with Challenging Behaviour in a Primary School in Vienna

Presentation of the School

In October 2000 we were invited to a conference in the Prückelmayrgasse primary school, situated on the outskirts of Vienna, to present the Blickwinkel project. The school is located in the 23rd district and has nine classes. Teaching in seven classes is adapted to the principles of Maria Montessori, Peter Petersen and Celestin Freinet.

As a special feature in the Viennese school system, three of these classes are organised in the mixed-aged groups: children from the first to the fourth grade are being taught together. Mrs. Boran, the class teacher of this heterogeneous class, was interested in being observed and monitored by the advisers during her daily work on the "Blickwinkel" project, so she invited us into her classroom.



¹ BLICKWINKEL is a coaching project for teachers based on the system of internal collective communicative and methodological resources of teachers. The lessons are observed and feedback is provided. It is an optional provision of the Viennese school board; teachers are free to choose confidential advice sessions. BLICKWINKEL is meant to provide practical support to understanding the structures and communication models while teaching; it is intended to broaden the communicative scope for action of teachers and teams. Organizational, methodological, didactical and communicative stimuli from an outside and unbiased point of view may offer fresh ideas leading to innovations and enhanced quality of teaching.

After walking around the school it became obvious that this building gives a good and friendly atmosphere, despite the fact that it was a low-budget building. Pictures and children's paintings on the walls and a huge variety of plants make the school look nice and lively. A piano in the main entrance hall creates the impression that this is a genuine multipurpose place. Even the corridors are intensively used by the pupils. It seems that the whole school building is filled with vibrant life.

Also the part in front of the mixed-aged class is used as a working area. Many shelves provide space for the pupils' work, the materials and an aquarium.

Various materials in the classroom are conspicuous and sorted by subject. The room is divided into several working areas by shelves and small cupboards. A door leads to the neighbouring class which is also organised for kids from six to ten years. Both classes use the corridor in front of their rooms and an additional room.



There are 20 pupils in each of the mixed-age classes (five per grade) taught by one teacher. A co-teacher supports both colleagues during the lessons, divided into two types of phases: individualised learning and periods when pupils work and learn co-operatively. The positive working atmosphere and the way children get along in a peaceful way impressed us when we entered the classroom.

Parents and children of this public primary school have social backgrounds with a variety of cognitive and behavioural skills. Mrs. Boran's mixed-age class includes a boy who would be assessed as an AD/HD kid in other classes or schools. He needs a lot of attention, "*he is physically cruel, beats other children and swears*" (according to the class teacher). We realised that this pupil is more skilled in maths than others at his age and interested in geography, history and nature. The facilities to self-assessed work (work plans) and to open-learning techniques supports inclusion of children with behaviour problems in general and helps to avoid escalation in this specific case: "*Children get an opportunity to choose among the offers provided, but they have to finish their work. They can change their working place if it gets too noisy or when too much is going on. This often helps children to cope with the situation and they can choose how long they want to work on a topic, of course within a certain time frame. Therefore the pressure upon the pupils is limited, and they are not bored if they finish earlier*" (by the class teacher).

Support through special or appropriate provision lowers the pressure and the fear of failing, fosters pupils' attention span and improves their ability to learn. This in turn minimises potential aggression. Even when a pupil loses self-control, the classmates are very tolerant. This depends, on the one hand, on the mixed-age structure, on the other hand on the learning environment and the variety of options to retreat.

Competition and fights resulting from social behaviour problems are less perceptible in a mixed-age group than in a homogeneous group of children. The co-teacher helps to support the positive atmosphere: "*For me, teaching of knowledge is not the most important, I feel responsible for the "feeling good" factor and the social aspects in the class*" (co-teacher). Increasing positive feedback by the teachers boosts confidence and self-esteem of children with emotional problems and in connection with clear rules (which are executed consequently) a continuous social learning process is feasible.

This development is fostered by an ongoing support of an educational psychologist.² The pupil and the psychologist work on situations in role-plays and/or by having conversations to experience other behavioural models than the usual ones. So the pupil will be trained to cope with difficult social situations with other pupils and/or adults. This is carried out in single sessions in a special room as well as in the surrounding of the class. *“I am very concentrated on the special child, but always respect the background of the classroom situations and appearing conflicts. This pupil we are talking about has problems with his brothers and sisters and therefore the mixed-age class is a perfect forum to exercise and trying out several social situations“* (educational psychologist)

Inclusion of challenging children in Prückelmayrgasse primary school works because all staff are working in a team and support each other. It may happen that, for example, the head of the school takes care of a child for a while, who has lost his self-control: *“Sometimes I sit with a child in my lap for a quarter of an hour and hold him, to avoid self-destruction or violence against others“* (headmaster).

The team spirit in this school is also shared by the janitor, who is not only cleaning the corridors which are used more than in other schools, he also shows his team competence in crisis situations with pupils.

Development of the Mixed-ability and Mixed-age Class

Team-development and school-development change continuously from one year to another. In Prückelmayrgasse primary school the process started about seven years ago.

The starting point was to find an appropriate way how to combine interests of both the teachers and the pupils. Discussions were initiated, different opportunities were considered, organisational and resource issues were raised. The school looked out for innovative ways to facilitate learning with more fun and efficiency. Teaching after the principles of Maria Montessori was the first step for many colleagues. The next step was to reflect how to make entering school easier and optimise the support according to pupils' abilities and their individual social development.

The Viennese school pilot project, called “Neue Grundschule“ (new primary school) seemed to be extraordinarily fitting the ideas of the staff, so some teachers decided to work according to this curriculum.

“Neue Grundschule“ is part of the model “Neue Grundstufe“, (new primary stage) which delivers flexible adaptation of the curriculum for school beginners during their first three years of school (the primary stage can last from one to three years). Pre-school pedagogy is a part of this concept.

Within the framework of “Neue Grundschule“ (NGS)³ approximately forty children (pre-school, first grade, second grade) are educated together in flexible groups by three teachers.

² That is a teacher with a special training at the neuro-psychiatric department for children and adolescents of the University Hospital of Vienna. Her task is to care for pupils in need of continuous additional support in the field of emotional and social behaviour on the basis of her psychotherapeutic knowledge. Her working field includes the support of emotional and social development and therefore indirectly also the intellectual and physical development, as well as care and advice service for such contact persons like family members, friends, teachers etc. The Viennese model of inclusion of children with EDB provides an advice service for all compulsory schools by educational psychologists (Psychagogen) or “advice teachers“ (Beratungslehrern), whose working field is very similar. The difference is that training for advice teachers is offered at a teacher training institution (Pedagogical Institute of Vienna)

³ The concept of the „Neue Grundschule“ was introduced in depth by an article from Heschl in: *Erziehung und Unterricht* 1997/5/6 : Selektionsfreie Schuleingangsphase- Chance oder Belastung für die Grundschule (starting phase into school without selection – chance or burden for primary school?)

In Prückelmayrgasse School, the promotion to the third grade was considered difficult from the point of view of some children, parents and teachers, because the developed social connections were cut immediately after two years. Another negative aspect was the loyalty conflict, which arose when children had to decide for one of the two teachers who now run the third form.

Therefore teachers looked for advanced facilities. The idea to educate children in mixed-aged and mixed-ability groups came from a colleague, who had experienced a similar model in the Netherlands. In Vienna there had not been an equivalent project yet. To implement this concept into reality, exact planning and a lot of persuasion was needed in order to convince the school board to accept the mixed-age model as a pilot project.

The basis of the concept of a mixed-age class is *education of children with heterogeneous abilities from pre-school to the fourth grade of primary school in one class*. The goal is to avoid selection at the initial stage, and to respect diverse prerequisites and different learning speed during the whole time in primary school. Therefore primary school can last for four or five years, depending on the learning progress, or it can take only three years.

Advantages of this organisational concept are obvious on cognitive and especially on emotional and social levels.

The pressure on parents, children and teachers is minimised, because there are no changes of class and dates where children could be withdrawn, i.e. back to pre-school. Every child can take five years if necessary to cope with the demands of the curriculum. The class teacher stays as a close contact person. Also the group does not change dramatically, therefore social relationship can become stable, especially for children who tend to be “trouble” kids. Less skilled pupils don’t remain the weakest part of the group during four years, younger and automatically weaker children join the group. This fosters social learning processes, common support. Thus, taking care of each other is part of the daily routine. Gifted children get earlier access to satisfy their interest because older pupils act as models and provide support. Last but not least, the heterogeneous group supports challenging children, because there are more options to retreat or to make friends with colleagues who fit their individual development age.

The existence of two parallel mixed-age classes offers extra organisational aspects, i.e. the possibility to join homogeneous age groups and to optimise teaching facilities. To work according to the concept of Maria Montessori turned out to be an advantage, because open learning, joint planning etc. meet the demands of individualised and differentiated approaches. Differences in abilities and knowledge levels, amounts of documentation and the need to evaluate the pupils’ work and their cognitive development is very time consuming. Teachers have to record how and where the children are working to keep track.

Organisational and Structural Environment

To work for such a mixed-age class, preparation of individual working materials requires a lot of time and money: “*When I come home after school, it takes me three or four hours to correct the work of the children, to produce learning materials, and to plan the lessons*” (class teacher). Besides the basic training of reform pedagogy, which is needed to lead a mixed-age class according to the law, teachers have to update their knowledge concerning creativity strategies, dealing with children with EBD, production of learning materials and individual psychological care (supervision). All that has to be done after the lectures and is definitely quite costly.

We were told by a class teacher that it costs about 10 000 € to equip a Montessori class with basic materials. It is important to cope with the interests of the pupils. Up to

€ 100 are monthly invested by parents for materials which are not paid by the community, responsible for the maintenance of the schools in Vienna.

These materials are listed according to the subjects and are accessible. The rules for using them are discussed and agreed with the children. After the work is finished, pupils return the material to the right place. Ways of using the material are discussed with the pupils during the morning group meeting or individually.

A further pedagogical element is the "Klassenrat", a kind of discussion circle, which regularly takes place. This forum offers a chance to the pupils to talk about their individual needs and fears concerning educational and social aspects and to find common solutions in a democratic way.

The willingness for common problem solving is typical for school life in Prückelmayrgasse school. Team spirit and flexibility, open-mindedness for innovations are the key factors for a good working team, including headmaster.

"It is required of the headmaster to be always open to regular changes in their working environment" (head).

To lead a "school in movement" requires a balance between a clear structure and trust in the readiness and abilities of the teachers. *"Teams are not easy to evaluate, as well as Montessori classes are not easy to "control"*. The overall structure needs to be able to define what and how is going on, and where everybody is about; on top, all this works on the basis of mutual trust. Additionally, the head should be aware of alternative school reforms, that enable them to evaluate whether the ideas of the teachers are realistic or not.

The Austrian school system allows for carrying out the pilot projects. Its basis is a concept, to be applied at the County School Board of Education (here: Vienna Board of Education) where it can be adapted. Further prerequisites are the qualifications of the participating teachers as well as special training provisions for the team. The total number of school pilot projects is limited, because of relatively high costs. *"A mixed-age class costs almost twice as much as a regular class"* (local inspector).

The board of education in Vienna does not provide financial support, but additional resources with regards to the teacher costs are made available. That means that a class as such can be run in a team. Only existing room resources can be used but *"of course, the community is willing to provide adaptations to a small extent, such as new doors or additional equipment in the rooms"* (local inspector).

View

"It is necessary to mention that this mixed-age class is not a project only for children in need. The intention is to set up prophylactic measures, to avoid statements for these children. In spite of these efforts, school pilot projects are limited by law. This is why certain problems can be foreseen, since financial restrictions have to be taken into account in the future, and it is not guaranteed that we can afford mixed-age classes to the same extent. The fact is that we will not implement a further class in the near future" (local inspector).

This implies that a dramatic cut down in finance is to be experienced by this primary school. *"Our absolute dream would have been a fourth mixed-age class, because we could have organised more workshops and further didactic options."*

The number of pupils in one class will be increased (from 20 to 24) to meet the demands of the school board. In times of economic measures and political changes it is obvious that only existing projects will be maintained.

The team of “Blickwinkel” is happy about the ongoing existence of the mixed age classes in Prückelmayrgasse school, because all participating teachers achieved great progress concerning cognitive and social aspects in the field of inclusion of children with behaviour disorders.

Further quotes:

“If we did not know that there were children with EBD, we would not recognise them” (janitor).

“My child likes to go to school, although she does not like to do everything, but she still wants to come to this place” (parents).

“I think children are more flexible in dealing with others and are able to better deal with conflicts. Teachers show satisfaction and play an important role. Communication and exchange of information and experience amongst the staff is a profit for all” (educational psychologist).

“We work in a more motivated and more relaxed way, therefore aggressions of children are minimised” (co-teacher).

3. Inclusion “The Other Way Round”

The Institute for Children with Hearing Impairments and Resource Centre for Children with Visual Impairments in the Federal Province Salzburg

At the institute for children with hearing disabilities, experiences with inclusion have been conducted for some 20 years, although it is a special school for their clients. In the beginning, therapeutic measures for pre-school children were provided to enable them inclusion in their living areas. For approximately ten years, mobile support for children with hearing impairments through experts (specially trained teachers in pedagogy for hearing disabilities) has been a central part of the institute’s provision.

The latest innovation is classes with and without disabled children named “Umgekehrte Integration” (inclusion the other way round); which means that children without disabilities attend a special school.

After the installation of the successful kindergarten for all children, children with and without hearing disabilities have the chance to learn and live together for six years.

On the basis of the concept of a school pilot project, 13 children are educated according to the curriculum for primary and special schools. Their teacher is trained to teach both of the school types, as well as has undertaken some additional training for Montessori pedagogy.

In subjects as German, Mathematics and Geography, History, etc. an additional teacher works in the class, because the curriculum for deaf children offers more study hours in these subjects.

A Pilot Project

Before the teachers started the pilot project, they hoped to achieve the following benefits (excerpt of the pilot project description LIH⁴)

Benefits for the children with hearing impairments:

- There is a speaking environment. Children with hearing impairments get the chance to enhance their pronunciation. Through daily contact (living and learning together) it is easier for deaf children to accept the importance of sounding language. In addition to that, sign language is used, communication skills can be trained and lack of communication can be avoided.

⁴ Fraundorfer St.: “Inclusion, the other way round”, inclusive primary school at the Institute for Hearing Impaired in Salzburg, Salzburg 1998

- There are more social experiences feasible because of the bigger size of the group. Impaired children can make friends with their hearing classmates and vice versa; in addition to that more contacts in the spare time are offered. New ways of problem solving can be tried out.
- The model of hearing children helps children with hearing impairments to improve their language.
- During these years in school, children are prepared for life with hearing people.

Benefits for children without hearing impairments:

- Education is provided in a small group. Children can be supported earlier and more effectively; if weaknesses appear, special strengths can be fostered.
- Hearing pupils get to know everyday life with people with disabilities.
- Training of sign language "with ease"⁵. These children will have the opportunity to use the skills professionally (i.e., translator, teacher), apart from the basis for communication with people with hearing impairments internationally.
- Provision of outdoor activities and therapies (i.e. ORFF - groups, music- and physical therapy).

The Counsellors' View

As a counsellor for inclusive education in Salzburg, the Working Partner for the European Agency in Austria got to know the class in autumn 1998 and supported them as a "critical friend" as Rauch⁶ defines the role for school counsellors.

In the school year 1998/99 there was no reason to "criticise". The Working Partner was surprised by the progress the children showed. A boy who was said to have problems with behaviour and acted very restless during the Working Partner's visits, had learned to cope with the rules in the classroom.

It was a pleasure to observe the incredible progress in motor and communications skills, achieved by a hearing impaired child. At the beginning of the child's first year in school, she could hardly walk through the classroom. Meanwhile the co-ordination of her movements has increased and is much more fluent. She has started to learn cursive writing a feat, we had never expected she would achieve. As all the other children with hearing impairments, she takes part in the class and is included also on a social level.

Methodology According to Montessori and Freinet

The equipment of the classroom is remarkable. The "Prepared Environment"⁷, defined by Montessori, can be experienced in this class. It is very similar to the environment in the Montessori class in Vienna. There are shelves for materials and products created by the children, a computer is offered for individualised learning with brand new software. The room is divided into working areas by shelves and small cupboards. A comfortable reading area invites children to relax and read, the fish swim in an aquarium. The tables are arranged in a horseshoe-shaped manner and offer enough space to move about in the classroom: a friendly atmosphere where all the persons in the class feel obviously good and nevertheless find enough working inspiration.

Activities foreseen by the Individual working plans occupy 10 to 12 hours a week. In the first grade, children got to know the rules for open learning and accepted them. In the second grade, pupils worked in these periods in a very concentrated manner and

⁵ If one knows how difficult it is for adults to learn sign language and the other way round, and how easy children learn languages, the benefit of this provision is obvious.

⁶ Rauch F.: Project of innovation as a system of external support of schools in education research, counselling and monitoring schools, BMUKA, Innsbruck 1995

⁷ Haberl H.: Montessori-Pedagogy – Fundamental and topical in: Montessori and the deficits of regular schools, Wien 1993

most of the time they were goal oriented. The teaching concept for reading and writing was conducted in co-operation with Prof. Matl who works in a primary class of a teacher training college.

One main aspect of teaching children with and without hearing impairments was the methodology of Van Uden (Heidelberg 1980) who described development and support through reading and writing. To encourage deaf and hearing impaired pupils to learn reading and writing is much more difficult for an impaired child than for a normal child. To understand simple texts, deaf children should be in command of a vocabulary appropriate to an almost eight-year-old child. To encourage the learning process, it is necessary to offer writing topics, which are based on their daily life, describing everyday situations.

Sunday Stories, A Vehicle to Reading Comprehension

The teachers came across the so-called Sunday Stories by Freinet, were these prerequisites were found. *“For the situation in the class, minor modifications were made, i.e. teachers typed the words or the signs with a type writer to read the stories afterwards. The basis for this concept is teaching in a team”* (class teacher)

“Free writing offers children an opportunity to express and process their experiences... One small module of this approach is the Sunday Stories, which developed by telling stories in the morning circle. At the end of the ritual beginning of the week, every child gets a sheet of paper (A6) to draw the story.” (Prof. Matl)

If you have a look at the stories, you can see and feel how enthusiastic children have created them. Later on, they started to write calendar stories, which are the same as Sunday Tales, but produced daily.

Another pedagogical approach is learning by doing to broaden the horizon, to increase experiences and the vocabulary of the children, which is trained consequently. This holistic way of thinking leads to success, and further on to qualities and skills. In the last three years, the class got preoccupied with the “real situations”, i.e. at the bakery or at the local news publishing house, experienced several outdoor activities and won a prize for creative recycling of newspapers. The regular attendance of the local swimming pool is also fun and fosters children’s motor abilities in a natural way.

There is co-operation with another inclusive class in the federal province of Salzburg. The children and teachers visit each other, produce small gifts for welcome games and show their environment and the progress they have made. Teachers discuss various methodological approaches as well as exchange their experiences.

Parents’ View

In the academic year 1999/2000 parents filled in the questionnaires concerning their satisfaction with the school pilot project. The grade of satisfaction is quite high (87%). Most of the questions concern the parents’ estimation whether their children like to go to school, whether they are supported according to their abilities and whether teachers have established good contacts with the children and the parents.

When comparing both groups of parents, the parents of the children with hearing impairments are slightly more satisfied (91% : 85%)

Important Aspects for Joint Learning of Children with and without Hearing Impairments

Parents have figured out which aspects definitely support satisfaction and which ones cause worries. It has turned out that social aspects and appropriate support through co-teaching are experienced especially positively. The parents of children with disabilities express their satisfaction with the provision of additional support services.

Therapeutic horseback riding, speech therapy and therapeutic training have fostered their children's development and articulation skills. Although parents are aware of the open teaching style in the class, they do not notice the impact on an advanced independence at home. One mother said that it might be due to the children's young age, or their development level, or the character of the pupils, who work more or less independently.

The following topics were mentioned by the parents as positive aspects:



The primary school pupils show extremely positive attitude towards disabled or disadvantaged people, which also has an impact on contacts after school. One of the fathers is quite convinced that the small number of children in the class will strengthen the group identity.