

How Teachers in the Region of Saxony and Malta Are Similar and Different in Their Response to the Diversity of Students in the Primary Classroom

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Background of school system, teacher training and job satisfaction

General circumstances

Saxony is one of the five new federal states of Germany and still undergoing a transformation process 15 years after the reunion. One major strategy of handling the transformation can be observed in how the citizens of these regions are still in the process of adapting into the skeptically perceived social and democratic culture of the Federal Republic. Similar skepticisms can be observed in countries which found themselves in the process of European integration within a short time.

This transformation process has notable effects on the design of the school and educational system, the social dynamics and the norms and values orientation. The evaluation of five primary school teachers from eastern Saxony at hand is supposed to give clues on how the transformational dynamics in the pedagogic process are converted and where the development potential of differentiated teaching aimed at inclusion is based.

The school system

The four years of general education in primary school teaching involve the following goals:

- Differentiated development of cultural techniques;
- mediation of environment knowledge on the basis of natural sciences and the humanities;
- explanation of the immediate conditions of the social world;
- formulation of elementary technical and social competences of action;
- developing of an autonomous personality.

These goals are contextualized in the „secret curriculum“, which in particular applies the qualification function, the disciplinary function and the selection function to ensure expectable

success at school. The aspects of qualification and selection are evaluated particularly strongly on the parents' side. The schooling system has a number of selection instruments at its disposal:

- repetition of the year in case of insufficient performance from third grade;
- temporary schooling in dyslexia classes at primary schools;
- labeling approach to a disability (learning disability, speech disability, behavioral disability) and the according special educational requirements, realized either in singular integration or in a school for special education.

Three concepts of prevention can be named respectively to secure or empower learning success in primary school:

- Primary prevention by means of teaching accompanying aids, mostly through parental support;
- Secondary prevention by directed therapeutic advancement measures, which partly substitute or complement the instruction;
- Tertiary prevention by the agreement that the learning goals of primary school cannot be achieved under the conditions of primary school education and that an alternative schedule has to be put into action, which may also be associated with a change of the schooling location.

It is generally understood that the school of general education presents a differentiated profile of requirements for each year of schooling in the form of a binding curriculum. This curriculum is normatively determined; failure in achieving

major curricular goals over a period of two years in primary can result in special educational measures. Respectively, failure in achieving learning goals is mostly assumed to be an individual weakness, which basically opts out the question if the particular conditions of education may lead to learning disabilities as well. In logical consequence, teachers do not consider a need of action concerning their own teaching design primarily relevant, since the major part of students in one class is able to learn properly "despite" or because of the teaching. This basic understanding is part of the self-reflection of teachers. The effectiveness of this self-reflection reaches even further, as the assumption that learning success at school is closely connected to homogenous learning groups and that this homogeneity will be reproduced also derives from there. The thesis that homogenous learning groups are particularly efficient in reaching learning goals is supported by the fact that there are accompanying services which take care of those students who only partially or not at all assimilate with the homogenous learning group. Reversely, this also means that a differentiated pedagogic perspective is applied in the evaluation of equality and diversity of students.

Teaching staff

Teaching staff at primary schools is mostly female and near of the age of retiring. As a result of the massive decline of student numbers by more than 50% over the past 15 years, hardly any new teachers have been recruited. In addition, the working conditions are considered unattractive. A government resolution in the region of Saxony states that primary school teachers can only be employed on a part-time basis; the average wage is less than 50% of that of a comparable teacher in the old federal states. To "survive" economically, a number of teachers engage in secondary jobs. Offers of further education are not sufficiently appreciated, because they are not associated with an improvement of the individual situation. Also, cooperative agreements within the school are possible only to a limited extent in consequence of these working conditions. Accordingly, primary school teachers are seldom familiar with recent pedagogic teaching and learning methods, and also strictly stick to the precise curricular obligations and respectively constrict these when possible. Traditionally, there is a firm hierarchy within the schools and a mode of interaction strictly determined by authority.

Social background of the students

The heterogeneity of students is mostly defined by their social background. The social situation in eastern Saxony differs drastically from the German average. Demographically, the region is characterized by an excess of old people and younger women; up to 40% are partly or fully unemployed (Bundesministerium 2005). The so-called middle class is on the whole underrepresented, but at the same time there are functioning family structures and ambitious educational performances in this social environment. Approximately 30% of all primary school students are considered poor; state funding is adduced for them; in the eastern areas of Saxony, the number is assumed to be even higher. In addition to the poverty issues, a life in parlous family conditions is common. Single parents and patchwork families make up to 50% of the whole of the students' parents. Despite an excellent provision of kindergartens, about 15% of parents keep their children at home and withdraw them from essential preparatory measures for school achievement. In consequence of the parents' various social problems, the style of upbringing is rather contradictory. Surveys show that children are often left to their own devices and are introduced to the use of television at an early age. Many children are considered disturbed in their development and socially deviant for these reasons.

Conclusions for an outline of the situation

The conclusions have to be termed paradoxical as far as the everyday school routine at primary schools is concerned: on the one hand, significantly heterogeneous learning and performance preconditions of the students must be assumed at the point of school enrolment; on the other hand, the school system allows for a quick transformation of this heterogeneity into allegedly homogeneous learning and performance groups. The method of choice is the use of school-accompanying services and measures, including as a final measure reeducation in special classes (e.g. for dyslexia) or the reeducation in special schools. Primary school teachers are aware of the issues, but they mostly consider themselves victims of regulation obligations which they have to fulfill. The individual leeway is considered marginal (Gomolla 2002).

Context of the interviews

The five interviews were conducted at four schools, three of which are set in rural or provincial surroundings, one in medium-sized towns. Table 1 below shows the major key data of the interviewed teachers.

It will be helpful to note also the structure of the primary school classes taught by the Saxony teachers:

Index No	Teaching experience (yrs)	Present class age level	Class composition	Teaching responsibility	Support system
D1	22	8-9yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed gender; class with dyslexic children (5 m, 6 f)	Class teacher, but other teachers for maths, sports, music, and arts	No additional staff, only differentiated learning materials
D2	31	9-10 yrs (Yr 4)	Mixed ability (10 m, 5 fm)	Class teacher, but other teachers for maths	Counseling support
D3	31	8-9 yrs (Yr 3)	Mixed ability (17 pupils)	Class teacher, but other teachers	none
D4	27	8-9 yrs (Yr 1)	Mixed ability (19 pupils)	Class teacher, Math teacher	none
D5	22	8-9 yrs (Yr 5)	Mixed ability 13 pupils	Class teacher, Math teacher	none

Table 1: Teaching experience and class taught by respondent teachers

- Regular classrooms in primary with an average frequency of a max. 25 pupils; no pupils with special educational needs or dyslexia (D2; D4);
- Integrative classes with max. 4 pupils with special educational needs who can be educated with an alternative curriculum and with extra teacher support; frequency is about 20 pupils (D3; D5);
- Special classes for dyslexic children in primary school, frequency is about 12 pupils (D1).

Dealing with the major issues in responding to diversity identified by teachers

The findings from the Saxony interviews are reported within the general five-category framework developed for interview analysis from the seven Comenius 2.1 project countries (see Bartolo et al. 2005).

Adopt a positive attitude to diversity

The adoption of a positive attitude towards diversity depends on if the teachers first and foremost consider themselves

representatives of the school and respectively the differentiated and binding curriculum or if they approach the students understandingly and move on to convert the school's and curricular conditions accordingly. The D1 teacher expresses the importance of „showing them that they have skills“, which results in the conclusion that „one needs to learn how one can lead these children to success in learning nevertheless“ (D1). This only works under the condition that “one has to be in it with body and soul and be optimistic about the students' development” (D1). The personality of the teacher plays a decisive role in this positive attitude. “Remain patient. Make sure they realise you are the teacher, but also the mom for many children. Be authentic as a teacher and as a person. Always be optimistic.” (D2). In relation to the pressure of the curriculum a teacher states: “I want to keep the good ones busy, but I have to make sure the majority is taken care of, and that's hard” (D4). The positive attitude needs support by the parents, otherwise the teacher becomes frustrated: “The surroundings don't do enough. They could get more motivation at home. I can't do in the morning what the parents don't do for the remaining three quarters of the day.” (D4)

Understanding of the pupils' world as a source of an adapted education and therefore for a positive attitude can be won by the strategy of “role taking.”: “If I were a child, what would I want my teacher to be like? Not only to seeing it from our perspective, that might be the wrong approach.” (D4)

Attitude towards diversity also has a source in the conviction of responsibility about what I am doing: “... we were always the ones who had to get as much out of every child as we could, we were responsible for them, and this feeling of responsibility makes things much more difficult. A different perspective, a more appreciative one towards different values, makes things easier.” (D5)

Educate in appreciation of diversity and solidarity

A basic argument to educate in appreciation of diversity and solidarity is linked to the conviction that poverty and poor educational standard of the parents leads to a culture of solidarity. There is no teacher who is not scared about the difficulties pupils are facing at home and about the burdened biographies of some of them. But there are two options to deal with appreciation: to create a climate of confidence and confident relationships between pupils and between the pupils and the teacher. All teachers at least once a week offer the possibility of talking about personal issues: “Children can talk about difficulties and troubles which are bothering them.” (D2). Therefore children get to know each other quite well, even in terms of their differences. “I've made clear from the start that we're one class, learn together and help each other” (D3)

Build collaboration

Collaboration can be seen as a learning style of cooperative learning. There are different types of cooperation: to create cooperative learning between pupils or/and stimulate collaboration between pupils, cooperation between teachers concerning the needs of pupils and the curriculum development; cooperation with parents.

It is evident in all interviews that cooperative learning among pupils is an important strategy to create a productive social class climate and to activate learning processes. Some teachers use collaboration as an activity outside the lessons, during the breaks; others are integrating collaboration as cooperative learning into the lessons as a learning style. Examples of extra curricular activities have a strong focus on coping and learning in cooperation. A simple and inspiring way is shown in this example: “We start out easy by talking, everyone has something to tell or I have... We start the lesson with a song, and I also exercise with them, so both halves of the

brain are active.” (D 5)

An example to win the parents' interest for school is shown in D2: “During the first years we also did handicrafts, together with the parents, and they liked that and came here.” Ways to support the curricular achievements are also mentioned with an interesting project: “I regularly do something outside school every five or six weeks. A reading night or staying somewhere overnight, we've organised a lot of things with a little parents' committee, and that has helped a lot in finding together.” (D3). Cooperation with parents as a feedback is also considered essential: “First of all it is very important to me that I have the parents as a backup. I try to communicate that during consultations with the parents. That there is a foundation of faith and that the children realise that teacher and parents cooperate.” (D3)

Cooperation with other colleagues is observed as an enrichment of teaching and as an important feedback for the own professional role: “Working together with many subject teachers during interdisciplinary lessons has proved useful, since everyone has his strong and weak points.” (D3)

Organise responsive teaching

Responsive teaching means organising additional resources of support for specific problems of pupils. But it also means to organise settings of learning that include pupils who are excluded by other pupils for reasons of behavioural problems, social conditions etc. Responsive teaching meets the necessity to differentiate in achievements and learning performances, but also to look at the interests of pupils when implementing learning content. “I teach German, the mathematic lessons are similar, but there are also up front teaching periods where we try to open things up and give the students the opportunity to meet the requirements in different ways.” (D3) Taking care of the pupils' interests leads to effective learning experiences: “A very good example are the new interdisciplinary lessons. I gave a few suggestions, and at the end we settled on the topic Indians. That was a major success... It would never have been so much fun for them if I had determined the whole thing.” (D4) Another teacher is involving pupils in participative planning of the learning agenda: “I tell them what our task is, what we're facing and what the next thematic complex is that we have to deal with, and ask them how they would like to approach it, in a kind of brainstorming. Then we try to categorise the ideas and see if we can process them somehow.” (D 5)

Face challenges for responding to diversity

The challenges of responding to diversity are mostly seen in changing the school system, the school culture and to combat the social deprivation which is created by the difficulties of the employment market. Frustration is shown because changes in the system need time; but there are also teachers who see a perspective in the fact that the changing of some attitudes also leads to more effective teaching and positive teaching experiences. The lack of resources in school is observed as a blockade of school development. “More teaching aids would certainly be useful for more effective work” (D1); the new curriculum being implemented without extra equipment and personal resources is also challenging for the response to diversity: “Since we have to meet the requirements of the new curriculum we have big time problems, because we have to make up for what hasn't been accomplished and is left over to do from last year at the same time.” (D3)

Challenges to their own teaching and education style and the discussion of rules is also observed as a response to diversity: “The student's individuality. It's very hard to unite all of them, it takes a lot of patience and calmness. Never cease to try, never leave the path. It's very important for my work to follow certain norms and rules, that they know these norms

and rules and for them to know there are limits.” (D2)

Summarizing the main focus of the interviews

The interviews show that there is a lot of tension within the challenge and focus on diversity: Teachers notice diversity from the perspective of socio-economic difference and difference in the capacity of achievement. These are conditions which are created outside school. The reaction of school is using exclusion technologies for those who are low achievers in relation to a prescriptive curriculum that does not allow failing without taking educational measures. The objective that the development of an individual learning and educational plan can avoid exclusion is known but within the system nearly impossible to realize. All of the teachers focus for this reason on the aspect of solidarity and collaboration for giving the children the opportunity that they feel socially accepted, even if their achievements are very low. Some initiatives of responsive teaching show how it could work.

The guideline for all teachers is the curriculum which is focussing on the idea that all children are able to learn all in the same age and the same time. If children do not do they have the need of extra support or, if it is even and intensive low achievement they have to follow an alternative curriculum. This curriculum can only be realised if the child has special educational needs and is therefore marginalised.

Comparison with the interviews of Maltese teachers and conclusions

In comparison to primary teachers in Malta, the following similarities, but also the following differences, can be stated:

Similarities:

- Teachers are aware that pupils are different for several reasons;
- Teachers have a high appreciation of equal standards and opportunities for all pupils;
- Teachers have in mind that support for the individual has the same value as support for the whole class;
- Teachers complain about the lack of institutional resources.

Differences:

- teachers in Saxony are embarrassed about the social living conditions of their pupils;
- the curriculum is a high norm that seems to be difficult to overcome;
- the system allows and encourages selection by insufficient achievement of the curriculum

If this is reflected regarding the requirements of teacher training, the following issues have to be mentioned:

- The need for practical advice: How to work inclusive education; what are the methods of implementation, how can the curriculum be defined, what has to be changed in the classroom, how is cooperation with colleagues changing?
- The need for theoretical advice: How do children learn nowadays? How can individual learning processes be activated? What is the latest knowledge in research about psychology, development psychology and didactics?

- The need for examples of best practice: Show me how to do it!

What appears to be obvious is that teachers are quite aware of the necessity of inclusive education and that they have a very differentiated perception of the child's world, including its social environment. The ethical base is obviously developed, the solidarity with pupils with problems, needs, but also with abilities and capacities can be considered as developed on a high level.

References

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