

Austria

**SchülerInnenschule und Werkcollege des Vereins Gemeinsam Lernen
(Students' school and Work College of the "Learning Together"
Association)**

A private comprehensive school (student age 10 to 18) that follows the official Austrian curriculum but uses reform pedagogies from diverse influences (Neill, Montessori, Wild, and Freinet), and with additional emphasis on students' development of social skills, self-confidence, and critical thinking. Several forms of democratic assemblies with students and/or teachers and parents exist. Students are taught in small groups (< 12 students) guided by interests or ability, and one-on-one teaching if needed (e.g., dyslexia coaching). Timetables are student-made with teacher guidance, and are sometimes interrupted by interdisciplinary projects. There are weekly gender-separated project groups. Parents must work in the school for some time every year (e.g., maintenance, kitchen, etc.). All students receive extensive individual written feedback from every teacher at the end of the school year, and in return write feedback for all teachers. In general, student work is not graded, but students receive a traditional report upon graduation. Efforts are made to ease transition into conventional higher-level schools. Early-morning care is available from 7am to cater the needs of working parents.

Main Focus of Innovation: LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONTENT, ORGANISATION

Other Keywords: alternative philosophy

General Information

Name of the ILE: SchülerInnenschule und Werkcollege des Vereins Gemeinsam Lernen (Students' school and Work College of the "Learning Together" Association)

Location/Address: Währinger Strasse 59, 1090 Wien

Website: www.schuelerinnenschule.at

ILE submitted by: Bundesdachverband für selbstbestimmtes Lernen (Austrian Federal Association for Self-Determined Learning, BDV)

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

The following criteria qualify our school for this project:

Democratic participation of all stakeholders: Students' plenary assembly twice a week, students' parliament once a week, association meeting once a month.

The plenary assembly is attended by all students and teachers and addresses all school-relevant topics such as admission of new teachers and students, projects, school trips, school rules, etc. At the plenary assembly, all students and all adults have one vote each, so students can overrule teachers' decisions.

Equal standing of manual and brain work: The school has its own workshop, which is open 2 full days a week.

Child-centred learning: The child and its development are the main focus of our interest.

Parents Involvement: Parents, like their children and also the teachers, must be voted in to the school association. Once the parents are accepted into the school, they are given full voting rights in the association meetings where only adults are present as well as are expected to fulfil member responsibilities. Responsibilities include from the physical maintenance of the school to being involved in the running of the kitchen during school hours.

Social learning: Our school community is characterised by mutual responsibility – older children provide support and assistance to younger ones, everyone ensures that interactions are non-violent (conflict-resolution counselling, students' parliament, etc.) and even the maintenance of the school premises is a communal concern.

Self-determined learning free of fear and without assessment grades (graduates receive a traditional report with grades, but have the right to be present at the teachers' meeting where the grades are determined).

Individualised coaching and support: One-on-one dyslexia coaching, small groups, no fixed forms, personal needs and interests can always be incorporated into the teaching content or in a project.

Gender awareness: Gender-separated project at regular intervals. Once a week, girls and boys are taught separately in an effort to reinforce a positive gender self-image and critically analyse preconceived gender roles. The methods applied range from role play to artistic expression to discussions, field trips and workshops. At the end of the school year, girls' and boys' days are organised to present project results.

School as a place to live and learn: A place where everyone, children and adults alike, can learn and feel at home. We design and decorate our rooms in such a way that everyone likes to spend time there. Parents are also expected to be involved in the daily life in the school by being involved in the running of the kitchen and are also encouraged to run various projects in order to share their talents and skills creating a feeling of cooperation and togetherness. By adding parents to the school life, the kids are able to share a part of their family life, regardless of how diverse or different, with each other in a positive way, creating even stronger families and a more confident youth culture surrounding family issues.

Projects and trips are an integral part of school life.

Time and again, interdisciplinary projects or projects conducted in collaboration with other schools interrupt day-to-day school life, suspending the "standard" timetable which the students compile with teacher guidance at the beginning of each school year.

- Projects carried out these past few years:

Annual animated film project: First of all, the students choose a topic together with the teachers (this year, it is moral courage), then the students form small groups and, for a week, work on developing a story, drawing a story board, selecting an animation technique, building, drawing, designing what is needed and finally shooting the film.

WWII project: 2 projects were carried out in 2008, addressing topics such as the "Anschluss" (Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany), resistance during Nazi rule, the November pogroms, and the holocaust.

Circus project: Juggling, unicycling, etc.

The Elements: Special physics and chemistry focus

Africa: Geography, history, problems, music, tales and myths, arts and craft

- Trips undertaken these past few years:

England: To visit our partner school (Sands in Devon and London)

Morocco: Marrakech, SHOUF project – women in the Maghreb region. Female students used Moroccan women and girls as motifs in artwork which was then exhibited and auctioned off, with the money going to the Moroccan aid organisation "Association Alkawtar" for disabled women.

Florence: Getting to know the Renaissance culture

Berlin: Project on socialism

Croatia: Marine biology project

Skiing trips

Plans for this year: Morocco, USA (Seattle)

Evidence

Is there any evidence or indications showing that this initiative achieves the outcomes that it is aiming at?

Evaluation currently takes the form of internal self-assessment:

- at association meetings with parents and teaching staff (once a month);
- at supervision meetings (every six weeks);
- at teachers' meetings (every three weeks);
- and, at weekly discussion meetings.

At the end of the school year, each student receives extensive written feedback from every teacher.

Likewise, at the end of the school year, each teacher receives written feedback from every student.

Also, the students reflect in writing on what they have learned at the end of the school year.

Several retreats are organised during the school year: teachers only, teachers and students, students, teachers and parents.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE

What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

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Our school follows the so-called "Glocksee" curriculum (available for download from our website), which subdivides teaching contents into 4 subject areas: aesthetics, nature, language, and society.

As we are a school with public-law status, our curriculum is complemented by a supplementary curriculum, so basically our learning aims correspond to those of the official Austrian curriculum.

However, in addition to that, we place great store by:

- acquiring social skills,
- strengthening personal self-confidence,
- encouraging creativity,
- providing insights into the system of politics,
- developing a critical mind.

Each child is unique and should get the best possible support and assistance for its individual development.

Learners

Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

Currently, we have 48 students aged between 10 and 18 years at our school.

Public-law status applies up to year 9. Students who attend our “Werkcollege” after year 9 either remain at the school to find further educational or vocational orientation or to prepare for the external matriculation exam (Matura).

We do not have fixed forms; students learn in small groups of not more than 12 guided by personal interest or different ability levels (German, English, mathematics).

Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

While nearly all our teachers have a university education, not all of them hold a teacher’s diploma. Our staff members have additional qualifications in a variety of fields such as dyslexia, mediation, creative writing, vocational orientation, sports, open learning, etc.

The school also has an annually elected board consisting of both teachers and parents. This board takes on the responsibility of legal issues as well as financial questions regarding the running of the school.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Students learn in small groups, sometimes also on a one-on-one basis (dyslexia coaching).

We try to offer individualised support and assistance, so open and independent forms of learning are predominant at our school.

Students and teachers decide jointly on contents and students also have a say in defining learning aims.

In principle, our students can learn everything they choose to - if they are interested in a particular topic, we will help them organise a project. For instance, if they want to learn a language currently not offered by our school, we arrange for extra courses or hire people from outside.

When we are planning a trip, students are called upon to help organise it, finding out about flights, accommodation, planning the route to take, etc.

While we do have pedagogical role models, we focus above all on continuing our development, for we are first and foremost a "living" school. All the stakeholders have a say in shaping and changing our school.

The school has its roots in the 70ies “Kinderladen” movement. Neill’s Summerhill School, which is still one of our partner schools abroad today, has probably had the most significant influence on our school.

We have also embraced concepts developed by Montessori, Wild, and Freinet, but are not following a strict and dogmatic system.

Our curriculum is governed above all by what the children need and want, which may change from year to year. This said, we still try to provide an education that makes it possible for our students to transfer to conventional higher-level schools without problems.

Where German, English and mathematics are concerned, we comply, as far as possible based on individual ability, with the curriculum for general secondary school and/or the lower cycle of academic secondary school.

All other subjects are taught either in the form of projects or of regular weekly units. It is the students' responsibility to cover all subject matters to a sufficient extent during the course of their time at our school. Failing that, they will have to prepare an extensive research paper on a topic of their choice and prove in an interview with the relevant teacher that they have given the topic adequate consideration.

In addition to a school-leaving report, we also issue a diploma. Every graduate selects a topic on which they work extensively throughout a period of one year (for a list of our graduates' diploma papers, refer to our website). This paper is then presented to a jury consisting of parents, students and teachers, who will assess the achievements. To obtain the diploma, students also have to complete 2 internships of at least one week each, one with a vocational and one with a social focus.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

Our school is housed in the WUK building (Werkstätten- und Kulturhaus (autonomous cultural centre), Währingerstrasse 59, 1090 Wien; www.wuk.at). On the second floor of the building, our students have some 500m² at their disposal. "Schulkollektiv", an alternative primary school with which we collaborate closely, is located on the same floor.

Our school has several large learning rooms designed and decorated in a joint effort by parents, teachers and students. In addition to typical school furniture such as tables, benches, blackboards, etc, each room features comfortable sofas. The school's interior design is generally aimed at making learning rooms appear more like comfy living rooms where everybody feels at home.

We also have a well-equipped workshop, a computer room, a separate "girls' room" to which girls can retire when they feel like it and for whose decor, maintenance and cleaning they are also responsible, a kitchen where food is prepared fresh every day (by parents, teachers and students), and a secretariat.

Maintenance, repair and cleaning for the whole school are communal tasks for parents, children and teachers. All the furniture is provided, bought, transported to and from school by the school community.

Our school is part of the WUK's children's and youth organisation, which also includes a primary school ("Schulkollektiv"), 3 children's groups, and an afternoon-care group.

All groups elect at least 2 representatives who meet once a month in a plenary meeting to discuss issues such as joint events, professional education and training offers for facilitators, joint early-morning care including breakfast for all children in the house from 7 a.m. to cater to the needs of working parents as the pedagogical facilities do not start their activities before 9 a.m.

Our school is also in close contact with groups outside the children's and youth section, for instance with WUK artists (workshops with painters, musicians, photographers), cooperation with the WUK's joinery, screen printing workshop, pottery workshop, photo gallery, bicycle workshop, etc., participation in cultural events, collaboration with immigrant groups, etc.)

Many of our students complete their internships within the WUK, for instance in the IT department, the event technology department, the children's groups, etc.

We try to make the best possible use of the synergy effects offered within the WUK organisation. Last, but not least, we also use the WUK's courtyard as our playground and sports field.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

It was in 1980 that the "Kinderladen Tempelgasse", an alternative childcare facility, became the "SchülerInnenschule". The underlying reason for establishing this private school was a lack of trust and confidence in the Austrian state school system by a group of parents that came together to find a way to change the situation. One of the founding members was Susanne Jerusalem, education spokesperson of the Vienna Green Party.

Characteristic elements of this pilot project were self-administration, parental involvement, alternative teaching methods, and the safeguarding of the children's freedom.

In 2003/04, the "Werkcollege" was founded as a logical extension of the school.

Ever since its inception, the school has been subject to change. In the beginning, it still had forms for each year, while today there are learning groups and so-called "home groups" where children gather in the morning. The home groups, which are usually supervised by two teachers, consist of not more than 15 children. The home group is the first point of call for the children, and the home group teachers are the first-instance contact persons for the parents.

In the early years when the school had not yet acquired public-law status, students had to pass external examinations, which is no longer the case now as the school was granted public-law status in 1989.

At present, there are no assessment grades for years 5 to 7, while grades were marked in some years in the past. Upon leaving our school, graduates receive a traditional school-leaving report with grades.

The "Werkcollege" offers students an opportunity to find further educational or vocational orientation, and those who want to can prepare for the external matriculation exam ("Matura").

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

The school is funded primarily through the contributions made by parents. Current fees amount to EUR 350/month (12 times a year), plus 10 hours of parental work/month. Parents can fulfil the hourly requirement through several work groups. The maintenance and repair needs of the school, IT and other technical needs, bookkeeping, PR, cooking and kitchen, cleaning, new parent information meetings, moderation of association meetings, and support of new parents are all areas where parents are strongly involved in the school.

In addition, we receive grants from the municipality of Vienna for our afternoon-care facility and a pro-rata share in the overall grant awarded to our umbrella association (BDV) by the Federal Ministry for Education. However, as these grants account only for a small part of the cost, parents must be willing to make a substantial contribution and teachers to accept a lower-than-standard income.

The teachers are constantly striving to reduce costs and apply for project grants and funding wherever possible. Funding for individual projects is provided again and again by the cultural association "Kulturkontakt Österreich", the district administration and various municipal departments.

Learning Outcomes

What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

As at other schools, we also have written tests, oral tests, homework, etc. to provide students with a means of self-assessment. If students wish so, they can get marks or grades for their “tests”. But even if they do, they do not have to fear any consequences when the expected result was not achieved.

During the course of the school year, we rely on individual catalogues of learning aims, contracts, portfolios, written self-reflection, etc.

At the end of the school year, everyone gets extensive written feedback.

External evaluation is currently provided by several students of sociology who are writing diploma theses on our school.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE

Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

The school has an archive where all relevant documents, research papers, printed material, folders, photos, reports, etc. are kept.

All projects are documented extensively in project folders.

Interested parents receive an information brochure, and we also have a folder, a publication commemorating our 25th anniversary, and a website.

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

What makes our school special is:

- the commitment shown by all stakeholders;
- the willingness to make substantial financial contributions for the sake of an idea;
- its pioneering role for the Austrian school system;
- the willingness to accept each child in its uniqueness and provide specifically tailored help and support;
- the broad spectrum of students we cater to - highly gifted children, children coming from alternative primary schools, mentally and physically challenged children, slow learners, children with special needs.