

## Austria

**Hauptschule St. Marein bei Graz**

*Students (aged 10-14) at this lower secondary school are taught in mixed-age integrative classes, including some disabled students. Instead of streaming students in ability groups, teacher teams apply within-class differentiation, alternating between basic instruction of the whole class and add-on content for motivated students or extra support for less motivated students. The organisation of the school day has been changed such that each day starts with three units in native language (German), mathematics, and English, followed by three units for interdisciplinary projects. The lessons are shorter than Austrian standard, so that each day some extra time can be devoted to student coaching and individual student work based on a weekly work schedule that replaces standard homework activities. Learning activities also include remedial teaching, reading and writing training, outdoor teaching, station plan work, and the use of “strength portfolios” to support personality and aptitude development.*

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

**Other Keywords:** equity

**General Information**

**Name of the ILE:** Hauptschule St. Marein bei Graz

**Location/Address:** Markt 15; 8323 St. Marein/Graz

**Website:** [www.hs-marein.at](http://www.hs-marein.at)

**ILE submitted by:** Federal Ministry of Education

**Rationale**

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

For several years now, our school has been visited by numerous interested colleagues, many of whom wished to sit in and observe our teaching methods. The feedback we received on these occasions not only furnishes a useful basis for self-reflection, but also confirms us in our efforts.

We understand school development as a process that is in need of continuous evaluation, reflection, enhancement, modification and amendment.

Working together in a network of innovative schools has shown us how enriching and fruitful cooperation with others who are active in the same field can be. This is why we would like to be included in this project which we expect to help us become even more professional and to open up new opportunities for us to develop our students' skills and competencies as best possible.

**Basic principles**

For children, the classroom has to provide a stable emotional environment where they can feel at home and at ease. For those who are not fortunate enough to experience stability at home, it should offer a feeling of belongingness, of family.

We have launched the KL: IBO project to offer professional support and guidance to our students when it comes to developing their personalities, personal perspectives and visions for the future. Focusing on each student's strengths and aptitudes helps develop individual abilities, which we aim to achieve by using strength portfolios, vocational orientation, and individualised open teaching.

At the same time, our efforts for ongoing organisational development are designed to improve the aspect of cognitive achievement also in terms of individualisation and differentiation, with special attention being accorded to empowering students to learn and work self-reliantly.

Education takes place at school, and the responsibility for providing education **lies with the school**.

**Description of teaching model**

Teaching is provided in 6 to 7 45-minute units every day.

Our teachers use the 5 minutes saved on our 45-minute units as compared to the standard 50-minute ones to dedicate 25 minutes every day to coaching and support activities.

The first three units every day are reserved for German, mathematics and English, which are taught using within-class differentiation, divided into basic courses and exercises.

Instead of homework, students at our school get weekly work schedules assigned which they can for the most part complete at school and with teacher guidance.

The remaining units of each day are devoted to topic-specific interdisciplinary teaching (projects) covering all subjects.

**External organisation:**

- Family classes – mixed-age classes – integrative classes
- Permanently assigned classrooms (homerooms)
- Small teacher teams
- Detailed rules and agreements applicable for the whole school
- Observance of rituals:  
morning circle, discussion of topics, presentations, festivities and celebrations.

**Internal organisation:**

- Teacher team develops individual unit contents
- Premises and rooms offer sufficient equipment
- Outdoor teaching
- Field trips, excursions
- Free choice of groups within classes during project work
- Student peer support
- Expert support

**ORGANISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION****Within-class differentiation**

For 15 years, our school has now been teaching all classes from years five to eight based on within-class differentiation, i.e. without ability group streaming or setting. Our students are thus fortunate enough to escape the stressful ability group assignment process at the start of their secondary school career, which gives our teachers ample time to observe the new students from a holistic perspective in a climate characterised by trust and free of pressure to achieve. The motto of our individualised teaching approach is to provide support and challenges alike. The school relies on a well-designed tried-and-tested support concept.

**Individualisation instead of streamlining = less stress**

Our model of within-class differentiation focuses on developing each student's individual skills and talents. Experience has shown that this type of classroom organisation offers an enormous impetus, in particular to students with an average or below-average motivation to learn, to try and catch up with the top achievers, while ensuring at the same time that particularly gifted and talented children will get enough stimulus and challenge. The latter can benefit in terms of social skills by taking part in an integrated peer support system. Tool and material libraries have been set up for English, German and mathematics, offering a comprehensive range for both basic and add-on contents as well as for individually organised phases of repetition and consolidation (open forms of teaching and learning). Given the changing number of students in classes and ever-changing learning situations, measures for within-class differentiation, organisational forms and teaching aids have to be continually adapted to the specific requirements. The use of remedial teaching and reading & writing training as a separate subject in basic and group teaching has been optimised over the past few years.

It has to be noted, however, that the implementation of all of these measures calls for above-average commitment on the part of the teaching staff.

**Organisational form**

2 weekly units of basic instruction for each class and subject for the whole class and 2 weekly units of add-on content for particularly gifted and talented children and/or for consolidating content and supporting students with an average or below-average motivation to learn.

Several classes are integrative classes with disabled students. We are convinced – and our experience proves it – that successful social integration is possible only when combined with within-class differentiation.

### **Mixed-age classes**

Mixed-age classes take within-class differentiation one step further, coming very close to the ideal of individualisation as they progress from one-dimensional differentiation (within one year) to two-dimensional differentiation (across years).

Inspired by visits to the Jena Plan School in Jena, to Laborschule Bielefeld, to Red Rose School near Blackpool, and a film about Bodenseeschule, we launched mixed-age teaching along the lines of P. Peterson's reform concept. We have two mixed-age classes now: M1 has students from years five and six, M2 from years seven and eight.

The comprehensive school concept for all regular classes from year's five to eight has likewise been adapted to this concept. Our topmost priority was to change the timetable in such a way that it would be possible to cater more intensely to the individual needs of students, a small teacher team being a necessary prerequisite.

### **Weekly work schedule**

The traditional 50-minute units have been replaced by 45-minute units at our school. The 25 minutes saved each day are pooled to form a single unit dedicated to the weekly work schedule, where students can work independently on their assigned written homework for the whole week. Two teachers are present to provide guidance throughout these units, which take place at the same time every day for all students of the school.

### **Special-topic / era units**

Basic prerequisites for teachers:

- Farewell to conventional teacher-input instruction (“chalk and talk”)
- Changes in the role of the teacher: counsellor, coach and facilitator
- Willingness to try out new approaches
- Teaching without text books
- Working with basic and add-on content
- Familiarity with different teaching methods
- Weekly work schedule
- Station plan work
- Individual, partner and group work
- Project work
- Working with portfolios
- Collaborating with students without performance assessment
- Moving away from marks towards providing constructive feedback
- Individual differentiation offers for students
- Willingness to undergo continued professional development
- In-service teacher training

Basic prerequisites for students:

- Independent learning
- Becoming familiar with different learning techniques
- Working in groups
- Presentation skills
- Use of new media
- Preparation of mind-maps and index cards
- Obtaining information from the Internet, from books, etc.
- Processing and editing information
- Self-assessment
- Personality training and social skills

Basic prerequisites for the school:

- No fixed units after the first three of each day
- Flexible recreation phases instead of pre-defined break times
- Small teacher teams for the individual classes or years
- Flexible design of content by the team
- Fixed times for teacher team meetings
- Premises allowing students to move around freely during break times and project work
- Access to computer rooms, to the internet and to the library
- Sufficient teaching staff

The concept is supported by all staff members. Our teachers are willing to try out new approaches and to invest time in school development.

Structural changes have made it possible to provide up-to-date, individual and interesting classroom teaching. Single-subject units are a thing of the past. We offer open learning in blocked units or “eras”, which allows students to dedicate more time to a given subject matter and broaden their knowledge individually, in line with personal interests and abilities.

It is easy to suspend the timetable to make room for projects –all that is needed is for the teacher team to agree on a timeframe, which can be done quickly and flexibly.

It is possible to work on a topic-centred basis over the course of the school year as needed, which implies that, once chosen, a topic will be addressed in all classes in all years. Topics are selected from the angle of the different subjects on a rota basis, with plans and dates being compiled and fixed already at the start of the school year. All subjects make contributions relating to the selected topic throughout a period of one to six weeks. Our practice has shown that this strong focus on a particular topic significantly increases the sustainability of learning. Students show enthusiasm and interest for their own work and come up with products such as topic folders or portfolios, which optimally interlinks different learning aspects and ensures sustainability.

### **A diverse range of open forms of teaching**

To opt for open forms of teaching implies having to provide a broad range of method and topic offerings to prepare the ground for individualised learning.

Working with station plans, weekly work schedules, portfolios, workshop teaching, project work, topic-centred teaching or internet research provides the possibilities for differentiation needed to meet the demands of heterogeneous groups. It is these diverse forms of open learning that enable students to develop their own abilities and interests. Having become familiar with basic work techniques, children can be motivated to work independently and of their own accord. Differentiation is an automatic by-product of differing ability and willingness to learn, of different leaning histories or personal levels of development.

The results differ both in terms of quantity and quality. Contents, learning strategies and social forms of learning can be chosen individually and on a voluntary basis, in spite of topics being applicable for all students. During such phases of independent learning, teachers take on a different role. While previously, with a teacher-input approach, teachers obtained and conveyed information and provided a clear structure for learning units, today their role in independent learning settings is to assist the children in finding and processing information. One of the key prerequisites for attaining differentiation objectives, however, is to create a learning environment where students feel at ease and free from stress.

### **Evidence**

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

- Tests are carried out to review dyslexia and dyscalculia results (Salzburg reading screening, Eggenberger model for mathematics).
- Learning outcomes in the main subjects are reviewed in year 7 to provide a basis for a modular offering of subjects in year 8, with a view to the students' further education and career paths, with parental involvement.
- The school model is subject to evaluation (internal self-assessment and external valuation).

### **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?*

Years 5 to 8 (10 – 14 year-olds)

Our school is a compulsory school, which means that all students living within the school district are entitled to attend.

- 24 students between ages 10 and 11
- 38 students between ages 11 and 12
- 42 students between ages 12 and 13
- 47 students between ages 13 and 14

### **Facilitators**

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

The teachers have undergone the prescribed education for general secondary and/or special schools at teacher training colleges.

Most of them have additional qualifications in various fields such as social learning, Jena plan pedagogy, dyslexia, dyscalculia, school development, information technology.

Having such experts on our team is favourable to the success of our school model. Numerous staff meetings ensure that the available knowledge is shared and multiplied.

It is largely due to the personal commitment and initiative of the teaching staff that our model has been implemented successfully. Our teachers see themselves as coaches and guides.

**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?*

Learning takes place in a variety of ways, from traditional “chalk and talk” approaches to completely open learning environments.

Flexibility with respect to needs and tasks on hand is our top priority.

The ranges and scopes of interaction vary as much as the actors involved. Our preferred types of interaction are cooperative, peer-to-peer talks.

There is no predominant pedagogy we follow, but a plethora of pedagogical impulses that we try to implement.

No special curriculum exists.

**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?*

The students are responsible for their own progress. They learn independently and self-reliantly in a variety of social groupings with guidance from the respective teachers.

Students have not only their classrooms, but also group rooms, halls and special rooms at their disposal.

No outside resources are being used.

**History of ILE**

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

Dissatisfaction with the existing school concept was the starting point for this process, which was initiated already 20 years ago. Since then, we have permanently continued our development process.

All steps were made in a team effort, with initiatives being triggered by individual staff members.

As a result, the concept is the sum total of varied approaches to innovation and school development.

The challenges underlying the development were dissatisfaction with the organisational form, a need for increased professionalism, non-attainment of learning aims as well as dissatisfied students.

**Funding of the ILE**

*How is it funded?*

No additional funding apart from statutory funding is provided.

**Learning Outcomes**

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

Parts of the model are subject to both self-assessment and external evaluation.

For the summer semester of 2009, we plan to carry out an action research study in cooperation with the University College of Teacher Education of Styria.

**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)*

A detailed description of our teaching model can be found on our website ([www.hs-marein.at](http://www.hs-marein.at)).

**Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE**

As of the school year 08/09, we have introduced a new type of collaboration with parents.

Under the title “**Elternschule**” (school for parents), we try to give parents an opportunity – at biweekly intervals – to experience the school’s philosophy up close and personal, with a focus on the practical development of new forms of teaching and learning.