

Switzerland (Bern)

"Gesamtschule Lindental: Part of group of Small Mixed-Grade Schools"

This comprehensive school has one mixed-age class with students from grade 1 to 9. The children do not follow the program of a certain grade, instead learning activities are flexibly adapted to their current level of development, allowing the challenging of gifted students as well as the fostering of self-confidence of weaker students. Grade repetition does not exist. Half of the lessons are given by two teachers, with some of these lessons dividing students into two groups according to age or subject. There are very few disciplinary problems, which the school attributes to individualized education and the social dynamics of a classroom in which younger students learn from their older classmates. Learning activities are inspired by Pestalozzi pedagogy, and involve much autonomous work with week plans, with student autonomy increasing with age. Each quarter, lessons are linked to an overarching theme, and students present their work to their parents at the end of the quarter.

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

Other Keywords: alternative philosophy.

General Information

Name of the ILE: "Gesamtschule Lindental: Part of group of Small Mixed-Grade Schools"

Location/Address: Lindentalstrasse 126 3067 Boll + 41 31 35 11 263

Website: www.vechigen.ch/de/04_bildung/06_primarschulen.htm

Rationale

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

Our “comprehensive school” includes grade 1 to 9 in a single class. This mixture of ages corresponds to normal situations of everyday life, e. g. at work. The mixture of ages and levels results in a healthy and natural mixture in a community aiming for discovering new topics and for keeping joy of learning alive.

At each grade, there are less than five students. Therefore each single child is perceived and fostered in his/her developmental process. There is no grade retention and each child passes through the nine school years corresponding to his/her cognitive and intellectual development. For each child, the time it needs to advance in the learning matter, is invested. Therefore it is needless to attribute children to grades. Children don't have to follow the program of a certain grade but a program corresponding to his/her development. In this way a low achieving child is not overcharged with matters he/she cannot cope with and a gifted student is confronted with additional material corresponding to his interests and abilities. The less gifted students are not confronted with their weaknesses again and again, but one finds own ways and solutions and their self-confidence is fostered. Because students are seldom over challenged or under challenged, there are nearly now disciplinary problems in the class: the student can concentrate on his/her work and does not need to get attention by perturbing behaviour. In addition students request a perturbing student to persist to his/her work. Regarding disciplinary questions, age-heterogeneity is self-regulating. Older students upbraid youngsters, young students tell, if they are disturbed in their work.

The fact that children take over changing roles in a structure constant over many years leads to a naturalistic and socially stable situation which enables creative and individual forms of learning. Exactly the large age range (6 to 15 years) determines the changing roles that children take over during the course of schooling and induces personal development. The individualized instruction fosters autonomous learning and preserves curiosity and a need to know.

In his/her social and emotional development each child passes through the nine school years in a natural role distribution like among siblings: the young align themselves towards the older; the older worry about the younger. The young students learn from the older. These responsibilities are not artificially imposed, but experienced in a natural way. (Artificial) integration and separation are not needed in such a class since each student is accepted as a person of its own. School life serves the natural process of maturing, taking place in a rich social environment oriented towards learning. We see the good learning atmosphere as core element of our comprehensive school. Because of the important age mixture subject contents are delivered by new forms and ideas. Learning and working at school becomes normal everyday life and continues during nine years. By “weekly schedules” autonomous learning is fostered and self-responsibility encouraged.

During the last years the comprehensive school has proven to be suitable for heterogeneous groups of students. Lowly and highly gifted students develop and unfold in this environment. We insist on a good intermix so that students profit from each other especially in the social domain. This mixture is seen as core for reaching a good learning and schooling atmosphere. Only with this experienced mixture we reach the self-conception of the several individuals and their needs. Especially today, when children grow up in small families (1 or 2 children), such a class structure is experienced as rich and familiar.

Evidence

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

Our comprehensive school has to distinguish itself in order to compete with single grade classes. Our equipment is very limited (in a small rural school). Therefore we only can succeed because of acknowledged achievement and a good learning atmosphere. As everywhere, expectations of parents regarding achievement and social behaviour are high. We continuously have to adapt to new such needs in order to put the welfare of the child into the centre. We can fulfil this challenge as the large inflow of students from other school districts proves.

In the last years, we repeatedly accepted students which were no more acceptable in other classes because of their behaviour or achievement. This is every time a challenge for the students and teachers of the class. Nevertheless, such cases are seen as enrichment by teachers, students, and parents where all can profit.

As a small school, we are very flexible und without a large effort we can adapt to new needs and utilize chances. E. g. we offer English starting from grade 3 since 10 years although the curriculum of the canton of Berne does not yet ask for that. Special offers are not immediately institutionalized but offered or dropped depending on the current possibilities and interests of the students.

After compulsory education, our students can easily go to secondary school or to vocational training (apprenticeship). The teacher knows the students so that a suitable pathway can normally be found. The daily enjoyment of the students up to grade 9, their motivation to discover und to deepen knowledge stimulates each teacher to high investment into the school enterprise.

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)

Because of the large age differences students learn the ways of thinking of older and younger students and accept differing perceptions leading to reciprocal tolerance and acceptance. Peace pedagogy is realized quite naturally. *Contrary to single grade classes differing perceptions are seen as normal and as enriching the own perception.*

Autonomy of students grows with their age. Because nine different grades have to be taught each student has to acquire much learning content on his/her own. During the interaction with topics and with the cyclic learning at different ages each student has to ask for techniques and subject contents from older students and has to teach younger students.

With autonomous learning, the didactically "just" approach of the teacher to a topic/problem is not the only means to understand a problem and acquire knowledge. Rather new creative approaches and ways of solutions fitting to the world view and understanding of a student are allowed. Not the accumulation of knowledge but cognitive experience during the enlargement of the own horizon is the goal. The learning of ways of problem solving is more important than reproduction of knowledge which can be immediately found online today. This allows gifted students to realize their specific abilities, to foster their talents and to strengthen weaknesses by own "receipts".

In the class council all students have the possibility to realize social behaviours, commonly useful ideas and school concerns. The teacher here tries to influence in a way that a social functioning is guaranteed and a good learning climate in the class is kept.

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?

19 students from grade 1 to 9 in one class, age between 6 and 15 years. Instruction is often within one room. (4 students in grade 1, 1 in grade 2, 2 in 3,3 in 4,1 in 5,3 in 6, 2 in 7.3 in 8, 1 in 9)

Lindental is a hamlet within the municipality Vechigen. The comprehensive school Lindental is a public school. Parents from whole Vechigen can freely choose Lindental School. To avoid “school tourism” parents decide at grade 1 for or against Lindental. At the beginning of lower secondary (after grade 6), they again can choose to stay with their child in Lindental or to send it to the main school centre of the municipality (with 2 classes per grade).

For us, the free decision of the parents has the advantage that no one is in our school against its own intentions. The parents know the characteristics of the school and support its concept. These are good preconditions for the learning behavior of the students from the beginning. In the same time, parents are time and again asked to cooperate in projects. In each quarter (=4 times a year) there are presentations of the students regarding the theme of this quarter. This stage offers the students the possibility to perform what they have learned and to get approval for what they have achieved. Thereby parents gain insight into the academic activities and developmental processes of each child.

Facilitators

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

The school/class is managed by persons with together 150% full time equivalents. The head master works for 100% and lives in the same building. He is a primary and remedial teacher. Other 40% belong to a primary teacher who is in the same time a musician. Three lessons (textile handicraft) are given by a specialized teacher.

For half of the lessons per week, two teachers are present. In a small part of this time instruction is offered to two groups defined by age (grade 1, 2 / other grades). For another part, instruction is separately given to groups formed by subjects (especially languages). The cooperation among the two main teachers is very intensive since they both teach all students in the current subjects. In principle the relationship is very cooperative – whereby the head master with his 100% has inevitable a dominant position.

For this pattern, it is beneficial if both teachers are all-rounder confident in nearly all subjects. Specialists are included if one has to foster a special talent. Yet in principle the structure and the given curriculum determine the rich learning offer. Teachers need to be confident regarding elementary knowledge of all subjects.

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?

Each quarter is dedicated to a theme. All lessons of NMM (Nature-man-co-world <including science, history, social geography>) and many lessons of mother tongue are integrated in this theme or linked to it. The themes alternately focus on scientific, social, historical and environmental topics. Thereby the class experiences the theme on quite different levels. The lower grades approach the theme quite emotionally, creatively and oriented to practice. The middle grades try to treat it quite systematically and the upper grades treat it mainly on a theoretical level. During presentations the themes are experienced holistically. Each student takes out what he/she understands. Themes and learning contents proposed by teachers are treated by students in their spare time. Therefore students may freely use learning materials, instruments, sport equipment, and more after lessons and in the weekend. It is interesting to see that some children

exactly use certain sport equipment after they had to exercise with it during lessons. Also the pond, sandpit, and the nearby forest time and again function as fields of exercises and experiments for our students.

There is a time table for normal school days, yet this table is not only organized by subjects. Students work on their individual tasks and always have the possibility to get help from the teacher, to retreat in order to deepen a learning content or to work in a group on a project.

The learning content is not presented by lessons, but treated by each student individually in his/her time needed for that (week plan work). The teacher becomes a coach for each child and leads common lessons like music, sports.

Grades are seldom used in everyday teaching. At the end of a task or a project they function as a feedback and recognition for what is achieved. The grades in the school report correspond to the abilities expected at the developmental state of a certain age.

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?

Each student may choose whether he/she wants to work on a certain topic alone or in a group. Everybody individually plans his daily working program. The teacher presents introductions into new topics in the different grades as well as helps if a task was wrongly treated. Elementary knowledge and evidence of each level is exchanged in the class group so that they are recalled for everybody. For a student from the lower grades it is an excellent recognition if he/she can explain something in the class. For middle grades, it is a challenge to present newly learned knowledge, and for upper grades it is about being able to create and present tasks/topics neatly, clearly and understandable. Recognition is for sure for everybody. This motivates each student to continue to work on tasks and to continue to delve into a topic.

A working room (workshop) is at the disposal of the students. They can work there during the week plan lessons on projects. In the same time we are in free nature – the best of all fields of experimentation.

History of ILE

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

The comprehensive school “Lindental” was founded for the inhabitants of the hamlet 300 years ago. Comprehensive schools were then quite usual. Where to few students to form grade-based classes were enrolled and mobility was low, this form remained. Yet in the last years the comprehensive school gained acceptance as a pedagogically valuable model.

The fact that the comprehensive school Lindental can fulfil the requests and needs of the present society is certainly due to Paul Michael Meyer, a well known pedagogue and author, who introduced the necessary changes during his seven years at this school. After the change of the teacher, the core elements were kept and refined. The motto “Head, heart, hand” of Pestalozzi is taken seriously here.

In order to persist today, it is necessary to fulfil societal needs and to strive flexibly, none bureaucratically and with common sense for an encompassing educational goal.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

The comprehensive school is recognized by the state and is part of the public school. The costs for this model are not higher than for forms with grade-based classes. Yet the small teaching team (150%) must include all-rounder in order to be able to put forward a broad learning offer and to react flexibly.

With the yearly school feast attracting many sympathizers of our school, parents and teachers gain a considerable amount of money, which we invest into the school operating.

Learning Outcomes

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

Teachers prepared to fulfil the task of a comprehensive school experience this form of instruction as intensive but very satisfying work. Especially very few energy and nerves get lost in the disciplinary field.

Former students of the comprehensive school hold their ground in societal life, complete vocational and academic education and are active citizens in everyday life. The emotional link to the school usually remains. Former students time and again visit school feasts and meet their former co-students. They seldom attribute their success to the school since they early learnt to see the learning result as part of their initiative and motivation. The schooldays are usually remembered as a good time.

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)

- Mission of the comprehensive school Lindental

- Book: Paul Michael Meyer (2009). *Lehrer sein. Wenn Kinder Schule machen*. Bern: Zytglogge Verlag (ISBN 978-3-7296-0791-0)

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

The comprehensive school Lindental (i.e. including grade 1 to 9) is part of a network of small schools with mixed-grade classes in the canton of Bern. Originally, these schools have classes including students of several grades because they serve a very small catchment area. They intentionally use the heterogeneity of their students as a pedagogical basis for an individualized education aiming for integration and autonomous learning. Other members of the network are e.g. the comprehensive school Schüpberg (grade 1-9) and primary school Geristein (grade 1-4).