

Austria

Lerngemeinschaft Wien 15

The Lerngemeinschaft Wien has students of different skill levels (aged 5 to 15) and deliberately avoids early segregation of students into different school types. Students are taught in mixed-age classes with a reform pedagogy focus. Classes include children with disabilities, and teachers come from primary, general, academic secondary and special schools. Children who need more time can spend more school years in individual core classes, while gifted students can take a “fast track”. The school follows different curricula in addition to school-specific “activities to be happy”, like rituals (e.g. class council, reflection meetings), creative training, the teaching of learning techniques and communication rules. Learning is highly differentiated and individualized, and organized in work schedules per week, which include regular feedback sessions with the teachers.

Main focus of Innovation: LEARNERS, CONTENT, ORGANISATION

Other keywords: alternative philosophy, equity

General Information

Name of the ILE: Lerngemeinschaft Wien 15

Location/Address: 1150 Wien, Friedrichsplatz 5

Website: www.schulen.wien.at/schulen/915021/

Rationale

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

This state school run by the municipality of Vienna accommodates a learning community where children aged 5 to 15 with different skills, talents and different curricula, and teachers from four school types (primary, general and academic secondary, special schools) learn with and from one another. The community is supervised by a team of school heads: Silvia Schmeilzl, Primary School 15, Friedrichsplatz 5, Helga Hutterer, Special Education Centre 1150, Kröllgasse 20, Gabriele Kaiblinger, New Secondary School 1150, Selzergasse 25, Dr. Eva Mersits, Academic Secondary School 1170, Geblergasse 56-58.

The learning community is divided into three core classes which are mixed-age classes with a reform pedagogy focus (pilot project approved by the Vienna Municipal School Board). All classes include disabled children of different ages.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
Core class 1			Core class 2			Core class 3	

Transitions from one core class to the next are seamless and individualised, which is made easier by teachers working not in just one class. The form head of core class 2, for instance, teaches children from year 3 in mathematics, while the form head of core class 1 goes on to teach German to children in year 4. This approach is made possible by the fact that the core classes work on the same learning networks, which combine the various subjects to form holistic learning fields. Different levels of learning and prior knowledge are taken into consideration so all children can work jointly on the same projects, but each at their individual level.

Core class 3 does not dedicate the same amount of time to the learning networks as the focus here is on preparing learners for transfer to higher schools.

At our school, children who need more time to meet curricular requirements may opt to remain longer in the individual core classes, while others who are on the “fast track” in one or several subjects get all the support and assistance they need.

Learners can spend their entire compulsory schooling period in the learning community. We avoid the premature selection¹ into different school types. If a child chooses to transfer to a different type of school, this is possible at any time.

Our teaching concept is based on reform pedagogy principles that have been scientifically corroborated by the latest findings of brain research. Insights gained into the way mirror neurons work show impressively how important positive interactions (encouragement, appreciation, confidence, friendliness, etc.) are when it comes to developing self-confidence and self-motivation. These basic competencies make children fit for a future that holds manifold challenges in store. In an effort to keep the basic principles needed for mastering life in mind and apply them in varying contexts, we have developed a curriculum encompassing strategies of positive psychology, findings of research into resilience, stress and happiness as well as WHO recommendations.

Postponing selection and offering a very special curriculum (called "Happinet") constitutes our very own response to the teaching and learning challenges of the 21st century.

¹ In the EU, Germany is the only other country where – if not in all Länder – joint schooling ends at such an early age

Evidence

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

For cost reasons, no evaluation has been carried out (so far).

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)

The learning and performance aims are based on the Austrian curricula for primary, special, general and academic secondary schools. In core class 1, feedback on learning progress is provided by means of verbal assessment. In year 4, learners receive a report with marks, which is mandatory under Austrian law. From year 5, assessment takes the form of progress documentations based on the Vienna Education Standards. When transferring to another school, all students receive reports with marks.

Rituals (class council, feedback and reflection meetings, presentations at the end of learning network programmes), creativity training (preparing and performing dance and drama events, writing and designing a class newspaper and class books), the teaching of learning techniques (relaxation, memorising and thinking techniques) and rules of communication (win-win rules, dispute arbitrator training) all contribute to our specific focus – training to be happy (→ “Happinet”).

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?

In the school year 2004/05, an integrative mixed-age primary school class with a reform pedagogy focus became a learning community for learners of all skill levels from year 1 to year 8 and, where necessary, year 9.

Breakdown by years

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
2004/ 05							
Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4				
2005/ 06							
Core class 1 ~ 26 children			Core class 2 ~ 26 children				
From 2006/ 07							
Core class 1 ~ 26 children			Core class 2 ~ 26 children			Core class 3 ~24 children	

Facilitators

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

Teachers or facilitators have teaching qualifications for primary school, special school, general or academic secondary school. Nearly all team members have additional reform pedagogy qualifications; three of them are coaching teachers for the Vienna University College of Teacher Education. Further qualifications include: Dyslexia, self-controlled learning, information technology. One of our learning coaches teaches at the University College of Teacher Education and is the author of school text books and scientific articles.

All teachers see themselves as committed to life-long learning.

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?

- **How is learning organised?**

Our special type of “feedback work schedules”, where facilitators (can) provide daily feedback helps learners and teachers to stay abreast of things in spite of a highly differentiated and individualised way of working. The work schedules generally cover a period of one week and help children who still need more aid and support to organise their workloads. Where children can profit from freely expressing their ideas and creativity, they get the opportunity to do so.

- **How do learners and facilitators interact?**

The interactions between facilitators and learners are governed by the golden rule “Do onto others as you would have them do on to you”.

With due consideration of the latest findings regarding the way mirror neurons work, we pay attention not only to our actions and words, but also to our thoughts. After all, what we think of others reflects what we think they are capable of achieving.

- **What kind of pedagogy do they follow?**

Our teaching concept is based on reform pedagogy principles. At primary level (in core classes 1 and 2), elements from the Jena plan and Montessori pedagogy are predominant, while organisational forms from the Dalton plan take priority at secondary level. Our learning networks approach draws on the concept of exemplary learning according to Martin Wagenschein and is true to the motto “Less is more”. In this spirit, we can choose to focus in a holistic way on a few selected topics and give learners the time they need to acquire, train and apply competencies in new contexts, also taking older students as an example.

As the latest findings of brain research corroborate the principles of reform pedagogy, the concept underlying our learning community might also be classified under the heading of neuro-pedagogy.

- **What curriculum is used?**

The key elements of our special curriculum, which is called “Happinet”, have been outlined briefly under 2. This curriculum overarches our teaching concept, and we try to integrate corresponding exercises and strategies into our learning networks as often as possible.

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 learning community is located in a school building that is more than 100 years old and used to house a primary and a general secondary school. Due to dramatically decreasing numbers of students, the school was in danger of being closed down, which fortunately could be avoided given the great interest in mixed-age classes.

As our school is a half-day facility, parents have organised private afternoon care which includes supervised lunch at the neighbouring municipal district office, catering provided by the "Jobfabrik" social project as well as supervised homework in the classroom arranged with the help of an adult education centre.

Resources: We can look back on long years of fruitful cooperation with “KulturKontakt Austria”, a cultural association, which culminates in an annual joint dance theatre performance. Our school also performed several times at “Künstlerhaus”, a cultural venue in Vienna, as well as in the St. Pölten festival center. In the spring of 2008, we provided the opening act for an international congress organised in Vienna by “Lebenshilfe”, an association for the disabled.

History of ILE

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

The starting point for the learning community was an integrative class, which quite logically evolved into a mixed-age class where everyone was able to learn and develop at their own pace. Soon we had to experience, in a painful way, the limits set by too early segregation according to school types. This gave rise to the idea of establishing a learning community for learners of all skill levels from year 1 to year 8 and, where necessary, year 9. With the help of the Vienna Municipal School Board, it was possible to put this idea into practice surprisingly quickly and easily.

As places at our school are in great demand, the second mixed-age class will start in the autumn of 2009.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

Making use of the resources for mixed-age and integrative classes, our pilot project is cost-neutral.

Learning Outcomes

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

Unfortunately, we have no evaluation results, probably due to cost reasons. However, the fact that places at our school are in such demand permits the assumption that parents are highly satisfied and shows how effective word-of-mouth recommendation is.

A kind of unofficial external evaluation is provided by teacher students who have written (diploma) papers about our school or made video documentations of our school life.

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)

Several articles on our learning community have been published in specialised publications, three diploma theses and two video documentations have been produced.

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

We try to adapt our teaching organisation and pedagogical concept to the needs and talents of each individual child while keeping an eye on the challenges of the future. Our learning community with its nearly seamless transitions is the end product of all of these efforts and considerations. As we see ourselves as a learning system, it is important for us to take account of the most recent scientific findings relevant for the field of schools and learning and put them to use in further developing and professionalising our work. True to our motto “The more diverse we are, the more can we learn from one another”, learning at our school is always a cooperative effort that comes in many shapes and sizes. And all of the stakeholders benefit from it - be it children, parents or teachers.