

Report: CIDREE Expert meeting on heterogeneous grouping in lower secondary education (Brussels, February 12, 2010).

For many years, there was a discussion about the comprehensive and the categorical structure in education systems. This discussion was primarily based on ideologies such as equity, equality.... Nowadays, the discussions are more and more based on evidence: it's about common sense.

Choices in school careers are being delayed and pupil's careers evolve in a gradual way. Pupils are being put either in homogeneous or in heterogeneous groups. This trend raises questions as: how to deal with the less able pupils and how can we simultaneously assure that the gifted students can fully develop their capacities? Over the last few years, several initiatives were developed to cater for these difficulties. During the expert meeting, several institutions presented how they deal with heterogeneous grouping in their particular education system. The problems and difficulties they experience were also discussed.

In what follows, a summary is given of the situation in different European countries. Finally, we end with a conclusion of the discussion that day.

The Netherlands - In the Dutch system, students are tracked at an early age. A political discussion has started about the current system: some calls are made for a more comprehensive education.

Nonetheless, students can still move on to a higher or lower level when necessary. This flexibility solves some negative aspects of early streaming. Still, there are problems such as loss of motivation, a large number of underachievers and extra costs due to the long learning carriers. Teachers feel the need to differentiate, but it is hard to do so in practice. Some organisational measures are already taken to support students. There are two kinds of measures: within and outside the school curriculum. The former consists of combination classes, talent classes, enrichment courses, innovative didactic models. The latter comprises summer courses, weekend classes and 'top classes' (extra bridging course after primary education). Despite these initiatives, SLO puts forward three issues which are needed to improve differentiation:

- more insight in effective and feasible differentiation strategies;
- more flexible textbooks and teaching materials, including the use of ICT;
- strengthening teacher competencies in curricular differentiation, also in teacher training programmes.

Slovenia - In Slovenia there are four forms of differentiation possible for 14 year old learners. 1) Simultaneous classification of the learners in an age group into smaller heterogeneous learning groups (27-39 %). 2) Simultaneous teaching or team teaching by two teachers in all or in part of the lessons (3-5%). 3) Classification of students into homogeneous learning groups (42-55%). 4) A combination of these forms (3-5%). Schools are obliged to provide one of these forms of differentiation in L1, FL and maths. The second form is seldom chosen by schools though learners believe that the variety of their learning and other needs is best catered for by this second form.

Spain – In Spain, a debate is going on to create more flexibility but still keeping the comprehensive structure. Some calls are made to make it possible that students can choose between pre-university and pre-vocational education before the age of 16. Now, teachers already use ordinary measures for diversity such as flexible groups, reinforcement groups, in-class support, diversified materials, adaptations to access the curriculum... These measures are common to all educational stages. Especially in secondary education, they diversify by giving options to the students. Besides the ordinary measures, there are also extraordinary measures: curricular adaptations, reception classrooms for linguistic competence, enrolment in special education schools, special education classrooms in mainstream institutions and combined schooling. These examples are common to all educational levels. For secondary education there are specific measures: compensatory educational programmes, curricular diversification programmes and initial vocational qualification programmes. Other current points of discussion are dealing with immigrant populations, the improvement of teacher training and research into inclusive education.

Scotland – In Scotland, they work with a curriculum framework that meets the needs of all pupils from 3 to 18 years old. There is a broad general education till the age of 15. It consists of all experiences and outcomes across all curriculum areas up to and including the third level. In each of the areas there is special attention for the 3 skills: skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work. This broad general education enables pupils to achieve the highest possible level. It helps them to develop knowledge, but also understanding. Progression in pupils' learning is not longer seen as climbing up the ladder. Progression must be seen in 3 dimensions. The 3 dimensions are application, challenge and breadth. Teaching and assessment are seen in these 3 dimensions to guarantee education that meets the needs of all learners.

Ireland – Pupils in the Junior Cycle (aged 12-15) get examinations at different levels: at Higher and Ordinary level. For some subjects (English, Maths and Irish) a third level is offered: Foundation level. Despite of these differentiation measures, some pupils do not get access to the Level 3 qualification.

A study commissioned by the NCCA shows that students who were in mixed ability classes perform better than those who were streamed. Teachers in a mixed ability class differentiate their materials and pedagogies to suit the learners' needs. This mixed-ability setting is used in the Junior Cycle Schools Programme. The JCSP is aimed at students who are identified as being at risk of early school leaving. It offers school and teachers a more flexible approach in catering for the diversity of their students' needs. Now there is the idea to reduce the focus of the Junior Certificate examinations on the programmes of study at junior cycle because they have a negative impact. The ideas for a new junior cycle put the focus on activity-based learning, assessment for learning, key skills, access to three level of qualification and flexibility.

Sweden – Because of the sparsely populated areas that are typical of the Swedish context, pupils are systematically kept together in comprehensive schools and heterogeneous groups. This puts heavy demands on the teachers. They make use of individualisation and the distribution of time. Streaming pupils in different groups at different levels in subjects like mathematics and languages is allowed, but not very common. Now, they are preparing reviews of the curriculum with more distinct goals

and more national tests. Entrance tests will also be allowed to profile classes. The challenge of this review is to keep all the good things about the comprehensive system and at the same time give all pupils the same chance to develop their knowledge.

Belgium – In Antwerp, there is a comprehensive Middle-School: H. Pius X-Institute. This school is member of *St.A.M*, a study-group for authentic middle school education. This group consists of 65 schools where teachers meet teachers in the forefront of innovation. They pursue 4 objectives for all pupils: 1) all pupils are admitted from primary school; 2) they have the same common core curriculum; 3) positively orientated (with guidance); 4) support in study methodology, in making choice of studies and in social-emotional behaviour. The 65 schools put themselves on a kind of developmental line, which makes it easier to compare with each other and to learn from each other.

In Pius X, teachers rely on several differentiation practices: grouping, level of difficulty (they support gifted and less able pupils by using levels: basic, extra and depth subject matter), learning time (split class groups, remedial classes, task assistance classes), teaching methods (group work, working in corners, contract work, peer tutoring), motivation (beside the core curriculum, pupils can choose activities).

In general terms, it appears that each institute / country wants to achieve similar goals. First, they all want more autonomy for the teachers. So teachers can make out for themselves what works in their classroom. If they have autonomy, the step to cooperate with each other is smaller. The Pius X school in Belgium (Antwerp) is a good example of this. Giving teachers more autonomy makes them more motivated, so they can try out different ways of differentiation in the classroom.

It is also clear that change in an education system requires political will. The bottom line is that it is an ideological and therefore a political choice.

Another need that we all have is to value both academic and vocational schools. Too much, the academic schools are seen as more valuable, although even in those schools pupils can be found who are not motivated any longer. Often, pupils can't move on to another more vocational or a more academic direction. This brings us to the fourth goal: simplifying complicated school systems so as to make flexibility possible. Simplicity is also necessary to put successful innovations into practice.

The last goal that we all try to meet, is to find a balance between homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings within a comprehensive education system. There is only one real comprehensive system and it consists of heterogeneous groups with differentiating towards the individual needs of the pupils. All the other types are quasi-comprehensive. A lot of research has been done to find out what type of differentiating leads to what kind of results. In fact this is an empty discussion because there are a lot of configurations within this research: some studies defend this method, while other studies advocate another method. This makes that the belief in all this studies decreases. The only thing that really works is finding out how it works and why it works in other schools. Therefore, a co-operative network like *St.A.M*. is a good initiative because its focus is on learning from other teachers who tried something out in practice.

CONCLUSION

One of the expert meeting participants, Alan Armstrong from LTS Scotland summarized the conclusions as follows:

In summary, across presentations from all countries on the day, the conclusion can be that we identified similar priorities and goals but that each country has a different starting point from which to develop their improvement agenda, both in terms of national policy and the current practices in schools.

The five key points from my perspective were as follows.

- The political will for change is clearly apparent in each country. In particular, we sensed cross-political party support on the need for change. This is helpful in ensuring common understanding of the key issues and the likelihood of more sustainable policies and policy direction.
- There is a general movement towards greater autonomy of the professional teacher. This should help to encourage more flexibility and innovation so that schools and teachers can meet the needs of children and young people more effectively.
- All countries are giving equal status to academic and vocational education - or at least moving towards greater parity between academic and vocational.
- Within comprehensive education there is a growing trend for meeting the needs of children and young people through careful groups across classes and / or subjects. In Scotland, this is referred to as 'streaming' or 'setting' – with setting being a much more flexible and effective way of grouping pupils differently for different subjects / activities. Within classes of course we would always expect the teacher to differentiate in the learning and teaching of individuals groups and pupils. These approaches help to address the 'homogenous versus heterogeneous' argument.
- All countries are looking to simplify pathways through their education system, basically by taking the best features of different routes and trying to develop a sufficiently flexible system for comprehensive schools to cater effectively for all children and young people