

Best Practices on differentiation in- and outside the classroom

Differentiation as a guiding idea

The overall concept of the Academy of vocational training (Akademie für berufliche Bildung gGmbH (AFBB)) underlines the idea of differentiation. The main goal is to intensively support the individual prerequisites and strength of every individual pupil. Because of the demographic changes und therefore a decreasing demand for education, we have to meet the challenge to support every pupil individually and simultaneously develop a class climate, where an overall social competency can be generated. There is a demand for excellently educated specialists, who are also able to differentiate.

The AFBB has got its own department for the acquisition of new pupils (Lehrstellenservice) that already implements this overall concept before the educational training starts. Applicants for an educational training at the AFBB are individually advised about their perspectives. Not only school marks are important, but also and even more practical experience, soft skills, the individual curriculum etc..

Diversity at the Academy for vocational training

The demographic change has a direct impact on educational institutions. Diversity is a here a result of the demand for specialists, on one hand, and on the other, because of different individuals, willing to start an educational training. Therefore we have to deal with an age structure from young people to middle-aged adults. There is diversity in the classroom not only because of sociodemographic factors, but also the learners' former education and ways of learning. Diversification in educational institutions is also a result of internationalisation (e.g. Erasmus).

Diversity produces heterogeneous class structures that enable every pupil to yield versatile resources in the learning process. Diversity can potentially utilise resources for the whole group, but – uncontrolledly – can also lead to social exclusion. To reach certain education aims, a conscious dealing with diversity is necessary, which presupposes diverse methods. This means primarily that every human being is accepted in their diversity and has the right of individual support. Differentiation enables the individuals to deploy their identity and to get aware of their competence. By getting aware of and dealing with diversity every day, a self-concept can be created and therefore developed into a social norm, which is a benefit for the whole society.

Differentiation in the classroom

Report from the VET of kindergarten teachers:

When the three-year-training starts, we mostly have classes with 24 pupils. Aspects of diversity that can directly be observed are age and gender. The female sex is mostly prevailing, and the age ranges between young and middle-aged adults. During introductory talks more characteristics of diversity get obvious: origin, family status, interests and former education. In addition to the social assistants there are also professions from fields like gastronomy, butchery, floristic, office etc.. Also differences in school education are described. One aim they all have in common: the certificate of the kindergarten teacher. Everyone directly or indirectly notices diversity. The teachers realise the heterogeneity of the class at the latest after the stage of orientation. The challenge for the teachers is now to enable every individual to achieve their goals, possibly without individual losses. That's the point where differentiation works. It's necessary to create the lessons in a way that everyone has the opportunity to comprehend the knowledge to their conditions. How is that possible?: By creating exercises for the individual or small groups and by supporting the learners according to their demands. To work autonomously or in small groups is not always accepted by the learners because of their prior learning experiences which are mostly teacher centred und lead to the opinion: "The teachers are teaching and I am only listening."

Finally, we have to explain the learners that the former teaching methods have disadvantages and convince them of the advantages of autonomous learning. Only when a learning atmosphere is created where learners can yield their personal contribution according to their resources, the teacher is able to support every learner individually. Moreover, it is necessary to analyse the current state of the individual competencies in all classes for the development of a teaching structure.

Difficulties in developing a supporting teaching structure are cause by the general conditions. Time resources are necessary for differentiation. At the beginning of a VET the demand for individual talks is especially high. Sometimes conflicts arise out of the situation, which have to be solved. One more difficulty to cope with is the preparation of exercises. To create them individually we need observation and time. When teachers are able to spend the time and individuality, an atmosphere of mutual respect is created, in which the ability of differentiation can be acquired.

Differentiation outside the classroom

Report from the work of a school counsellor:

During the VET sometimes learners develop or are already suffering from problems that cannot be solved in the classroom. Therefore we have school counsellors. These counsellors offer open office hours or arranged dates that can be used on demand. The demand is due to the initiative of the clients themselves or others (e.g. their class teachers).

Differentiation starts from the very first contact with the school counsellor. In the framework of counselling the individual case is primary. This means that methods and the way of counselling can vary due to the individual case.

But there is a common main procedure:

1. The client explains his/her situation.
2. Open questions are answered (resource-based analysis).
3. Goals of the client are discussed.
4. Formulation of individual methods to reach the goals.
5. Documentation of fixed methods and goals.
6. Follow-up care.

This procedure can be client oriented or systemic.

The school counsellors are contact persons for all pupils and teachers, while the office hours are mainly used by pupils because of different problems: pregnancy during VET, conflicts with other pupils or teachers, problems in school achievement, family or economic problems, but also diagnosed mental disorders and many more. After steps 1-5 (see above) the counsellor and the client develop solutions together. The school counsellor has a coordinative function and purposefully spreads needed information. In that case the counsellor always asks which information he/she can spread and which have to be treated confidentially. This systemic procedure secures individuality and at the same time counsellor and client create structures and processes together.

A case is closed when the goals have been achieved or the client is able to act autonomously. So the counsellor is not needed anymore. The main duty of the school counsellor is intervention, although it is also obvious that additional time for prevention would be necessary. When there are therapeutic demands, there are also limits for the counsellor. If necessary, the head of school is involved in order to decide about individual cases (interruption period, special conditions for school fees etc.). By their support the school counsellors offer learners and teachers the opportunity to get individual help specific to their needs.

Best Practice „Weihnachtsbasar“ (Christmas Market)

The annual event, which is organised by pupils and teachers, is a good example how the VET school uses diversity as a chance (and basically practices inclusion). For the last school day of a year they organise a pre-Christmas event with culinary and entertaining highlights. Pupils of three different VETs are equally participated. Exchange between the classes is possible and diversity is emphasised by different contributions. But there are also common goals: the main goal is to collect a high amount of money as a donation for a social institution.

Limits are again set by general structures. Because of not every class can be involved in the organisation of and/or on the event itself.

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