



ORGANISATION OF PROVISION
TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Flensburg way to inclusion: a community of practice

Visit to Flensburg, Germany

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European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	3
PREAMBLE	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
INTRODUCTION	5
HIGHLIGHTS	6
CONTEXT	6
The Community of Flensburg.....	7
<i>Waldschule</i>	8
THE PROJECT VISIT	9
INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES	9
TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES	10
Transforming the Waldschule	12
SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT	13
Collaboration systems.....	13
Support structures within the classroom	14
Support structures within the school	15
Support for learners and family involvement.....	16
INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES	18
SUSTAINING THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS	18
KEY LEARNING POINTS AND AREAS OF FURTHER DISCUSSION	19
CONCLUDING REMARKS	20
References	20
ANNEX 1: Flensburg Way of Inclusion	21

PREAMBLE

The Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education project is being undertaken by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education from 2011 – 2014. The key question for the project is: How are systems of provision organised to meet the needs of learners identified as having disabilities under the UNCRPD (2006) in inclusive settings within the compulsory school sector? The themes to be explored include:

- Inclusion as a quality issue – the presence and participation of all learners in the school/classroom community enhances the quality of the educational experience.
- Strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools to respond to diverse needs (including developing the role of specialist provision as resources to support the mainstream sector)
- Collaboration and networking – effective provision of educational and multi-agency support within the mainstream sector
- Funding and resourcing – targeting support to meet the needs of learners with disabilities
- Leading the change process

Project activity and project outputs will include:

1. A Literature Review: this provides the conceptual framework for the project and includes a review of research literature post 2000 on project themes as well as an analysis of past Agency projects.

2. Country Information: a questionnaire has been circulated to Agency member countries to gather information on how provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools is organised and evaluated.

3. Identification of examples of practice: Five sites in Sweden, Austria, Germany, Slovenia and Malta will be visited in February/March 2013. A report will be produced following each visit.

4. Thematic seminars: Following collection and analysis of data from the visits, a series of seminars will be held in autumn 2013. The seminars will explore in detail the factors that have an influence on the success of inclusive education, taking into account different country contexts. A report will be produced following each seminar.

5. Project synthesis report: The report will draw together evidence from all project activities and, following an analysis of key issues, will provide a series of recommendations and potential quality indicators for the organisation of provision and implementation of new practices to improve systems of provision for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

6. Leading the change process: A practical tool to support policy makers in leading change towards more inclusive policy and practice will also be produced.

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For the description provided in this report, thanks are particularly due to Christine Pluhar who provided us with information about the historical development of inclusive policies in the Länder of S-H; to Birgid Oertel who provided us information about the current developments in special and inclusive education in the Federal Republic of Germany; to Ute Hölscher who translated all the interviews and the documents from German into English language and to Per Skoglund who provided us with valuable suggestions and illuminating discussions into the development of inclusive education and the management of change towards inclusion.

Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role played by all members of the Project Advisory Group, the Agency Representative Board members and National Co-ordinators who took part in the visit and who provided additional support.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides information about the study visit conducted by the Agency team to Flensburg, Germany in March 2013.

The city of Flensburg was selected, along with other four sites, from practice examples provided by Agency Representative Board members and their networks as part of the Organisation of Provision project questionnaire.

The Agency team in collaboration with the Project Advisory Group (PAG) members identified criteria for the selection of the sites that should be followed up to provide relevant information for the project. The criteria were: relevance of the site; clarity of the information provided and evidence of the following: quality assurance; system leadership and the management of change; collaboration and partnership; sustainability and a variety of support systems (different approaches to and ways of organising support). Overall, the examples selected also needed to reflect diversity of geographical location and learner needs.

The city of Flensburg was selected for its focus on collaboration and networking. The visit theme was 'How do inclusion networks support the needs of learners with disabilities'.

The focus of the other study visits were:

- Essunga, Sweden – strengthening the capacity of mainstream schools - changing practice to improve support for learners with different needs (in particular those with disabilities)

- Vienna, Austria - inclusive education as a quality issues - a collaborative approach to quality management
- Ljubljana, Slovenia – developing the role of special schools as resources to support mainstream provision
- Valetta, Malta – Organisation and resourcing of in-class support (with a focus on the roles of school and multi-agency staff).

After presenting a short summary of the lessons learnt from the study visit to Flensburg, this report will describe the different supports provided to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings and the different factors that contributed to their development. Information about the management of change, transformation strategies and sustainability will also be included.

HIGHLIGHTS

- System-based support is a key factor for the development inclusive education
- The collaboration between education, social services, health services, resource centres and municipal bodies is fundamental in providing support to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings
- Sharing the same values and principles as well as developing good communication skills among different partners are crucial factors in fighting against discrimination and ensuring a continuum of interventions for learners with disabilities
- The use of critical friends, a 'scouting' strategy and research findings are fundamental factors in the process of change towards inclusion, along with visionary leadership and distributed leadership
- Parents and community support are essential to manage difficult situations and promote inclusive change
- Teamwork at the level of school (teachers and school staff in general) is a key element for the organisation of support in the classroom
- Peer tutoring is a crucial aspect of the provision of support to learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms
- Developing a single community of practice and enhancing professional learning are key factors in organising provision for learners with disabilities
- Prevention, early identification and early intervention are essential elements for the development of inclusion
- The focus of the system of support is on meeting the needs of learners through listening to their voices and creating a supportive climate in the classroom

CONTEXT

Germany is a Federal Republic of 16 Länder or local authorities that are usually responsible for schools. The right of people with disabilities to be educated in mainstream settings is stated in the Länder constitutions and legislation. The Basic Law (1990) and the new Social Welfare Code IX (2001) play a central role in the German legislation for the

education of learners with disabilities. The current Recommendations on Special Education in the Schools of the Federal Republic of Germany (Resolution 1994) apply to all pupils with disabilities who should be educated, as far as possible, in mainstream schools together with pupils without disabilities.

The Community of Flensburg

Flensburg is located in one of the 15 districts of the Schleswig-Holstein (S-H) Länder in the northern part of Germany, close to the border with Denmark and about 150 km from Hamburg. Originally a Danish rural community, it has now developed into a German modern town with a strong rural vocation. The municipality has 85.000 inhabitants.

The Länder of Schleswig-Holstein has a student population of 266.000 (from grade 1 to 10). Learners with disabilities represent 6% of the entire population (15.900). 60% of the learners with disabilities are educated in mainstream settings (9.600) and 40% are educated in special schools (6.300). Such figures seem to indicate that the Schleswig-Holstein Länder is characterized by inclusive policies when compared to the rest of Germany where 75% of the student population are educated in special schools (SEN Data, 2011). In the area of Flensburg, there are 900 schools of which 400 are primary, 250 are comprehensive and 100 are grammar schools (Gymnasium). There are about 100 resource centres: 60 resources centres for learning, speech and behaviour problems, 28 resource centres for intellectual disabilities, 5 resource centres for physical disabilities and 1 centre for visually impaired learners and 1 resource centre for hearing impaired learners.

Historically, the Länder of Schleswig-Holstein is characterised by a strong dual system of education. For example in 1983 learners with disabilities were educated in 160 special schools divided according to seven different categories of disabilities (learning, speech, social and emotional, visual, hearing, physical and severe disabilities).

The first steps towards inclusion date back to the early 80s when the special school for visually impaired learners was transformed into a resource centre (SfS Forderzentrum) that reached out to learners educated in mainstream settings. The specialised teachers from the resource centre for visually impaired had to develop their expertise and the SfS Forderzentrum changed its role from providing support to individual learners to provide support, consultancy and advice to teachers in mainstream classrooms. The experience of SfS Forderzentrum, however, did not remain a solitary example and another 15 special schools began their journey to become resource centres. In 1985 the first integration classes welcoming a varieties of learners with disabilities were created.

This grassroots movement towards integration was subsequently supported by national legislation in 1990 when a new law was passed for the integration of learners with disabilities in mainstream settings.

The new law envisaged the following two steps:

- Learners with disabilities should be educated in mainstream education under certain conditions
- Special schools were to be transformed into resource centres

In order to support this process of change towards inclusion a ministerial body (known as BIS please add the complete name in German) was established and in 1993 new regulations for teacher training in the area of inclusion were passed.

Since then, the Schleswig-Holstein Länder has focused on the process of transforming special schools into resource centres. This process of change has been supported by a series of factors : Schleswig-Holstein represented Germany in the European Agency for

Development in Special Needs Education in 2002; the PISA results demanded that regular schools had to request special teachers in order to improve the school general attainments and in 2002, a process of individualisation of learning began. At first, this entailed only learners identified as having special educational needs but in 2004 it also included learners in regular classrooms.

The move towards more inclusive settings, however, had to face a series of challenges such as transition phases (from kindergarten to primary school, from school to work). These challenges required the participation of new partners, such as social welfare workers, to facilitate the process of inclusion.

Nevertheless, in 2008 nearly 50% of all learners with disabilities were educated in mainstream settings supported by resource centres and the number of learners with disabilities that receive special education in special schools or in resource centres decreased every year.

The educational imperative towards inclusive education was strengthened by the participation of the Ministry of education in important conferences such as the UNESCO International Conference in Education in 2008 and by the ratification of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2009.

A series of events make it possible to identify the cultural change that is currently taking place in Schleswig-Holstein:

- The President of the Federal Republic of Germany visited the community school in Lubeck
- The S-H secretary of state of the Ministry of Education was invited to speak in a conference in Berlin to report about the process of inclusion in the S-H Länder
- The Jakob Muth Award for Inclusive Education was founded by the Commission of People with Disabilities, UNESCO Germany and Bertelsmann Foundation
- The Waldschule in Flensburg was awarded the Jakob Muth Prize in 2012

Nowadays, in Flensburg there are 10 primary schools, 5 comprehensive schools, 1 secondary regional school, 4 Grammar schools (Gymnasium), 3 vocational schools and 7 private schools (5 are Danish). Learners with disabilities are educated in 9 primary schools out of 10, and there are inclusive classrooms in all secondary schools.

Waldschule

Waldschule is a primary mainstream school in the municipality of Flensburg. It is located at the border between a wealthy town district and a very poor one. This proximity between highly different social communities has consequences on the pupils that attend the school. There are around 300 learners divided into 12 classes and 40% of the student population is from an ethnic minority.

The organisation of the school includes mixed grade classes and each classroom welcomes learners with disabilities. There is, however, a maximum of five learners with disabilities in each class with a total of 25 children per each class.

The Waldschule, however, does not stand alone, as it is part of a system of support. The system includes a resource centre for learning, speech and behavioural disabilities, a centre for physical disabilities and a centre for intellectual disabilities.

The school won the Jakob Muth Prize for inclusive education in 2010 and several other prizes and awards for being an innovative school. As a member of the Forderzentrum resource centre, it was listed twice among the 50 best schools in Germany.

The school, which welcomes pupils from all backgrounds now has among the highest academic outcomes (for example 170 pupils from grade 1 and 2 can read at an average or above the average rate),

THE PROJECT VISIT

A team of Agency staff and project advisory group members and consultants visited the community of Flensburg including the primary Waldschule and the many different agencies, bodies and centres that support the work of the schools in the area. The visit provided opportunities to hear first hand accounts about the developments in the region, to observe lessons and to interview different stakeholders such as local politicians, community leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents and learners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted according to a pre-determined schedule that had been prepared in agreement with the Agency team and the PAG members in order to provide consistency across the 5 project visits. All interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis. In addition, relevant documents on National and local policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All these sources of evidence have been used in drafting this report.

Interviews were conducted with the following:

- the municipality inspector/SchuleRat of the community of Flensburg;
- the school principal of Waldschule;
- the mayor of the city of Flensburg;
- one of the Agency Representative Board members for Germany.

A series of focus group interviews were also held with:

- school principals of the Forderzentrum (including the social services Director);
- teachers of the Waldschule;
- learners of the Waldschule;
- parents of the Waldschule;
- local policy makers and administrators at the municipality of Flensburg.

This information was analysed by the Agency team that visited the site, along with observation notes that were collected during the visit

INCLUSIVE PRINCIPLES

When visiting the schools and talking to the different stakeholders it emerged that the process towards inclusion was not only the result of the implementation of a new policy or of a new legislation but was the result of a change in the way people were thinking about the education of learners with disabilities. Fundamentally, it was due to the dissemination of the principles of inclusion that triggered a critical change in the way in which learners with disabilities were perceived and how they were educated in the city of Flensburg.

As the school principal of the Waldschule indicated:

'the first necessary step was a change in the consciousness of the teachers within the system, in particular of the specialised teachers that impacted upon the work of regular teachers' (School Principal)

Similarly, the inspector of the municipality of Flensburg reported that inclusive principles had started to permeate the German ground thanks to the work of two enlightened academics from the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Prof Andreas Hinz and Ines Boban, whose work began to be known in the city of Flensburg at the beginning of 2000s. In addition, the municipality inspector reported how he contributed to the dissemination of inclusive principles by sending out a letter with questions taken from the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) to every school on a weekly basis. Teachers were offered the chance to reflect on these issues in relation to their everyday practice and find a way in which they could improve things.

... the inclusion letters are a way for teachers to think and reflect together on the things that they have done or that they could do better in order to promote the process of inclusion in their school' (Municipality Inspector)

Although the inspector also acknowledged that not all teachers were willing to engage with the 'inclusion letters' and to think about new solutions, they nevertheless represented an opportunity for those willing to promote inclusion to receive further inputs and incentives to continue. There is a link with the fact that 9 out of 10 primary schools can now be defined as inclusive schools. In particular, schools such as the Waldschule seem to agree on a series of mottoes:

- *It is normal to be different*
- *Prevention, prevention and prevention*
- *What does the child need?*

The different stakeholders of the community of Flensburg articulated these mottoes throughout the interviews, along with a series of principles such as respect, trust and acceptance. Trust, in particular, was considered to be a crucial value, as all stakeholders need to trust the work of their colleagues involved in the process of providing support to learners with disabilities in order to make the system work. Respect was also considered important as the different stakeholders value the work of the other actors without attempting to impose their view on them. Consequently, conflicts, although present, were limited and always solved to the benefit of the children with disabilities.

TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

Different stakeholders working in the community of Flensburg reported that after 2007, a huge process of change was implemented, moving towards inclusion.

Different forms of collaboration were developed as a result of a new way of thinking about the education of learners with disabilities. This process of change had already involved the transformation of special schools into resource centres at the end of the 90s as well as the work of visionary leaders such as school principals, municipality inspectors, members of the Ministry of education and academics that embraced the principles of inclusion and promoted them in all sectors of society. In particular, the work of Prof. Andreas Hinz and Prof. Ines Boban, as reported by the municipality inspector, had a profound influence on changing the way of thinking about diversity and disability. The research conducted by these academics triggered change towards inclusion and the need to transfer vision into action in mainstream schools.

The idea of inclusion slowly became a prerogative of the community of Flensburg, a city with a long tradition as a mixed community that had already found a way of promoting the successful coexistence of the Danish and German communities. Not unrelatedly, the Mayor of the city of Flensburg reported that the '*agenda of inclusion is global*' (Mayor interview) and it did not concern only the education sector but the social and economic sectors as well. He clearly put an emphasis on inclusion in education as being a means to an end - that of creating a socially just and equitable society.

The municipality inspector reported that in 2007 inclusion was identified as a main goal in the educational agenda of the community of Flensburg:

We understood that children needed to be educated in the same settings and that we needed to move away from a segregated system of education for learners with disabilities. Most importantly we understood that we needed to intervene on a preventive basis in order to avoid social problems and dependent citizens (municipality inspector interview).

The education system, however, could not be the only responsible body in charge of providing the support needed for all learners in particular for those identified with disabilities. A series of different partners started to collaborate:

- The city council with the schools
- The special schools with the mainstream schools
- The resource centres with the mainstream schools
- The schools with the social welfare system and the health sectors

These different forms of collaboration can be described as a system with links that run both ways across the different actors and are always in contact in a continuum of practice (see attached table). They developed what is now called the 'Flensburg way of inclusion'.

Such collaboration, which grew into a form of established collegiality, was strengthened by the participation of critical stakeholders who occupied key positions in education, social and welfare services and in the municipality. They fostered the development of forms of support for the inclusion of learners with disabilities through regular meetings (every 14 days), national and local conferences (usually 1 or 2 a month) and a strong personal commitment.

The following steps could be identified as the fundamental steps that led to change:

- The awareness of living in a moment of crisis and that change starts with changing oneself and the way in which one thinks about disability and mainstream schooling
- The acceptance of the reality and the management of difficult situations and crises
- The end of blaming the children and families ethos and the need to adopt a new perspective based on the following idea: 'what can we do to help each child with what we have?'
- The formal decision by different bodies to focus on each child's needs and on the transformation of mainstream school and its daily teaching and learning routine
- The creation of a strong distributed and visionary leadership
- The change from supporting individual children in segregated settings to support a school system that welcomes learners with disabilities

Transforming the Waldschule

In 2006, the Waldschule was on the verge of collapse. The old school principal retired and the new principal had to face a series of challenges to help the school to survive. The principal of the Waldschule reported:

... the first factor that triggered the process of change was that in 2006 we were going to be closed down. It was a very critical situation and we needed to do something if we wanted to survive. So we started to identify the problems and to face them as a team.
(School Principal)

The emergency that the school had to face was clearly a key point in the process of change. There was no choice but changing the way the school had worked so far. As emphasised by Per Skoglund during the visit, the management of a crisis is a crucial factor to make change happen.

When the new school principal was elected, the primary school was experiencing a series of challenges, such as the reduction in the number of enrolled pupils, especially from middle classes as their parents did not perceive the school as being a 'good school':

... the school was a violent place, with behavioural problems and dissatisfaction at the level of parents and teachers. Teachers were working hard but they could not find a way to teach in heterogeneous classrooms and to find solutions to problems (school principal).

As the school principal also stated, the German education system had always been characterised by a history of sorting pupils into homogeneous learning groups and teachers were not trained to deal with the heterogeneity of the student population, such as that of the Waldschule.

Among the problems that the school had to face, the following ones presented a particular challenge:

- The school was situated in a district at the border between a rich area inhabited by wealthy people and a very poor area, where underprivileged families lived.
- Learner heterogeneity was perceived to be a big problem by all teachers
- Parents were very dissatisfied with the school. The wealthy parents tended not to send their children to the Waldschule, thus increasing the number of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds attending the school
- Teachers were complaining all the time about the quality of work in the school and most of the best teachers left the school to teach elsewhere. There was no team working.
- The school had a very bad image.

The school principal, in collaboration with a team made up of teachers, a member of the IQSH system (Institute for Quality of Schleswig-Holstein), the Teacher Education Institute and the University of Flensburg started to investigate a way of improving the quality of the school.

Using a strategy known as 'scouting,' the school principal along with a team of three teachers (the steering group) visited other schools in order to gain insights about their own situation and to learn about how they could improve it. They basically attempted to answer to the following question: 'what can we do in order to improve the system with what we have?'

The most important strategy to help the school survive and be successful was that teachers, parents and learners started to take ownership of their school. Teachers felt responsible for their work and they contributed to the elaboration of solutions to existing

problems. Distributed leadership was a crucial component in the process of decision-making. In addition, parents started to support teachers in their process of school improvement and contributed to the change of the school image.

A crucial aspect of the Waldschule was also its ability to laugh. 'The laughter factor' as the school principal argues, was a fundamental aspect for keeping up the spirits of all school actors and, most importantly, to create a community of practice. Laughter was the glue of the team-work and the way in which the school principal started to create an inclusive climate for both the teachers as well as the learners (Marques, et al, 2012).

The principal of the Waldschule also added that special education teachers played a central role in the implementation of change towards inclusion. The experience of special schools to work in teams, to network with other special services, to follow guidelines and to work in collaboration with families and deal with emotions was used to strengthen the mainstream school.

SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

In order to develop forms of support that could promote the implementation of inclusive education, the community of Flensburg understood that it was necessary to collaborate on a common project. The project consisted of the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream settings with the support of local bodies and services. In order to carry out such a project the key element was to establish partnerships between all the actors who contributed to the provision of support for learners with disabilities: education, health sector, social welfare, special schools and resource centres. As argued by the municipality inspector:

... the child with disabilities becomes the centre of the organisation of support and the services are the satellites that rotate around the learner. All the actors of the community collaborate in a continuum and meet on a regular basis to provide the best support for the children with disabilities (municipality inspector).

The development of a networking system of collaboration required the work of a 'broker' (Fielding et al. 2005) or of a linkage agent (Becheikh et al. 2010), someone who could build relationships and create connectivity among the different local stakeholders. The municipality inspector developed such brokerage skills and was able to create a bridge among the different actors via constant dialogue and regular meetings.

Collaboration systems

The community of Flensburg is characterised by a well-organised system of support. The actors for the inclusion process in the city of Flensburg include:

- Stadt Flensburg (SB JSG), which is made up of the Centre for cooperative educational support, the medical service for children with special educational needs, the Welfare and Assistance service, and the regional social services
- The Schule, which consists of the primary school, the regional schools, the special schools, the comprehensive schools, the Gymnasium schools and the vocational schools
- The Stadt Flensburg (FB BSK), which is made up of the administrative bodies that construct school buildings and provide equipment for schools.
- The Weitere Akteure, which is made up of a private psychiatric centre, a centre for German as a second language and a local school authority

These systems are shown in the table (Annex 1).

All these stakeholders constitute a single network that collaborates to provide support to learners with disabilities in mainstream settings. The strength of this network is that the different actors do not work in a fragmented way but as if they were a single organisation, a unique body that shares the same principles and goals.

Support structures within the classroom

The development of inclusive education requires fundamental changes at different levels. In particular, inclusion requires changes at the level of teaching and learning. The Waldschule has started to impact on traditional routines of teaching and learning in order to allow each learner, including those with disabilities to participate in the process of learning. During the study visits, the Agency team could observe changes at the level of pedagogy, assessment and at the level of the organisation of the teaching and learning routine.

A circle of chairs where learners sit to do their 'circle time' activity every morning, replaces the traditional teacher's desk. The rest of the learners' tables are distributed in groups of four or five around the classroom. Such an organisation of space and of furniture not only suggests that learners can move freely within the room in order to follow different activities depending on their tasks and skills but also that teaching and learning routines take place in a way that fosters both personalised support as well as co-operative learning strategies. The circle time activity is also used as a strategy to develop a circle of friendship among the learners, necessary to create a good climate as well as to manage difficult behaviours.

There are also a few tables on the side of the classroom for use by individual children who need individualised special assistance for part of their school time. In particular, there is a table for a learner with visual disabilities who requires the assistance of additional staff to use a machine to enlarge print. A learner with emotional and behavioural difficulties spends only two hours a day in school occupied another table. The issue of educating learners with severe disabilities and emotional difficulties in mainstream settings was felt to be an area that required further investigation by the teachers, the school principal and other stakeholders in the Waldschule.

Along with the mainstream teacher, three or four other adults were working in the classroom: a support/special teacher, a social worker/educator, a personal assistant, and sometimes also a trainee teacher. The presence of many adults moving around the classroom was perceived to be a positive factor in supporting classroom activities. In particular, during the focus group interviews, the learners reported that they felt fully supported as they only needed 'to raise their hands' and someone would come and help them in their process of learning. Similarly, mainstream teachers felt particularly relieved that they could count on colleagues throughout the school day in order to address the heterogeneous needs of all children.

In addition, the presence of more adults in the classroom increased learning time and opportunities as learners could be supported individually, if necessary. Special support was also provided to learners with disabilities whenever required without the need for them to be withdrawn into another room in the school. However, the presence of different adults and educators in the classroom appeared to promote independent learning.

Teachers have also developed a system to assess learning. They use a system called 'competence plans', which consists of a table that provides information about the learning points achieved by each learner during the week. Rather than measuring and marking learners' work, teachers provide parents with information about what their children can actually do. The table of competence includes explanations such as 'I can recognise key

words in a text'; 'I can read long sections of text'; I can answer questions related to a text' etc... In such a way parents are provided with clear indications about their children's abilities. On the other hand, children can also make sense of their own progress. The crucial role played by assessment for learning was also visible in the development of 'learning diaries', where each pupil is required to write what they have learnt on a daily basis. This diary represents a sort of individual portfolio that shows the progress made by each learner according to their own pace.

The school activities include the development of academic as well as life skills. Based on a regular shift, some pupils are involved in selling food to other pupils and staff in the school. Such an activity provides all learners, including learners with disabilities with an opportunity to train in life skills (such as the use of money) that will be very helpful outside the school and in working environments. In addition, such an activity provides learners with an opportunity to socialise and interact outside the classroom.

In summary, co-teaching, a very clear lesson structure, and the presence of different adults within the classroom was a guarantee that an adequate level of support was provided to all learners as well as to teachers in their process of professional development.

Support structures within the school

The school was known in the area of Flensburg as the 'whispering school' because learners were so engaged in their learning that there was always very little noise. Such a nickname indicates that the Waldschule had successfully managed to change from a failing school into a flagship school for inclusion.

When you enter the teachers' room, it is immediately clear that the teachers that work in such an environment are a team. There were smiling photos on each drawer and a series of charts and tables with working schedules and shifts, along with a tray of sandwiches and biscuits in the middle of the table where a meeting has just finished. Such a perception was confirmed when walking through the corridors of the school where teachers worked with open doors and moved from one room to another knowing exactly what they needed to do and where they needed to go. In this regard, during the focus group interview with teachers, they reported that they had developed a lesson structure that they reproduced in each classroom of the same grade. This allowed teachers to work in a team and to cope with unexpected events.

In addition, teachers reported that team teaching was a fundamental strength of the school. They argued that the school principal supports teachers to meet on a regular basis, in order to talk about children's problems, and most importantly, how to solve them:

... we meet every Thursday afternoon for two hours and we talk about one specific subject and the problems that some children may have, and most importantly how we can help the children to address those problems (Focus group interview with teachers)

The teachers felt that they had a time to reflect and to address the problems together as a team. Having some time to talk about the problems of the learners was a fundamental factor for finding solutions. Although the school did not pay for attendance at such meetings, all teachers reported that they were willing to take part in them on a voluntary basis, when the subject and the problem being discussed were relevant to them.

The teachers also discussed how all teachers at the Waldschule were committed to inclusion and to the success of all children:

... it was not easy to work at the Waldschule at the beginning. Those teachers who did not believe in what we were doing left the school. I can probably say that it was a natural process of selection (Focus group interview with teachers)

Teachers also reported that they appreciated the presence of a steering group that could provide them with indications on the priorities and how to address them. This steering group was made up of the school principal along with four colleagues. Its purpose was to bring new ideas and to put them into practice, in cooperation with other bodies such as the University of Flensburg. A monthly seminar was also held in order to keep all personnel updated with relevant information and recent news in education and research.

Leadership was a critical factor for the development of inclusion in the Waldschule. The school principal was a supporter of inclusion from the very beginning and his influence could be seen in each school activity. His experience as a former specialised teacher and as a former principal of a special school were significant factors in fostering the development of inclusion:

... if and when special education gets in contact with the mainstream, the latter will inevitably have to change (school principal)

The principal has changed the school from a failing school into a high-performing, inclusive school. He understood that he needed to trust his teachers and provide them with all the assistance and support they needed, both in terms of the re-organisation of teaching and learning and the provision of additional resources whenever possible. However, as the principal himself remarked in terms of resources:

... it was not an issue of providing more resources to the school but to use the ones we had already got in a different way (school principal).

Such a statement indicated that the Waldschule had developed an inclusive approach to the use of resources that were allocated for learners with disabilities – by using resources for all learners in the classroom. Learners reported that support/specialised teachers were always available to give them a hand if needed. They were not considered to be only for the learners with disabilities.

Other forms of support within the school include the provision of a variety of projects during the school year. Each project aims at increasing the participation of all learners in school, especially those learners at risk of being marginalised. The Waldschule had taken part in a project known as the 'circus project', which fostered the integration of traveller children. This project entailed collaboration with traveller families and with parents and other stakeholders of the community that were invited to take part in the initiative. Such a project not only reinforced the participation of traveller children in the school but also strengthened the involvement of the local community in school activities and initiatives. Parents, in fact, participated actively in the organisation of the project by providing their specific expertise to the school.

Support for learners and family involvement

Along with the support provided to learners by teachers and additional teaching staff, pupils can also rely on the support of their classmates. In the focus group interviews with learners, they reported that when they had a problem they knew they could ask classmates for help.

Peer tutoring is a crucial aspect of the support provided to the learners within the classroom. In this way, learners are given the chance to develop autonomy and become responsible adults. In particular, they can practice skills such as conflict management, having taken part in a course on this. Following the course, each classroom had a nominated learner to act as a mediator of any conflicts in the classroom.

The learners know that they can refer both to their classmate, who acts as a conflict mediator, as well as to one of the different adults who works in the classroom during the

daily activities. Learners reported that feeling part of a group and experiencing peer tutoring are two fundamental sources of support in their process of learning. Each classroom has a class book in which learners can write their conflicts and how they were willing to manage them. In addition, each classroom has a box where learners can collect messages from others. Such messages are delivered to each learner at the end of the week on a personal basis.

The issue of learner voice was also central at the Waldschule. The school has a learner Parliament where learners can make their needs and requests to the school bodies. Each classroom nominates a representative to be a member of the learner Parliament. During the focus group interviews, learners expressed very clearly that they felt that their voices were being heard and were seriously considered if they wanted to change something they did not like.

Similarly, parents felt that their voices were being heard in the school both in terms of advice on how the school could improve things and support to school projects and initiatives. Parents are also members of a charity club that is attempting to raise money for the school. An example of such collaboration between parents and the school staff can be found in the video that is produced by the school in collaboration with parents every year. The video not only provides information about what the school offers to children in terms of learning, but also about the positive climate that can be found in the school both at the level of teaching and administrative personnel.

As for the teachers, parents felt that Waldschule was their own school:

... this is our school and we want to do our best to help the teachers and the principal to make it a better place for our children (Focus group interview with parents)

When asked why they had chosen the Waldschule for their children, parents commented upon the issue of providing support as being central for their choice.

... we know that all children have got all the support they need. In the class there are three adults at a time, this ensures that their needs are met. Teachers make a difference (Focus group interview with parents)

They also listed the following points as being central for choosing Waldschule:

- The empathetic and caring attitudes of teachers
- The development of social skills along with the academic goals
- The good home-school communication
- The variety of school projects during the school year
- The flexible organisation of teaching and learning within the school and classrooms (including the presence of more adults within the classroom and the mixed grade classrooms)

Parents also articulated their positive attitudes towards learners with disabilities as a result of the way in which the school dealt with their education:

... when you enter the Waldschule you do not see many learners with disabilities, you do not have the feeling that this is also a school for learners with disabilities. The problem with including learners with disabilities is more a parents' problem than a child's problem. Parents are used to the model of segregation in Germany and it is difficult to accept that there can be another model (Focus group interview with parents)

In general, parents felt that they could trust the school as a community of learning for their children and agreed with the different organisation of teaching and learning:

... the school has got a system of open classes, which means that the child can stay one or two years in the same classroom before he or she can move to the following grade. This allows all children to develop at their own pace without any pressure (Focus group interview with parents)

According to parents, Waldschule seems to have found a good compromise between being a school that aims to raise the academic standards for all learners, including those with disabilities, and transforming learners' heterogeneity into a strength of the school.

INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

The key aspects supporting the move towards inclusive policy and practice in Flensburg can be summarised as follow:

- A change in the culture is a key to transformation towards inclusion – the community of Flensburg developed a new way of conceptualising diversity that led to the education of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools
- Strong leadership was fundamental to the move towards inclusion – examples of this leadership included: the inclusion letters by the inspector and the support from strongly committed school principals and teachers
- Community support - the city of Flensburg was able to create a system of support made up of different stakeholders such as: health system, local municipality, special schools, resource centres and social welfare system.
- Multi-disciplinary teamwork - stakeholders belonging to different educational and social sectors were able to collaborate and work together as a single organisation sharing the same principles and goals.
- School teamwork – teachers and educational staff were able to develop strategies to work together and provide support to all learners within the school
- A new role for the special sector - the special sector (school principals and teachers, resource centres and special schools) was identified as a crucial lever for change towards inclusion. Support/specialised teachers and special school principals were able to transfer their expertise into the mainstream school
- Re-shuffling the existing resources – Inclusion was not simply an issue of additional resources but a way of re-organising existing resources to increase capacity.

SUSTAINING THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS

The community of Flensburg has provided the Agency project with an excellent example of collaboration and networking as a way of supporting the process of inclusion for learners with disabilities in mainstream settings. However, there are a series of concerns that the community of Flensburg needs to address in order to ensure the continued development of inclusive mainstream settings.

One concern that was expressed during the study visit was that of sustainability of the process of providing support necessary to include learners with disabilities in mainstream settings. What has been identified as being the strength of the community of Flensburg, i.e. its strong leadership made up of committed stakeholders could become problematic if

actions and interventions are not made to ensure that when these key actors are gone, the system of support remains in place.

Similarly, it is necessary to make all efforts to ensure that the Länder of S-H, which is at the forefront of the process of inclusion in Germany, can continue its journey towards inclusion, with the support of the new politicians in power. For example, the process of changing special schools into outsourcing resource centres, such as the experience of the SfS now serving the local mainstream schools, must be supported both financially and politically by the ministerial bodies.

KEY LEARNING POINTS AND AREAS OF FURTHER DISCUSSION

Ainscow (2005) indicated that the presence of external observers and critical friends, can provide schools and communities with an opportunity to reflect on ways to further develop the process of inclusion. The visit of the Agency team provided such an opportunity to the community of Flensburg.

Along with the issues of sustainability highlighted in the previous section, the community of Flensburg along with the Agency team identified a series of areas that need to be further investigated. This includes the need to:

- Educate all school principals and other school leaders about the principles of inclusion. It is undoubtedly true that leaders represent a key factor in the process of change towards inclusion
- Provide incentives to encourage schools and educational staff in general to develop inclusive approaches. Such incentives may include both the allocation of additional resources or funding (through prizes, awards), but also ways of celebrating the efforts and the work done by a school or a community to support learners with disabilities in mainstream settings (e.g. local and national acknowledgements)
- Develop skills concerning crisis management, which enable the school to benefit from difficult situations and use these as a way to promote change
- Consider using another word instead of 'inclusion' as this has become loaded down with conflicting agendas (e.g. special schools versus mainstream schools) to the detriment of children
- Develop additional statistics that emphasise the process of inclusion rather than the number of learners with disabilities
- Address the education of learners with severe disabilities and with behavioural difficulties in mainstream classrooms by developing forms of inclusive teaching and learning
- Develop the role of organisations of people with disabilities as advocates for the development of inclusion. Their experiences could be used to build the capacity of local stakeholders and to ensure that the rights of people with disabilities are at the forefront of policy measures.
- Take note of the UN Convention of Persons with Disabilities which put an emphasis on the need to reduce all forms of segregation in education and reduce the segregation into separate institutions that is still happening for some learners
- Address the problem of diagnoses. The German legislation classifies learners with disabilities into many different categories and the process of categorisation and statementing procedures are still the prerequisites of the process of mainstreaming

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The community of Flensburg has made the case that the organisation of provision to support inclusive education requires a strong collaboration between education, social work, resource centres and health departments. Most importantly, all actors need to share the same values and principles and act in collegial partnership, rather than simply as a well co-ordinated networking system.

The sharing of values and inclusive beliefs among the different actors in the community of Flensburg has reduced disagreement and conflicts, and overcome institutional areas of weakness, in particular in relation to the allocation of resources, both at the level of personnel and of funding. The close collaboration between the different actors has increased opportunities for learners with disabilities who can count on the inter-agency and inter-professional support of different organisations.

The Waldschule and the whole community of Flensburg can be described as a *community of practice* as they act as a single body or organisation that relies on the knowledge and participation of all its different members to solve common problems and make inclusion happen. The community of Flensburg is capable of providing resources and support throughout a learners' life in a continuum of interventions with the simultaneous engagement of families and the community. The collaboration developed by the community of Flensburg is more effective as it has been internally driven, and not the result of externally imposed programmes and legislation.

During the study visit, most of the interviewees reported that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) was not used as a lever for change, but rather as an accountability tool that could foster the shift from segregation into inclusion.

In general, the whole community of Flensburg feels that it is responsible for the education of learners with disabilities and is willing to commit resources to fight against all forms of discrimination. In struggling to find its own way to address problems and provide solutions, the community has been creative in finding alternative ways to use existing resources.

The community believes in an education system that acts at the level of prevention and focuses on early childhood intervention, rather than on learners' deficits. It has put in place different forms of support that can strengthen the mainstream school system and help learners and families at risk of marginalisation.

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ANNEX 1: Flensburg Way of Inclusion

