

“25plus” Initiative of the Austrian Ministry of Education: Individualising Learning and Teaching

Starting with the school year 2007/2008, maximum pupil numbers per class will be reduced within a period of four years. This action will apply to grades 1 – 4 of elementary schools, grades 1 – 4 of general secondary and academic secondary schools, to pre-vocational school and to certain sectors of secondary level II.

Fewer pupils per class will help enhance individualised teacher support, but will *not automatically* improve the quality of teaching.

With the “25plus” Initiative, designed to individualise learning and teaching, the Ministry for Education will give new impetus to the joint further development of class-work practice at Austrian schools. The idea is to highlight a principle already anchored in the existing curricula, the application of which however requires joint effort on the part of all the stakeholders.

The Initiative relates to the continuum of teaching methods and of measures employed in organising learning and teaching, all of which start from the assumption that learning is a highly personal, self-reliant activity of each individual pupil. Individualisation is aimed at fostering and challenging pupils, taking account of their personalities, of learning conditions and learning capacities. Hence, special attention will be paid to monitoring learning levels, class-work planning, task design and performance feedback.

The Initiative starts from the assumption that diversity (heterogeneity) is the standard prevailing at schools in terms of both individual differences and differences between social groups. Pupils differ, for example, in performance capacity, learning style, learning speed, motivation, mother tongue, sex, and social background. As is generally known, the “average” pupil belongs to the realm of statistics.

A whole range of options for dealing with this fact in class teaching has been developed at Austrian schools: learning and teaching arrangements, such as team teaching, open learning, weekly plan work, project work, various forms of internal differentiation (e.g. small groups, learning workshops), periodic individual feedback as well as alternative and/or complementary forms of performance assessment (e.g. portfolio) – just to mention a few. So, the “25plus” Initiative for individualising class work is anything but a “new start” in terms of pedagogics. It is not an extra task, but the continuous and professional development of existing class-work practice in the sign of growing heterogeneity in classes and learning groups.

In practical terms this means that the Ministry for Education will – in the four years to come – stimulate pertinent measures on a broad basis beyond reducing the maximum number of pupils per class. Such measures will include information events, PR activities, the production of material, the dissemination of good practice as well as in-service training targeted at key actors. Pilot and/or model projects and their evaluation are supposed to generate new findings and help to spread good practice. Particular attention will be paid to the educational benefit that may be derived from the use of the new media (e.g. learning platforms).

Austrian schools have been requested to get actively involved in the project as of the school year 2007/08. This can mean that, starting from the needs and requirements prevailing at school locations and making allowance for the operating environment of specific school types,

- prevailing learning and teaching routines and/or their usefulness need to be examined,
- new forms of learning and teaching need to be tested,
- more scope needs to be given to individual feedback and recommendations concerning support to pupils,
- the assessment of the performance of each individual pupil needs to be rendered transparent and comprehensible,
- the schools' repertoires as regards methods, didactics and learning diagnostics need to be broadened,
- cooperation within teams of teachers needs to be intensified,
- pertinent in-service training programmes need to be taken up,
- the potential and options of the new media need to be utilised,
- the development of class work and of schools needs to be consistently pursued.

As of the school year 2008/2009, schools will need to commit themselves to the implementation of specific measures, which they will have to plan, monitor and document under a quality development and assurance system, and which they will have to agree with the school inspectorate in talks on funding and objectives.