

Application for school prize

The Sekundarschule in Rheinhausen Duisburg was founded in 2015. It is situated in one of the poorer areas of Duisburg. The principal and her team started with great enthusiasm, motivated by one of their chief objectives, to create a safe learning environment for their students, many who have a variety of challenges.

The team found themselves confronted by many obstacles: a great number of their students come from broken homes, live in poverty, are heavily traumatized by neglect and abuse and do not speak German well enough to follow the lessons. As a result of their upbringing, the students are often lacking social competence and the ability to concentrate on the contents of the lessons. A 45 minutes lesson, taught frontally, would have been an insurmountable task for teachers and students. The teaching team truly believed that students should learn more in lessons than subject content. So the solution had to lie elsewhere.

The principal, a participant of the workshops, my husband Norm and I did years ago, and a committed trainer of cooperative learning, had gathered a lot of experience with cooperative learning at her former school and considered this way of teaching and working the only possible way to cope with their current challenges. Further, this model of instruction would create a learning atmosphere that 'turned tourists into citizens'. Many teachers on her team shared this vision as well thus, with this mandate in mind, she focussed on like-minded teachers when assembling her staff. She selected educators who shared her idea of a learning community and those who were willing to put their efforts into working as a team to help students learn together. Thus the school opened with a handful of enthusiastic teachers who have developed a school curriculum that considers students and teachers as partners, an environment that helps students grow in an atmosphere of encouragement and support. Over the years, new teachers have joined the teaching team and they were introduced to cooperative learning and coached by their colleagues. They monitored and shared lessons. They were given the opportunity to attend workshops or training and they were encouraged to come up with new ideas to make it their own.

At first, one of the biggest challenges, was that most of the applicants were young and inexperienced teachers. A great number came from other professions and did not study to become teachers. However, what seemed to be initially a disadvantage, turned out to be an advantage. Those inexperienced teachers were eager to learn and circumstances made them want to learn quickly. The well established network of mutual support and sharing in the school coupled with the carefully selected team, gave the new colleagues a rich learning environment that helped them face and overcome the challenges of working with the students. It took and still takes a lot of motivation, commitment and energy from the whole staff to maintain this positive outcome and the work load is daunting – but the progress the students make is their reward and their shared understanding of teaching and learning is their guide line.

Visitors come to this school expecting to see disruptive students who are not interested in learning and who do not achieve well academically. Often they leave the school wondering if what they saw could be true. In each classroom the tables are arranged in groups. Students work together well with a minimum of disruption and there is a culture of respect between students and teachers. Working together is the norm and the students know and abide by

the rules. More than once the visitor is surprised by the way the students present their results and display their competence in communicating ideas. Their presentations give proof of the power of learning to work well in a team and the fact, that cooperative learning can enhance an individual's success both academic and social. Students are encouraged to develop their own way of learning, according to their own abilities, but they also learn from each other and thus can overcome learning difficulties or anxieties by sharing and getting support from their fellow students.

It is my sincere wish that all the colleagues at this school will find the energy to prevail, to disprove prejudice against their school and against their students in particular. I would encourage more good teachers who share this high moral purpose to come to this school using their talents to help these students find and create a way into a better future. Finally, it is my fervent hope that this school will get the appreciation and recognition they deserve for all their herculean and admirable efforts.

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