

## **GIVING OPPORTUNITIES, LEAVING DISADVANTAGES**

**Case Studies of programmes from  
three EU Countries to prevent dropping out**



*G.O.L.D.* transnational partnership  
within the framework  
of EU's Equal programme

No. 280

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Case Studies of programmes from three EU Countries  
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# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Step by step in Kiskőrös</b>	<b>11</b>
Introduction	11
The background of the programme	12
The introduction and implementation of the programme	13
The students	15
The teachers	16
The school and its surroundings	17
Results, failures	18
Summary	19
Resources	20
<b>The concept of Natural Learning at the Educational Campus Winschoten</b>	<b>21</b>
Introduction	21
Natural learning, theory and practice	22
Lines of learning and development	26
Conclusion	31
Used sources	34
<b>The concept of Slash 21 at the School community Marianum in Lichtenvoorde</b>	<b>35</b>
Introduction	35
Concept and school	36
Evaluation/conclusion	42
References	44
<b>Piazza dei Mestieri</b>	<b>45</b>
Introduction	45
History	45
Current activity	47
The project objectives in the short, medium and long term	50
The methodology applied	52
Future sustainability	55
<b>The Bencs methodology</b>	<b>57</b>
Introduction	57
The programme of the school	58
Conclusion	67
Resources	68



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## Introduction

The case studies in this book were made in an international cooperative programme, the so called GOLD, which was established within Equal programme by three organisations of the European Union. These organisations dedicated themselves to realising pilot school programmes in their own countries for disadvantaged youngsters, which are either intended to prevent them from dropping out of secondary vocational education or to create new training opportunities for those who have already left their studies behind without getting completed educational attainment.

The programme's name GOLD is an acronym formed from the initial letters of "Giving Opportunities, Leaving Disadvantages". Besides exchanging their experiences with each other and working on a common research on these issues, the participating organisations also decided on publishing a case study book of the most successful implementations and initiatives concerning reducing drop out rates in education. Our intention with this case study book including examples of "good practice" is to draw attention to an issue of high priority, but is also to get through to professionals who might become interested in the methodologies which were made available for use here. If they find useful and worth applying certain elements of these methodologies to their own schools, then can directly contact the institutes where the projects were carried out to get a deeper insight into them.

For lack of space, all the activities of the participating organisations and their three projects (which are either completed or will be finished soon) cannot be discussed here in details, so we can only briefly introduce them to the reader so that they can get some insight of the background of this international cooperation.

Onderwijs campus Winschoten (<http://www.onderwijscampus.nl/>) located in Winschoten, a small town in the north of the Netherlands, implemented a programme that provides common educational principles in a common campus as bases for both prevocational and vocational training, so that transition from prevocational to vocational phase would be easier for young students, and thus drop out rates, which used to be quite significantly high, would also decrease. Further details of the programme and its methodological background will be discussed in one of the case studies.

The Italian Piazza dei Mestieri (<http://www.piazzadeimestieri.it/>) is a typical "second chance" school which, as an integrated part of the local educational system, by applying unusual teaching solutions tries to provide professional education valued in the labour market for youngsters who dropped out of other schools or could not even get into any of them.



The leading partner of the Italian Equal SCIE project, Associazione Consorzio Scuole Lavoro (CSL) from Turin, intends to spread the good practice of their pilot project Piazza dei Mestieri (PdM) (<http://www.piazzadeimestieri.it/>) in another Italian contexts like Milan, Naples and Catania. This is a Foundation (Fondazione PdM) settled up on the basis of the so called PPP (Public-Private Partnership) model in which it also operate a Training Agency (Immaginazione e Lavoro), an Association (Associazione PdM) which deals with the cultural and leisure activities for the youngsters, a Cooperative (Cooperativa PdM) which deals with the several production activities which work, at the same time, as protected laboratories for the students. It is, in fact, a model of *second chance school* which, as an integrated part of the local educational system, by applying unusual teaching solutions tries to provide professional education valued in the labour market for youngsters who dropped out of other schools or could not even get into any of them.

The Hungarian National Transit Employment Association (Országos Tranzitfoglalkoztatási Egyesület – <http://www.resegyesulet.hu/ote/>) situated in Debrecen represents all those civil organisations which have so-called transit employment projects and supports the projects' implementation by various tools, as well as by spreading the word about the programmes' success. They aim to experiment in working out new methodologies in school environment based on the experiences gained in the civil sector in the "Second Chance" project of Equal programme, and they have chosen the First Hungarian-Danish Productive School (Első magyar-dán Termelőiskola) in Zalaegerszeg as a venue for the realisation of this.

The four case studies in this book show different initiatives of dealing with dropping out of school. They were selected for publication from many other similar programmes in their countries by the professionals who participated in the international cooperative programme.

On one hand these case studies indicate that there is no single, ideal model, which would unambiguously solve the problem of early school leaving, but on the other hand they all show similar features. Even if the social backgrounds, the labour markets, the needy are different in the particular countries, and also they have different educational systems, the origins of their problems are very similar, so are the solutions. As we can see the biggest and the most common problem is that students lack motivation that is why every case study emphasises the high priority of stimulating their students to show interest in learning, working and sometimes simply in everyday life, as a project element. They realised that making students become genuinely interested in these issues they need programmes, activities and stimuli that are familiar to them from their own lives, culture and thinking. It is common in all the case studies that their programmes are practice oriented meaning that the traditional way of educating, giving the theoretical input first as a basis for later practical training, reverses and

practical training becomes the focal point of teaching and followed by theoretical knowledge to complete it.

We can find however quite a few differences in the details. For example the most significant difference between the Hungarian and the Dutch case studies is the extent to which the student or the school contribute to the composition of the programmes on offer. The Dutch examples are based on the so-called natural learning methodology, which provides a lot of self-reliance for the students, but the Hungarian ones are rather based on project methodology. The different approaches, in our interpretation, mostly originate from their different social traditions and educational systems. The first is based on a rather decentralised system where "self-conscious" citizens try to decide on their own lives, and the latter is on rather centralised traditions of French- Prussian historical origins, where the "enlightened" leaders try to find the best solution from the options for the members of their society, in this case for their students. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and we do not think that either one approach or the other is better.

Contact with the society and its institutes has an important role in each of the case studies, because they do not intend to carry out school experimental programmes that are isolated. They find important to rely on the local communities, their institutes, professionals and of course the families to uncover the potential reasons for school failures and to cease them, and also to get help in assessing the students' achievements and results. The demand for co-operation between schools and the economic sector is more pronounced in the Dutch examples than in the Hungarian ones. Partially because the school in the case study is not a vocational training institute, so the question is irrelevant, and partially because co-operation between schools and companies is traditionally stilted in Hungary. Providing mental help however appears to be more emphasised in the Hungarian examples, which involves greater presence of mental professionals and institutes in their projects, in many cases in the forms of partnerships as well.

Of course the differences due to the different development stages also become obvious, because they have better chances to use the opportunities IT provides in the Netherlands than in Hungary where they cannot rely on them to the same extent. Although it is not apparent from the case studies, but can be suspected that lack of teacher competences and not just missing or limited IT facilities or limited access to IT contributes to the problem.

Our case studies show that thinking together about common issues despite the historical and social backgrounds is possible and worth doing.

Our book of case studies unfortunately will not provide enough information and guidance in depth for those who might become interested in one of the methodologies and wishes to use it in their practices, so we suggest that should contact the institute of the programme they are interested in, and then, after getting a more thorough insight of their methods, they should adapt them to their local needs. That is what we would like to contribute to with this book of case studies.



## Step by step in Kiskőrös

### Introduction

The methodology discussed in the following is associated with a school in Kiskőrös, which is a town in the middle part of Hungary. The town itself has approximately 15 thousand inhabitants, but being a regional centre of 15 villages roughly 50 thousand citizens belong to it altogether including the town's population.

The school<sup>1</sup> that implemented the project had provided special education for children who have learning difficulties owing to minor mental problems before. These type of schools that educate children with special needs have had a well established institutional network for a long time, and they have always followed independent schooling programmes carried out either independently or as a separate department of a school. Children who have learning difficulties, but not necessary because of their mental problems, but because of their social backgrounds which do not provide enough socialisation schools require, have always got into these special classes, sometimes in small sometimes in great numbers, because they have not been accepted into comprehensive schools where the majority of children are educated. Comprehensive schools quite often (mostly used to be true in the past) try to get rid of those kids who create problems for the teachers in their everyday work. The regulations concerning state school funding used to support this attitude, but now, partially because they have changed and financing integrated education has become more well-established and partially as a result of professional expectations, fewer and fewer kids are forced to go to special classes for the mentally handicapped if they are not, but are perfectly appropriate for normal class development. Of course good intentions and pure financing stimuli are not enough for integrated education, they have to have suitable methodologies. And that's the field where the school in Kiskőrös was highly innovative.

Actually the school tried to find solutions to two of their problems, and when they got familiar with the *Step by Step* programme, they decided on

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<sup>1</sup> The official name of the School is "Bács-Kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Óvodája, Általános Iskolája, Előkészítő Szakiskolája és Egységes Gyógypedagógiai Módszertani Intézménye, Kiskőrös." (Municipal Kindergarten, Primary School, Preparatory School and Central Methodological Institute for Children with Special Needs of Bács-Kiskun County in Kiskőrös) Their website is <http://www.egymi.hu/egymi.php?content=udvozlet>

renewing their methodologies. One of their targets to achieve was to help the students who have learning difficulties owing to missing or underdeveloped competences, but are not mentally handicapped to get gradually from special education to the normal educational system, because that is where, according to their philosophy, they should be. Another aim was to handle the issue of dropping out of school, because, as they experienced, the majority of those students affected, after a series of learning failures, leave their studies behind early and incomplete without getting any qualifications, thus making their lives later difficult.

Parallel with their methodological novelties, the school extended their services and clients as well, and now they have new departments, a kindergarten, a preparatory course for vocational school<sup>2</sup>, but also a special group for autistic kids.

Being traditionally a regional institute, the school is maintained by the county council and not by the local authorities. In addition to education, they also provide professional services, the so-called early development of skills and competences <sup>3</sup>, for their (Kiskőrös) small region and for one of the neighbouring small regions, but they also supply kindergarten and school age children with special physical education training and remedial speech correction and therapy.

Besides fulfilling its literal teaching tasks, the institute also functions as a methodological centre, because they try to hand over their well established methods and experiences to other institutes or teachers who are interested, in an organised way. It is not insignificant at all, considering that students who are found appropriate for integrated education should be transferred to a suitable, understanding environment, to institutes that not just simply receive them into, but are also able to educate them distinctively as they need.

Our case study is based on various Internet resources and six interviews carried out with the leaders and teachers of the model school and some of its followers, and with the director of *Ec-Pec Alapítvány* (Ec-Pec Foundation), which provides the backgrounds for the programme.

## The background of the programme

Their programme is based on the principles of the *Step by step* programme developed by American professionals in the 1990's with the directions of the *Open Society Institute*. The programme has solid theoretical foundations and basic values, such as democracy, co-operation and tolerance, which form the

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<sup>2</sup> In the Hungarian vocational education students, followed by their eight-year primary education, start with an initial two- year phase of general training and then they can begin their actual professional training.

<sup>3</sup> In case of children under 3.

bases for educational principles, such as openness, ensuring individual development and student-friendly environment, and the necessity of getting the families involved as well. Their methodologies are based on the same principles, regarding learning as an enjoyable activity, which makes the participants motivated for learning. Their methodologies include team work, co-operative learning, project based teaching, differentiation, and special classroom arrangements that support all these. The programme has not become fossilised, it has been changing all the time, adjusted to local needs and the special requirements of the different countries. Even individual elements of the programme can be adapted, if somebody decides on that.

Any kind of educational institute can apply these methodologies, but obviously they are especially appropriate for those kids who are not motivated for learning at home, so the school has a special role in forming a need for it.

*Ec-Pec Alapítvány* (Ec-Pec Foundation) took on the task of disseminating the programme in Hungary, so it is up to them that the school in Kiskőrös got acquainted with it.

## **The introduction and implementation of the programme**

It used to be a big problem in the institute that quite a few of their students (mostly Romany) dropped out of school or did not attend school on a regular basis, so they could not meet the requirements of the curricula, and ended up in failing their school year. The school was not able to establish proper contact with their parents, which could have helped in handling the problems.

The school got the opportunity to join an international survey in 2000. The survey carried out in Eastern Europe was to find out whether methodologies that differ from traditional ones would help children who have learning difficulties to an extent that after a remedial period they could continue their studies not segregated from the others, but integrated into classes with other students of average learning abilities. This programme initiated the launch of an experimental pilot class. The experiment turned out to be a success story, half of the students could get into the comprehensive school and were able there to keep up with the others and the requirements. Seeing the good results, the school management started to brainstorm whether they should use these or similar methodologies not only in one special class, but in their whole school system. That's how Step by Step programme was selected.

The programme focuses on improving communication skills and working in groups. They do not ignore the importance of the rules of the outer world which the students will meet face to face after finishing their studies, so it is a high priority to make their students acquire them. The programme they introduced and have been applying ever since emphasises the significance of

getting the students' parents involved, regarding them as partners in the processes of teaching and learning.

Education is not limited to making students acquire factual encyclopaedic knowledge, but to teach students how to cope with problems on their own when they meet them, and if they feel that they are not able to, how to ask for help from somebody. The basic principle is to make students understand that not knowing something is not a problem by itself, but they should know who to turn to for getting the necessary information or guidance to sort out their problems and to know how to ask for help. As we can see, the programme focuses on improving social skills and competences, because by acquiring them students learn that even if we are different, we are still able to live together and to co-operate with others.

Adapting their methodologies to the Hungarian educational system, they worked out different methods for the junior and the senior sections of primary education. The co-operative method is highlighted in the junior section (first four grades), and in the senior section (5-8 grades) project-based work is noticeable. All subjects are taught with project methodology, and a project usually lasts for one- one and a half months. In a project children are given or they chose a task which best suits their abilities or interest, e.g. they make researches, collect data and information, make interviews, edit school boards. They can work individually, in pairs or in small groups. The parents can get involved in the collection part of the projects. In project work, based on a chosen topic, students get acquainted with the different disciplines (mathematics, physical education etc.) that it involves.

Uniquely in Hungary, the school does not follow any curricula, but work in accordance with project networks and time schedules. It is a summer task for the teachers to prepare the projects. The project network is a result of team work, and it includes in details the problems to be solved, what the purposes are, what topics a subject should cover and what kind of skills and competences they are going to develop. They prepare progress plans and schedules, in which project presentations are recorded in advance. When the details are worked out, the students also participate in the job.

The methodologies applied for education should be modified according to the students' needs, because mentally handicapped children and students who have underdeveloped skills and competences study together, so when projects are planned their different abilities, skills and targeted developments should be taken into consideration.

Differentiation follows through with all the processes of learning and teaching, because even if students study segregated from other students in a special school, they accomplish integrated education within their school, meaning that students of different learning difficulties (either owing to mental problems or to underdeveloped skills) co-operate and work together in the classrooms. Establishing good relationship between the school and the parents is a high priority. Parents are not only to be informed, but are also

invited to participate in everyday school life, and are sometimes given some tasks which enhance their kids' school duties.

Character building (improving personality traits) is part of their programme, there is a special educational needs (SEN) teacher who is also trained as an educational psychologist to help the students.

They have an afternoon programme for senior students who can choose from various extra curriculum activities, but they also have other cultural, sport programmes organised occasionally

Evaluation has a very important role in efficient project management. It is two-folded, on one hand it linearly and continuously follows up the progress the student made from kindergarten to the tenth grade, but on the other hand it also shows how much progress and at what pace the student made compared to him/herself. For the latter the student's self-assessment, his/her fellow-mates's evaluation and his/her teachers' feedback all add up to. The students' products as results of their individual achievement are collected and stored in their individual project portfolios, which are evaluated when a project expires. Their parents are also shown these portfolios, so that they can also see their kids' results and follow up their progress. As we can see, portfolios represent a significant element of the assessment system, because they are the best means of monitoring the students' progress.

In both the junior and the senior sections of the school they put emphasis on finishing the projects and on displaying the project's results. When project results are formally presented, the parents, the partners, the siblings and other relatives are invited for the event. The school contributes special importance to indicating to the kids' relatives the whole distance the students covered, where they started from, from what level and what levels they reached. Parents are invited all the time to participate actively in the school's life, they even have a special parents' club.

Unlike the traditional grading report books typical in other schools of the Hungarian educational system, they assess the junior section students' achievement and progress in text form at the end of the school year. Adapting themselves to the requirements of the Hungarian educational system, they start grading in the fifth class.

## **The students**

There are altogether 185 kids in the kindergarten and the school. Quite a few of their students are disabled or need special education. There are eleven children in the kindergarten group, and ten autistic children in a special group, the others are pupils at the school.

Seriously disabled children used to attend a school in Kecskemét, which is the county capital 60 kilometres from Kiskőrös. Commuting or boarding



however proved to be failures. On one hand because the parents were reluctant to get separated from their kids, finding everyday commuting difficult to realise, and on the other because even professionals regard local school attendance more beneficial for children, thus providing a better and more complex socialisation with the active participation of their families.

A county level educational and rehabilitation committee (consisting of a special educational needs (SEN) teacher, a junior section teacher, a doctor and psychologist who phrase their opinion as a decision together) is to decide on the special school the kids should attend if they needed by surveying their learning abilities. Parents, district nurses, paediatricians, family welfare services and kindergarten staff can all initiate a ruling examination at the committee if they think it is necessary, but in practice, mostly kindergarten staff notice first if a kid would need special learning programme later on. Half of the students live in Kiskőrös, and the other half commute from approximately 16 villages. Their social backgrounds are very heterogeneous, we can find qualified doctors or unemployed Romany amongst the parents.

Completing their special education the children can either go to ordinary comprehensive schools or kindergartens, but they can decide on continuing their studies in the same institute. When they consider their students' further studies, it is a very important criterion and aim that they would not go to so-called special educational needs vocational professional schools, but to normal, comprehensive schools. Of course it is not always achievable, because seriously handicapped students also attend the school.

Experience shows that the most significant factor in school failures and dropping out originate from the students' social backgrounds, and if they manage to get the parents involved in their kids' project-based education, the chances of eliminating the handicaps multiply, and the children can get back into general education. Normally it happens within a year, but sometimes it takes 2 or 4 years to step forward. The school targets to achieve that in all cases, and when their students manage it, they let them go on their own ways.

## **The teachers**

There are 36 teachers at the school to deal with the students' needs. Some of them are trainers with special project educational qualifications who specialise in project education and co-operative learning. Fourteen of their teachers are teacher trainers who transfer the methodologies the school adapted and developed to other schools.

The school staff are very well qualified, many of them have three degrees. They all feel important to improve their methodological knowledge and participate in further training sessions. They organise workshops in the school, which, with their problem oriented and exploratory discussions in

teams all contribute to their success. They have become an efficient work team for the last 5-6 years, so even if they have to work under a lot of work load and stressed, they are able to cope with it, because they are highly motivated. The school actively participates in tender applications. Their motivation is supported by their continuous everyday success. The positive feedback they receive from the students and their parents gives them a lot of stamina and power, but the feedback they get from other professionals is also very helpful. Presentation lessons also to keep up high motivation of the teachers, when colleagues can observe each other's teaching activities and comment on them on survey sheets by giving their opinion and making remarks. For the same reason they keep a "thank you" (Köszönöm neked) diary, in which the technical staff and the teachers can give feedback to each other when they feel that somebody solved a problem in a successful way, which was also beneficial for them.

We should remark here that the school staff are directed by a very ambitious and energetic headmistress who managed to introduce the current methodologies with a lot of hard work and thus established a very innovative attitude in the school.

Unlike traditional Hungarian school staff, they work in teams and not in subject based teacher communities. The teams are organised for a particular professional task, and even the senior section teachers who participate in projects form project teams. The working processes of a team can be easily and flexibly modified while the project realisation is in progress. The separate teams co-operate with each other and represent professional control for each other.

## **The school and its surroundings**

For efficient school work they have to be in touch with the various local institutes and organisations. They are able to cope with their everyday problems with the assistance of their own professionals. There are only very few cases when they have to ask for help from outsider psychologists or psychiatrist. At the same time they have family issues that belong to the concerning welfare and social services and institutes or to the local authorities, such as drug prevention, traffic and road safety questions, when occasionally they have to involve other professionals.

The school is respected by the maintaining county council for their achievement. They have been supporting the school as much as they can, and the school building itself is a result of that. It is true that the old school building was inappropriate for special project based education, but practically it was inappropriate for any kind activities. The new building with its flexible

arrangement is suitable for separating the groups from each other without the feeling of isolation.

Not only does the school provide education, but also operates as a methodological centre. They try their best to transfer their experiences as intensively as possible to other institutes, because their target is to provide integrated education initially for all the special educational needs students. It is of high priority in other villages, because commuting to Kiskőrös on an everyday basis would be quite demanding for them. For financing teacher training in the neighbouring villages they use their own resources (given for that activity as one of their basic services), but they have to rely on project funds as well gained from tender applications.

Potential future teacher training for transferring their experiences occurred to them originally as an idea in 2000, but actually got realised only in 2002 in a PHARE programme. Teacher training as one of their basic activities and professional services was officially declared in 2005. They organise further training courses and conferences for teachers, have presentation lessons and provide professional consultation for primary schools. At the moment they have contact with eight educational institutes and a Romany foundation in the framework of a national project. The Romany foundation organises workshops on gipsy culture.

According to the school's foundation documents, they should disseminate knowledge and information on county level, but in practice they do it with a much bigger radius. The two-day conferences they organise with practical presentation lessons are visited by participants who arrive from various different parts of Hungary. Besides the conferences and further training courses they launched a service of "travelling teacher". It means that they delegate a teacher professional to each school where there is a request for it, who helps to adapt the methods for their needs. On one hand the teacher professional helps with finding the methods best suit the school's requirements, and on the other hand he/she assists with demonstrating the most important tasks. In some cases this consultation and implementation processes take several months, while the professional transferring the model continuously monitors them in progress.

The dissemination of their methodologies is supported by the co-operations they have with many teacher training and special educational needs (SEN) teacher training departments at various universities, by providing trainee teachers professional training opportunities.

## **Results, failures**

There are no unambiguous indicators for evaluation, because their results can be interpreted in many ways and on many levels. The number of students

who get back to general comprehensive education is very important, but of course it cannot be used as a single measurement of success, because unfortunately not all of their students can use this opportunity. Not only does the school register the number of students who enrol their institute, but they also follow up their former students who get into secondary education by monitoring their school results, performance and stamina. They ensure the finances for the follow-up from project money they received for that purpose.

The number of school (subject or term) failures is also an important indicator of success, because a decrease in them proves that the student has already left a critical phase behind and can step out..

Of course soft indicators are also necessary to show success, but they cannot be transformed into figures. One of them is when students become active and learn how to learn, understand how to co-operate with others and make decisions in a responsible way. It is also part of success when the parents get involved in the school's life and when they children feel that they can rely on them realising tasks in connection with their school projects.

The programme was originally piloted in the junior section of the school in the first four grades and immediately and obviously showed success, because the students became more motivated and started to attend the school in a more devoted mood, but also, their parents began to show more interest in their kids' studies. Seeing these good results, the school staff decided on extending to programme to the senior section as well.

As feedback from former students who attend other schools shows, they successfully adapted themselves to the new environment. Their teachers think that it is a great achievement by itself, and as practice shows the programme has achieved its original target, because their students are motivated and acquired to study on their own.

The school management takes potential future difficulties which are not foreseeable and not up to them into account in advance. To be prepared enough when it is needed they continuously analyse the inner and outer situation of the school. A potential risk is that owing to a decrease in the number of children, they will be forced to make people redundant. The school management thinks that ensuring the position of a "travelling teacher" to as many teachers as possible would prevent them from losing their jobs. This idea helped them to keep the school staff together and also contributed a lot to the dissemination of their programme.

## Summary

The Kiskőrös school took up a programme which was originally to provide special integrated education for young students who have definable learning difficulties, but as they later realised it was appropriate for handling the

learning problems of those youngsters who have learning failures mostly owing to their social backgrounds and for preventing them from dropping out of school. One of the advantages of the school's activities is that they did not get stuck in the experimental, initial phase, and they have been able to disseminate their methodologies and to provide a useful alternative programme for schools where traditional teaching methods are still used. They put a lot of emphasis on certain, formally ignored areas, such as motivation, relationship with the parents, differentiation, which can give the missing extra push to keep students in education.

Figures show success only in the model Kiskőrös School, because their followers have been just gradually implementing their methodologies, and not necessarily all the elements, but as we can learn from the Kiskőrös School's experiences, success is quite likely to be widespread.

## Resources

- <http://www.ecpec.hu/II.html>
- <http://www.egymi.hu/egymi.php?content=udvozlet>

## Interviews

- Terézia Radicsné Szerencsés headmistress, Bács-Kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Óvodája, Általános Iskolája, Előkészítő Szakiskolája, és Egységes Gyógypedagógiai Módszertani Intézménye, Nevelési Tanácsadója, Kiskőrös (Kindergarten, Primary school, Preparatory School, Central Methodological Centre for Special Educational needs and Professional Educational Service of Bács-Kiskun County Authorities in Kiskőrös)
- László Bella headmaster, Bem József Általános Iskola, Kiskőrös (Bem József Primary School, Kiskőrös)
- Éva Herczegné Koch, teacher, Arany János Általános Iskola, Kecel (Arany János Primary School, Kecel)
- Helga Hímerné Komáromi teacher, Arany János Általános Iskola, Kecel (Arany János Primary School, Kecel)
- Melinda Pető, professional director of Ec-Pec Foundation
- Klára Szauterné Lévai headmistress, Érsekhalmi Általános Iskola (Érsekhalmi Primary School)
- Lászlóné Tihor headmaster, Arany János Általános Iskola, Kecel (Arany János Primary School, Kecel)

## **The concept of Natural Learning at the Educational Campus Winschoten**

### **Introduction**

People who drop out of school without completing their primary education create a lot of social problems in the Netherlands. The main cause is there is no proper connection between primary and vocational education. Pupils who get into vocational education come from schools, where rules, principles, methods and manners are completely different. Vocational schools expect a more independent attitude and programmes are less demanding compared to their pre-vocational education.

Another problem is that two schools AOC Terra<sup>4</sup> and Dollard College decided to start providing prevocational education in the east part of Groningen, which was a sensible idea in a mostly agricultural region, but it created competition between the two schools. Considering these issues the province of Groningen came up with a proposal suggesting that they should co-operate. That's how the idea of Winschoten Educational Campus was born.

Winschoten Educational Campus is a "joint venture". It consists of three schools (Noorderpoort College, Dollard College and AOC Terra) implementing "natural learning", which means that prevocational (age 14 – 16) and vocational education (age 16 – 19) are integrated with one another to form a continuous learning process. This method was implemented to reduce the drop-out rates in an area which is regarded as economically disadvantaged, with high unemployment rate, where young workers without any qualification are likely to become unemployed.

Educational Campus Winschoten provides the following studies, metal work, motor mechanics, carpentry and building construction, electronics, social care and welfare, agriculture and animal care, catering and tourism, economics and trade. Natural learning refers to the way how people learn meaning that learning is approached from its practical side.

It involves compulsory apprenticeship, which can be internally or externally acquired. This means that the school or the local industry provide the student with practice of their trades.

When students graduate from Educational Campus Winschoten, they have to demonstrate that they have acquired the necessary competencies, so

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<sup>4</sup> An agricultural vocational and pre-vocational school

the assessment is based on practical knowledge rather than on the requirements of “traditional” learning, where grades are added, which is commonly known as lines of learning and lines of development.

Students graduate when they are able to prove mastery of their trades, a process that does not always require grades, but mostly taking notice of their achievement on the required level of their learning and development. Most students progress through coursework and other activities, such as practical training, participation in projects on the campus, or individual study.

In the past students worked the other way round, so they initially studied theory for quite long so that they could apply this knowledge to their practice later on. The usefulness of these lessons was not always clear to the students, which made it difficult for them to feel motivated.

By linking theory to practice, they hope that students will be more motivated and realise why they are to do certain assignments in their studies. Furthermore this working method offers students the possibility to alternate between theoretical and practical subjects in their weekly programme.

To bring students into contact with companies using modern techniques will also improve their motivation and their apprenticeship will help them to become acquainted with their chosen field of training. They can also discover at an early stage if they have made the right choice and are really interested in their chosen direction, thus increasing the chance of graduation.

## **Natural learning, theory and practice**

Educational Campus Winschoten is a unique project, where prevention of dropping out is a high priority. Their target is to work for an uncomplicated continuation and a lower the drop-out rate to 10%. To achieve this, the Campus started to provide lines of learning.

The Educational Campus receives extra financial support for this programme, which is guaranteed in an achievement contract with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

Educational Campus Winschoten applies Natural Learning, which is an innovative educational concept, because they find it best to achieve their target. Educational Campus Winschoten started to implement Natural Learning in the school year of 2004–2005.

Natural Learning is a competence based learning programme, which provides individual help for the students to develop their skills. After the students’ abilities are assessed, they try to improve their underdeveloped or missing necessary skills. Natural Learning is an educational programme, which emphasises co-operation as the most important starting point for learning. That is why they consider the students’ interest as much as possible, so that they can attract them to things they are already interested in, which is

the best way of motivating them. As part of their methodology, the lessons themselves differ from the traditional classroom arrangements, e.g. they use “readers”, and also from the traditionally emphasised priorities, meaning fewer theoretical than practical lessons.

The main concept of Natural Learning is to develop skills and competences on individual level. It is personalised process in which every student improves his/her skills, and learns at their own pace. At the beginning of Natural Learning students learn to experience and these experiences are shared with the other students. It makes a big change for both the teachers and the students. Before this concept was introduced, there were mostly classical lessons and the pupils had to listen to the teacher, taking notes and then they had to learn the important things before a test.

The most important thing about Natural Learning is that the pupils learn best, when they are interested in what they are learning, so they will investigate, and would like to talk about the subject, which explains a lot.

### ***Characteristics of Natural Learning***

- Students learn best when they study in real situations, which are relevant to their profession or to a social situation.
- Motivated and meaningful learning; students learn better when they are in a situation, where learning is important to them.
- Learning with others; Students learn better and improve their social skills when they have to explain things to others and in groups, which is also beneficial for their personal development.
- Students study not exclusively from course books than before; teachers assist them in learning, obtaining and processing relevant information.
- Students work on common projects, but have different tasks and responsibilities.

### ***Schedule***

According to natural learning concept there aren't any set timetables, but individual ones (they call them “weekly rhythm” programmes). In addition to the “weekly rhythm” programmes, which include assignments, workshops, training and practical training, they also have morning sessions, when every group discusses their daily programme. . At the end of the day there is another session, when their daily day's job is assessed together with their *coaches/mentors*.



## ***Apprenticeship***

The students work on assignments in real work environment outside the school, for example at companies, institutions entrepreneurs or individuals, which is believed to be motivating for the students . During their apprenticeship students improve their knowledge, skills and personal qualities. The students work in small groups on their assignments. Students enrol for various assignments. Students who have the same interest are grouped by the school, with the consideration of creating mixed groups of different personal qualities as a priority.

*Apprenticeship should satisfy the following issues*

- the task is announced
- complex
- open for anybody
- the assignments could be done together with companies and institutions in the region
- is defined clearly for all the participants

Group sizes of course, depending on the task vary from small to quite big.

*Here are some examples of typical group tasks:*

- Building a market stall
- Fix up a car and sell it with a profit
- Organize an enjoyable afternoon for old people in an old age home
- Provide lunch for 50 guests
- Establish or maintain a garden, etc.

*Every group has to follow the same sequence for an assignment:*

- Choose a task
- Write a detailed plan including initial steps
- Discuss the plan with the teachers
- Execute the assignment
- Provide evidence of successful completion
- Evaluate the results individually
- Evaluate the results with the teachers involved
- Write a report on the job

The knowledge and skills necessary (or on the contrary, unimportant) for the job should be incorporated in the plan. The students can ask the teachers for help if they need, who would organize workshops and training sessions, which can be not only practical training, but also Dutch, English, Maths, Biology, etc. Besides planning, allocation of tasks and the time required should also be indicated.

When an assignment is finished, the students have to write reports, in which they reflect critically on their assignments. The students describe what they have done, what they have learned, and also suggest improvements, if there are any considerations how they would do things differently next time.

The assessment of a completed assignment is complex. It's a principal of their methodology that the students should assess their assignments first. They give their opinion about the results of their completed tasks. Then their coach evaluates the work, especially its practical aspect and also makes comments on the group's progress.

If any problems arise between group members or with their principal, they discuss them in group sessions. Good contact with their coaches is very important in their methodology, so they can contact the school any time to talk about possible problems.

Lastly the students have to present their assignment to a group of other students.

We referred to two types of trainers, coaches and practical trainers. The differences between their tasks are explained in the following:

#### *The coach:*

- Gives feedback on the development of the students' personal qualities
- Nurtures the students' development
- Steers the personal development of the students
- Works in the context of the profession or in other contexts
- Discusses students' progress with them
- Works with lines of development
- Works with a portfolio, which is a method of collecting evidence of their competences

#### *The practical trainer:*

- Shares knowledge with students regarding trade skills
- Steers the personal development of the students
- Gives feedback on the development of the students', knowledge and craft skills

- Lets them work in an environment that stimulates their progress in their chosen profession
- Works with learning lines

*The coach and practical trainer are both responsible for the following things:*

- Enabling apprenticeship
- Discussing and assessing students' progress with them
- Thinking together with the student about their learning processes
- Letting the student choose, think, do and reflect on their assignments
- Learning both with and about the students

The assignments are linked to the lines of learning and development that are drawn up from the goals of an educational programme.

## **Lines of learning and development**

The school explains the concept of lines of learning and development as briefly and clearly as possible to the students, and tries to limit its quantity to the minimum necessary for their development. It is important to make it clear and comprehensible for the students. Also, they try to describe the lines in a positive way, to motivate the students.

At the beginning of their studies, students get a brief educational package containing lines of learning and development. The lines of learning are important for the craft skills and the lines of development for the behaviour and attitude of the student.

Now every individual training programme includes 7 – 10 lines of learning and 8 lines of development, as a result of new regulations introduced last year, in the Campus.

*Freshers, as they refer to students who start their studies make steady progression their lines of learning and development, as they continuously improve their knowledge and skills. Students can see how far they have got in their studies, but it also gives them information about the skills and competences which need further improvement.*

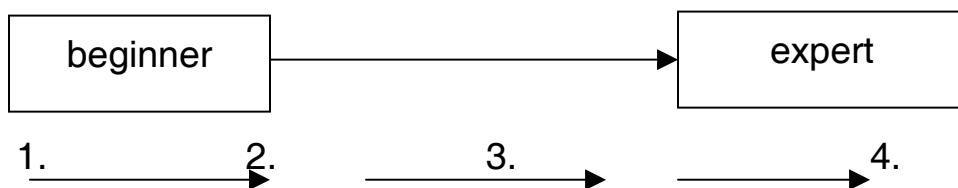
There are eight lines of development in each department of the school,

- Assertiveness
- Respect
- Co-operation
- Responsibility
- Flexibility

- Creativity
- Using their initiative
- Independence
- Empathy and sympathy
- Self-knowledge

### ***Examples of Lines of learning:***

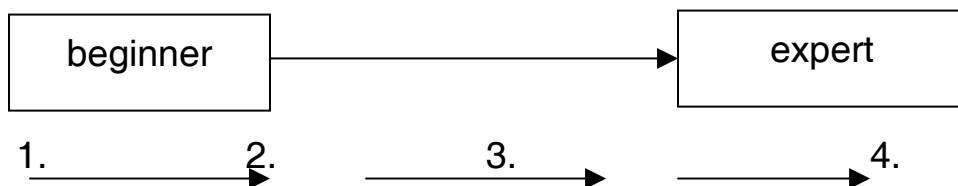
#### **1. Learning line: *basic knowledge – metal industry***



Students should:

1. Find information about the different functions within the metal industry.
2. Explain the position of the company where they do their apprenticeship (practical training).
3. Name 3 products within the metal industry and explain how they are made.
4. Name different departments of a company in the metal industry and explain the function of each department.

#### **2. Learning line: *basic metal skills***



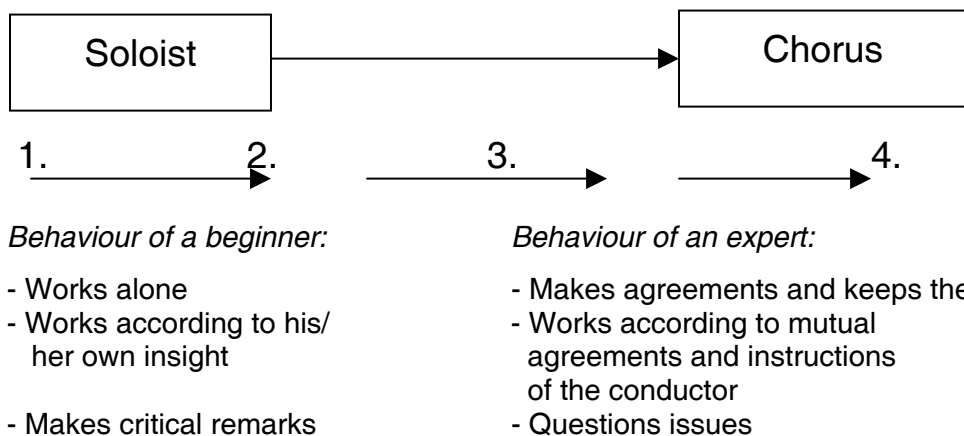
Students should

1. Explain the basics of how to process metal from a raw material to an end product
2. Saw metal by hand
3. Explain how a drill works and drill neat holes in metal product
4. Drill a conical hole in a metal product

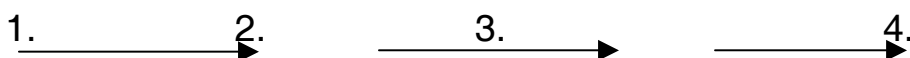
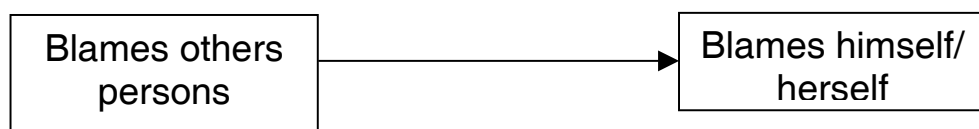
5. Make a thread with a bore) in the hole or make threads in nuts or bolts
6. Maintain tools used for metal production
7. Understand how to use a technical drawing
8. Make a simple metal product.
9. Make an action plan before they start assignments
10. Explain the basic materials used in the metal industry, and their importance during the manufacturing process.
11. Distinguish between metal and non-metal materials
12. Understand the role of the quality control department
13. Check and inspect the component or product they made.
14. Maintain metrological instruments
15. Apply the necessary safety regulations when working.

Examples of lines of development:

### Cooperation



## Responsibility



*Behaviour of a beginner:*

- "It is someone else's fault, not mine"
- Works under constant supervision

"It's my fault."

*Behaviour of an expert:*

- Works on his/her own

## Portfolio

Students keep portfolios throughout their training programmes, where all the records of their progress and training are kept. . They are very useful for either a job interview, because their potential employer can immediately see their acquired competences and skills, or for their trainee teachers who can check and follow up the students' competences.

The Students' portfolios include the following things

- Certificates
- Assignments
- Photos
- Videos
- Evaluations (of their principal, practical trainer, fellow-student, trainee teacher, etc.)
- PowerPoint presentations
- Enquiries

## Campus weeks

When they have a week break, the trainers look back on the previous period and assess its results and findings with the students. Then it is time to celebrate and evaluate their achievement. First, at the beginning of the week they start with celebration, like that.

- Students present their assignments of the period to their
- fellow-students
- A day for relaxation, excursions, sport activities, etc
- Students present their assignments to their parents
- School party
- Projects

These activities help the visitors to get a general picture of the knowledge and skills the students acquired.

After the celebration it is time to evaluate their progress, so all competence tasks the students completed are discussed in portfolio assessment sessions.

Portfolio assessment sessions are four times a year, when three people who are involved, the student; his/her mentor and practical trainer evaluate progress. Documents of completed tasks are presented there by the students.

The teachers add notes to the portfolios, for example of their attitude to work and of their school attendance rate, and of course of their progress in their lines of learning and development. All these progress reports are kept in the students' portfolios.

## ***Restrictions***

There are some important restrictions worth considering, which are necessary to keep the educational work on the right track.

## ***General conditions***

Working in structures is very important for students. Therefore it is important that the structure of the education programme is clear. It doesn't mean that the students are not committed or without let or hindrance., . They are not allowed to do whatever they want to do, because constant supervision is considered to be necessary.

General knowledge and skills lessons are organised in the forms of 'obligatory' workshops and training.

## ***Location***

Rooms of the size of two big classrooms that function as both workshops and classrooms (called "combilocals") are the home bases for the students, where they assemble, work on assignments and meet etc. Establishing an instructive environment is very important element of their methodologies, so t

there are computers, which are used for media-based lectures, because they consider the various means of the media as useful for motivating learning.

There has to be enough theory and practical classrooms in forms of workshops and training sessions. When it is possible to organise these classes subsequently, the students can practise immediately what they have already learnt.

Quite a lot of freedom should be given to the students by their mentors, because they are to complete the greater part of their assignments outside the Educational Campus, which provides a very good opportunity for the students to become self-reliant. Mentors are also to stimulate the students to make their own decisions in their studies. They believe in learning by doing, without making judgement or blaming students only for their mistakes, admitting that anyone is bound to make mistakes from time to time, but they are to teach you something. This attitude helps students learn more than they would if their practical trainer told them what to do.

## Conclusion

In the school year 2004 -2005 Educational Campus Winschoten introduced natural learning as a new teaching methodology. Their achievement was evaluated two years later and a report was written on it, in which both positive and negative aspects of the methodology were analysed.

### *The positive aspects:*

- Before and during the implementation of the methodology of natural learning the teachers of the Educational Campus Winschoten participated in training courses organised by two teacher training organisations (APS and ECNO)), which also assist schools in implementing new methodologies.
- Learning groups and teams were formed in each department with the supervision of team managers. Team managers organise everything in connection with education and teaching including methodology.
- The students find working on assignments positive. They are challenged and realise that the assignments that they do are meaningful. There are good examples, such as the Dakar project, some garden design assignments, or metal products made for customers etc., but the school canteen is also run by the students t,. Unfortunately these tasks are not as frequent and regular as they should be, so apprenticeship needs further improvement.
- Having portfolios gives the students a greater sense of responsibility.



- There is an opportunity to visit other departments any time
- Students find the uninterrupted lines of learning (prevocational-vocational) positive, so they stay in the school and in some cases in the same location. The transition between prevocational and vocational education is smoother than it used to be.
- As soon as a student finishes his/her pre-vocational education, he/she gets qualification, which prevents them from becoming early school leavers without completed educational attainment.

*Things which need improvement:*

- Students' studies are not as structured as they should be within the school. The management is trying to solve this problem by revising the educational concept and by creating a framework of agreements, which has to be kept by everybody. Timetables, indicating school breaks by ringing and theoretical subjects have been reintroduced, because these all structure the students' studies.
- The students have more challenges within their learning processes.
- It is difficult to find assignments for some of their departments (e.g. animal care, economics and electronics). This has to do with the fact that students have too little experience of the industry to be able to function properly. Another problem is to fulfil safety requirements.
- Money should be invested so that companies, organisations, the government and social groups in the region could work together. At the moment this represents only a small part. The first step to improve the situation was the construction of a website containing assignments from companies ([www.campusleerklus.nl](http://www.campusleerklus.nl)).
- The construction of the new building has been delayed, which makes the implementation of the new methodology difficult. They hope that new building will have been finished by 2009, which will be a great relief to all.

## **Costs and investments**

*New learning has the following extra costs:*

- Schooling and training of teachers and trainers
- Investment in furnishing the school building in a different way including equipment and machinery
- Investing in the school building itself
- Investing into social capital of the industry (establishing contacts) in the region

Lastly, the charts below show the occupation and drop-out rates of students within the Educational Campus Winschoten. The charts give information about the first two completed school periods, because the information about the initial phase of the students who just entered the school and are only halfway with their studies would not provide good insight into the situation. . After four years when they have completed their studies, we will have a better insight into the situation.

**Continuation and completion of study year 4 pre-vocational education  
2004 – 2005 basic learning level.**

	<b>2004-2005</b>	<b>2005-2006</b>
Number of participants per 1 October	140	82
Entry within the school year	0	0
Diploma vocational level 1	0	0
Diploma vocational level 2	2	20
Different establishment within our school	18	7
To a completely different school	23	8
Moving homes	2	0
Working without a diploma	7	1
Social working placement	0	0
Other	6	4
Continuation to the next year within the Campus	82	37

**Continuation and completion of study year 5 pre-vocational and vocational  
2004 – 2005**

	<b>2004-2005</b>	<b>2005-2006</b>
Number of participants per 1 October	102	68
Entry within the school year	0	0
Diploma vocational level 1	1	7
Diploma vocational level 2	12	25
Different establishment within our school	0	1
To a completely different school	3	2
Moving homes	3	2
Working without a diploma	2	2
Social working placement	2	1
Other	11	8
Continuation to the next year within the Campus	68	20

### Continuation and completion of study year 3 pre-vocational education 2005 – 2006

	<b>BB*</b>	<b>KB*</b>
Number of participants per 1 October	132	84
Entry within the school year	2	2
Different establishment within our school or to a completely different school	11	9
Moving homes	4	3
Working without a diploma	2	0
Other	1	0
Continuation to the next year within the Campus	114	74

\* BB and KB are the first two level of the VMBO (prevocational school)

### Used sources

- Alex van Emst: Buy a car and tidy up APS
- Study brochure Natural learning Onderwijscampus Winschoten
- A challenging and pioneering trip. Sub-evaluation 2006. Educational Campus Winschoten
- [www.wellantcollege.nl](http://www.wellantcollege.nl)
- [www.aps.nl](http://www.aps.nl)

## **The concept of Slash 21 at the School community Marianum in Lichtenvoorde**

### **Introduction**

Students who drop out of school without getting completed educational attainment (qualifications) create educational and social problems in the Netherlands, which should be dealt with. Recognising the importance of this issue the Government examined the possible causes and searched for the right solution to tackle the situation and then, based on their findings, decided to implement a number of new educational teaching methodologies, because the current ones were considered to have been inefficient and outdated.

For the most part, education still takes place in traditional, frontal classroom arrangements, in classrooms with blackboards where students have 40 to 45 minute lessons subsequently. Students are supposed to be mostly listeners, paying attention to their teachers lecturing on the subject.

The Government has tried to break through this attitude in many ways, for example by introducing new teaching approaches, by setting-up new core curricula, and by among other things establishing so called study houses, and most recently by applying “proof of competencies” methodology. The first two changes however proved to have been failures unfortunately, due to circumstances and fixed frameworks one must always abide by, such as school buildings with their classrooms, grading and the “old ideas” concerning the tasks of teachers.

Considering all these issues, Carmel College (to which school Marianum belongs to) decided to look for other solutions to renew their education.

Most schools are limited by legal regulations. For this reason the Carmel College has decided, to start a research with the KPC group, which is a consultancy on continued education).

The economy of the Netherlands is changing all the time. The Netherlands’ economy used to be known as one of those based on producing basic consumer goods. As labour has become relatively expensive, and the economies of China and India alongside the former socialist Eastern-European countries are rising, the Netherlands have to face up to changes..

Unless they are willing to shift the emphasis from production to expertise and service provision in their economy, the Netherlands won’t be able to keep their place as a country with a relatively strong economy. Matters such as professionalism and flexibility have become very important, and the

government's high standards are quite demanding for the companies and the employees. They have to rapidly transform their expertise into actions, and also have to be able to combine their expertise with implementation in a wide variety of fields. IT plays an important role. All employees must in fact be prepared for lifelong learning.

This was the outcome after the first brainstorming sessions concerning educational renewal. After two years intensive preparatory work, Slash 21 started in September 2002. The project will last up to four years and afterwards will be evaluated.

## **Concept and school**

### ***Concept***

Slash 21 is the name of a new educational concept, but also the name of the school itself. The new school is part of Marianum Secondary School, which is a boarding school for lower (the age of the students are 12 – 16 years) secondary education, higher General Secondary Education and higher Secondary Education (in the Dutch school system the secondary levels are pre-vocational, vocational, higher general secondary education, higher secondary education followed by tertiary levels) The age of the students at Slash 21 are between 12 – 16 years. Marianum now has 21 schools in the east of the Netherlands. Slash 21 provides only lower secondary professional education . During their Higher General Secondary Education and Higher secondary education students are taught for the first three years at Slash 21 and after that they continue their education at other locations of Marianum.

### ***Educational Goals***

They have the following goals to achieve :

- Provide appropriate training suited for the students' needs;
- Ensure welcoming and safe learning environment at the school so that students can co-operate with the other students;
- Students should work on their future plans with the help of their teachers and trainers;
- Motivate students to do their best in their studies and to discover things;
- Nurture the students' development into young adults who can make their own decisions and are responsible for their actions;

- Develop their skills and competences, improve social skills and to take responsibility for further learning.

Slash 21 has set a number of goals, namely:

- Marianum is a Catholic school. They want students to treat each other with respect and to accept the differences in beliefs. Development, philosophy and way of life are considered to be enriching for the school community.
- They want to ensure that young people develop in a way that they will manage to continue their education and receive their diplomas which give them greater chances of success in the society.
- They are aware of what takes place in the world and are therefore also aware of what takes place at school.
- They ensure a rich and varied study period at Marianum so that every student is taken into account.

## ***Methodology***

At Slash 21, similarly to Natural Learning methodology, there are no traditional classes or grading methods and the use of books as a permanent source of information has been avoided.

The school of Slash 21 is therefore different from an average school. Students work in basic groups of 150 students. These are subdivided into three smaller groups of 50 students. The students have to do the most of their work within these smaller groups. They usually know each other well, for example from their previous schools, which makes co-operation much easier.

There are no fixed timetables, which makes sense, because they have long study periods a day. Every morning lessons start at 8.30 and finish at 15.30. An additional advantage of not having set lesson time is that the students are not disturbed by the school bell all the time and therefore they do not always have to change classrooms. This stimulates the students, because they can work quietly and finish what they have to do with no need to wait for the following lesson. A consequence is, however, that school days last longer, but then without any homework

An example of a school day at Slash 21:

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
8:30 o'clock	Start in their home-room; looking for tasks on the web in English on their computers
9:00 o'clock	Working in groups (conversation in English)
10:10 o'clock	Short break
10:25 o'clock	Talk with a native speaker of English
11:00 o'clock	Making tasks on their computers
11:45 o'clock	Lunch break
12:15 o'clock	Watch a video about energy
13:00 o'clock	Prepare tests on energy
13:45 o'clock	Short break
14:00 o'clock	Doing their tests
15:15 o'clock	Short evaluation, making plans for the next day.
15:30 o'clock	End of school day

An example of a week programme:

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
Morning	English	English	English Sports	Energy	Energy
Lunch					
Afternoon	Energy	Energy		English	English Swimming

Teachers are called tutors at Slash 21. They have a lot tasks, including instructing, teaching, organising, doing administration and studying process guides. They believe that these tasks could best be carried out by together with others. For this reason, they strongly rely on teacher assistants who can give the necessary support to the tutors. The tutors have to be familiar with their tasks as well.

In every basic group there are 150 students, 5 tutors and 4 to 5 teacher assistants . The team is led by a team leader. All the colleagues follow a special training programme together and are able to work together well. Thus the tutors can go about their tasks, namely coaching, supporting and developing the students.

Tutors are considered as coaches. They accompany the students if necessary, encourage and help them and enable to discover their talents together. Moreover, tutors watch the students' progress carefully and take action if needed.

Lessons are carried out at Slash 21 even if one or two tutors are sick, because teacher assistants are able to take over certain tasks when a tutor is ill., and it does not create any problems for the students either. Thanks to the electronic environment, students can get on with their work independently.

## ***Concept and building***

There is no longer need to study exclusively from schoolbooks, because they work in an electronic learning surroundings. Computers have high importance. The students are allowed most of the time to use their own ones for learning to acquire the necessary knowledge. The computers register the students' progress, so that their tutors can follow up with them . The tutors therefore get a good overall impression of their students' progress . If necessary the tutor can easily intervene in one or more components of the teaching material together with the student . This means that the student is swiftly put on the right path again (Tailor made education).

A new educational concept usually requires a new building. This methodology happens to be so different from conventional methodologies that constructing an entire new building was found to be necessary. Unfortunately this was going to be too expensive, so eventually they had to put up with renewing only some parts of the original buildings of Marianum School.

Slash 21 hired an architect (Anton Vermeulen) to look at the possible modifications and to redesign the existing building. There was need for large rooms, because the students work in groups of 50 . Occasionally in small groups of less than 50 and sometimes students also work individually. This means that the building must be suitable for a variety of uses.

The architect came up with the idea of an auditorium of the size of four traditional classrooms and with good atmosphere and the feeling of safety, which are the most important issues. Slash 21 has two of these auditoria. Between the rooms there is enough space where the tutors and their assistants can work. That's where students or small groups can be individually coached. There is also an entertainment area (not a canteen) for the students. The entertainment area has got a completely different design, so that the students have the feeling as if they were not at school. In the morning and at noon the students can relax there after completing their tasks. At lunchtime there is a break, when they go to the canteen.

There is another large hall where the students study Science, improve their hand skills and practise drawing. This is also a large room, so that students can freely co-operate with one another in doing complex assignments. Electronic learning surroundings are also present in this space, so that the Internet can be consulted about information.

There was also a need for a music and drama stage. For this reason it was created to imitate an amphitheatre type of space. This place can also be used for lectures and in the future possibly as a music studio.



## ***Concept and realisation***

Funding the educational concept of Slash 21 has cost a lot of money. The concept was created and started from scratch. The initiators of the project looked for potential sponsors at the very start having realised that this would later become necessary.

In the Netherlands it is unusual to sponsor a school. But for the sponsors, the Slash 21 project would have nothing else to rely on just the limited standard funds legally guaranteed by the Dutch Government. The necessary costs to rebuild the school building have been saved by limiting the funding necessary for the school.)

The persons responsible made huge success in finding sponsors, because as it turned out, many companies were interested.

## ***Curricula***

In the traditional educational methodologies, the main aim is to pass on knowledge from teacher to student. In fact this does not seem to be such a strange idea, but the creators of Slash 21 know that they can improve the current methodologies. They believe that it is better for the student to create their own learning styles at their own pace, when they can draw their own conclusions and discover their talents, even if they seem to be out of context when taking their chosen direction into account. This is called authentic and effective learning.

The teaching package or curriculum of Slash 21 has only three components. This curriculum should be as clear as possible and therefore the major topics are combined.

A few examples of the topics which are presented are climate, poverty and pollution control.

The first topic is Science (this is a combination for all exact sciences: physics, chemistry, maths and biology). The second is Humanities (this is a combination of economics people and society related topics for the social professions) and the third topic is modern languages: English, German and French.

Below we shall briefly define the first two topics.

### ***Science***

Energy, sustainability, substances, building materials, water flow, logistics, electromagnetism, pressure, flow, resistance, waves and material, balance, organics and mechanics.

## *Humanities*

Staple supplies, physical and psychological aspects of social issues, security, safety, war and peace, status, economics, power, socialising, society, group activity, goals and targets, leadership, culture and nature.

Unfortunately modern languages cannot be combined with other topics, but they try to work according to the main points of authentic learning. In practice it means intensive training, when the students have twelve hours English a week in a twelve week period. study. From the very first lesson students are expected to try to express themselves as much as possible in the studied foreign languages t during the lessons, where . native speakers are also present. They conduct short conversations with the tutors and the students to master the language as rapidly as possible. This methodology is used in most language courses, because it is necessary that the students master the language as quickly as they can. English studies are followed by German and in the second school year by French.

In between the lessons students are busy with other instructive tasks, such as reading and listening or visual tasks, which they usually work on independently.. For example they e-mail contacts with other schools abroad, practise conversations, complete grammar tasks. The use of electronic learning surroundings increases the access to the above-mentioned opportunities.

The students are challenged to solve problems during discussions, specially during the so-called project weeks. Students co-operate with one another while working on big tasks. They try to get the students social awareness broadened during these weeks and to make the student realise that they have very important roles in their society.

### Portfolios

The students at Slash 21 don't have report books, because they don't have any subjects of their traditional sense . Instead of them they have digital portfolios, which are kept updated throughout their studies . The students present them to their tutors, proving what they learnt during the previous period. The students also make it clear to others what they have mastered and in which aspects of their studies they are competent. The proof of the students' competencies is collected and kept in their portfolios. The portfolios of the students are rather like business portfolios. The students can show what they can do and therefore impress the potential employer/ trainee teacher, but the tutors can also see what the students' potential are.

The following things can be collected by the students and placed in their portfolios:

- Certificates
- Assignments
- Photos

- Videos
- References (tests, projects, group assignments, practical training, languages, etc)
- PowerPoint Presentations
- Enquiries

The digital portfolio is a file filled with evidence. The students collect evidence of courses of the last school period. Three times a year the students have to discuss and comment on their portfolios with their tutors. The focus of this discussion is on progress, but it is also about making appointments for the next period expected to be realised by both the student and the tutor..

Slash 21 is progressive school, because unlike in traditional education, students do not have report books . For potential employers report books are not very informative,, because they cannot decide on them what a student who obtained an 8 can do better than a student who obtained a 6. By means of portfolios employers get a much broader picture of the knowledge, potential and competencies of their future employees.

The tutors monitor the students' progress, and set the requirements the students have to meet with their work. By means of criteria given to the students in advance the tutors are able to decide whether their jobs are satisfactory and completed. The tutors report on the learning process of the tasks in their portfolios will.

Have tests gone forever ? Not completely, because certain facts and knowledge cannot be acquired by this new methodology, therefore there are some written exams.

The parents/guardians of the students can continually monitor their children's progress on the Internet, so they are always up-to-date with the latest achievements of their sons or daughters.

## **Evaluation/conclusion**

In August 2006 the project Slash 21 expired . Nevertheless, it does not mean that the whole concept of Slash 21 has vanished, because the comprehensive school Marianum (of which Slash 21 was part) is trying to implement the most successful principles of the project . It is also promising that other schools in The Netherlands are also trying to use some elements of the Slash 21 concept, and this is only the initial benefit of the Slash 21 project, because innovation within education continues.

Giving enough time for the preparatory phase of the new educational concept and building the project from scratch both contributed a lot to the success of Slash 21. Slash 21 worked with a new curriculum, features of the existing school building was changed to meet their needs and they could take

their time to find motivated staff that fitted in the new concept and to school them for their needs.

It often happens that when a new educational concept is implemented, schools stick to their fixed boundaries (like curriculum, subjects, traditional classrooms, etc.) within their education, which creates hurdles for successful implementation of the new concept..

Slash 21 had only three rules to follow. The education had to fit for the educational regulations and had to be realised with the money provided. Finally, it was important that Slash 21 was part of another school. In this way students of vocational higher level education were able to move on more easily to the next level.

One of the most important goals of Slash 21 was to create a learning environment which would completely surround the students. It was important that the learning process of the students stood in the centre, didactical tools, electronic learning environment, building and the organisation had to be subservient to the students.

In the first years there were several initial problems, namely:

- For the mentors, it turned out to be difficult to 'let the students go' and 'not to steer/guide them too much'.
- Furthermore, the teaching materials developed were still too traditional.
- Many mentors found it difficult to stay close to the concept, which caused some tension at the beginning.

The Slash 21 project was completed and then evaluated. In the assessment process the Free University of Amsterdam was involved as well. It turned out to be difficult to make appropriate evaluation and to name the good and the bad aspects of the project, because the concept included too many facets, which could have been looked at in many different ways, making an unambiguous conclusion difficult to draw..

However, here are some results to highlight

- The pre-vocational students were able to pass their examinations in great numbers. The students who were taught in e Slash 21 were as successful as and the regular pre- vocational students at Marianum.
- The pre-vocational-students who needed extra support (about 10% of the students) were able to participate in the Slash 21 project without noticeable problems.
- In comparison with other schools, the students of vocational higher level education lag behind in modern languages and maths. However, it's too early to leap to the conclusions, because not all students

have finished their studies (the next vocational higher level education students will graduate in 2008).

- In the first three years of Slash 21, there were no drop-outs or and no students were referred to other schools (to other type of education, for example four days working and one day school).
- Research shows that the Slash 21 students were more capable of skills like gathering information independently, reflecting, co-operating, working on task-basis is and presentation.
- The mentors experienced working in a team as something very positive. Educational assistants took over a lot of work, so the teachers had more time available for the students. The guided educational time of the students could be extended by 10% (which is similar to 3 times 60 minutes). (that had more time to help the students. Normally the have 180 minutes and now much more to help them. And that's a positive thing, in this concept).
- The educational concept was very positive for all parties.

The educational renewal of Slash 21 has inspired many other schools. There was a great interest in following this radical renewal in the Netherlands from the start . At the moment, many schools are trying to innovate in the same way as Slash 21 did, and the cry for renewal is only getting bigger and bigger.

## References

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- Voorlichtingsbrochure Slash 21. Een nieuwe school, een nieuwe manier van leren
- Informatieve CD- rom over Slash 21
- Hierin staan de belangrijkste overeenkomsten en verschillen beschreven tussen Scholengemeenschap Marianum en Slash 21.
- Oogstbundel Slash 21

## Internet

- [www.slash21.nl](http://www.slash21.nl)
- [www.slo.nl](http://www.slo.nl)
- [www.aps.nl](http://www.aps.nl)

## **Piazza dei Mestieri**

### **Introduction**

Piazza dei Mestieri operates on one hand to struggle against the scholastic dispersion of youngsters through educational pathways and placements; on the other hand to get over teenagers' learning difficulties through educational and training actions. Among the principal actions it might be quoted those connected to the reception, guidance and training. Moreover there are collateral-type activities, but particularly useful to the attainment of the above mentioned aims, i.e. those connected to the cultural and sporting field<sup>5</sup>.

### **History**

Piazza dei Mestieri has begun its activity in September 2004 in Turin and it represents the arrival point of a deep rooted experience that has, whose beginnings are in early nineties: a volunteers association (the Centro di Solidarietà di Torino – Turin Solidarity Centre-) and a cooperative (Immaginazione e Lavoro Imagination and Job) they begin to deal with the phenomenon of the scholastic dispersion and the so many young people that fail both in completing a suitable educational path and in joining the Labour Market with a minimum guarantee of success. The volunteers association primarily addresses the youngsters on reception and guidance actions and, in the cases in which this is possible, it begins to favour both working insertion paths and regular change between school and job; instead the cooperative begins to provide training for this target group by offering specific courses and by promoting more articulated projects. From 1994 to today more than 147.000 training hours have been provided to almost 3.000 at risk youngsters.

The difficulties found after 15 years of activity have lead up to the creation of a new model like Piazza dei Mestieri: The old model succeeded in regaining so many young people to bring to finish an educational trial (lower rates of dispersion than the school). The placements introduced, at the end of the training paths, good percentages as well. However, when the youngsters had lost the job (sometimes more than 50% in an average time of 6 months)

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<sup>5</sup> Contact person to Piazza dei Mestieri: Alberto Ximenez – ximenez@cslitalia.net

they re-entered in a marginality spiral that in the most serious cases have degenerated in deviance phenomena.

The study of this phenomenon has brought to underline some points of weakness of the old model.

The young people going out of a driven context, able to take back them in continuation during their "crisis", they didn't succeed alone in overcoming the rock-cliff and they allowed themselves to go into irrational and instinctive behaviours hard to conjugate with any working activity. Many of these young people primarily belong to a degraded family context and the re-entry in this context often mined the ability to act correctly: after the failure, there was not any device to allow them to be able to get back into the virtuous road.

Despite the importance of the training aspect, it was not able to make up a fragile educational context.

Besides the young people asked more and more often to be accompanied in the leisure time, in the support to their works. They asked for a more involving relationship that could help them both to overcome the difficulties they met on their walk and to support them in their way to adulthood.

The idea of the Piazza dei Mestieri is really born from the attempt to answer to these demands.

Placed in the city centre, in a 7.000 squared meters building, the Piazza has in its own centre a great court where, as in a metaphoric middle-age plaza, employers and jobseekers met.

Every day some 400 boys meet each other in Piazza dei Mestieri, during the lessons, during the breaks, during the leisure time: during the day they attend training courses to get a professional qualification, to become hairdresser, cook, baker, pastry cook, chocolate artisan, electrician, graphic designer; the day goes by among the lessons of Italian, mathematics, computer science, history and the job in the various laboratories.

At the end of the training pathways the boys are accompanied to their integration into the Labour Market: so that there are born relationships with over 400 local firms that work together before, during and after the youngsters' traineeships also by bringing their direct experience to the Piazza.

The idea has always been that to bring the boys into the more comprehensive reality, it is necessary to widen the look: The cultural events board has foreseen 70 meetings during the last year among theatre plays, musical concerts, paint shows, literary appetizers, ethnic dancing shows. In the same way there has been developed the poetries contest, that after just a year has become National Contest for all the vocational schools of Italy.

A particular attention has been paid then to the psychomotorial activities, as a key element in the life of a teen-ager, with tournaments, races, gym and among other sporting activities.

Finally the last challenge: the Piazza wants to be a place in which the guys can approach a direct job experience, in the meantime, it wants to be a social enterprise and so it has to try to stand in the market by its own means.

As a result there are some market activities, namely a restaurant, a pub and a typography which are open to the public. Recently there were also added a fine chocolate production centre and its related shop to sell the products. Each of these productive activities follows a precise model: the responsible of each of these activities is a reputed professional who works and hands with himself the boys which learn the working methodology. These productive activities, besides representing a real experience of measurement with the job, they are the occasion to pick up many of that young people that after having tried the adventure in some enterprise they have the necessity to start and to be inserted again.

Furthermore it should be underlined how such a complex project cannot disregard the solid and structured network from which it has born: to be able to develop an integrated centre as the Piazza dei Mestieri it has been essential to constitute an active partnership that includes the local authorities, the social services, the associations and the private sector.

It is necessary to emphasize that, in a moment in which the word "network" seems to be primarily used as an organizational tool, such term is used in this context with an ampler meaning. The network represents a series of relationships, people and corporate bodies that desire to put on together for confirming a job methodology that we could synthesize with a slogan: "to do with".

## **Current activity**

The structure with which it responds to the above mentioned demands is particularly articulated also from a legal point of view. The Fondazione Piazza dei Mestieri owns the building. Its main function is both to guarantee that all the activities developed inside the edifice are coherent with the aim from which it was born and to offer a support for the young people inside a place in which they can be accompanied while growing up, this means to face all the situations they have to live (study, work, leisure time,...), nearby to adults that don't intend to give up to be teachers for the new generations. In order to reach these goals, the Foundation has stipulated an agreement with Immaginazione e Lavoro --training agency certified by the Piedmont Region for guidance and training activities-- allowing every year that some 400 boys can attend a training course to finally get a regional qualification.

Besides it has favoured the birth of a cooperative that manages the restaurant, the pub and some other productive activities, in order to give the opportunity to the boys to frequent innovative alternation pathways between work and study inside the same structure, or to make them transit for a "soft" placing, or still to regain them in the eventuality of a broken working path.



The third legal entity operating within the Piazza is the Association that manages cultural activities for the young people coming from all the city corners.

Currently some youngsters together with the teachers that participate to the weekly football match, they are setting up a sporting association affiliated to the Italian Sporting Centre (CSI) to promote tournaments and other activities.

The role, field of intervention, links among the different subjects operating in Piazza dei Mestieri (Foundation; Association; Cooperative; and Training Agency) they are defined in an Agreement that institutes the project goals and ties each actor to the respect of these goals that are firstly of educative nature.

### Users typology

Main problems of the target group	Services proposed by the model Piazza dei Mestieri
Particular seriousness of the school dispersion phenomenon in the degraded urban zones	<p><u>The importance of a physical space</u>: it guarantees the meeting of youngsters inside the metropolitan context; the place reproduces the complexity of the present services in a city, but it allows the boy to reconnoitre it and to use the active citizen spaces.</p> <p>Inside the structure they are present the places for reception, training, accompaniment to the job and leisure spaces (pub, gym, music room). Such aspect reduces the elements of uncertainty and insecurity typical of those who live the metropolitan context deepened in marginality, or in a passive way. The Piazza, as a physical place, favours the development of a sense of affiliation in the boys, in a complex urban reality. They feel protected, but at the same time they are inserted in a context of normal life, open to the reality. The boys are used to look the reality in its multipart, actively acting inside it, learning to organize the times and the spaces and to respect its rules.</p> <p><u>The aggregative dimension</u> makes to fully emerge the personality of the boys, favouring their education. They are trained to the interpersonal relationships toward the companion-colleagues, in a ruled context as in the business realities.</p> <p><u>The cultural dimension</u> brings the boys to the concept of beauty typically present in our cities, but not always recognized by the boys and often forgotten in the more degraded areas. The collateral activities of the Piazza, the sport, the art, the music, fully develop the youngsters' personality.</p>

<p>Rigidity of the scholastic system, especially in the secondary schools</p>	<p><u>The training dimension</u> is founded on the assignment methodology. Every student can try in a personalized way, the ability to acquit to an assignment inside the daily circumstances. The assignment is a structured system of actions that it is necessary to effect for producing the transformations desired on the reality. The assumed didactic criterion is the learning, understood as process of change and growth, rather than the teaching, understood as transfer of contents. In the methodology of learning on the assignment, the protagonists are: the teacher, the student and the assignment, that is a concrete and binding situation for the student, that introduces the element of responsibility.</p> <p>With such methodology the ability is developed to cognitive level (to understand the trial inside which the assignment takes place), productive (technical-scientific) and behavioural (transversal competences for the attainment of the purpose and the realization of the assignment).</p> <p>Such methodology entails an actual training personalization: the students learn better when the training proposals answer to their interests, when they respect their ways of learning and their abilities. The operators know how to build flexible <i>ad hoc</i> pathways, able both to satisfy the demands of every boy and to develop their personal and relational skills.</p> <p>The tool adopted for the training pathways to make them recognizable by every boy is the competences portfolio.</p>
<p>Insufficient guidance support</p>	<p>The key element in this field is the <u>attention to the trial conclusion</u>, the accompaniment, the placement, the tutoring on the Labour Market, is an integral part of the vocational trial.</p> <p>Inside the Plaza there are foreseen moments of reception, information and accompaniment to the working insertion.</p> <p>Every boy is accompanied by a tutor, that follows him from the initial reception to the working placement. The tutor carries individual interviews, at informal level, helping the boy to solve uneasiness situations, helping him to achieve positive results.</p> <p><u>The working dimension</u> is concerned since the first steps of the training phase, through protected laboratories, the possibility of the regular change between work and study and the intense relationship with the enterprises of the territory.</p> <p>Among the professional figures of the Piazza, the Promoter for the working insertion (PIL), helps the boy in this stage, he suggests the market trends with which the Piazza operators come into contact, he also creates bonds with the territory.</p>

Scarce cooperation among school, family and local institutions	<u>The added value of the network</u> is fundamental in such a model, founded on the presence of a solid and structured network, supported by an active partnership formed by the local authorities, the social services, the associations and the private sector. The network basic concept is "to do with", with the social services, with the artisans of the territory, with the schools, with the families. The presence of a steady network is born from the belief that only with an active involvement of all the territorial stakeholders, the success in the struggle to the scholastic abandon is possible.
Absence of a specific professional preparation of the teachers	<u>The educational passion</u> is the soul of this model, the teachers are strongly motivated to develop their role. In the protected laboratories the teachers are skilled craft masters, that besides transmitting technical knowledge, they convey the passion for their trade. The rotation moments between work and study guarantee that the boy is pervaded in the reality productive context, and so he learns updated professional competences in line with the enterprises' requirements.

## The project objectives in the short, medium and long term

The preceding experiences on that field suggest the necessity of developing further ways to meet the large range of the already described needs with continuous adjustments and close examinations for those consolidated actions that have lead to meaningful improvements.

### ***Short term objectives***

- a) giving support in the identification of potential problems connected to the learning process;
- b) providing assistance in the individualization of a method of study suitable to face the manifold challenges set by the learning process.
- c) planning individualized pathways for finding both the different cognitive approach and the proclivity of the pupil;
- d) Promoting moments of reflection / comparison through specific paths for the families;
- e) supplying alternative and innovative learning tools and methodologies to teachers and operators,

### ***Medium/long term objectives***

- f) favouring diversified experiences of learning able to valorise the inclinations and the potentialities of the individuals through positive and meaningful experiences of learning,
- g) preparing the families with suitable competences and knowledge to manage different situations;
- h) Implementing the competences of the operators in relationship to the innovative learning methodologies.

The purpose in the long period is to prevent the scholastic failure through actions able to offer a concrete help for the testing of the diversified models of competences' acquisition (knowledge, skills and ability). In fact one of the project objectives is to provide methodological suggestions, not only to the students themselves, but also to the other actors involved in the learning process (families, teachers and operators), by using them as an operational support and connector of the local network.

### ***It is important to underline that the main long term objective has a double aim:***

- a) from one side, to strength the developed activities, by demanding to the Institutions to create ad hoc devices for this type of activity; this kind of approach characterizes all the interventions of experimental nature promoted by the Piazza dei Mestieri.
- b) from the other side, to structure the model of the Piazza dei Mestieri by covering the whole field of vocational education, training and work and by involving all the working actors on the same one; this formality allows the model to be more easily transferrable in other contexts and becomes, at the same time, a policy suggestion for the institutional stakeholders; finally this approach favours the fund raising processes for social enterprises.

### ***Expected improvements for the users in the short term and in the long term***

For what concerns to the expected improvements, the project foresees to start a trial able to guarantee for the families and the territorial network a better capacity in managing successfully the difficulties of the young people.

***More specifically the short term expected improvements are based on the following actions:***

- diminishing the learning difficulties of the teenagers and preventing failures and scholastic dispersion
- supporting a process of meaningful learning in the young people and, in the long period, the educational success, by favouring a renewed self-esteem of the youngsters;
- encouraging the introduction of new learning methodologies based on the educational success by raising the qualitative level of the educational actions
- involving the families in facing the learning difficulties of the teenagers, favouring an active role of the parents in a shared trial
- supporting the operators both in the management and the facing of the difficulties linked to the learning matters, promoting the acquisition of suitable and effective competences;

In the long term together with the attainment of a reduction of the school abandon rates, the attention to the teachers and families, it will bring about all to a more integrated and shared activity of planning, addressed to overcome the difficulties of the teenagers with the purpose to favour the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational pathways, as a first step to a positive insertion both in society and in the Labour Market.

The strategies with which have been planned the different actions of the Project answer to the demand to identify effective and efficient response methodologies for every individualized target (boys, families and operators).

## **The methodology applied**

As previously illustrated, the analysis of the question expressed by the territory of reference has also shown the demand of an organic intervention and, above all, the necessity of an interlocutor that can act as a point of reference.

The schools, the institutions and the associations openly express the uneasiness in front of the above mentioned problem list, uneasiness that up to this moment it has seen the launch of single initiatives and projects without links nor coordination; the present project offers a synthetic reference point to the territorial network by aiming at coordinate and widen to more possible actors the access to the resources and the present opportunities on the territory.

## ***In detail, the single methodological actions are as follows:***

### ***1. The activities for the boys (12 – 16 years old)***

As previously underlined, the studies emphasize how the pre-adolescent period is the moment in which the individual elaborates and matures meaningfully their own identity: during this age youngsters have the higher risk of social exclusion and for which is effective and meaningful to speak of prevention.

The specific activities foresee:

- a) Reception, operated by a guidance expert: It answers to the necessity of knowing what the boy need, and to look for useful instruments to support him in this demand. The operator might interview not only the boy but also his parents an the other figures eventually present in the boy's life: tutors, social assistants, etc.
- b) Bilancio delle Risorse (BDR) It takes back the model of the Bilan des Competences (Selvatici, 1993 – Association Retravailler 1991) that was institutionalized in France (centres CIBC) and it had been experimented in Italy on early nineties (Emilia Romagna – Tuscany 1992). It is conceived for an adult use as tool of reflection and as technique for the validation of the competences and the knowledge acquired both in formal and informal way.
- c) Strategies of Learning how to Learn: this third moment takes advantage of the results of the previous phases by proposing different actions leading to strategies of learning how to learn. These actions must be flexible, personalised and time-effective

### ***2. The families***

The experience of the Foundation Piazza dei Mestieri underlines how often the families suffer a strong uneasiness when facing such situation. In fact there is an increasing demand by the same families for help and support in such sense, above all in front of specific but not often sufficiently known problems.

As it is deduced from the last document produced by the Ministry of Public Education "Culture, School, Person. Toward the national indications for the Primary School" (Rome, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007), in the contemporary society to teach the rules of the way of living is an assignment that needs a strong alliance among school, family and extra-scholastic actors: the educational assignment cannot be interpreted as a simple answer to emergency conditions, but it has

to foresee constant relationships in an optics of mutual recognition of the different roles and the mutual support in the common educational finalities.

The proposed activities for the families are determined to be an occasion of construction of such relational dynamics in the management of the parent-children relationships: the intervention can be structured in different and flexible moments depending on the expressed needs.

It is foreseen the activation of specific laboratories both for the promotion of moments of reflection / comparison on the inherent parent-children thematic, and for the promotion of specific information and / or training courses. Such meetings will be also open to the operators: in this way the meeting between operators and families will be favoured.

### *3. The teachers and operators*

The integration of actions and services, belonging to different contexts as school, professional training, employment services and university is certainly a complex trial that asks for strong wills and resources. The foreseen activity aim to the constitution of an integrated and inter-sectoral network among all the components of the system that act for helping the individual and the community to acquire a greater control on the factors that can determine the rise up of specific problems.

The analysis and the knowledge of the territorial situation allows to share the objectives that can be considered the unifying principle for the network operators: it is necessary to come to share a new way of action for the production and delivering of services. It might be based on some fundamental conditions:

- a strong orientation to the dialogue with the institutions
- the implementation of agreements and partnerships with the territory
- the continuous interaction with the stakeholders that express the social and professional demand on the local context

The demand of an inter-sectoral action that stings to the integration among the local actors needs a strategy of relationships that implicates an intense job, from the planning of meetings and the constant job of comparison up to the relationship with the interlocutors and the working services in the community.

The foreseen action has the aim to use the relationships of such network to support teachers and operators in the planning of didactic interventions that lead to the educational success. In fact, uneasiness emerges more and more also from the operators and from the teaching staff, not always prepared to manage and to study specific actions for boys with strong problems of scholastic adaptation.

The operators, busy in any order and degree of activity inside the education system, have to face students with different learning difficulties;

such phenomenon, lately more frequent, is tightly correlated to factors as the lack of methodology in the study, the difficulty to recognize their own cognitive style, the scarce motivation and a family context often characterised from a multiplicity of social and cultural problems.

In such sense, this activity aims to intervene by offering methodologies and alternative ways of learning and, more specifically, by foreseeing the activation of four paths on these learning modalities and methodologies already tested in Piazza dei Mestieri. The plan includes also the illustration of good practices and operational tools.

Firstly such specific actions were tuned to teachers of the secondary school.

The proposed methodologies are:

- Assignment methodology;
- Learning from the beauty in the 5 senses;
- Peer Education;
- Project planning methodology.

Such methodologies allow to focus the attention on the personalization of the pathway of the students, supporting and favouring the learning on three levels: cognitive, productive, behavioural. It promotes an active role of the teachers and the teenagers, so that both are aware protagonists of the educational relationship and of the training path, favouring the interaction among teacher and students.

The action intends to contribute to the development and diffusion of specific competences for what concerns the more effective methodological innovations found for the creation of educational paths. Besides, the interventions intend to valorise and to increase the professional competences of the operators also by analysing the methodological and training objectives in the management of educational, cultural and professional pathways.

## **Future sustainability**

The hope for the medium term is that such experimental device can become stable and become a model to spread into the territory of reference. Furthermore, the debugging of this device could also become a model for the whole Country by exploiting the synergies and relationships the Piazza dei Mestieri has with much other Italian realities that operate in this sector. It is already in act the feasibility study to export the model to Milan, Naples and Catania.



In the following years, the project could be financed through other sources of financing both public and private; obviously for what concerns the private sector it's referred to the network of local operators interested in the existence of the same service.

From the European point of view, it is necessary to underline how the new UE planning not only sets the accent on the educational aspect, but also on the real ability to favour a working insertion. In such sense, the Plaza of the Works represents one of the more suitable and meaningful attempts in such direction.

## **The Bencs methodology**

### **Introduction**

Bencs László Szakiskola és Általános Iskola (Bencs László Professional Trade and Primary School) operates in the Eastern region of Hungary in Nyíregyháza, which is the capital of a 570 thousand-inhabitant county, characterised by high unemployment rates, with approximately 140 thousand inhabitants including its satellite villages.

The school focusses on students of disadvantageous or multiple disadvantageous social and cultural backgrounds and problems<sup>6</sup>, most importantly with those who have been rejected by other secondary educational institutes.<sup>7</sup> Not only does this school, the only so-called "base school" in the region, try to do its best to cope with its tasks, but it also makes an attempt to provide a model for other similar institutes in the extended region to copy.

Although the school is maintained by the local authorities of the city, its compulsory acceptance area goes beyond its immediate satellite villages.

The activities of the school, we found worth choosing for this case study, are outstanding, because their programme developed for the last couple of years targets the least motivated students to give them a chance to get professional attainment which qualifies them to put themselves into position in the labour market. Although there are schools which would wish to follow them and now are studying their programme, at the moment there is no

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<sup>6</sup> In Hungary the sociological and legal terms differentiate between the disadvantaged and the multiple disadvantaged (the latter has been referred to "underclass" since the 1980's in the USA and "socially excluded" in the EU) . A multiple disadvantaged student is defined in act 1993. LXXIX. Tv. 121. § (1) 14. as somebody whose parent in charge has completed only his/her primary education and he/she regularly gets social childcare benefit, or to someone who is in permanent social care.

<sup>7</sup> In most cases Hungarian students apply for admission to secondary schools at the age of 14. Those who fail acceptance to any of their chosen schools, because there are fewer positions than applicants will continue their studies in comprehensive state schools which are obliged to accept any students. Obligatory school attendance for children is up to they are 18 (it used to be 16 before 2006). These comprehensive state schools accept these students for their least prestige professional training programmes of their three types on offer, where the curricula usually include only core – general knowledge- subjects but not strictly professional ones for the first two years, so many of them and even quite a few of those who originally volunteered for these programmes later decide to drop out of education when they pass the obligatory school attendance age, and thus they expose themselves to a very difficult situation in the labour market.

similar programme in Hungary, so that's why it was chosen for our case study. This case study is based on interviews carried out in the school and its partner institutes and on a case study published earlier on discussing the school's activities.<sup>8</sup>

## **The programme of the school**

### ***The position of the school***

The school's history dates back only to 17 years. Originally it was founded as a primary training institute for adult education, and professional training was added to their activities only later in 1996. Ever since the two types of training programmes have been going on parallel with each other, to which a preparatory training course – with focus on improvement in competence – has recently been added. In the latter training programmes "over the age" youngsters participate who have no chance to complete their primary education owing to the learning difficulties, but with the right help and preparation might be able to study a trade later on.

The premises of the school have very basic infrastructure at the moment. There are two buildings pretty far apart from each other, which just fulfill the requirements and needs, and they both are, despite the continuous improvement, quite far from modern. General knowledge subjects and professional trade subjects are being taught separately in the two buildings in small, crowded rooms which were not designed for educational purposes. For lack of physical space, they are forced to teach students in two shifts, one in the morning and other one in the afternoon, which has been a virtually non-existing solution in Hungary for several decades. The shifts are very demanding, especially for those who have to commute from the country, and who, because of transport difficulties, quite often have to quit extra-curriculum programmes, resulting in education rather inefficient. They hope to significantly improve the situation by moving into some former army barracks in the near future.

Partially for educational considerations and partially for lack of big enough rooms, students mostly learn in small, maximum 15-student groups.

Besides the professional commitment of the school management, the educational innovation of the school can be contributed to two other facts.

1. Owing to its original purpose, the school has always been a "gathering place" for those youngsters who were not motivated enough to study, had patchy knowledge, bad social and family backgrounds, behavioural problems or learning difficulties, and who

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<sup>8</sup> Venter-Lenkovichs, 2005.

would not respond to traditional teaching methodologies, and were unlikely to be kept in education to complete their studies with qualifications.

2. Financing the school has always been very difficult, because the support they have been receiving from the local authorities just covers the most necessary expenses, so the school management has been forced to find supplementary funds. The stipulus to receive them has quite often been to have applied innovative solutions first, developed locally.

This sort of forced innovation gradually turned to their advantage. On one hand they were more and more successful when applied for tenders, and new activities were added to the existing ones. On the other hand, extending the range of activities on tender criteria is often risky, because tender applications should always meet them, independently from their existing programmes. This can easily result in creating hurdles, preventing well established methods and systems from consistent development, which can be traced here as well.

Two tenders and sponsors should be highlighted, which had great impact on their improvements in the longer run. At first they gained support in a programme sponsored by Phare, which helped them to renew their methodologies and build their foundations. After this Phare project, their development was ensured by a government programme called "Szakiskolai Fejlesztési Program (SZFP)" (Trade School Development Programme). The latter was originally designed to provide a one-year preparatory course with the focus on competence development for those who have inappropriate prior education to study a trade later on, so the emphasis was on applying new solutions in this area. What it means in practice is that the methods discussed below are just partially realised in the traditional training programmes, in the aspect of both the general knowledge subjects and the subsequent professional training in the 9th and 10th grades. Of course it does not mean that teachers would show a different attitude to them or would treat them in another way, because the effect of new methods appear apparent in all fields of their education, but for lack of time and money, expensive and time-consuming solutions are not used everywhere.

### ***The need to change***

There are no special or different school related problems there, which would not be common in other parts of Hungary or in almost every welfare country.

There are numerous problems in connection with the students, who quite often did not even volunteer for the school. There are many of them who are older than their classmates, because they failed their exams, but even without that, nearly all of them experienced some sort of serious school failure in their past.

Members of the staff experienced and had to face the fact that traditional frontal classroom arrangements are not very efficient, because they are not motivating enough for their students to study and co-operate.

Most of their students have very difficult family backgrounds. Their parents have very low educational levels, and quite a few of them are unemployed. The majority of parents do not really find schooling of their children very important, so it contributes a lot to their high dropping out rates, due to lack of supporting family background, which would help them to overcome school problems. Another problem is that for keeping both ends meet, many older students' odd jobs contribute a lot to the family income, and become a priority over attending school or learning .

Owing to their different social and cultural backgrounds and norms, many students find it difficult to come up to school expectations and requirements, making their adaptation troubled.

All these issues marked the ways where the school eventually moved ahead. The school management incorporated the findings based on the teachers' methodological reports, and that's what they have been trying to achieve

### ***The Bencs methodology and its background***

The Bencs methodology means both a sequence of activities carried out in the school and the structure belonging to it. The most important elements of this are the following.

- Identifying the students' problems.
- Working out individual development plans. Getting other specialists involved to help in solving some problems, either from the school staff or if necessary from other institutes
- Implementation of individual development plans, follow-up of students' achievement in the school, in case of any problems, intervention immediately.
- Analyses of students' family backgrounds. Co-operating with them more intensively than usual.
- Nurturing and following up a students' job careers after they passed their professional trade exams.

To achieve all these are supported by both a renewed institutional structure in the background and by applying training programmes based on mostly (but in case of catch-up programmes exclusively) projects. Innovation, however, is not limited to this element of their programme, but can be traced in other solutions which are to help all programme elements fit in the relatively rigid school structure, which, to some extent, even though the main target is to help students, is a top priority issue. Not only is it not easy to work out a

new programme and find supporting outsider professionals to help in it, but it is also mostly an issue of having sufficient financial resources for that. What they find most difficult is to adjust the programme to legal requirements, they are obliged to meet, and to make the maintaining local authorities accept these modifications, but also to defeat the resistance of the staff to changes, which originates from the natural human fear of novelty and from the foreseeable extra workload. Not to mention how to make all the changes attractive or at least acceptable to the students and their parents, so that they should support the programme and to help its implementation if possible at least minimally

The methodology adjusted to tender opportunities was gradually developed. The methodological tools of the teachers who participated in catch-up further training programmes became more versatile, got revised, and as a result these positive changes became apparent even in other (professional trade and in traditional non- specialised) classes, where the Bencs methodology was not officially used as part of the programme.

## ***Implementation***

Two of the above-mentioned programme elements required quite thorough preparatory work, namely identifying problems and revising curriculum subjects, which also meant that they inevitably had to undergo institutional restructuring. Professional teams of teachers originally founded on the principle of separate subjects were not designed to work out a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary curriculum for the training programme, and also, there was no designated group for either diagnosing problems or for the preliminary job to work out the methodologies necessary for that.

During the complete institutional restructuring, the school management divided the teachers into three teams based on different principles. One of the teams is now responsible for professional preparatory work, another deals with the students' various problems, and the third has controlling and checking tasks. According to these there are three groups, namely curriculum development, prevention and quality assurance, which are to cooperate in the implementation of the programme and to try their best to prevent students from leaving school early and dropping out of education without attaining professional trade qualifications.

The curriculum development team is to work out the core subjects for the latest curricula considering the special criteria of a module-based educational system, which has not been used widely in Hungary, but which has the advantages of applying project methodology and of taking into considerations special needs, e.g. catching up. The team works most intensively at the beginning of the school year when they plan the annual subject programmes, but recently they have been involved in the Vocational School Development Programme as well. Curricula are planned in advance for a whole school

year, but can be flexibly modified later on. The team's development activities resulted in quite a few subject programmes, and their findings have been, being a base school, shared with many others in teacher further training methodology workshops. A complex character building and compensation for disadvantages programme was also developed for these workshops, which best represents the core of the Bencs methodology.

The prevention group is to help to compensate for disadvantages, to carry out various surveys, to visit the families, and to realise social programmes. Their main task is to coordinate all these activities.

The third group designated to quality assurance operates on task bases from time to time, in the area indicated in its name.

The Bencs methodology can be traced best and most thoroughly in the catch up programme. In the initial phase of the programme with conscious application of the appropriate tests and surveys all the problems and needs of the students are identified, ranging from learning difficulties to various social issues, which all have to be dealt with great care and attention. They also pay attention to basic individual differences, whether a student would respond better to auditive or visual stimuli depending on their natural abilities, which can make their learning more efficient later on.

Basically the survey consists of two parts, one is to assess their learning abilities and to find out the blind and black spots which have significance from the point of view of learning, and the other is to survey their possible socialisation problems. Then to these findings their form teachers add information or clarify details they gain when visiting their families, which is obligatory for them. All their results and the details of their social and family backgrounds are recorded on data sheets, to which form teachers and school staff social and human service assistants add other details or make remarks on if find necessary, including potential educational or discipline problems in the classroom, difficulties with their mother tongue, traits which would lead to antisocial behaviour, health problems and the characteristics of their habitation. When deciding on the most appropriate development, all these facts and details are considered by the teachers to provide the right support.

Every single student and each class has to go through this diagnostic phase we discussed above before they get into the programme, and even students who are already in school, but wish to continue their studies in the professional trade classes are not exempt from this rule. On the other hand their survey is limited to the assessment of their logical, mathematical, literacy and reading comprehensive skills and to detecting any possible speech problems. The findings of their surveys are assessed by the whole school staff, so that they can all see the necessary tasks or steps.

Solving really serious problems goes beyond the competence of the school, in some cases, just for surveying how serious a certain problem is, they have to get an outsider specialists involved. These might be when they suspect that a certain skill is missing, or there are personality traits which

would suggest behavioural or adaptation difficulties, so they often ask official expert committees or/and psychologists for opinion to find out what to do. Students with bad results of the diagnostic survey all have to participate in the catch up programme.

Unfortunately surveys and working systematically on survey findings will never solve all problems, because family support is inseparable from motivating students. With the knowledge of this, the school puts emphasis on explaining the significance of regular school attendance to the parents, so that they can recognise that is how their children will get eventually professional qualifications. In many cases, most commonly when students live in small villages and hamlets, persuading parents is like water off the duck's back, because the children's income represents a very important part in the family budget just to live from hand to mouth, so their vital interest is to see their kids work as early as possible. That's why they find it essential to find other potential motivating factors in the individual which can balance the missing or inefficient family support.

Once a week they have a lesson based on subject programmes in the curriculum with the participation of school staff social and human service assistants to help to compensate their inappropriate socialisation. Certain activities incorporated in the programme are to help students understand what their employees will expect of them, and what the requirements are they will have to come up to, so that they will be able to find their way in the labour market when they have finished their studies. These lessons have both re-socialising and character building effects. If necessary they deal with students individually after class, making clear that if they need any help they should not hesitate to turn to the social and human service assistants. Sometimes these activities push general knowledge subjects back, because their experience is that if they did not pay attention to these issues, it would make teaching itself impossible. Owing to continuous monitoring teachers spot when students have problems or conflicts, so if they think it is necessary to intervene they regroup and restructure or reduce their learning tasks to make time to deal with solving them

Improving learning competence is an additional activity carried out in catch up classes after the normal classes, with the aim of covering black spots in their patchy knowledge and improve skills and problems found necessary to deal with in the diagnostic survey, but cannot be achieved in the normal school hours. They represent an integrated part of the curriculum, but separated in time and space from the other classes.

Unfortunately the realisation of individual student development plans highly depend on the budget a certain tender provides, so for financial limitations they have recently had to significantly reduce the number of these catch up classes, with the solution of dividing normal classes into groups and deal with them in normal school time. Their experience that commuting students had found extremely difficult to attend afternoon programmes also contributed to this decision.



The school continuously monitors how the diagnosed problems of the students change, so that they can immediately turn to the right professional if necessary to intervene in the processes. That is why they introduced standardised, regular competence tests as organic parts of catch-up programmes. On the findings of these tests they can make the right changes in the subject programmes, by putting the emphasis on those skills which most desperately need improvement.

All these activities are highly demanding of the teachers and need a lot of experience, partly because they are to find and identify the problems on the spot, and partly because they have to solve many of them (they cannot turn to experts in all cases). That's why the school management finds further training of its staff a priority, but to realise this aim without sufficient financial resources, they have always had to apply for tender applications. The teacher training programmes preferred by the management have been to help the school staff to acquire new, cooperative learning techniques and to get familiar with project based teaching methodologies, which focus on practical activities. These teacher training programmes have also had a role in helping teachers to react in a flexible and innovative way to all the challenges the institute has experienced.

### ***The teachers***

There are altogether 34 teachers with tertiary education in the school. They are relatively young, the average age is 35. Most teachers are qualified to teach general knowledge or professional trade subjects. There are two of them with social and human service assistant degrees. Considering the various tasks, they are well understaffed, the school needs at least a psychologist and a skills development teacher, but they can't afford to hire them for financial reasons. .

The teachers did not greet with undivided enthusiasm the introduction of the programme, partly because they could immediately see an inevitable increase in their workload, and partly because they were quite uncertain about the positive outcome of the concept. Even though, the majority of teachers supported the programme, but some experienced teachers found it a real drag to adapt to the new requirements. Not all the teachers take part in teaching in catch up classes, but newcomers to the programme understand what they are expected to do and what they might expect, so they accept the situation, and recognise that they should also have more patience than they should commonly find necessary in other schools.

## ***Partners***

As it might have been apparent from the above, the programme strongly relies on various institutes. Co-operation was founded in the Phare programme, which has already been stated here, but of course there had been other informal connections before. Among their partners strong co-operation was established mostly with the local child welfare service and with the local pedagogical service, which was ratified in a consortium-type contract. They also established cooperation with other towns' child welfare services, which eases a lot the activities of the social and human service assistants, because they can more easily check the existing family problems manifesting in the students' bad school performance and low attendance rate. In other matters, which are not related to everyday activities, such as working out professional programmes, the National Vocational Training Institute<sup>9</sup> provides guidelines and help. The local authorities supported the pilot programme by providing the salaries of one psychologist and one speech specialist for a year, which was great contribution considering the school's financial situation. Unfortunately they have ceased to provide this support, so now they have to rely on the professionals who work in the two above-mentioned institutes, and who have many other operating areas besides the school.

## ***Results, failures***

The school management puts emphasis on making the efficiency of professional teaching work accurately measurable, so the initial status survey is always followed by subsequent ones. In addition to this, they evaluate school performance. In case of participating in catch up education, projects are also assessed, partially based on self evaluation and partially with marks given by the teachers (according to Hungarian tradition it is average of marks given for oral presentations in class and for written tests) or text evaluation in the report books depending on the type of the programme. They deduct the teachers efficiency from the changes in students' achievement.

Participation in the quality assurance programme, which is within the Vocational School Development Programme will provide the school the opportunity to measure not only the changes in the student' school performance on the grounds of certain indicators, but also to compare the school's achievement to other schools', and to continuously monitor the changes in a common database. This will also include surveys based on the findings of following up their former students. In this phase we cannot really

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<sup>9</sup> The Nemzeti Szakképzési Intézet (National Vocational Training Institute) is a government maintained national institute with the tasks (besides many others) to work out the outcome requirements for secondary professional programmes and also for vocational education.

say anything about this programme, because it has just been formed and has already changed a lot, some elements have disappeared some have got extended, depending on the tender support, which has always changed, so forming professional opinion would be premature and would give inconsistent results. However, we have experience of the previous two-year catch up training programme, seven of the fifteen-member class continued their studies in the vocational training programme, and four of them have already completed their studies. We can see that the dropping out rate is very high, but considering that the participants are from the least learning oriented and motivated class of the society, we can regard this humble result as a result. There have been two grades which have already completed their catch up programmes in the new, only one year long education. In the first year ten of twelve continued their studies in vocational training education where they seem to be successful in coping with learning difficulties. In the school year of 2006/2007 two other groups of students finished their studies, but we cannot really conclude anything from that right now.

The school management does not really evaluate school results based on outcome figures but rather with soft indicators, such as what the school atmosphere and morale are like, and how the circumstances are accepted, which cannot really be expressed by numbers, and precisely defined with statistical indicators. The first criterion shows requirements, such as students should wish to go to school, learn and should accept a partner-type attitude to the school, and the second that they should feel that the teachers are to co-operate with them in their common target. They regard success when somebody does not drop out of school, and hope that early school leaving rate would drop. They have the aim to decrease dropping out rate to/under ten percent.

What they mean by evaluation is that their activities would be recognised on both local and national levels, and also, if possible, that opportunities for participation in pilot projects would be given to them. In this aspect we can talk about success, because the National Vocational Training Institute asked the school to operate as a base school, and their achievement in the Phrare programme has also been acknowledged. For transferring and spreading information about their own developed methodologies they regularly organise conferences, which provide good opportunities for those who would wish to get familiar with them by sharing their experience.

The family and social backgrounds of their students, prejudices against them, or bad experience in connection with their students still create problems, so the local public opinion is very low of their activities, misregarding their efforts and achievement, which all results in very low social prestige. That's why the school management aims their services mostly not at the locals, but at the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages and towns .

If the school was not forced to continuously apply for tenders to provide the finances, teachers would probably be able to focus on only professional work. At the moment a lot of time, energy and effort are wasted on fiddling

with tender writing details, instead of concentrating on the programmes in progress, because parallel with their teaching activities they should always be far-sighted enough to scrape together all the necessary resources for the next programme.

## **Conclusion**

Despite having a long history of dealing with youngsters who have learning difficulties and social problems and having an own developed comprehensive programme for success, the school is in a very difficult situation. There is a great demand for their services in the society, because the problems they have been dealing with are quite general, and also, the representatives of various professional organisations have also become aware of the significance of the urge to do something about them, but for lack of well-established institutional systems, and for clear financing resources, the solution has not really been given shape, so that anyone could really rely on that. Educational policy would wish to do something in an area which is strictly related to it, but in this issue co-operation between various educational, social, health care and labour market institutes would be necessary. Recognising this necessity of cooperation, the school of our case study has initiated and partially achieved it in its various tenders. Their activities however are always limited by tender criteria, which not intentionally but ignore all pre-activities, so newer and newer concepts are prized for their novelty, and stipulate financial support to that, making an end to a developed project they have just started. Owing to the fact that neither the school nor the maintaining local authorities are capable of financing expensive projects, they have nothing to do but adapt their plans for the criteria of a tender.

Despite the problems and difficulties their activities are still outstanding and provide a role model, because they have recognised what types of answers should be given to a question, what methodologies should be used for that and what institutes to co-operate with, and also, how to lead the youngsters concerned back to education so that at least part of them could get vocational trade qualifications. We can hope that their activities will involve more and more their vocational training programme as well, partly because their students finishing their catch up programme would get similar attention they got used to and partly because there are many of those who got into vocational education in the traditional way but still need a lot of special care and attention. The teachers of the school are more and more prepared to fulfil this goal, and if financial background exists they are able to perform appropriately. Before that time significant changes in efficiency and results cannot really be expected.

## Resources

### *Interviews*

- Oroszvári István, headmaster, Bencs László Szakiskola és Általános Iskola, (Bencs László Professional Trade and Primary School) Nyíregyháza
- Batári Ferencné deputy headmistress of education, Bencs László Szakiskola és Általános Iskola (Bencs László Professional Trade and Primary School) Nyíregyháza
- Áfra Viktória, psychologist, Egységes Pedagógiai Szakszolgálat (Nyíregyháza)
- Boros Andrásné, teacher (trade subjects), Bencs László Szakiskola és Általános Iskola, (Bencs László Professional Trade and Primary School) Nyíregyháza
- Magyar Mihályné, head of practice education department, Bencs László Szakiskola és Általános Iskola
- Dr. Húse Lajos director, Gyermekjóléti Szolgálat (Children welfare service, Nyíregyháza)

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