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Prof. Dr. Michaela Sambanis

Basic features of internal differentiation and selected methods for the English language classroom.

Anne-Maria Nützler

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Introduction

There is a well-known cartoon that illustrates the need for internal differentiation perfectly. It shows a teacher, a tree and several different animals such as a fish, an elephant and a monkey (see <http://westjeffhigh.wordpress.com/2011/06/03/differentiated-instruction-s-fairness/>). The teacher then announces proudly that he wants to keep the task fair and the same for everybody; accordingly, he wants each of his students to climb the tree. This tongue-in-cheek cartoon sums up an essential discrepancy. Schools in Germany are faced with a difficult and what some might even consider impossible task. On the one hand, school has to acknowledge that every student is an individual and has to be treated as one, but on the other hand school is also a place of selection that is governed by standards. Figuratively speaking, teachers have to recognise students as monkeys, elephants or fish and at the same time they have to make everyone climb that tree.

To deal with this heterogeneity among students external and internal differentiation can be applied. Whereas external differentiation takes place when students are assigned to different types of schools or courses (for example a basic course and an advanced course), internal differentiation is applied within a learning group. This paper will focus on the less straightforward and more complicated internal differentiation. First, the topic is approached from a general point of view, looking at basic criteria as well as the four types of internal differentiation in greater detail. Afterwards the application in the English language classroom is brought into focus. Several selected methods of internal differentiation will be introduced, analysed and assessed. Finally, the current situation concerning the handling of heterogeneity in German classrooms is evaluated.

1. Heterogeneity, not homogeneity is the rule in German classrooms

Differentiation can roughly be described as a number of measures concerning the organisation of learning processes that aim to improve said processes with regard to content and organisation as well as institutional, individual and social matters. But why is it necessary at all? It will prove beneficial to take one step back and take a look at two terms differentiation is closely linked to, heterogeneity and homogeneity. The word 'heterogeneous' stems from the ancient Greek adjective 'heterogénés', consisting of the parts 'heteros' (different) and 'gennào (to create). Consequently, it can be translated as 'non-uniform' or 'different from sth.' The Greek stem 'homós', on the other hand, depicts something 'joint', 'similar' or 'equal'. Keeping these derivations in mind, it has to be stated that the terms heterogeneity and homogeneity always remain relative; they constitute nothing but the outcome of a comparison between things or people (see Bönsch 2009a: 65 and Eckhart 2009: 24f.).

The institution 'school' fulfils several functions when it comes to the delicate subject of bridging the gap between these two poles. Whereas learners have a right to be treated and appreciated as individuals, they are also entitled to enjoy equal rights as a recognised member of a group. These two conflicting claims, the right to be different and the right to equality, have to be reconciled in school (see

Bräu 2005: 138). Through means of external differentiation, a concept that will be explained further in the following chapter, school, at first sight, manages to act homogenising. Within its walls, however, it falls prey to mechanisms of selection and produces disparity among its students (Eckhart 2009 refers to Wenning 2007: 43). It seems utopian to believe this contrast will ever be solved satisfactorily, when actually it does not have to be. Constructive approaches, such as the ones being offered in this paper, are able to show how diversity can be taken as a chance and enrich learning with each other as well as from each other. Both heterogeneous and homogeneous learning groups have their rightful place in school.

It is a common belief among parents, teachers and other professionals that a great extent of heterogeneity automatically equals some kind of a disadvantage. A great variety in classrooms is thought to affect the students' learning processes negatively (see Eckhart 2009: 38). A shift towards focusing on the opportunities that are to be gained from varied prerequisites has to take place. This undertaking is a difficult one. Heinz Klippert (2010: 78) notes that the teacher's good will is key to the success of making any heterogeneous learning group work. If teachers face the range in ability, interest and behaviour with inner distance or even resistance, this attitude will most certainly prove to be a reliable source for failure when it comes to supporting and integrating within a class. Students, especially the ones that are in need of special assistance, have the tendency to notice the teacher's attitude towards them fairly early on and act accordingly. There is also the possibility that they will resort to defensive and problematic behaviour. Many forms of refusal of performance or indiscipline have their roots in this basic constellation. Who feels he is not appreciated takes 'revenge' and acts out. It is the task and challenge of a school that promotes inclusion and equal opportunities to break this vicious circle.

The realisation that learning potential is not distributed equally is a starting point. Different strengths and likings have to be uncovered in order to ensure a tangible sense of achievement for both stronger and weaker students. Only then can withdrawal, exclusion, boredom, demotivation, refusal and chronic failure in performance be avoided (see Klippert 2010: 80). The basic concept of differentiation therefore aims to 'pick up' each learner individually and accompany him on his journey. This notion has formerly been expressed as follows (Thürmann 1988 refers to Röder 1981: 4):

Differenzierung soll Lehrern ermöglichen, unter den normalen Bedingungen von Unterricht – also in Lerngruppen von 15 bis 35 Schülern – jeden Schüler gewissermaßen dort abzuholen, wo er sich auf seinem Lernweg befindet, und ihn seinen Kenntnissen und Fähigkeiten entsprechend so zu fördern, da[ss] innerhalb der Gruppe Unterschiede in den Lernvoraussetzungen ausgeglichen und Ziele erreicht werden, die auf anderen Wegen unerreichbar sind.

This concept is in strong contrast to the principle of linearity which is still executed by many teachers nowadays. They plan and teach a lesson in the hope that 25 learning processes (in the case of 25 students in a class) will flourish synchronously, an illusion to be sure (see Bönsch 2009a: 36). The resulting guilty conscience often leads teachers to level out at a medial aspiration level and call for

external differentiation. Even though general guidelines and curricula demand internal differentiation, in the general structure of lessons as well as in tasks within lessons it can still be considered a delicate subject that offers no easy solutions (see Börner 1988: 12).

To complicate the matter further, school finds itself in a difficult position for another reason. On the one hand it wants to differentiate, individualise and create an emotionally secure atmosphere, but on the other hand it takes an active part in the selection processes society requires it to have. This area of tension is a constant given when it comes to dealing with school and the functions it serves (see Bietz 2008: 38).

2. Keystones of internal differentiation

It is customary in Germany to assign children to different types of schools following the fourth or sixth grade. This allocation into different learning groups is referred to as external differentiation and practically based solely on performance. The four common types of schools (Hauptschule, Förderschule, Realschule and Gymnasium) differ in their target groups, educational mandate and in their underlying concepts of ductility and aptitude. Even though this distribution of students simulates a sense of unification, heterogeneity, not homogeneity remains the rule in German classrooms. In addition, external differentiation is also used as a means to bridge this remaining heterogeneity within school types. To do this, the model of differentiation used most often is the so-called 'setting' in which students are taught several subjects in different courses depending on their level of performance. This, as well as the preceding allocation to a school, poses the threat of reinforcing the attribution to certain levels of performance in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students might resign themselves to the situation and stop trying to aim higher. Although external differentiation tries, heterogeneity cannot be eradicated completely. Consequently, the measure of distributing students to different types of schools can be considered both a pseudo-differentiation that does not achieve what it claims to and that, at the same time, misses out on giving different students the possibility of learning with and from each other for a longer period of time. A social component is lost (see Bönsch 2009a: 14ff. and Bönsch 2009b: 36).

Due to these reasons and what might be considered pitfalls, many researchers consider internal differentiation a much more worthwhile approach. It offers what is supposed to be the best possible matching between the learners' prerequisites and the learning opportunities the school has to offer. A promising premise within internal differentiation to achieve this match seems to be the focus on each individual learner. This claim for differentiated and individualised lessons revolves around the idea of opening up a number of options for the students that allow them to make use of their personal talents, dispositions and interests. This might be put into practice with a combination of teacher-centred teaching, an important and downright indispensable means within internal differentiation and school in general, and autonomous learning in the succeeding phases. Whereas basic information is imparted in front of the whole class, the subsequent exercises are then highly individualised and presuppose the

students' willingness to be held accountable for their processes of learning. Manfred Bönsch (2009a: 74) calls this 'backward differentiation' (nachgehende Differenzierung). In the best of cases, constant motivation, social integration and enhanced learning curves are the resulting outcomes (see Grunder 2009: 118ff. and Klippert 2010: 97).

Aside from the differences in performance, conflicting interests are probably the second most important characteristic a teacher has to deal with. It is the teacher's as well as the school's responsibility to resolve these issues and offer equal chances of success for every student. Since both varying interests and capabilities when it comes to performance levels create a complex framework which cannot be met sufficiently with undifferentiated measures and an orientation towards a supposed average expectation, internal differentiation indeed seems to be the only way out. Whether the differentiation is based on performance or interest, it has to be kept in mind that the measures taken accordingly are temporary either way. Methods or arrangements are always aimed at a specific objective and are highly dependent upon a particular situation. Among those, weekly schedules and other forms of open learning that offer students a great amount of choices and which Bönsch calls 'arrangements of mid-level range' have become popular in the last 20 years. These approaches offer a combination of compulsory contents as well as contents that can be picked out of interest and motivate the students to trust their choices and take responsibility. Another alternative tendency that has come to light in recent years is the orientation towards competences rather than fixed contents. This approach is revolutionary in that it confronts the students with the skills that are to be acquired from the very beginning. Besides being both task- and goal-oriented, it also supports and fosters self-sufficient learning. The process as well as the outcome is important (see Bönsch 2009a: 14, 31 and Bönsch 2009b: 37f.).

No matter how many new and revolutionary approaches researchers and institutions bring forth, internal differentiation hinges on teachers alone. They serve as the subject-specific authority and plan as well as structure learning processes; they serve as the designer of ideal learning environments, train their students to be self-sufficient and make themselves redundant; they serve as counsellors who are familiar with talents and potentials and maintain contact with parents (see Sorrentino et al. 2009: 20f.). It is only fitting then that both the teacher and the students agree on and decide on means of internal differentiation. If only the teacher were to choose how to challenge as well as stimulate certain students, he might fall prey to false assumptions concerning a student's interest, prior knowledge or motivation. Students, on the other hand, might misjudge their own abilities and either over- or underestimate their performance capability (see Haß 2008: 6). Internal differentiation has to be grasped as a collective effort to improve pre-existing conditions. Manifestations of this 'effort' will be looked at in more depth in the following subchapters.

2.1 Basic criteria

In a pluralistic post-modern society that aims to accommodate populations of students that get more and more heterogeneous, a number of distinguishing factors has to be taken into consideration. The differing prerequisites students bring to school do not only include interests and intellectual potential (talents, learning rate and modes of learning). Age, individual state of development and social background, but also factors like domestic working conditions, cultural background and (inter)cultural experience are of the essence. Furthermore, communicative competences, work ethic as well as the self-concept a student has (motivation, perseverance, the ability to concentrate and resilience play a role here) are not to be underestimated. Lastly, when thinking about internal differentiation teachers have to factor in discipline, social skills when it comes to dealing with fellow students, learner type affiliation and many other components (see Haß 2008: 2f.).

In order to suit the needs these prerequisites ask for, Bönsch developed a number of criteria that are supposed to facilitate and organise internal differentiation. He urges to bear in mind that framework curricula set the standards that have to be met with individual learning arrangements, stimuli and learning aids so that each student can reach them successfully. Hence, the criteria for differentiation used to achieve this are highly complex. Bönsch's first criterion for internal differentiation concerns the developmental state, the work itself and the processing (Er-, Be- und Verarbeitungsweisen). The students are able to choose between different approaches to a topic (for example the internet, a scheme, a picture, a movie or a text), different manners of dealing with a topic (for example books, exercise books and worksheets that demand analysing, reading, listening, watching, experimenting etc.) and different exercises to deepen their knowledge on the topic (for example working through exercises with the teacher, writing texts or applying the knowledge creatively). This criterion also entails the vital differentiation between various methods and media to be used. In addition, lessons can vary when it comes to the quantity of the educational content (Quantität der Unterrichtsinhalte). In doing so, the teacher might, for instance, make use of basic texts or a more differentiated, in-depth handling of sources. The third criterion is concerned with the aspiration level and quality of contents (Anspruchsniveau – Qualität). Here one might differentiate between simple and more complex tasks, between a reproduction of contents and productive, independent transfer or between subtasks like the training of new words and multi-dimensional tasks such as writing a creative text using the new words as well as new grammatical structures. Fourthly, self-sufficiency and the help required (Selbstständigkeit – Umfang benötigter Hilfen) are crucial variables. The range within a classroom can span between complete autonomy and a considerable need for counselling and support. Another criterion is the issue of time (Zeit). Whereas some learners are able to reach set aims fairly quickly, others take much longer for the same task. Since internal differentiation is about the inner workings of a group, cooperation competence (Kooperationskompetenz) is a criterion that cannot be neglected. This criterion revolves around being able to supply and accept helpful advice in contrast to

possessing a rather low ability to convey information. The seventh measure Bönsch mentions is aim differentiation (Zieldifferenzierung). It includes the setting of required standards and, under certain conditions, the provision of necessary additions. Lastly, the achievement of quotas or extracurricular work (Planerfüllung oder zusätzliche Interessen) factor into internal differentiation. Next to offering compulsory tasks, teachers are supposed to keep an open mind and encourage independent activities (see Bönsch 2009a: 65ff. und Bönsch 2009b: 36f.).

2.2 Four types of differentiation

Within internal differentiation it is possible to identify four different types. All four types can be aimed at both, differentiation due to performance or due to interest. Firstly, there is thematic differentiation which includes several of the aforementioned criteria, these being quantity, dealing with and applying newly gained knowledge, aim differentiation as well as aspiration level. Then there is media-related differentiation. This concerns the various kinds of supportive media a student can be offered when trying to cope with a difficult learning situation (for example a computer programme, a worksheet or a picture). Among other things, the question of how much time students get to work on a task belongs to methodological differentiation. Finally, there is also always a social component to differentiation. The conscious decision to split the group into several smaller groups, pairs or having students work on their own is a powerful tool (see Bönsch 2009a: 18f.). Since this social component plays a particularly vital part, it will be looked at more closely.

Individual work has its merits because it provides the best possible match between the learners' prerequisites and the requirements that have to be met. If teachers prepare only one task for the entire class, they have a lower workload but they also have to base the task on an assumed medium performance level by default. Several different tasks for individual work improve this situation and incorporate ideas of internal differentiation. However, students tend to seek partners and small groups with the same tasks and any individual activation will occur less focused. If teachers then take individual work one step further and prepare a different task for each learner, the learners will indeed be fostered optimally but the organisational effort is simply too much to carry out. As far as individual work in general goes, it is suitable for phases of repetition as well as enlarging upon and ensuring contents. It is less suitable for the development of a new topic (see Trautmann/Wischer 2007: 46 and Sorrentino et al. 2009: 25).

When dealing with pair or group work both homogeneous and heterogeneous allocations are possible. Strong pairs or groups then get more difficult tasks or mixed groups get different tasks corresponding with the needs of the individual members. In any pair or group work situation it is implied that students make use of the chance to learn with and from each other (see Trautmann/Wischer 2007: 46). Especially heterogeneous groups also offer great possibilities for weaker students to contribute to the end product. Since parts of group work can be outsourced and handled individually, each group

member has the opportunity to take responsibility as well as show their individual skills and strengths and thereby make a valuable contribution to the outcome. Especially in the foreign language classroom, where students try to learn a new language together, group work encourages authentic language use, for example when different groups present their results to the rest of the class (see Bräu 2005: 135f. and Wolff 2003: 325). Other methods of and suggestions for internal differentiation especially in English will be looked at in closer detail in the subsequent chapters.

3. Applied internal differentiation in the English language classroom

Englischunterricht in der 7a: Paula und Leonie fragen sich gegenseitig Vokabeln ab, drei Schüler kontrollieren gegenseitig ihre Arbeit in den *workbooks*, eine Gruppe sitzt mit einem CD-Spieler im Flur und macht eine Hörverstehensübung, Peter wartet sehnsüchtig darauf, dass er endlich an der Reihe ist, die Lehrerin etwas zu fragen, Maria und Janine besprechen, was sie jetzt machen ... (Bietz 2008: 36)

This scene from an English language classroom can be considered internal differentiation par excellence. As long as the teacher provides a certain framework and the students know what to do and what not to do, the sky is the limit when it comes to applying internal differentiation. When, for example, dealing with the tedious task of learning new words in English, Bönsch (1995: 98) proposes to not just let students memorise them, but to give them the option to read a text and develop the unknown words out of context. Equally, the new words might be used in a story or internalised in a dialogue or role play. The possibilities seem endless. Apart from classical methods such as worksheets, posters and letter writing, numerous other techniques are imaginable. A few that also support and apply the notion of differentiation are: riddles, presentations, free story-telling, talk shows, interviews in the streets, brainstorming, computerised learning and journals (see Klippert 2010: 83 and Meister 2003: 69ff.). Special attention will now be directed to station work, portfolios and projects. An accumulation of other suitable methods that have been applied in the English language classroom will conclude this part of the analysis.

3.1 Station work

Station work can be considered the classical version of differentiation in the developmental stages of a new topic (see Bönsch 2009a: 76). The teacher prepares the learning content in the form of several tasks (for example reading texts, filling in worksheets, answering questions, finding mistakes, doing experiments, playing games etc.) and distributes them among several tables in the classroom, the hallway and possibly even the school yard. With respect to certain rules such as a time frame and compulsory stations, the students then move around on their own account and navigate their journey by means of a control slip. It also helps to number the stations and give them catchy names. In the planning phase it proves beneficial to work in teacher teams and ensure that an elaborated station work, which is very time-consuming in the making, is used in more than one class (see Klippert 2010: 109 and Sorrentino et al. 2009: 40).

Margitta Kutny (2008: 20f.) describes her experiences with a successfully executed station work on the topic 'sports' in the seventh grade. The new vocabulary has already been introduced and now has to be applied in several different tasks that are to be worked on individually, in pairs or even in small groups. The control slip does not only indicate whether a station was completed, but it also serves as a means of self-reflection (asking for the evaluation of degrees of difficulty, appeal of the station and gained knowledge). The station work ends with an evaluation as a class. Results are compared, work is presented and wishes for future station work are expressed. Internal differentiation is a given, since learners are able to choose the stations and their course of action freely, since they can find new partners at each station and since different stations demand different skills. Whereas learner 1 has a deeper knowledge of the language, learner 2 is quicker with the internet research and learner 3 has specific knowledge on a type of sport at his disposal.

3.2 Portfolios

Portfolios provide incentives and possibilities to archive the products of learning processes achieved at home or in school. Some types of portfolios, like the publishing or presentation portfolio (Veröffentlichungs- oder Präsentationsportfolio), are meant to document and introduce products that have been compiled during phases of individual learning. They often include filled in worksheets, self-penned texts, charts and sketches, pictures, protocols or presentations. Other portfolios, on the other hand, are concerned with documenting the personal development of a student rather than focusing on the results only. Letters, track records, learning journals, learning contracts or reflections might be incorporated in this. No matter which form of portfolio is chosen, it is important to note that they mirror each individual learner and do not have to be assessed. Works over a period of time are collected and have a purpose; the works get justification, recognition and appreciation (see Klippert 2010: 119f.).

3.3 Project work

Project work is supposed to link life, learning and work. A somewhat important and to the students' interests appealing problem is to be handled (process) and led to a satisfactory conclusion (product). Contents, methods, social forms, use of materials and media usage are initiated and organised autonomously (see Sorrentino et al. 2009: 126f.). Two projects that have been carried out to great success are given as examples.

In the early eighties, Michael K. Legutke conducted the 'Airport' project with a sixth grade in Hesse. Together they paid a visit to the airport in Frankfurt that was filmed and even made into a documentary (WDR: *Schule und Medien*). After an intense preparation phase, the students went on a field trip to the airport, collected information (announcements, brochures and signs in English) and interviewed international travellers in English. The project combined 'regular' school work with authentic situations and an effective use of language. The preparations as well as the follow-up were

very time-consuming, but the motivation gained and overall success of the project spoke for itself (Brusch 2009 refers to Legutke 1988: 189).

Another project called 'Animals in danger' was realised in a fifth grade. Groups of students were given a continent each and prepared a presentation (orally and written down) for their class, other classes as well as a meeting with their parents. Additional to the continent every group got assigned, students also had to pick an endangered animal from that continent each. That way, every student had his own responsibility but at the same time was in charge of a continent with his group. The initial presentation in front of the class was then taken as a final rehearsal where students could openly comment on their classmates' work and correct themselves mutually before they presented in front of their parents. The presented posters showed the outline of the continents, which included pictures and short texts and which were pieced together later on to make a map of the world that would be displayed in school. Internal differentiation occurred naturally within this project. The students helped each other with the internet search, the texts about the animals (learner 1 pays attention to the completeness of the sentences, learner 2 focuses on the linguistic structure) as well as the preparation and presentation of the poster (learner 1 draws and decorates, learner 2 writes, learner 3 organises the order of the presentations and learner 4 makes suggestions in dealing with the blackboard and the pictures etc.). Since the topic of endangered animals appealed to the students and their interest and curiosity were sparked right from the beginning, this project, too, was a thorough success (see Kuty 2008: 18ff.).

3.4 Other useful methods

Zu einem Sprachunterricht, der eine Differenzierung in den Lernwegen im Sinne der Förderung multipler Intelligenzen zulässt, gehören unter anderem vielfältige Lese- und Hörtexte [...], Quizzes, Puzzles und *brainteasers* [...], Bildimpulse und Filmsequenzen [...], Lieder, Reime und *chants* [...], Bewegungsspiele und physische Aktivitäten [...], Schemata und Kategorien [...], Gruppendiskussionen und Rollenspiele [...], Einzelaktivitäten und Selbstreflexionsaufgaben [...] (Haß 2008: 7)

Frank Haß promotes the encouragement of multiple intelligences as the ultimate goal of internal differentiation. His colleague Eike Thürmann (1988: 6) agrees with him when he puts forth the argument that internal differentiation is legitimised not only by the performance in a subject but also by the positive impact on the students' personal development and social as well as learning behaviour. Next to the aforementioned station work, portfolios and project work, there are a number of other methods that aimed at this and have been taught efficiently.

Creative tasks like role playing can be a great crowd-pleaser with students. A dramatisation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in the ninth and tenth grade of a 'Hauptschule', for example, showed surprising results. During the preparation of the performance weaker students with a liking for drama developed unexpected ambition and caused the balance of performance levels within the group to change. The students corrected their own language and worked on it so they were able to speak more

fluently. It was even noticeable that this ambition carried over into the regular lessons. Creative tasks pose the possibility to differentiate due to interest as well as performance and also provide an additional motivating factor (see Thürmann 1988: 7f.).

When it comes to the first phase of an English lesson (*warming up* or *opening a field of awareness*), image descriptions are popular methods. The task of simply describing the picture can be altered easily and made more accessible to both strong and weaker students easily. A *Where's Wally?*-picture (Wimmelbild), for example, might be used on five different levels. Task 1 could be to collect words on a poster, task 2 could be to describe the picture, task 3 could ask students to narrate the daily routine of a character in the picture, task 4 could be a fictional dialogue between two of the characters and task 5 could be to perform the dialogue. Supplementary to these levels of differentiation, pair or group work are also possible (Haß refers to Gutschow 1968:6).

When not just one single lesson but a whole unit is to be introduced, more elaborate tasks are feasible. As an introduction to the topic *Scotland*, for example, students could be able to choose between several different assignments and group tasks. Whereas group 1 might like to prepare a presentation and read texts about historical sights, characters and events, group 2 might enjoy riddles and *open-ended stories* about Scotland more. Similarly, group 3 could work with photos and film sequences and prepare a *slide show* for the rest of the class. More artistic students might enjoy working on the melody and lyrics of *Flower of Scotland* and preparing a performance. Another group might take the CD player and the introduction to the dance steps of *Gay Gordons* to the school yard or gymnasium and prepare a performance. Group 6 might have an affinity to maths and enjoy looking at tables and statistics and therefore could compare the rainfall in the Highlands to the one Berlin. Group 7 might choose to work in pairs and swap information, opinions and knowledge by using *information gap activities* or *opinion gap activities* (Tandembögen). The last group could keep track of all the other groups and work on additional information about Scotland that is to be looked at in the unit. In the end all of the groups present their results and exchange information (see Haß 2008: 8).

Open tasks are also an easy and effective way of applying internal differentiation. Learners get the possibility to fulfil the requirements in accordance with their own capabilities. Naming as many colours, animals, names or exciting, boring, funny things as possible could be considered the easiest way to set such an open task. *Brain storming*, *characterisations*, making up interview questions for an interview with a famous person, texts about oneself or writing down the understood, most interesting or most important facts about an authentic text (newspaper, magazine, brochure, listening text, picture or film) are more complex open tasks. It might prove useful to determine a minimum number. It can be observed that especially with textual work, the focus is often put too much on the things students did not understand; instead, a shift towards the information the students did in fact understand has to take place. When asking them to communicate what they actually made out, an individual sense of achievement will be much more likely (see Börner 1988: 12).

4. Problems and prospects

Descriptions of cases like the ones in this paper are somewhat misleading. The empirical data for differentiated lesson concepts is few and far between; they can still be considered rather uncommon in mainstream schools. Reasons for this have to be called into question. Teachers seem to long for homogeneous learning groups and still consider themselves first and foremost directors, master conductors or (animal) tamers. So, the starting point has to lie in a change of thinking. Teachers need to develop an awareness that lets them reflect their own mind-sets and attitudes. Only then will they be open-minded enough to seek appropriate material and start a productive exchange with their colleagues. It is important to know that the information is available and there is no need to reinvent the wheel, but it all starts with a receptive mind-set (see Trautmann/Wischer 2007: 46 and Trautmann/Wischer 2008: 167).

The 'problems' with applying internal differentiation do not only lie in the teachers that are to execute innovative methods, but in the school system itself, too. As long as the framework conditions are less than desirable and teachers are supposed to support 25 to 30 students in one class individually, it is difficult to speak of successful internal differentiation across the board. The 45 minutes rhythm, the pressure to teach certain contents and prepare students for standardised tests and overcrowded classes with students that all want to be observed, counselled and nurtured are too much for teachers who often view themselves as lone fighters. In tough everyday life situations even benevolent teachers lack the time, routine and concrete instruments to initiate a lasting change in diagnostic and supportive work. The usual appeals by politicians, school inspectors and educational researchers do not change that. In the long run measures like smaller learning groups, well equipped rooms, more than one teacher in a class, longer time periods, the continuing education of teachers and the provision of resources have to be evaluated. There is no general method or approach that works like a charm in every lesson. Sustainability can only be reached if it is borne collectively by an entire school and, for example, firmly established in the school programme (see Klippert 2010: 220f. and Bräu 2005: 146f.).

School does not stand on its own but is closely connected to society. Society in turn asks students for a number of qualities like the ability to communicate well, to work independently and to be self-responsible (see Wolff 2003: 236). These soft skills have gained and will gain much greater attention against the background of the European integration and processes of world-wide networking. Especially standardised tests like PISA have fuelled discussions in Germany and called pre-existing beliefs into question. Consequently, a paradigm shift from input towards output orientation was put into practice. Skills rather than concrete facts and contents, which teachers still cannot really let go of, have become the governing principles in classrooms. Still, school remains part of a whole and has a selective function to fulfil. Competence levels are the new standards. Tests on national as well as on state level (Vergleichsarbeiten, Zentralabitur etc.) examine whether students have reached set standards (see Tönshoff 2003: 332 und Haß 2008: 3). So, even though the shift towards more general skills that are of

use in the world of work can be considered a positive development and in keeping with internal differentiation, school continues to be far from offering equal support to students in need and recognising diversity as something positive. A lot still needs to be done.

Conclusion

Differentiation, be it external or internal, is a highly complex undertaking. Teachers and schools have to realise that a certain amount of heterogeneity cannot be helped; there will never be a perfectly homogeneous class. This paper has shown that differences can be understood as opportunities instead of obstacles and that students should be given the chance to learn with and from each other. Instead of separating them and splitting them up, varying prerequisites can be singled out deliberately and used in a positive, productive manner. Teachers and students have to work hand in hand in order to make this collective effort work. The methods mentioned in this paper only hint at the successful cooperation within classrooms that is feasible. The free choices station work offers, the focus on the development and process portfolios document and the authentic use of language project work promotes are only few examples of effective internal differentiation. The recent orientation towards competences highlights an important change in the way school is perceived. Both the process and the outcome are given credit and self-sufficiency is promoted. But school policy and framework conditions in schools have to remain under high scrutiny and improve further. If the positive change then also manages to find its way into the minds of teachers, individualisation and a profitable cooperation of diverse generations of students are well under way.

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