

Hedenäset, 12 February – 13 February 2009

When my colleagues Carol and Yvonne asked me to join them for their next Comenius Project Meeting at Hietaniemi Friskola in Sweden, I didn't hesitate to take the chance of participating as I had already met some of the teachers taking part in the project. They had visited our school in Hamburg in November 2007, and I had been able to appreciate the friendly and open-minded atmosphere among them. Working together on a project concerning health, as well as spending some time in Sweden together with teachers from different European countries, was highly motivating, and I was looking forward to our coming Comenius meeting.

To prepare the project meeting the participants had a look at the health standards that were provided at their own schools to maintain the well-being of their students as well as the staff working in the place. What is meant when we talk about health at schools and what is offered, for example at a Finnish school compared to an Italian or British one to preserve and enhance people's health there? How do we organise ourselves to deal with health problems at our schools? Are there generally considerable differences between our countries? And what could we learn from each other to improve the standards at home when we came back from Sweden?

From all participants' point of view a definition of "being healthy" in our context had not only to comprise physical but also mental and social health. Some pointed out the absence of drugs for a healthy lifestyle or mentioned the importance of emotional and psychological well-being whereas others emphasized the active part of each individual to stay healthy, e.g. to do frequent and regular physical exercise and eat a balanced diet.

Of course, physical education plays a pivotal role in health education and it is part of each curriculum of every school that was represented at the meeting. Extracurricular sport activities are also offered at all schools. But beyond that it was interesting to hear that in Finland for instance health education is taught as a subject on its own, and that other subjects such as home economics can also be a popular subject to promote the "health issue" more precisely the "healthy food issue". Home economics I learned is not necessarily only popular among girls. At Steimbke Secondary School for instance both boys and girls enjoy learning how to prepare freshly cooked meals and find out about proper diets and nutrition. And this will maybe prevent them from malnutrition and diet-related diseases one day.

Another example of taking care and supporting a healthy nutrition at schools goes back to a parents' initiative at our school. Some mothers and fathers provide a healthy snack for the pupils every school day during the break. Furthermore, some of the parents have initiated an agreement for the school community that goes beyond a healthy diet. Pupils, parents and teachers have been working on that agreement since then and it encompasses among many other aspects of school life the physical and mental health of our students.

A similar "contract" between parents, pupils and teachers (Pact of Coresponsibility) has been ratified at our Italian colleagues' school in Rome.

Swedish and Finnish schools have developed an efficient system to cope with their students' mental, physical and social health problems on a regular base. Leif and Maarit from Hietaniemi Friskola as well as Anne, Tero and Sami from Seinäjoen Lyseo have got Student Welfare Groups at their schools. These groups meet once a week to discuss individual cases and they cooperate closely with local authorities like social services, the local health care and the police. Successful networking as a useful tool to maintain students' health and help in the case of a disease is also a major factor for the work of our British colleagues Sandra and Heidi at Silverdale Primary School in Hastings.

Moreover, it's noticeable that British as well as Finnish schools employ school nursing teams that care for their students' health which I haven't come across in Germany yet.

Finally, for our daily work in the classroom it's important to be aware of social and psychological problems our students might come up with, e. g. mobbing or stress symptoms that could lead to serious psychological or physical diseases. Our Italian colleague Floriana reported from LSS Archimede in Rome that the teachers there had to take part in training courses that dealt with psychological and pedagogical skills to support students in difficult situations and recognize possible problems.

In conclusion, Welfare Groups in Sweden and Finland seem a good working system to cope with students' health problems in an efficient way and networking with outside organisation is also essential to provide a satisfying health management at schools. We discussed a lot of aspects concerning students' health at the meeting whereas the staff's health was not really of importance. Thanks to our wonderful hosts Leif and Maarit their guests were offered an extraordinary social program for school staff's well-being in the magnificent landscape of Lapland. Never will I forget my first ride on a snowmobile and our visit to the reindeer farm although the reindeer I met wasn't called Rudolph.

Elmar Klein

