

Life in a Restructured School

For 14 years, cooperation and teamwork have been a way of life at Holweide School in Cologne, Germany.

Photographs by Monika Klemm

Unlike the high school in the U.S. or the comprehensive school in Britain, one school for all children is still the exception, not the rule, in Germany. We have a class-based system that dates from the 19th century, from the *Kaiserreich*. Beginning at age 10, students are sorted out and tracked. Children from the upper class—and the most able from other social classes—go to the *Gymnasium* in preparation to enter the university. Middle-class students attend the *Realschule*. And the children of the lower class, including many immigrant children, go to the *Hauptschule* until age 15 or 16, when they join the work force.

Since 1969, however, a net of *Gesamtschulen* (high schools, comprehensive schools) has been established side by side with the old system, and they have developed different concepts to educate all children in one school. At the *Gesamtschule* in Cologne (Köln)-Holweide, teachers and students have been operating under a special framework since the mid-70s. For example:

- teachers no longer work as isolated individuals but as part of a team of six to eight teachers;
- each team constitutes a small independent school within the larger framework of the big school;



- teachers and students stay together for six years;

- children and youth feel socially accepted in a cooperative group and in an environment that supports them in making friends, in learning, and in growing up

Something in the Air

We started out by trying to answer the question, "How can we adequately 'educate' children of all social classes and learning abilities in *one* school?" In the 1970s, this question had not—and has not yet—been raised generally in Germany, as it has in other countries. Only in 1965, with the publication of *The German Educational Disaster* (by Georg Picht, Olten, 1965), was attention drawn to the deficien-

cies of the country's system, which was not producing enough qualified students for the needs of modern industry, science, and technology. So many potentially talented students were labeled at age 10 for Hauptschule or Realschule that Germany was sending fewer students to universities than were most other industrialized countries. Its economy would soon pay the price.

To respond to the educational dilemma, in the late '60s a national commission was set up to create schools for children from all social classes and of all abilities. The first Gesamtschulen opened in 1968. Today a network of them exists side by side with the traditional system. The early Gesamtschulen were huge uninviting buildings, housing more than 2,000 students. It wasn't long before they earned a reputation as concrete jungles of alienated students and teachers.

The Holweide Gesamtschule in Cologne, begun in 1975, was supposed to be one of the largest schools in the country—and it still is—with a nine-form entry and roughly 2,000 pupils and 200 teachers. Every year, we have many more applicants than we can take in. About a quarter of our students are immigrant children, especially Turks (the biggest ethnic minority in Germany). The Holweide school had formerly been a Gymnasium with a selected population of middle- and upper-class children. When we decided to turn comprehensive, we observed closely how the first comprehensive schools had fared and developed an approach we called the "Team-Small-Group Plan." Teachers from another comprehensive school in Germany, in Göttingen, independently developed the same plan; there was obviously something "in the air."

The Team-Small-Group-Plan

In developing the plan, we hoped (1) to diminish the anonymity of a big school, and (2) to design a way of teaching in which students of very different abilities and backgrounds could reach their potential by working together. To achieve these aims, we divided the big school into small units

called "teams." A small and stable group of teachers, usually six, are responsible for about 90 students, in three units called "classes." This smaller design is intended to enable teachers and pupils to get to know each other well. They stay together for six years, from grade 5 through grade 10, up to the first leaving certificate.

Next we extended the team idea to the students by organizing them in small heterogeneous "table-groups" of 5 or 6 pupils. To establish a close relationship and enable the students to help each other with their work, they generally work with their same cooperative table-group for at least a year, often longer. The table-group concept has become the school's core instructional idea.

Our school is run as a team primarily by the head teacher, together with his or her two deputies and a governing panel of senior colleagues, some of whom are elected with others appointed by the authorities. The roles of the head teacher and the members of the governing panel, about 20 in Holweide, are quite different from the traditional ones of control and supervision. They are *coordinators*, supporting the teachers in their difficult work, monitoring the school's progress, and recognizing problems in time to discuss ways of solving them.

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An important duty of the head teacher is to provide teachers the freedom to do their work by contending with the authorities who distrust team-based decision making. Another of the head teacher's principal responsibilities is to find sufficient well-qualified new teachers for the school and to bargain with the authorities to hire them.

Teaching Teams

Teachers in Holweide have a great deal of autonomy. Between them, they teach all the subjects and are responsible for the education of three groups of 28 to 30 students. They form their own teams of 6 to 8 members; devise schedules for the coming year; choose who will teach which subjects in which classes; decide how the curriculum will be taught (in a single period or a longer block of time, for example); cover for absent colleagues; and organize lunchtime activities, parents involvement, field trips, and many other concerns. They also decide among themselves which two people will work together as *class tutors* (home class, or homeroom, teachers) in a given class.

To ensure continuity and progress in their work, the teachers set aside every second Tuesday afternoon for regular team meetings. (See "Sample Team Meeting Agenda" for an agenda from one of last year's meetings.) The team I (Angela Fisher) am involved in decided from the outset that we wanted to have our meetings once a week rather than every fortnight. To create a more pleasant atmosphere, we combine these meetings with an evening meal, taking turns cooking and playing host so that no one has too much work to do. In that the teachers must work together closely and consult each other constantly on all aspects of their work, the demands upon them are considerable. In reality, the practice may fall considerably short of the ideal; therefore, a limited reshuffling of the teams sometimes takes place at the end of the school year.

Though the teams have a great deal of autonomy, there is nevertheless a framework to ensure consistency in the academic standards of all the pu-

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pils. For instance, all teams send a delegate to *curricular conferences*, where the necessary decisions are made. Each team also sends a delegate to weekly *counseling conferences* with the school psychologist. At these meetings, general problems affecting the school are discussed, as well as students' problems that prove too difficult for the team to work with or that are of exemplary value. In addition, the norms of the school—for example, the principle of "social learning"—are discussed, surveyed, and developed within the framework of the conference.

About the Students

We assign students to table-groups of five or six members integrated by sex, ability, and ethnic origin. Within these "social unit" groups, the children tutor and encourage each other. The difference between our groups and cooperative learning groups is that our children stay in these same groups for every subject, normally for at least a year. The aim is to promote stable groups in which the members learn to work together despite their individual differences. To achieve good group results, each member is responsible not only for his or her own work but also for that of the other members. If the work of one child in the group is unsatisfactory or his or her behavior a problem, then we try to discuss the issue with the individual child as well as the group. Here we give them assistance in coping with difficult situations and characters.

Each table-group meets once a week to discuss any problems or to suggest improvements in their everyday working situations. For example, a group may decide that because two

boys constantly annoy one another during lessons, it would be better to arrange the seating differently. Or if one child feels unhappy within his or her group, the group then tries to discover what the reasons are and to resolve the issue. Usually the students need a lot of help from the tutor here.

During lessons, except for free learning periods, the group practices and works things out *together*. Students who are more able are expected to help the other members in their group. Since the teacher's time is limited, this *helper system* is of great benefit. Sometimes during an English lesson, for example, I (Angela) have given the groups a text to read aloud and then to practice together. Later, when they are ready, I hear and assess each group. Quite often one or two groups ask for a little extra time because, "We haven't finished with Hans yet!" Because the students are keen to achieve good results for their groups, a considerable amount of *personal coaching* takes place. Working in this way, the better students reinforce their knowledge through repetition and the necessity of transmitting their knowledge to others. Less able children have the chance to practice and pose questions they would otherwise be too shy or unsure to ask.

Key Program Concepts

To support the awareness of being in a group and the techniques required for working together as a group, we have incorporated several key concepts into our program. First, we try to maintain a regular group training program during the school week, for example, by having a second teacher take one group out of the regular lesson for this purpose. The students are made aware of the most favorable methods to adopt when working together; that is, making sure that everyone in the group has understood what the task at hand actually is—how to divide up a given task sensibly and allocate parts to the various group members. As a result, the group work becomes more effective and efficient.

Second, twice a year we set aside a day for group consultation. On this day the groups come one at a time to

talk to the tutors for an hour about their progress during the previous weeks. They assess their own positions and contributions to the group work and hear comments from the other group members. When these meetings take place at a tutor's house, they are often combined with an extended breakfast. We have found these meetings very rewarding and often notice that the students talk much more freely in an informal setting away from school.

During the school year there are also certain days, such as parents' consulting day or inservice training days, when regular lessons do not occur. On such days each table-group in a team thinks of a common activity for the whole group—for example, a visit to an exhibition or a museum—which they will then pursue and report on the following day in a discussion circle. They may even find something so interesting that they recommend it as worthy of a visit by the whole team. These special days are an important factor in stabilizing the groups because it is essential that they have experiences away from the tables and away from school. In doing so, they often realize that it is great fun doing things together. Other days are set aside for *project work*. Students themselves select the activities they undertake. For example, they may leave

Each table-group meets once a week to discuss any problems or to suggest improvements in their everyday working situations.

After a 20-minute lunch, these students have plenty of time for a group activity led by one of the team teachers before returning to class.



their school to find out about certain aspects of their suburb—playgrounds, the living conditions of elderly people, and so on—or they may work on improving environmental problems like replanting the banks of a stream to give bird life a new chance.

Because students and their ways of learning are different, we have also developed individual learning strategies in addition to the table-groups. For example, we hold "learning how to learn" to be extremely important. That is, we believe that our pupils should share in decisions about what they want or need to learn or practice, as well as the way they want to learn and whether to study individually or in groups.

Discussion Groups and Weekly Plans

Each school week begins with a discussion circle. For this event, the students move their tables aside, and those who wish to can tell about something special or interesting that happened to them over the weekend. After these remarks, the tutors announce any special events in the coming week. Next, the tutors present the weekly plan, which structures each student's work for the upcoming days. They also write the individual obligatory tasks for their subjects on the board, which the students copy into their plan books. Each student then checks his or her plan for the previous week and copies any unfinished exer-

Sample Team Meeting Agenda

- A visit to an exhibition as part of the social studies class—how and when will we organize this?
- The table groups in one of the classes—how can we help two of the groups with their problems?
- Parents' consulting day—what activities will we give the table groups on that day? What aspects do we find particularly important for the talks with parents?
- Problems with the behavior of one particular child—how can we best deal with them? How can the groups help?
- Free learning and the plan for the week—how can we improve the effectiveness here?

cise into the new plan. As teachers for other subjects come into the classroom, the plans are added to.

In addition to being involved in decision making about organization, our students also choose many individual learning tasks as well; for example, what they can do during free learning periods. These periods can be used in a very personal and differentiated way; that is, a less able student may be told that he or she need only complete certain parts of the plan, whereas a very bright student is either given extra work or can choose extra tasks.

The circular discussion group format is also used for certain lessons. For example, during *tutorial lessons*, students discuss any problems with the tutors and how these can be solved. The students themselves determine the agenda for these lessons; the teacher plays a passive role. Each person in the discussion group who has just spoken in turn chooses the next speaker, irrespective of whether students or teachers have expressed their wish to voice an opinion. Coming from traditional schools, where teachers have an almost absolute right to speak whenever they wish, many

teachers find that this format requires some getting used to. My first few weeks of classroom discussions were punctuated by children sighing and saying, "Angela, it's not your turn!" I was surprised how quickly the students themselves, who also came from traditional German schools, got used to their new way of discussing things. They stuck to the rules much better than, for example, me. In retrospect, I supposed the reasons are clear: students are used to waiting to speak; teachers are not!

Parent Activities

Our students' parents, whom we consider a very important part of our school community, are involved in our work in Holweide in many ways. For example, the parents in each class elect five parents to a council, which provides a link between team-teachers and the other parents. The council members discuss issues and problems facing the team as a whole—ranging from topics that parents want their children to learn to their priorities for selecting the next team trip or questions of evaluation and career. In addition, every few weeks the team parents arrange a regular but informal

meeting, often in a nearby pub. At these functions, any parents and teachers who have time gather to get to know one another in a more relaxed atmosphere.

We also invite parents to the school to see teachers and students at work. They have been of great help in starting a fund-raising activity for students who are unable to cope with a field trip financially. Some parents accompany younger students on research trips when they do project-work. They have also always supported us in any disagreement with the authorities. Further, we devote a great deal of attention to ways we can present our work to the parents, since they cannot be expected to feel actively involved in their child's learning unless they experience regular insights into what is actually being done. For example, one year we had an autumn festival at which students shared their school-work with their parents. The table-groups presented the topics they had been working on in project lessons. Students drew pictures, told stories, presented a little play in English, demonstrated dances they had worked out for themselves in P.E., and so forth. Everyone—teachers, parents, and students—benefited from the event.

A number of parents have become more involved in school life by taking charge of lunchtime activities. After the first 20 minutes of our 80-minute break, set aside for eating lunch, students are free to participate in a variety of lunchtime activities. Teachers, as part of their schedules, lead many of these efforts—such as music, sports, and mask-making—but by involving parents as well, we find that teachers' workloads are a little lighter and students are exposed to a greater variety of activities. For example, last year, parents led groups in cooking and calligraphy and helped put on a play. In addition, some older students direct lunchtime activities for younger ones.

We encourage and welcome parent involvement, but it would be untrue to say that we have no problems with parents and that differences of opinion do not occur. However, in our experi-



Five or six students working together over time is the school's core instructional concept. Here members of a table-group select the information they will need to complete a task.

The parents associated with our school have a much closer relationship with the teachers than in a traditional school.

ence, any issues that arise are much more easily solved in our setting than in other schools. This may be due to intervention by other parents or merely because the parents concerned do not feel so powerless and have a much closer relationship with the teachers than in a traditional school.

The Costs and the Benefits

Holweide is a democratically run school where every group in the school community—teachers, students, parents—is actively involved in decision making and participates in school life. The most obvious problem in the system, however, is the matter of time. Cooperation within the school, within the year group, and within the team itself is vital. Without extra meetings to promote cooperation, though, chaos would soon predominate. Thus, it is more time-consuming to work in Köln-Holweide than in a traditional school. At the same time, however, it is more enjoyable to work in an atmosphere where you are involved in decision making than it is to follow rules and ideas thought up by others, to be completely alone in a classroom situation, and to be caught up in the mood of helpless resignation felt by many teachers today.

Being a student at our school is more rewarding and more fun too.

Because of the group learning format, students can get special help when they need it. Their self-confidence increases, which leads to other positive outcomes. Our dropouts are under 1 percent, and about 60 percent of our students score sufficiently well to be admitted to the three-year college that leads on to the university (the German average is 27 percent).

Effective Self-Government

Reared in a world of hierarchy, teachers in Germany have not found it easy to come to terms with team structures. Relying on a "leader" is much more convenient than making one's own decisions and taking responsibility for the results. Teachers in Holweide have had to learn the hard way: by doing, making mistakes, and trying again. Yet,

despite many conflicts and difficulties, the team idea has convinced practically everybody. Our experience of 14 years demonstrates that responsibility and decision making by the teachers themselves, as well as school as a form of self-government are not only possible but also beneficial and deeply satisfying. □

Authors' note: Quite a few other schools in Germany have adopted the team-small-groups plan and on these principles have developed their own individual program: schools in Cologne, Berlin, Kassel, Hagen, Ludwigshafen, The Saarland.

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