

Project outcomes and crucial points in the “Teaching Empowerment Plan” (TEP)

After the project’s first year, the Mercator Berufskolleg Moers – inspired by the impulses and input – to (re-)organize its school development turning it into a “Teaching Empowerment Plan (TEP)” to foster a student-oriented, sustainable and therefore effective change in teaching and learning at school, made changes at all levels.

In various meetings, staff board meeting and conferences all colleagues were informed about the project’s underlying main drivers (change in perspective: from teacher to learner, Hattie survey, importance of certain factors in improving learning) and practical approaches from the project work (e.g. feedback formats) were discussed, implemented, evaluated and worked into the school’s existing change processes. One assumption the Mercator Berufskolleg Moers is very aware of is the fact that empowering teachers to support their change in everyday teaching habits does not only come from fresh ideas, new methods or ready-to-use materials. Empowering teachers means empowering a whole group or groups of teachers in order to attain sustainability, it also means to empower a whole system - in short: giving professionals the opportunities and means to change within a system that is holistically driven by convictions and motivation, to which communication is the key.

Big points with regard to the outcome of the ongoing European project “VT4P” are as follows:

1. Developing a completely new school programme as a framework reflecting the change in perspective from teacher to student

As having such a deep impact on the way, we as professionals see teaching, learning and the function of schools, the input of the Hattie survey very much encouraged the discussion on changing the school programme. As being the school’s self-projection and the way, it wants to be perceived publicly, the school programme is the basic underlying overall framework for a learning culture. Without changing the environment (macro-level), learning scenarios in classrooms (micro-level) are not very likely to change sustainably. Power comes from a general student-oriented self-portrait with which colleagues can identify and therefore a feeling of with-it-ness and commonness can develop. Empowering people means to bring people together.

Therefore, a new school programme was developed over a period of two years. Bringing in the professional opinion of colleagues and students, the view of parents as well as companies and engaging professionals from a management consultancy to accompany and control this complex process, finally a new image was created that much more concentrates on students’ needs and perspectives (cf. <https://www.mercator-berufskolleg.de/> for the online version for first contacts).

2. Implementation of a feedback culture at all levels (peer-to-peer, students, management)

Being one of the Hattie’s survey most pushing factors, feedback and the implementation of a feedback culture became the Mercator Berufskolleg’s main objective in school development – mainly through the ongoing project activities and regular reports on it in staff meetings.

Backing up on the project partners’ input, an own format has been developed, firstly tested in one branch of the school, findings being presented by teachers in a general staff meeting of all 107 colleagues. With minor changes it then was tested by all colleagues twice a term, so that students could give specific feedback on teaching. With the positive outcomes from this, the format is now to be used obligatorily twice a term to evaluate one’s teaching habits. Moreover, teachers are advised to set specific development goals for themselves for professionalization. These goals are subject to staff talks with the school’s management which are carried out throughout the year. Through this, the approach of making teaching visible and seeing and understanding teaching from students’ perspectives, is enhanced.

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3. Individualized school career talks

Having already been practiced within a smaller educational branch at school (students gaining their regular school leaving certificate, class 10), the project put much more focus on this approach. Each mid-term every student gets a form paper asking for personal details such as class performance, social contacts within class, overall well-being, personal goals and vocational perspectives, serving as a basis for individualized talks on the student's school career. Offering the possibility of talking to students regularly and confidentially about their personal situation, enhanced the relation between teachers and students likewise and offers the chance on meeting on eye-level.

Through the project the two largest full-time branches at school (branches for gaining the higher education entrance qualifications or the university entrance qualifications) joined in with a similar format. Now, after two years of work, each year more than 650 students talk about their situation in class and in their lives outside school to teachers in order to support them better – fostering their efforts in starting a future.

4. Students supporting students

Seeing and understanding teaching from students' perspectives and evaluating outcomes of learning processes from a different view, the project led to widening a didactic approach connected to disadvantaged young people. Often having it hard to get the chance for an internship or a regular training programme, therefore leaving school with low educational qualifications and little future perspectives, a programme was initiated to improve the situation.

Young trainees, mostly with a school background, were made the mentors of young school leavers and job seekers in regional companies. Instead of teachers acting as mentors, therefore often lacking insight and practical expertise, the young trainees are on eye-level with the school leavers, serving much more as an objective and motivating force than teachers. Coming from VT4P's findings, this has become a fruitful development of supporting the least advantaged in society.

5. Open school development to students (schools without racism)

We as a school community understand now better, how important it is to listen more closely to students in school development. Often being bound to formal changes and developments in accordance to “teachers' interests” (and/or politically imposed agendas) with regard to improving schools, teaching and learning, students have little influence on changing a school's culture.

Starting as a test coming from this European project, the students' representatives of the school council were asked what they would like to change if they were given the chance. Surprisingly an answer came almost immediately – they wanted to improve the social culture at school. They established contact to a network of already 3000 German schools engaging in prejudice-free learning environments (*“Schule ohne Rassismus. Schule mit Courage.”*; cf. <https://www.schule-ohne-rassismus.org/>). For all 2283 students at the Mercator Berufskolleg they organized, being supported by teachers, a kick-off exhibition informing about different kinds of prejudice in today's society. Every student was obliged to visit the exhibition in the first week of school after the summer break and was asked to sign a petition in order to actively engage in the network's aims. More than 78% of all students signed the petition leading to two outcomes. The school is now officially listed in the network and – more importantly – the school council organizes a new exhibition at the beginning of each school year to keep the school community going.

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6. Re-designing internal school curricula

Though on the surface evoking the impression that working on internal curricula is simply formal work carried out by teachers for teachers, VT4P led to the conclusion that these are not made for teachers alone but predominately for the “object” of teaching processes – the learners. The curricula insufficiently expressed what learning situations aimed at, what teachers wanted their students to learn, what they expected from them with regard to tests and exams and they were written in a “teachers’ language”. All the internal curricula were then re-designed under one focus – the focus of students. Students are eager to know what they have to learn, by which means and which outputs are expected. They demand a “just” grading, backing on understandable criteria which helps students to understand what they have to keep an eye on and what they still can improve. In one word – the school strove for transparency and accountability.

According to a survey carried out among 383 students (almost 17% of the school’s students), they welcomed the new “openness” in the internal curricula, demanding even more and further details on learning expectations/outcomes and more feedback on their class performance.

7. Professional training

The project almost made further professional teacher training obligatory, in those fields being identified as the push factors in learning processes. Therefore, eight professional trainers from the regional school board administration were invited, carrying out eight workshops on two days for all 107 colleagues at school. In preparatory meetings with the trainers the workshops were planned along the Hattie survey, focusing on factors such as “feedback”, “self-organization in learning processes”, peer-to-peer teaching and collaborative learning scenarios.

8. Making the “Teaching Empowerment Plan” the Mercator Berufskolleg Moers’ “Schulentwicklungsplan (SEP)” – 3 NOT 14!

The idea of a “Teaching Empowerment Plan (TEP)” as the final product of the recent VT4P project led to the school’s management wish to work this into a “Schulentwicklungsplan (SEP)” in order to attain sustainability. Therefore, a plan was put up in form an Excel-spreadsheet that ensures “with-it-ness” in development processes as well as transparency. It defines intermediate targets, resources needed, people in charge and therefore makes sure that change really takes place. It – in the truest sense – empowers colleagues in carrying out change. In the past, such plans were not the usual attitude in change management processes, the last school programme only sketched a timeline and had not been updated for 14(1) years.

Today, the Mercator Berufskolleg Moers has a school development plan that emerged as an impulse from the project, which is binding for three years, monitored and updated every three years, which gives colleagues support and keeps processes going.