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Same Rights for All

Or how to please most of the people most of the time

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Same Rights for All

Or how to please most of the people most of the time

Increasing dissatisfaction and lack of conviction in my own teaching methods were the reasons for me to want to attend the PFL for English, that is to say, my own lack of motivation and the resulting lack of enthusiasm in my students. Chancing upon the following remark: "He is not only dull in himself but the cause of dullness in others",

Samuel Foote (1720-1777)

I was moved more than was my want - a sure sign of its relevance to my situation at the time? Over the weeks and months the prospect of having to write this study gradually developed from a Damocles sword dangling over my head to being a motivating agent and I have noticed how my interest in my own teaching has increased since I began to research my particular teaching situation. It soon became apparent to me that many and diverse influences contribute to the complexity of a given circumstance and that it would be essential to concentrate on certain aspects rather than to lose myself in details.

What To Research?

For the subject of my study I chose my third-year second-stream group English of our country secondary school in Upper Austria. This third year, as every HS-teacher knows, is a problematic year altogether, any existing problems being enhanced with the onset of puberty. Also, generally speaking, the second stream (2.LG) means a group of children from different classes with a wide range of ability: some will have just missed by a hair being streamed into the first group whilst others will have just managed to keep their heads far enough above water to prevent themselves from sinking into the third group. These children are under pressure, experience frustration at their bad marks and cannot afford to lax. Their counterparts as far as ability is concerned find out that they can maintain their position and achieve quite passable remarks with very little effort - their most dangerous enemy being their own complacency. Some of them could, with continuous effort, achieve the necessary standard to warrant being re-streamed into the first group - an honour that most decline. They much prefer NOT to strain their reserves but to work below their capacity.

My Flock

The general picture painted above was certainly applicable to my group and the discrepancy between ability and actual achievement was that which frustrated me most and which I wanted to eliminate to the greatest degree possible. It goes against the grain to accept the low standard of work from pupils with the ability to do far more, but whose main interests lie in being the centre of attraction, even if it means disrupting activities. My maxim was and will remain:

"...from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

Karl Marx (1818 - 1888)

It was significant that those pupils who disturbed most were of higher ability than their results would suggest so there was also the possibility that they were not getting enough challenge, at least not the kind of challenge to spur them into positive action. At the same time weaker pupils were given less attention by me because of the behaviour of others. Some very able, but very complacent pupils, also took advantage of the situation to slip into anonymity and make

little contribution in class. Even though the negative aspects are being concentrated on for the purpose of this study there were some very capable, reliable and well-behaved persons in the class who I felt deserved better and this was a further motivation to aim at an improved teaching situation.

A not unimportant aspect was the "battle of the sexes" - most of the boys were "buoyant" and disruptive whereas most of the girls were quiet and withdrawn, but that did not necessarily mean that they were the "goodies" but that their methods were different and also their motives. It would seem that the boys were out for effect and wished to be heard by as many as possible, however the ability of the girls to carry on conversations without my hearing them reminded me of the Victorian maxim on bringing up girls - "Little girls should be seen and not heard".

"...all men are created equal..."
Thomas Jefferson (1743 -1826)
...but some are more equal than others...

The choice of my title "Same rights for all" resulted from the daily situation in the class in which around a quarter of the pupils were receiving around three-quarters of my attention and I was aware of the unfairness that my time and energy was not being "shared" equally - the introverts, mainly girls, were paying the price for the extrovert "Golden Boys". My aim as the teacher should be to steer the activities in the class so that each pupil had the same chance, his/her fair share of my attention and that of his/her fellow pupils, and no more. I was sure that if I could achieve this, then a by-product would be that it would become more possible for pupils to work according to their ability, being, hopefully, more motivated.

"He shall separate them one from the other, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats."

St Matthew (25:32)

That my own person also played its part in the dynamic of the group was obvious, though to what extent was to surprise me, and I also knew, even before beginning this study, that I had changed my teaching methods for various reasons, the main one being the general behaviour in the group. For example, partner and group work had not been carried out to my satisfaction: the pupils were too noisy and had too much opportunity to "act the goat" or do nothing if I were not in their immediate vicinity. My reaction had been to allow less and less such activities, on the contrary, I was breaking up disruptive grouping and tending towards frontal teaching because it was lenient to my own energy reserves. The situation I found generally dissatisfactory as it denied pupils the opportunity to practise words, phrases and situations. I then felt demotivated, knowing that willing pupils would get more enjoyment out of lessons if given the chance, and I was sending off no sparks to enthuse - I was spending far too much time remonstrating and showing how fed up I was and this was hardly an apt method to create zeal! Praise was seldom heard although I was perfectly aware how motivating it is:

"Where none admire 'tis useless to excell"
George Littleton (1709-1773)

"What is to be done?" said Zeus

My first intention was to pinpoint some aspects so as to become more aware of them. If I wanted to change the situation then I had to find out what it actually was and not to rely on my assumptions. Were my assumptions confirmed then that was okay but one had to be open to correction, if not surprise. My action research was to be surprising in quite some respects!

First the all-revealing weapon of audio-aids was put into action :

Two "normal" lessons were taped by me and the first revealed what I had already feared: Two boys dominated the conversation with their "wittiness" and although they spoke on the subject and to the point the others pupils were restricted to playing either minor roles or the role of the audience. It was devastating to perceive that the way I played my role contributed nothing to counterbalance the undesirable result!

These two boys spoke 25 and 15 times and together very often. One girl not to be deterred managed to speak 6 times but most of the others were content to be passive - or so it seemed.

Armed with my newly won knowledge I was convinced that this would not happen again! But alas, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The next lesson was going to be totally in MY hands so everyone was to speak whether he/she volunteered or not - and the result was exactly I had intended but still not what I desired. The lesson was absolutely frontal and took place only in the form of a dialogue with me. Just about the only positive aspects to be perceived was that "my golden boys" had had no chance to show other than their knowledge and no chance to "show off" and the more introvert pupils had been forced to take an active part as I had "peppered" them with questions.

However I had geared my questions to the lower level and the tasks were too easy for most. Whereas I do believe it condonable to pander to the less gifted now and again, such a lesson would not work if repeated too often - and there was that faint feeling that I might have been putting on a good one-man show!

New Facts

The knowledge won was not uninteresting. I had proved that it WAS possible to get my "sleepers" into action if only the class situation were steered in the right direct direction BUT.....

Face Facts

I had still not been successful in reining in my extroverts: the two boys mentioned before had spoken 19 and 13 times, the same girl 14 times. Why had I let that happen? Was it because of habit? The two boys had always sat right at the front of the class and bombarded me with their not always welcome attentions and I had always allowed it, if not encouraged it. I was aware that I knew I could expect a correct answer from these pupils and that when I waited for answers from the slower pupils my "buoyant" boys would take advantage of the situation.

..... It was obvious that many things were taking place in the classroom without my being able to take them into account or sometimes even being aware of them so the time had come to ask for assistance and a young colleague fresh from college but initiated in action research was

willing to come into a "normal" lesson and make his observations on the interactions in the group.

His results revealed even more that I gave my attention to the same children most of the time because I was relying on the correctness of their answers but at the same time unconsciously encouraging the complacency of the majority of the group. My patience was too limited to wait for the slow whom I allowed insufficient time to think out the answers for themselves. It had certainly not been my aim to target my teaching at the top half of the group but in retrospect I realised that my teaching had so developed in order to keep my "golden boys" busy and out of mischief.

A further aspect of which I had not even been aware was that most of the children were able to have a good chat to each other about quite other things while others were making contributions to the subject being dealt with. Even sitting alone in a seemingly isolated position did not prevent the children concerned from carrying on conversations the extent of which was surprising. One boy sitting alone but centrally managed to contact other pupils 12 times. Another sitting in splendid isolation contacted another fellow in similar isolation 10 times and that although a row of desks separated them. The analysis showed that it was the pupils at the back who chatted most and contributed least. They also spoke least to me. This was to be lesson to me - I had been of the opinion that isolating pupils prevented them from chatting but that was not the case! It would be better to channel this potential into a positive occupation. Group work after all?

A bad habit I had developed was to stay at the front near the teacher's desk where my books, the radio and the blackboard were at hand. Before I used to move around the class more so that no-one was lulled into complacency - but did that complacency stem from me? What a daunting thought!

My knowledge was increasing and also the uneasy awareness that the unsatisfactory class situation had a lot to do with my own person and actions. Knowing that any change initiated by me would have to be well thought over and well-founded, the next step was to be a questionnaire. The final version was perhaps too long but there was so much that I wanted at least a comment on and not all points were pertinent to this study. I had decided to write it in English so that it could also be considered an exercise.

Before giving them the questionnaire I told them about the study I was to write. They decided that this was great fun and they felt very important. I assured them of their anonymity and that no names would be mentioned or information carried out side the class, except of course in the direction of Klagenfurt. If they wanted they could leave questions out, write no names on the paper though I did point out that for some questions it would be good to know who was concerned and so they should be careful not to let their neighbour see their answers. Surprisingly their trust was such that only one person did not write his name on his questionnaire - what a shame for him who so wanted to be anonymous!

I could only hope that I had convinced them of the necessity of being honest in their answers and that I could take less complimentary facts. Obviously some would misunderstand the questions although we went through them first so I could expect the error level to be relatively high. However it proved to give enough information to show tendencies and some items were not to be subject of this study, as already mentioned.

Friends Or Foes - Or Show Me the Friends and I'll Tell You the Man

Firstly it was important to know whether everyone liked sitting next to his/her neighbour, whether the friendship was fruitful or not and if they felt at home in their present geographical position in the classroom. In order to change the dynamic of the group I intended changing the seating arrangement. Whereas I did not want to separate friends, especially those who seemed to profit from one another, certain observations had led me to believe that some partners were ready for divorce and pining for another; perhaps a child was craving for contact - but more of that later!

It was a bonus that the children had put their names on their sheets as I could then see how the information correlated with my observations.

To Talk or Not To Talk

There were 10 children for whom it was highly uncomfortable to speak out in the large group and 12 children for whom it was a penance to be seen but not heard. What a contrast there was within the group so frontal teaching was going to be unfit for half of the group anyway. It looked as if we were going to have to go back to partner and group work in any case. My problem was:

How to organise it so that shy pupils were not talked down in the group and the talkative ones did not WANT to misbehave - no easy task, but that is what teaching is all about!

Group work and especially partner work had been highly favoured on their "wish list" so this was going to have to be seriously considered.

Seating Arrangement

Children are very loyal and were satisfied with their partners, however whereas most pupils did not want to sit next to anyone else,

2 pupils wanted to sit alone and

2 pupils sitting alone wanted partners

1 pupil liked the neighbour but would like a change

3 definitely wanted to sit somewhere else in the classroom

It had been obvious to me that certain partnerships were detrimental on the "bad apple" principle, one suffering more than the other, that labile types were often led into the deep end by "clever" types who could talk their way out of trouble or catch up on work more quickly. As I was determined to move the children around in any case I suggested a plan of attack on which they agreed. They were to get new places but were to keep to the new places for at least two weeks so that they could really see if they (and I) were happy. At the same time I reserved the right to move anyone who became insupportable.

(Democracy has also been known to have its limits!)

When the day came the plan was simple to the extreme: Numbers were pulled out of a hat then we all tramped out of the classroom. The person with number 1 went in first and could choose the desk s/he wanted, then number 2 and so forth. Those with the low numbers were favoured as they could choose both desk and neighbour. The reason for their choice will remain

a mystery to me and probably even to themselves but it was a surprise to see that nearly all had stayed with their neighbour and some had even chosen the same desk. The two boys who had "peppered" me previously had parted and were no longer sitting under my nose, two others with the same aptitude but less intensified were now sitting away from the middle. It was fascinating to see that light attracted my flock - all the window seats were taken and also the front of the class. Places to avoid were at the back and near the wall. Also those WANTING to take an active part wanted to sit at the front, the others did not.

Would this bring about an improvement in behaviour? That was to be answered by my kind colleague who would once again be making his observations - in a "normal" lesson. However I was not prepared for that yet. First I wanted to see if the new arrangement was suitable or whether I would still have to part some "friends". I also believed that my pubertating boys were trying to find out how far they could go with me and that when they had found out my limitations and also their own they would then be quite agreeable. For this reason I re-introduced my check-list on the pinboard for homework, corrections, etc. I had intended press-ganging anyone forgetting their duties into an extra English lesson but the time-table made this impossible. My only possibility was to keep them in during lunch-time and this was accepted quite happily with only a few gnashings of teeth. They had found out MY limitations and were pleased about it. Being consequent is certainly my weakness, especially as it requires an excellent memory - which I do not have. The only answer is to write everything down!

Plan of Attack

So I had a plan of attack on three fronts: new sitting order, new consequence and a new try at group work in the form of a project on London which was to be dealt with in the next unit (English for You and Me 3, Unit 8). Before any observations were to be made I wanted to try out this plan of attack and also let enough time pass not to allow observations to be only the results of the effect of novelty. I wanted to re-arouse their previous interest with the project but as there are also aspects such as grammar and vocabulary which may not be neglected the hope was that their behaviour would have changed sufficiently enough to make a "normal" lesson more fruitful for more pupils than before I had begun this "experiment".

A New Term and a Fresh Start for All

A change is as good as a rest, they say and the new term started well for us all. Freshly out of London the day before I felt really enthused enough to fill them with ideas on how to collect sufficient material for our London project. The few anecdotes were obviously enjoyed so it is a shame that we cannot do projects and tell stories all the time. Once again I was aware that it is still the teacher who commands the all important issue - what kind of atmosphere is predominant in the classroom situation. However, as we are human - at least most of us - we are not always up to the mark and energy is not always available in sufficient quantity, a fact that we should bear in mind when we are not satisfied with our pupils' work.

Project in View

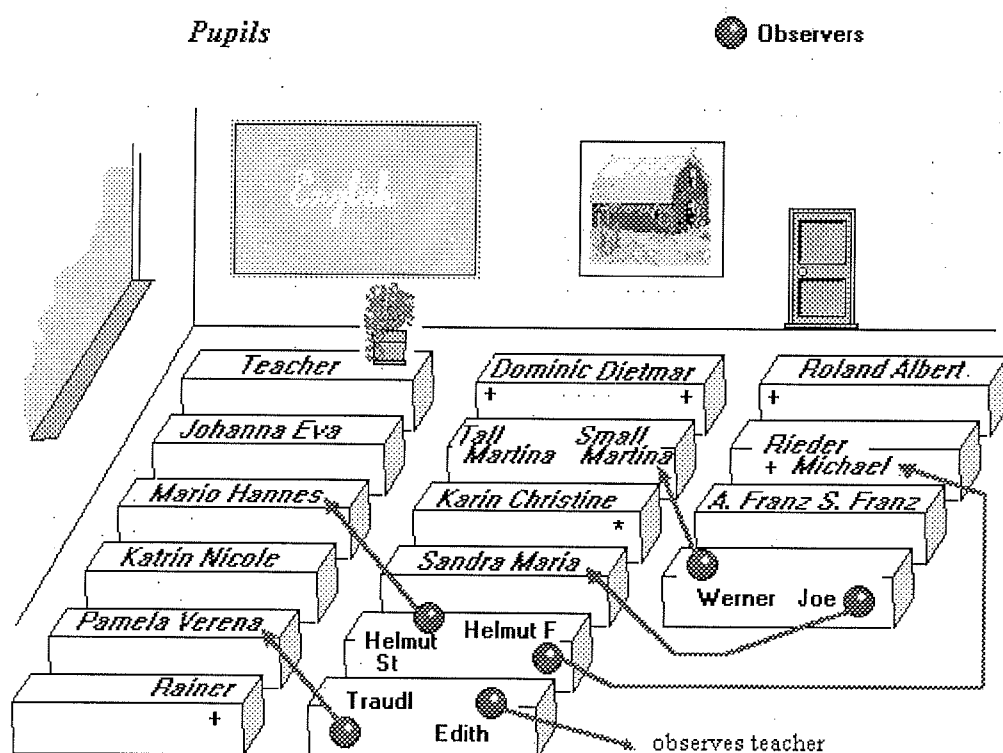
After the usual catching up on work, vocabulary and grammar so as to be at the same stage as the other groups we got into the project straight away. The first stage was to collect material, of which I certainly had quite a lot though not the kind that I would want to be cut up for posters. It was certainly very uplifting to see how many children had actually organised their

parents, relations and their friends to obtain brochures from travel agents or material their relatives had at home. Interest had been aroused and I was curious to know what would be produced.

The optical results of the project were not terribly convincing but the way was the destination. Firstly they gathered lots of information from their different sources and it gratifying to note that though the chatterboxes chatted more than ever it was to the subject - and above all it was obvious that they were enjoying their work and were organising themselves within the group to get results. As to be expected some individuals contributed little but this was not out of lack of interest but rather lack of relevant background at home or ability to express themselves.

The day was approaching when my PFL-colleagues were visit the school to study the situation in this class. Their task was to observe both the pupils and myself. For this purpose they were to place themselves strategically (see plan of seating arrangement) so as to be able to have the allocated groups of children in their view, but at the same time without disturbing the natural flow of the lesson - that is, as little as possible. The attempt to "hide" seven adults in a class-room with a group of some twenty-odd children was doomed but the children had been prepared and asked to try to behave "as usual" as the visitors wanted to observe the real situation and not a show put on for their benefit. I had also emphasised the fact that my own person was to be scrutinised too! Thanks to the children's curiosity and the discretion of my PFL-colleagues an acceptable degree of naturalness was achieved.

Seating Plan for Observation



The results of their observations confirmed all the negative aspects of which I had been aware but they went further. It was more than daunting that my own behaviour was a prime aspect:

I ignored willing pupils, I "oversaw" others by allowing a "dead" area to develop in front of the teacher's desk which was caused by my habit of sitting on this desk and fixing my attention on the centre and back of the group, I favoured certain pupils, and they were mainly those whose buoyancy was such a problem to me so it seemed that I encouraged them.

Further

- some of my well-behaved girls did not speak a word of English during the whole lesson, a deficit caused by my allowing no pair or group activities
- some very willing pupils just could not attract my attention whatever they did
- my energy-saving frontal teaching was not preventing chatting and the usual non-productive interaction between the chatterboxes was rampant so there were still pairs to be parted.

One very surprising question my observers asked was why I spoke so much German when it was obvious that my pupils understood me very well when I spoke English. So many things of which I had not been aware!

My colleagues positive suggestions were most helpful and I hastened to put at least some of them into action. My immediate reactions were as follows:

- further pairs were parted
- I moved around the classroom more
- I spoke more English
- I allowed more pair and group work

These measures certainly had an encouraging effect on the class situation and the next lesson was to continue the textbook exercises on London. Interest had been aroused by the project, they knew what London was about and the exercises in the textbook which we did in the lessons following the topic, e.g. partner work on finding the way on the Underground, (You & Me) were carried out well and with very little deviation from the subject. The majority said that they intended going to London as soon as they had the opportunity so the London Transport topic gave them relevant information for this exercise, e.g. half a million passengers a day on the Underground.

(During the following summer holidays one girl of little language ability coupled with similarly limited diligence did actually take the opportunity of spending three weeks in England and her written work showed an immense improvement, as also did her oral. Her report was of great interest to the group and her enthusiasm was not to be overheard).

At the end of this particular lesson I was quite sure that they would be able to get around London and find all the places they wished to visit. The words and phrases test a week later was the best all year. The main question had been answered:

They WERE capable and willing to work in groups and pairs, not perfectly but pretty well. Also the one girl who had consistently refused to co-operate had actually produced some good work.

Around four months had passed since beginning this study and the actual classwork had improved, not considerably but noticeably. The children were quieter and written work was done with more thought. Homework was not forgotten as often and it was pleasing to note that three pupils who were notorious forgetters did their homework and corrections with more conscientiousness. The boys who had previously peppered me with their attentions were no-

ticeably quieter, which I attributed to their change of geography and partnership plus my awareness of the problematic. Of the two girls who had always been extremely passive but notorious „silent chatterboxes“ one had become very active and her written work had improved considerably, as also had her friend's though she still preferred not to be heard in the English lessons.

Another year older.....

Being in the fourth class brought my flock increasing awareness that their days at the school were numbered, a fact underlined by two days of work experience. They seemed quieter, maturer and more willing to be active. In the English lesson they were more attentive, perhaps because my own motivation had increased considerably, and I wanted to give them ample opportunity to participate in partner and group work.

The usual text book exercises and grammar were on the agenda but these were punctuated by a series of non-regular activities:

- personal reports (e.g. Week in Vienna, Work Experience.. using mind-mapping),
- partner and group discussions (problems in the family, holiday wishes...),
- written dialogues thenb acted out (e.g. problem discussion and dialogues resulting from Cat Steven's Father and Son, a policeman arrests a drunken driver...),
- creative writing (own fairy tale after acting out Roald Dahl's Red Riding Hood and listening to The Three Little Pigs.....).

A whole year had passed since I had given the my first questionnaire and during this year not only the pupils had gone through a process of change, but also their teacher. As I wanted to know whether my change of methods had had any effect on their attitude towards the English lessons, I decided to give exactly the same questionnaire they had filled out the year before. Sifting through the results I was wary but hopeful - however, what I was not prepared for was the extent of positive change!

The evaluation charts were the visual proof that a change had taken place and with few exceptions it could be seen positively.



QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____



● Is that a problem for you?

	NEVER		VERY OFTEN		
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Partner work	1	2	3	4	5
Group work	1	2	3	4	5
Sitting still	1	2	3	4	5
NOT talking	1	2	3	4	5
Talking in front of class	1	2	3	4	5

Do you like sitting next to you neighbour?

Would you like to sit next to some-one else?

Would you like to sit alone?

Would you like to sit somewhere else in the class?

	NO			YES	
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

● Does your neighbour

..... distract you?

.....help you?

.....ask YOU for help?

.....copy from you?

	NEVER		VERY OFTEN		
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

● In the English lessons

....Are you bored?

....Do you chat to your neighbour?

....Do you talk about the task?

....Do you put up your hand?

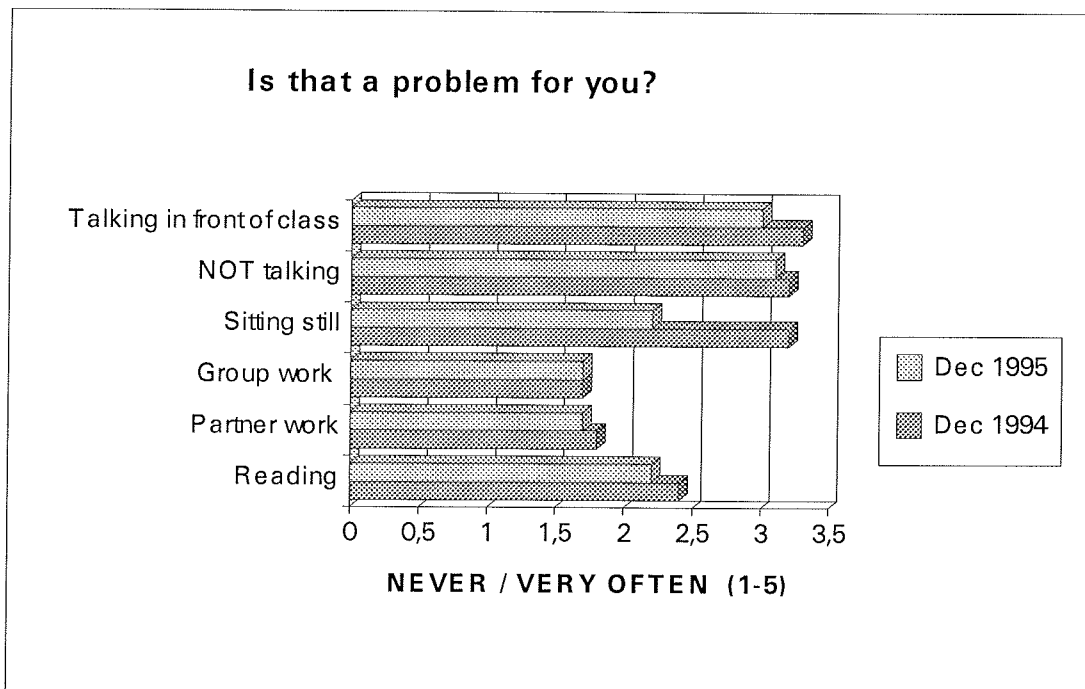
	NEVER		VERY OFTEN		
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

● WOULD YOU LIKE

	MORE		OR	LESS	
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Dialogues	1	2	3	4	5
Acting out dialogues	1	2	3	4	5
Partner work	1	2	3	4	5
Group work	1	2	3	4	5
Games	1	2	3	4	5
Moving around	1	2	3	4	5
Working alone	1	2	3	4	5
Talking English	1	2	3	4	5
Stories	1	2	3	4	5
Writing your own stories	1	2	3	4	5
Listening to cassettes	1	2	3	4	5
Finding out about USA, Great Britain	1	2	3	4	5
Drawing pictures	1	2	3	4	5
Songs	1	2	3	4	5

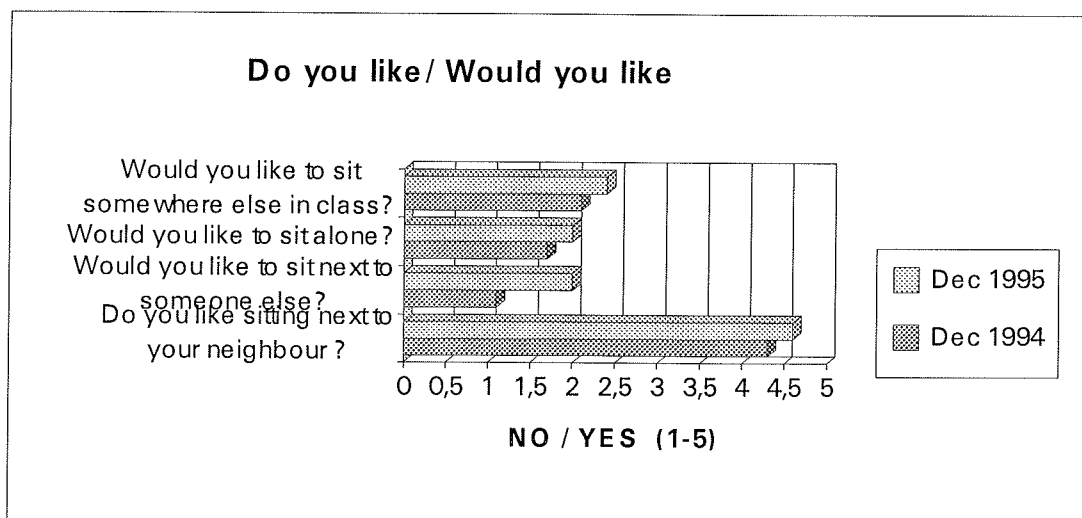
**Evaluation of Questionnaires Comparing Results
December 1994 and December 1995**

Graphic Chart One : Is that a problem for you?



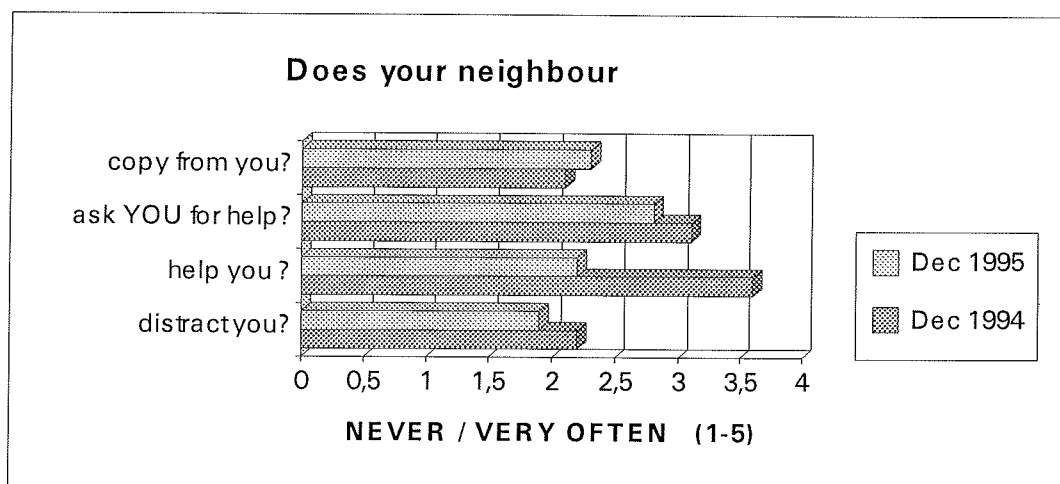
Although the results showed allround improvement of the 6 points evaluated, 4 of them fall under the category „chance result“. However there was a noticeable improvement in the pupils' willingness to talk in front of class though the most significant result was that „sitting still“ was no longer such a problem for them. Being a year older seemed to have curbed their natural yearning for movement - or did the reason lay elsewhere?

Graphic Chart Two : Sitting Arrangement



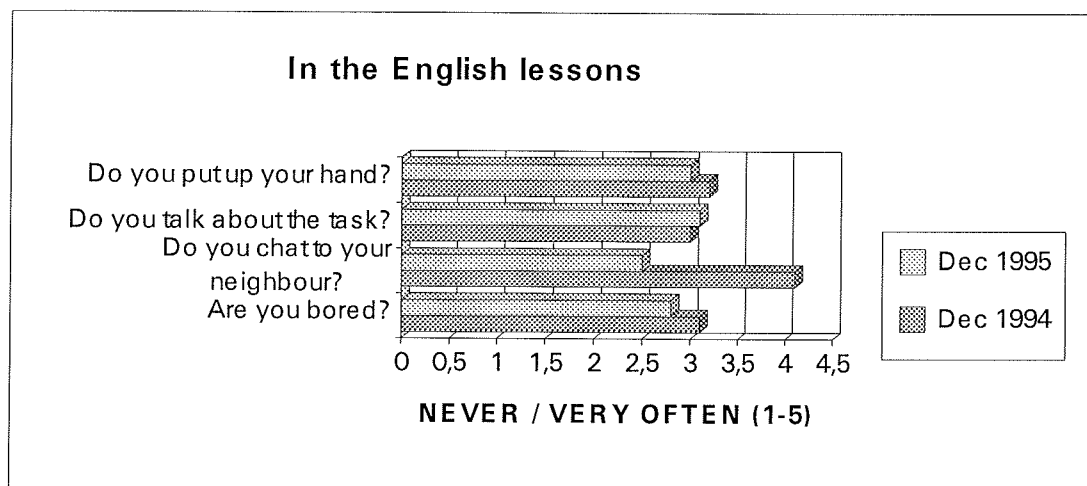
Here the only noticeable change was in the pupils' willingness to sit next to and work with other pupils, which showed a slight improvement in sociability.

Graphic Chart Three : Does your neighbour...?



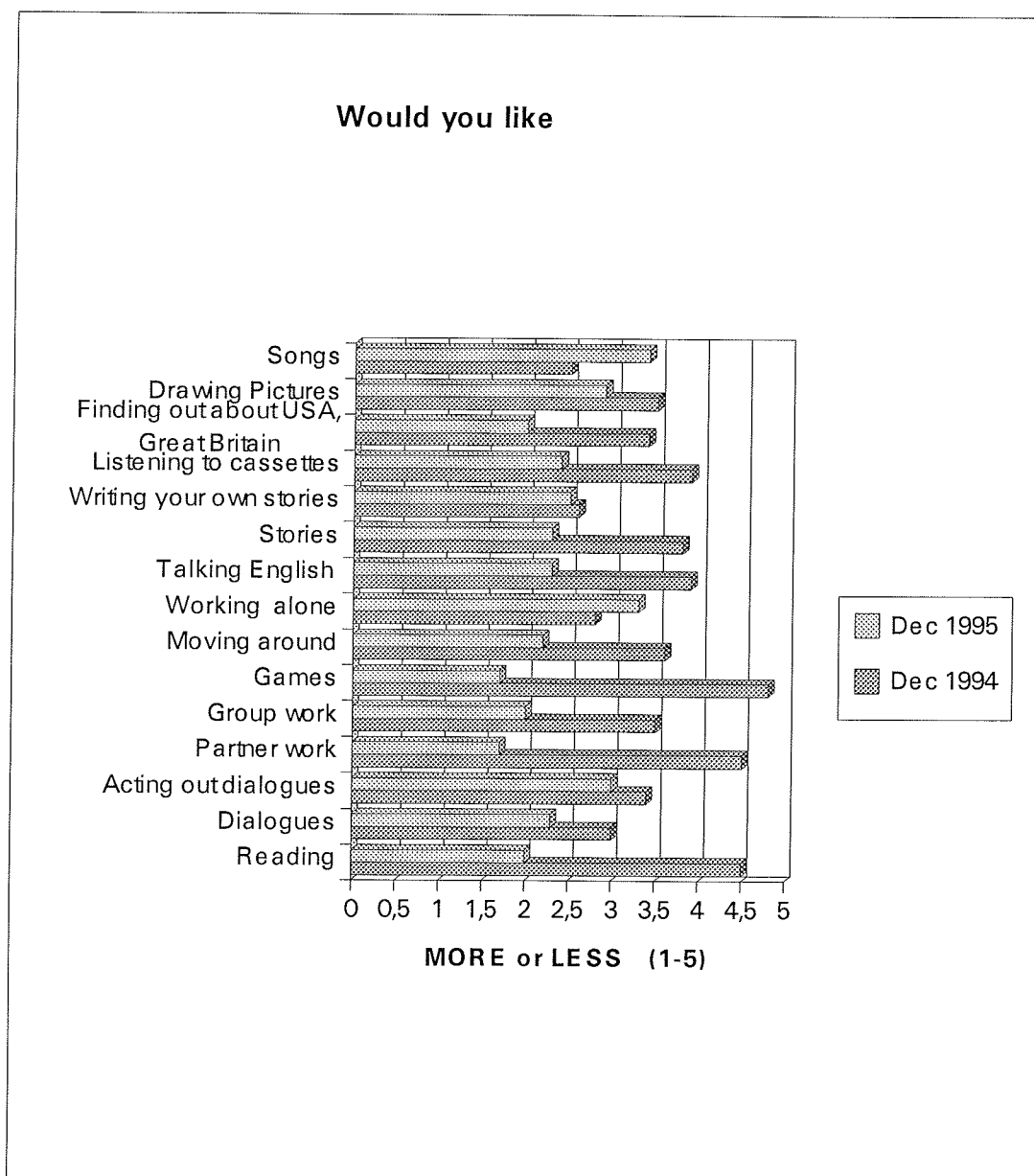
There seemed to be a definite correlation between asking help from and helping neighbours. The 1995 results showed there was less needing help and a lot less giving help - resulting in less distraction and a lot less chatting, as can be seen in Chart Four.

Graphic Chart Four : In the English lessons



My hopes for a definite improvement regarding boredom were not fulfilled so I had to be content with the obvious improvement regarding chatting.

Graphic Chart Five : Would you like MORE / LESS?



These results were the most pleasing of all! My pupils wanted MORE of everything with only two exceptions: working alone and songs. Not wanting to work alone correlated with the wish for more partner and group work. My presumption was that songs were not a hit as they had only heard Cat Stevens „Father and Son“ which they had found too old fashioned for their ears. A decision was made to find some more suitable songs.

Our London project would have increased their interest in Great Britain and the USA. Their increased interest in listening to cassettes, stories, partner and group work, dialogues, stories, reading and ESPECIALLY the willingness to talk more English I put down to their improved listening comprehension ensuing from the increased practice that I now allowed them. My efforts had paid off after all! and what pleased me most was the fact that they WANTED to speak English to a far greater extent. Experiencing that English could be more interesting, they rose to the bait and I had at last become aware of what kind of bait to give them.(e.g. policeman - drunken driver dialogue: three pairs were so engrossed in their activity that they did not

even stop when the bell rang for lunch break). Most of my pupils were happier and the few were no longer determining the class dynamic. The very irony was that I now had a relatively quiet class who were willing and able was poignant, but more important was that also I, the teacher, was capable of learning - and it was a fact that - right at the beginning - I had gone down a blind alley in trying to curb their liveliness instead of utilizing it.

My Conclusions:

- a committed teacher will not be content with complacency but have the courage to question his own person and teaching methods when confronted with a difficult teaching situation and if necessary change his methods
- it IS possible to improve a problematic class situation but it will need several different "tools" to get to work on the various facets thereof
- the personal relationship of the teacher to his pupils will determine his success and the teacher is the prime motor in the dynamic of a classroom situation because it is he who determines the subject of his lessons and his methods. This he should keep well in mind when he finds himself complaining about a certain class - there is ALWAYS something HE can do to improve the situation
- not even frontal teaching can prevent normal children from chatting so it would be more productive to channel this energy by means of pair and group work instead of trying to curtail it- some "friendships" are disharmonious and non-productive and should be diplomatically "pruned"
- you cannot change the personality of the pupils - if he is shy, let him be, if he is gregarious then use this aspect of his personality productively
- the children need a personal relationship to the subject being dealt with in the lesson and if the teacher is successful in creating this (as in our project work or problem discussions) then he will interest the children and motivation will increase
- not only should we take the varying personalities into consideration, but also the pupils' sex and resulting difference in behaviour.

"Boys will be boys - and even that would not matter if we could prevent girls from being girls!"

Sir Anthony Hope Hopkins (1863 - 1933) in Dolly Dialogues

But that is yet another story!

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