FLEXIBLE GROUPING OF DIVERSE LEARNING SITUATIONS IN INITIAL TEACHING

Päivi Valli, Sirkku Lähdesmäki
Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius (FINLAND)

Abstract

The beginning of the school path is a significant period in children's lives. The experiences that child gains during the first school years will form the understanding of one's learning deeply. When planning learning environments, teachers have to take pupils individuality and needs of every child into consideration. According to the renewed Finnish national core curriculum, which came into effect in autumn 2016, at the centre of transformational school culture is a learning community that develops in working together and through inclusion and dialogue. The flexible and advanced study modules are the targets in development of learning environments. It is also crucial that new learning methods and using various learning environments is research based. This research was conducted as part of the project, which focused on flexible learning environments and was implemented in four classes in the first and second grade in 2014-2016. The ground for this project was on teachers need and willingness to develop and improve an initial teaching learning environment for children that would serve as most functional and safe environment but also would enable flexible and diverse learning. The aim of this paper is to investigate the model of flexible grouping that teachers developed during project. The focus is on the teachers' arguments and solutions. While this project was started, the building of the new school was on process and part of the aim of this project was to develop a model that could be applied in this new school with versatile learning environments. The research was conducted as a case study in the medium-sized school. Data was collected from four teachers by interviews and observations of learning situations. The purpose of this study was to research teachers' solutions and arguments, therefore, interviews were selected for data gathering. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for deeper analysis. Observations were important in understanding the phenomenon of classroom working in flexible groups. This study offers some important insights into flexible grouping. The using of flexible grouping was versatile and they were formed on different basis. One aim of this project was to tighten the co-operation among teachers but the most important reasoning was to consider the pupils individual needs and learning goals. During the research period, it came into notion that working in flexible groups was challenging for some pupils. This caution made teachers to consider the reasoning a method, the readiness of the pupils, co-operation among teachers and the operational principles and structures at the school are in fundamental role. This study strengthens the understanding of the need for flexible learning environments, child-centered learning and the value and power of co-operation among teachers.

Keywords: flexible grouping, co-operation, initial education.

1 INTRODUCTION

The active and communal teaching, research basis and teamwork are moving Finnish school towards changing and developing a culture of learning and teaching with the help from the focus of the national curriculum for basic education (POPS) which came into force in the autumn of 2016. Developing and examining the teachers’ own work, as a part of the learning community is a significant part in the construction of the firm and steady foundation of the basic education. The subject of all the development is the creation of a learning environment, which is safe, balanced and respectful towards the child. In addition to the organization of learning, a great weight is placed on the atmosphere of the class and on the teachers’ ideas of learning and education. According to Välilä (2007, 354), the interaction inside the school is formed by the physical structures, resources of the school and the working atmosphere. The kind of school environment the child arrives at every morning and how everyone operates there has significance on the development of views that are connected to the child’s learning and skills. Direct and indirect action affect the child’s growth and development and they are all tied up with one another (Forss-Pennanen, 2006).

In this article, the teachers have stated as the reasoning of the project in question the securing of the pupils' individual learning path which is directed by the planning based on the pupils' learning and the development needs. The strategy of organizing the teaching was the pupils working in groups that
were changing, made up of different ages and for different reasons, which is called flexible grouping. The objective of the project is to develop initial education so that with the help of flexible grouping every pupil is guaranteed support for their own needs, learning is taking place with the help of peer learning and social skills are promoted. In the earlier projects, (see Järnström, Vermola and Gustafsson, 2013 9-24) flexible grouping has made it easier to focus the teaching of the pupils in the zone of their proximal development and the small group situations have made possible the genuine meeting of the children. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the effects of flexible grouping in learning to read and in differentiation (Hoffman 2002; Gibeault 2008; Olszewski-Kubilius 2013; Collins & Gan 2013). During this project, a model was developed to operate as a pedagogical foundation in the preschool and initial education of the new school that opened in the beginning of 2017. The preschoolers had to be left out of this study because they were physically far from the school pupils because of temporary school premises, and due to this, it was not possible to include them. The joining of the operation of the two different institutions is a demanding process as Karila, Kivimäki & Rantavuori (2013) showed in their study and in it the children's point of view in particular has to be taken into account. Kopisto, Brotherus, Paavola, Hytönen and Lipponen (2011, 33) have studied the implementation of flexible initial education with additional resources, and state that coherent continuum of the education is important.

The school participating in the research has initial education in two parallel classes. The teachers wanted to start developing a model where the pupils form the so-called multi-grade classes, and the four groups formed by the pupils in the 1st and 2nd grade were created. The teachers called these groups the base classes. The teachers justified this pedagogically with the 2nd grade pupils acting as model pupils and as support to the 1st grade pupils and their development as pupils would be supported in this way with the help of peer learning. In turn, flexible grouping was seen as a means to support the pupils' individual progress and development of social skills. This model of operation was studied by the Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, concentrating in particular on forming the flexible grouping and on their pedagogical reasoning. The study was carried out during the school years 2015–2016. This study encourages the pre-school and elementary teachers to courageously develop the models of flexible grouping with the pupils of different age.

2 FLEXIBLE GROUPING – THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The roots of the definition for flexible grouping are the interpretation by Radencich and Mckay (1995, 11) of temporary grouping where the members change regularly. Ford (2005) considers it important that the groups change and are varying heterogeneously and homogeneous (cf. Radencich and Mckay 1995). The groups are formed and dissolved when necessary and the objective is to reach maximum flexibility in individual lessons as in the wider learning modules (Ford 2005, 4). The foundation of flexible grouping can be the activity, the pupils’ skills, needs, objectives or the interests and they can be divided into groups of similar or different levels of ability, into groups chosen by the teacher or pupils themselves as well as into random groups (Ford 2005; Tomlinson & McTighe 2006, 52). According to Ford (2005), the purpose of grouping is to effectively build the class community with the help of, among others, the use of time, learning material and differentiating instructions. Also the tasks have significance and they have to be variable. In grouping the tasks can be for the whole class, groups and for the individual pupils or combinations thereof. Flexible grouping makes possible the simultaneous differentiation of the contents, learning process as well as the output or the task. The pupils’ skills, interests and learning profiles affect the planning of these varying strategies and approaches, which are used in the learning situations according to Tomlinson (1999). Hoffman (2002) calls such groups the mixed-groups in which case the pupils represent different skill levels and levels of competence or are at the same level in their learning skills. According to Olszewski-Kubilius (2013), it is particularly important that grouping have to meet the pupil’s learning objectives in regard to the contents and objectives.

Ford (2005) considers it as challenge that flexible grouping requires the teacher and pupils the ability to adapt oneself to the changes as well as the different groups during the lessons. However, the fact that the pupils avoid the labels, which are attached to learning and ability, because forming groups is transparent and variable, is emphasized as a strength. According to Tomlinson (2010 5, 26) as well as Tomlinson and McTighe (2006, 53) in flexible grouping respecting all the pupils, appreciating the individual differences, cooperation, teaching that is aiming for the success and the community in a differentiating class are central.

According to earlier studies, the use of flexible grouping has many advantages. The social skills of the pupils and self-confidence develop, as well as personal and social responsibility (Bellanca & Fogarty
1991), the pupils gain experience of working with other pupils from different backgrounds, learning abilities and skills (Valentino 2000). According to Gentry (1999), flexible grouping helps the pupil to reach an increasingly higher level of learning and the considered reasons for grouping produce better learning results than random grouping. Furthermore, grouping promotes the pupil’s ability to concentrate on the task (Castle, Deziz & Fortora 2005). Valentino (2000) has stated that grouping the pupils in different ways during the day facilitates the teacher’s work and intensifies that of the pupils. Grouping provides the teacher an opportunity to concentrate on guiding those pupils who need help in practising the basic skills, guidance in interaction, differentiation and encouragement to promote their learning (Tomlinson & McTighe 2006, 20).

Valentino (2000) divides flexible groups into teacher-led and pupil-led groups (cf. Hoffman 2002). The teacher-led group contains the tasks for the whole class, small groups and individuals. The communication in these groups is usually between a teacher and the pupil. Groups of this kind are efficient in presenting material, making summaries, meeting the general needs and in improving the individual level of paying attention. The group, which contains the whole class, is used, among others, to introduce new material, to construct shared understanding or to pay attention to the pupils’ earlier knowledge and skills. The small group tasks make possible working between the pupils who have similar needs. Furthermore, there are teacher-led tasks at the individual level with the objective to learn to work independently. With the help of these tasks, the pupils are supported in refining and deepening their own thoughts, for example, after teamwork. There are many pupil-led groups and emphasizing the pupils’ responsibility for the success of work is common to all of them. The objective of these groups is the pupils’ divergent thinking, working with different people, strengthening social skills and developing self-confidence in their own skills.

The pupils are also grouped according to their evaluated learning needs (Castle etc. 2005). According to Valentino (2000), some of such groups are the collaborative groups, the "performance-based" groups and pupil pairs. In a collaborative group, the pupils have to share thoughts, to solve problems and to interpret tasks together and this enables the strengthening of team spirit. The groups, which are based on performance, consist of pupils who have similar needs but they are only temporary and respond to the changing need. Pupil pairs are a general form of grouping and they are based on helping the other pupil and on cooperation. Flexible grouping makes possible the fitting together of pupils and tasks when necessary, helps the teacher to observe and evaluate pupils in many kinds of groups, and tasks (Tomlinson 2010, 26). The division into groups has to always be based on the information that has been received through evaluation and on the observations of the pupils’ skills, the subjects of interest and, the ways of learning, which are agreeable to the pupil. The flexible grouping is not a permanent group but it can be formed for a need that lasts for an hour or two, a day or a week. So that the flexible grouping functions in the best way, continuous versatile evaluation and the pupil-centered regular grouping and also the extremely efficient organizational skills are needed from the teachers.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006 3) emphasize that the foundation for the use of flexible grouping has to be in the aims of the curriculum. As a tool for forming the groups with flexible grouping they present the planning which is based on the understanding of the curriculum (Understanding by Design) and on differentiating the instructions (Differentiated Instructions). Then the general learning objectives and the objectives of the pupil’s individual instruction and learning are at the centre of the grouping. Flexible grouping also requires the versatile use of physical learning environment and premises. The learning premises have to support the objectives of the work of the whole group, small groups, pairs as well as independent work (Tomlinson & McTighe 2006, 52).

3 RESEARCH DATA AND METHODS

A case study was chosen as the approach of the study because of its practical nature. The subject of the study is the reasoning behind flexible grouping that the four class teachers developed in their own work community. The purpose of the study is to describe flexible grouping in detail and to create a general view of the implemented project (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015, 181). The study questions are (1) how flexible grouping was carried out in initial education and (2) why was flexible grouping used?

The subject of the study is the community formed by the teachers and pupils, individual teachers and learning events. The data consists of the notes and lesson observation forms by the two researchers, from a recorded teachers’ interview and a discussion and of their notes. In the data collection both the open interview of the teacher group and the theme interview were used. In the first interview, the
teachers and researchers discussed the matters naturally and openly and the progress of the
discussion had not been planned beforehand but it proceeded on the conditions of the teachers, which
is characteristic of an open interview (see Eskola and Suoranta 2000, 81). In an open interview, room
was given for the teachers' experiences, feelings, opinions and reasons. The researchers' task was to
keep the discussion on an actual subject, to ask for focused details, and to move the discussion
forward. In the theme interview, both the researchers led the discussion naturally together on the basis
of a sketched structure of the theme interview. With two interviewers, the situation was more relaxed
and more like a discussion. Both researchers maintained the easy air of the discussion and made sure
that the agreed subject matters were dealt with, however, in a way that was unhurried and respectful
of the train of thought of the members in the discussion (see Eskola and Suoranta 2000, 89-90). The
researchers’ participation in the planning discussion and the interactive interview try to encourage
teachers to reflect on their own operation in the cooperation (Heikkinen, Kontinen & Häkkinen, 2008).

The project was carried out from 2014–2016. The first stage comprised of the early planning of the
study, shared brainstorming of the research project, choosing the actual contents and the subject of
interest for the research study. The School year 2014–15 was the commencement stage of the project
for the teachers and the actual research material was collected during the school year 2015–16 during
the time when the teachers' shared approaches had taken shape and the members of the group were
known. During spring 2015, the development of the teachers' teaching approaches was observed in
the planning meetings and we also observed lessons. This shared commitment to the study process
and the definition of its direction together created the important confidence between the researchers
and the teachers for strengthening the principles of participation, commitment, reciprocity, sincerity
and reflection (Huovinen & Rovio, 2008). The researchers observed six lessons in October–November
2015 in classes and made notes of the formed groups and learning tasks that have been carried out in
them during the lessons. The interviews were carried out in November 2015 and in May 2016.

The recorded interviews between the researchers and the teachers were transcribed and the
reasoning and principles, which are connected to flexible grouping, were analysed from them. The
analysis of the data of the study was begun by encoding an open interview from May 2015 inductively
without theoretical presumptions. In addition to this, observations of the teaching situation in May 2015
and the notes from observing the teaching were added to the data. These observations were analyzed
and based on these the concepts and themes for the study took shape. Based on this observation
time the observation table of the teaching was drawn up as the model for the different forms of flexible
grouping and all the groups, reasoning, operation and tasks were recorded in the table. The review of
the observation forms served as the basis for choosing the themes for the open interview that was
carried out in the teachers' planning meeting. These themes were the pupils' point of view, cooperation between the teachers, the forms of grouping and the reasoning behind them. The themes
were encoded from the data from the teachers' planning meeting. The final interview in May 2016 was
also analyzed by categorizing according to theme. We classified both sets of interview data into the
excerpts, which are essential from the point of view of the study task by choosing, marking and
naming them (Alastalo & Åkerman 2010, 399).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Flexible Grouping in Practice

Flexible grouping was closely connected to simultaneous teaching. Four class teachers cooperated
closely forming the work pairs in which case the teachers, A+B and C+D shared the responsibility for
about 40 pupils in the 1st and 2nd grades. Each one of the teachers had their own so-called base
class which was formed from pupils of both the 1st and 2nd grades. These base classes had been
named as follows: bees (teacher A), bunnies (teacher B), moles (teacher C) and mice (teacher D). All
four teachers planned together once every week on Mondays when they together thought about the
week as a whole and about the subject matters for the coming week. Planning concentrated on
outlining the contents of the week and brainstorming, among others, on the concrete implementation
and areas of responsibilities in art, physical education and themes (science and religion). The theme
lessons were on Fridays. The teachers implemented simultaneous teaching mainly as work pairs in
addition to the shared planning. The teachers formed close simultaneous teaching pairs A+B and
C+D. Simultaneous teaching pairs adapted jointly planned contents to suit their own pupils' needs and
starting points. The teachers divided the weeks so that they took turns in the planning and teaching
responsibility of an age and skills level group. Every second week the teacher was responsible for
teaching Finnish (mother tongue) and mathematics for the first grade and every other week the
teaching in Finnish and mathematics lessons for the second grade with the teaching pair assisting in the lessons. One of the teachers took responsibility for the subject to be taught for everybody, while the other teacher was in the assisting or supplementing role. This also made the pupils' individual differentiation and interaction possible.

The precondition for the success of the project was the full support of the headmaster of the school for the teachers' development and the possibility to also have an effect on the timetable. The project made a weekly shared and paid planning hour possible for the teachers. Attention was also paid to the resources of the special needs teachers in planning and implementation which made it possible to group the pupils according to their skill level in the Finnish and mathematics lessons.

The group of 40 pupils of different ages is divided into different flexible teaching groups every day in an appropriate way according to, for example, a matter to be taught, learning objectives, activity or the pupils' skill level. The aim is to intensify learning and to share the responsibility with the help of simultaneous teaching. The large group was used when necessary when it was time to tune into a shared subject or theme, for the language shower, giving general and shared instructions, the assemblies and at the start of the physical education lessons to a common subject or theme. In that case the teaching was teacher-led. After that the groups were flexibly formed, among others, by mixing the 1st and 2nd grades pupils from both the classes, by forming mix-groups which had two 1st grade and two 2nd grade pupils, groups which had equal number of girls and boys or by forming pairs with just the 2nd graders or the 1st graders or by dividing the pupils into pupils in the 1st grade and the pupils in the 2nd grade. Likewise, the all 1st and 2nd graders -class skills level groups were used for giving the instructions, tuning in, for a discussion on a theme and for giving working instructions, for summary of the work and for self-assessment. Different flexible groupings are defined in table 1. In the study, we use names that have been presented in this table when describing different groups.

**Table 1. Flexible grouping according to the pupils' age groups during the school year 2015–2016.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base class (number of pupils)</th>
<th>base class's 1st grade</th>
<th>base class's 2nd grade</th>
<th>parallel class's 1st grade</th>
<th>Parallel class's 2nd grade</th>
<th>all 1st graders</th>
<th>all 2nd grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>moles (19)</td>
<td>moles 1</td>
<td>moles 2</td>
<td>moles/mice 1 (22)</td>
<td>bunnies/bees/moles/mice 1 (43)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mice (20)</td>
<td>mouse 1</td>
<td>mouse 2</td>
<td>moles/mice 2 (17)</td>
<td>bunnies/bees/mice 2 (37)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunnies (20)</td>
<td>bunnies 1</td>
<td>bunnies 2</td>
<td>bunnies/bees 1 (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bees (21)</td>
<td>bees 1</td>
<td>bees 2</td>
<td>bunnies/bees 2 (20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Different groups were formed from different age and ability groups with changing pedagogical grounds. These were small groups, pairs, skills level groups, the differentiating groups and girl-boy groups. The pupils were grouped as pairs in the following ways: large-small, reader-beginning reader, "temperament pairs", bunny pairs, bee pairs, girl-boy pairs and friendship pairs. The pupils were grouped in the age and level groups according to the skill level for example in reading instruction in Finnish in the first grade and in practical mathematics activities. According to the skill level, the pupils were grouped to the readers at the syllable level, the readers at the word level and to the readers at the sentence level. The pupils were divided into age and level groups when the contents were connected to the age group objectives, such as, for example, *bunnies/bees* performed the times tables test with the teacher's lead while the *bunnies/bees* practiced reading with another teacher at the same time in the different class rooms. The age and level groups also were used for the pair tasks in Finnish and for the individual work in mathematics with the textbooks or e-material. The pupils were also sometimes divided into the smaller groups according to skill level in which case the special needs
teacher was there as the third teacher. Flexible grouping made the pupils' individual progress possible towards their objectives in Finnish and mathematics of the initial education.

"every week we make sure that the community spirit is present and it would increase... then when they study the themes the studying would happen as together as possible with others, that it would not only be working alone" (teacher C)

"when sometimes we do coding in the maths lesson, the whole lesson we have had the small and the big ones in those mixed-groups for the lesson and a part of the lesson in a mixed age groups if there is a certain matter it has been in them" (teacher A)

The teachers decided on the basis of the operation if the pupils were divided into the small groups of different sizes or pairs. The teachers organized a two-hour long work station circuit every week and work stations were also used in mathematics. The work station tasks had been planned so that they were differentiating according to the pupil's skill level and that the instructions made the operation on the pupils' own skill level possible (Tomlinson & McTighe 2006). In that case the pupils worked in pairs. The special needs teacher resource was utilized in these lessons. The teachers utilized teacher-led and pupil-led (see Valentino 2000) models of grouping when using flexible grouping. The different task types that were drawn up for the pupils represented the tasks aimed at the whole class, small groups as well as to the individuals. The teachers had a clear aim to promote the pupils' self-direction as well as collaborative and independent working skills. The pupil-led tasks were used diversely and especially the weekly work station activity promoted the pupils' responsibility for their own work.

The timetable had been drawn up so that only the 2nd graders or the 1st graders were in the daily morning or afternoon lessons where the subject areas connected to the objectives and contents of the curriculum of the age group were taught. For example, all the 2nd graders planned a presentation on the subject of "our diversity" in small groups and later presented them to the 1st graders who were starting school. The pupils were in their own base classes, for example, then when the teachers wanted to promote the working culture of the classes and to make the large-small peer learning possible. Inside the base classes, the pupils were divided into pairs as well as into the changing small groups.

4.2 The Modifications of Flexible Grouping

In the final interview, the teachers talked about the latest developments of the project. Both simultaneous teaching pairs formed their own way to work. Teachers A+B developed shared planning and simultaneous teaching closely and they mixed the pupils of the base classes regularly in flexible groups. The teaching pair C+D in turn saw the need also for the own operation of the base classes and they emphasized fewer groups mixing the base classes. All four teachers saw the different types of groups as the advantages of the project. Work pairs had ended up in two differing solutions. The teacher pair C+D had dismantled the mixed-grade class model and divided the pupils into 1st and 2nd graders in the beginning of February. The use of so-called mix-groups by this teacher pair was limited to 6 hours per week and physical education, music, arts and German language as a language shower were studied in these groups. The teachers had dismantled the responsibility week system in the teaching of mathematics and Finnish. C was responsible for the content in the first grade and D in the second grade and they acted as each other's assisting teachers. The flexible grouping models were used carefully and the groups were formed amongst the pupils of their own base class. In the teachers' opinion, the change was made possible by the familiarity of the teachers with the pupils and the pupils getting used to the changing groups. On the other hand, the ground for the change was however just calming down the working with just one teacher.

"This system also allowed changing the situation even so radically during the school year ..."(teacher C)

Other justifications for the change were the pupils, who had challenges adapting themselves to the changing groups and daily changes and their school skills were also usually weak. Because of this the pupils' attachment to the groups had remained weak and one wanted to invest in it with the help of more permanent groups. The operational models developed by the teachers support the observation by Tomlinson (1999) of the fact that the pupils' skills affect grouping. The challenge of flexible grouping brought by Ford (2005) regarding the pupils' ability to adapt oneself to repeated changes rose forth and led to the change in the operation. Teachers noticed that after dismantling the mixed-grade class and reducing the pupils' grouping, the pupils' school readiness, social skills and working skills were progressing in the desired way. The teachers' mutual confidence and interaction was good and they...
could admit the difficulties in the operation and dared to courageously change the operational model to serve the best interest of the pupils and groups. In the model for spring 2016, they could utilize flexible grouping in a way that intensified the pupils' working (Valentino 2000). The teachers indeed emphasized that to them the shared planning and support from the other teacher in the matters concerning pupils and operation had been especially rewarding.

..."now we have seen changes in both groups, that a lot of development has taken place, it can also be just growing, learning, but clearly development into being a pupil" (teacher D)

The other work pair had also ended up changing things. Their pupils were still in the mixed 1st and 2nd grade classes but the teachers had divided the pupils between the groups with pedagogical reasons. Flexible group also made the pupils' group changes possible in the future. Furthermore, in their opinion, the pupils' initiative had increased, operating in the groups had become familiar, their social skills had developed and their approval of others had increased. The pupils still also worked in the mix-groups within their own base class but in the half-group lessons the pupil groups were formed from the pupils of the two base classes. In the half-group lessons the pupils studied Finnish and mathematics in alternate weeks so that the teachers were sharing the teaching with one of them having the main responsibility. The teacher pair A+B regarded the responsibility week system still as an extremely functioning model in mathematics and Finnish.

"grouping has worked really well this school year. The little ones work in them naturally; big and little work really well in mix-pairs. They have learned to be really independent. Noticing the results of the work here in the spring" (teacher A)

..."we are there even though it is teacher A’s responsibility week, the knowledge of the pupils just increases when I don’t have that responsibility for the teaching so I have time to observe that learning" (teacher B)

The teachers brought up the significance of individual support received by the pupils with the help of flexible grouping as a big advantage. The teachers experienced that there was more time to pay individual attention to the pupils. The groups operated well and the teacher was able to concentrate better on the ones needing support. The teachers felt that differentiation was easier with the pupils only from either 1st or 2nd grade. Furthermore, the assessment was experienced as getting easier when the aims had been set together and both the teachers had formed an idea of the pupils' progress. They formed groups meaningfully from the point of view of the operation and utilized different groups depending on what was the objective of the learning task or what was most sensible from the point of view of the pupils’ self-direction in the tasks (Tomlinson 2010). Those pupils who needed the teacher's supervisory interaction formed a group that was supervised by the other teacher when flexible grouping was being used (Tomlinson & McTighe 2006). As a rule, the teachers tried to pay attention to the most functional grouping from the point of view of the pupil's progress when forming groups.

In the beginning of the project, all four teachers had the common goal and objective to develop the model for the initial education in their own school, which supports the curriculum reform. During two years, the emphasis was on the simultaneous teaching of the work pairs formed by the class teachers and through that the development of the operational models which differ from each other was emphasized. At the final stage, the operation of the teacher work pairs A+B and C+D developed into their own models. The teachers C and D noticed that the excessive grouping was slowing down such pupils' development in their working skills and as pupils, there was a concern about their learning, social skills or other behavior.

The teacher pair A+B experienced that flexible grouping was also a model that facilitates the teachers’ work (Valentino 2000), they told that the interaction of groups was really good and working was independent already in the spring 2016. Teachers also described the pupils accepting different groups and friends in the groups. This indeed supports the observation of Ford (2005) of the fact that flexible grouping reduces labelling of pupils and promotes creating positive atmosphere in the class.

4  CONCLUSIONS

During the research project, which lasted for nearly two years, we were allowed to observe the development of the model of flexible initial education and the flexible grouping from the planning stage to implementation, to reassessment and to the development of the model through many insights and experiences. The study brought its own additional value to the teachers’ development because the
shared planning and interview discussions also served as the forum of shared reflection and clarifying of the operation.

The significant findings of this study are that there are multiple ways to form the flexible grouping and it should be based on strong arguments. The arguments can be related to pupils’ skills, goals, contents, differentiation, working methods or activities. The results of this study indicate that flexible grouping was seen as a facilitating factor to support individual pupils effectively. The interesting finding was, that flexible grouping helped pupils’ differentiation and gave possibilities to work his/her own skill level. From the pupil's point of view, the school path was seen more as a whole when the pupil can study different contents irrespective of what grade the pupil is on. The significance of knowing the pupils was emphasized, as well as the pupil group of the moment, in planning and implementing the activity. Flexible grouping was noticed to be demanding for the pupils who were inattentive or restless. On the other hand, simultaneous teaching was seen also as a facilitating factor in this respect. Especially the responsibility week -model was seen as useful from the point of view of the individual pupil's needs. The teachers’ and other adults' cooperation facilitated individual supporting of the pupils when more adults observe the learning of the pupil. Shared teaching, peer support and sharing of views were also experienced as empowering and supportive of the work. The lack of time hampered mainly the sharing of information between the teachers.

The pupils’ functioning as a model to each other was seen as a big advantage. The independent initiative and self-direction of the pupils were central objectives of the operation and it was seen that the model supported the development of these skills. The identical timetables of the classes make placing the pupils in different groups or premises possible when necessary. All the teachers are familiar and safe adults, under whose supervision the pupils can easily be placed.

The study expanded the understanding about possibilities and challenges of implementing flexible groups. Creating a unified model is challenging because the use of flexible groups is dependent on learning arrangements, pupils and teachers, and teachers’ cooperation. The study also shows that flexible groupings can be used as needed and are modified, and can not be defined as one model for everyone. With the project, the guidelines of flexible grouping and the cooperation became clear to the teachers. The precondition for the successful operation is finding the shared time regularly with the work pair, the uniform timetables, concentrating on the work pair model and on flexible grouping primarily within the base class. Shared planning and changing the main responsibility for the flexible groups gave room for the teachers to operate in different roles and also to observe pupils, or to concentrate on assisting some pupils according to their learning needs.

This study focused on describing flexible groups and teachers’ arguments for their use. It would also have been helpful to find out the pupils’ views and experiences of flexible groupings as this would have increased understanding of the benefits of their use and highlighted the student's experience. In the further research, it would be important to find out the pupil's point of view and to find more robust arguments for the use of flexible groups. This study examined the role of flexible grouping in initial teaching. Flexible grouping promotes close co-operation between teachers and creates a school culture where one learns and works in a learning community. Flexible groupings could therefore be more widely used as a basis for developing the new kind of school culture. The study gives valuable, realistic and even critical addition to the field of research on the subject and all the agencies who are interested in developing preschool and initial education can benefit from it.

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