EEPG Primary School Network meeting in Belgrade,
10-11 April 2008

Participants:

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Minutes of the meeting

Wednesday 9 April: Arrival of participants and welcome dinner

Thursday 10 April:

Topic 1: Modularization of materials

By modularization we understand not just to split up a textbook in smaller parts, rather the method of adapting specific parts and/or aspects of a topic (‘textbook’) to learners with specific needs (weak learners, strong learners, immigrants, etc.) in order to support and facilitate differentiated and individualized learning processes.

Dejan Begović showed examples of modularization in different topics for Primary level (letter recognition, Math, basic social science concepts, etc.). In some cases for kindergarten the staff had asked Kreativni Centar to put two minor volumes of 40 pages together into one volume of 80 pages for easier use in the
kindergartens. It is clear that there is a growing market for modularized materials, because the number of pupils with special needs of varied nature is constantly growing.

Ana Kekanović first described the textbook market in Croatia and mentioned that the Ministry each year publishes a catalogue with a list of all approved textbooks. In addition the educational publishers (like Profil International) distribute their own list of supplementary educational materials and teacher’s guides etc.

Nataša Živković explained the situation in Montenegro where the textbook market is limited (due to the population). The state approves of the textbooks, but it was stressed that the State gives subsidise to textbooks by paying 40% of the price to the publisher. This obviously makes the books cheaper for the parents to buy. As for modularization Nataša mentioned that their company publishers numerous supplementary materials for pupils with special needs and in addition electronic materials. Since the development of textbooks for foreign language learning requires many resources they opt for importing books for foreign languages (English and French) directly UK and France. This topic raised quite a discussion, and it was decided to hand the idea over to the Language Network for treatment as a special topic.

Margit Ross declared that Koolibri Publishers have no practice with modularization because the Estonian market is simply too small for such an approach. They tried once to develop a textbook into three smaller parts but this was not well received by the teachers and therefore given up. There is a possibility that they might try modularization with materials for kindergarten on the near future.

In the following discussion it was mentioned that too much modularization could lead to children buying books or modules which are really not for them. In general it was added that many school bags are too heavy, and a more strict approach to modularization might lead to a better solution.
Dejan Begović and Slavica Marković described the historic development of letters and handwriting in Serbia, and he stressed that in the Serbian orthography from the 1980’s only general shapes of the letters are defined. On that occasion it was pointed out that there can be some differences in the drawing and shapes of some letters. Simplified and calligraphic letters were defined by the orthography. Fine writing was introduced as an optional subject in the lower grades. This was a consequence of the negative reactions of teachers to the introduction of calligraphic letters in a Primer. They found it difficult to begin with teaching children these letters. In first grade in Primary school children learn how to write handwriting cursive letters correctly.

It was also pointed out that Kreativni Centar had developed their own font for showing examples of handwriting in Cyrillic fonts.

Margit Ross gave a historic overview of the development of handwriting in Estonia and pointed out the correlation ship between the political situation of the country and the method of teaching handwriting. In addition she presented the results of own research into the differences of speed and easiness between typing (on a keyboard) and writing with the hand. One outcome was the fact that typing is double as fast as writing.

Ana Kekanović explained the situation of teaching and learning handwriting in Croatia, where pupils begin handwriting in the second semester of first grade. It
as added that the fond for showing handwritten letters is decided officially in Croatia

Odeta Venckienė gave a detailed description of the history of handwriting in Lithuania, highlighting among other things the four letters which in their handwritten form differ from all other European languages

Walking along the river Danube

Friday 11 April:

**Topic 3: Finding new authors and editors for Primary level**

Natalija Panic explained the experience and methods used by Kreativni Centar. In summary there seem to be two methods: On the one hand you may use periodic, public announcement for potential authors and/or have coming authors submit proposals and texts directly to the publishers. On the other hand a publisher can make direct agreements with well known authors. Natalija described in detail the advantages and weaknesses of each method. The conclusion seems to be that the editors are completely involved in the author’s/authors’ teamwork all the way. Furthermore Natalija described the desirable features of a good textbook author/editor (please see the presentation). In Serbia there are no specific training courses for textbook authors, but a group of experts from the Department of Psychology at the University of Belgrade are working in the area
Nataša Živković explained how the Montenegrin publisher had successfully used external evaluators assessing their textbooks. The only problem with psychologists evaluating textbooks is sometimes that they have unrealistic expectations as to how the publishing process actually is carried out.

Ana Kekanović and Marija Odak described the Croatian situation where they realize that not all teachers want to become authors. Profil is now focussing on trying to attract teachers who have been/are doing special and extraordinary pedagogic approaches in their class (or school). This ensures a more progressive and innovative way of creating textbooks and other types of educational materials. In addition numerous workshops with teachers (i.e. potential authors) are organised, often 3 or 4 workshops per week across the country.

Odeta Venckienė declared that the situation of finding authors in Lithuania is equivalent to what happens in other countries. However, her presentation summarizes the situation from a Lithuanian perspective.

In the following general discussion the main topic was the (problematic) future of the textbook. It was asked how the learning environment(s) of the future will look like. Some food for thought can be found in a report “Schooling for Tomorrow” from the OECD. By clicking on the following link you can download the interesting file yourself: http://www.ncsl.org.uk/media/B32/0A/schooling-for-tomorrow-oecd-scenarios.pdf

Margit Ross reported of an unsuccessful way of finding new authors which they had tried in Estonia. They invited (several years ago) all teachers from elementary school to seminars. After having heard about the real world of publishing half of them disappeared. As for the other half they were set up in a series of teams but the views on pedagogy, content, methodology etc. inside these teams differed so strongly that the project had to stop.

**Topic 4: Materials for kindergarten and pre-school level**

Andjelka Ružić gave a detailed presentation of the materials for kindergarten and pre-school level, published by Kreativni Centar. She also described the conditions for assessing the maturity of children trying to enter schools (from kindergarten). In addition she explained the specific features of materials for kindergarten compared to books for higher levels. A number of spreads from the books showed clearly the characteristics for these very young groups of learners.
Odeta Venckienė told about kindergarten and pre-school in Lithuania. In her presentation she also listed the official criteria to be used when assessing whether a child is ready for school or not. In addition she handed out a teacher’s portfolio showing how a teacher follows every step of every pupil in order to be able to make the correct assessment at the end of the term.

Ana Kekanović explained that in Croatia there is no real pre-school education. The only option is that children in the year before school begins may visit a school-like institution two times a week. Assessment as regards maturity for school is carried out by the teachers of the school in question.

Margit Ross told that in Estonia there is a strong competition between (some) schools about attracting pupils. The children take part in a heavy test (duration one week) in order to qualify to enter the ‘right’ school. This system clearly favours talented children, and there is some debate in the country about this topic.

At the end of this successful meeting Preben Spåth declared that all four topics that were decided at the previous meeting of this network have been accomplished. On behalf of the participants he thanked Dejan Begović and his colleagues for their comprehensive work in organising this meeting and congratulated them on this success of hosting their first network meeting as a member of our group.
Finally it came out from the debate among the participants that the following two topics should be put on the agenda for the coming meeting of this network:

- How are seminars/workshops/courses to train textbook authors actually planned and organised? Possibly we could consider inviting Arno Reints or James McCall to take part in the meeting (they are experience experts in textbook authoring and publishing). Are there specific tools to help educating authors?
- How is the relationship between pictures/illustrations and text (in books for Primary – as compared to higher levels) and why it this so? Which types of illustrations are chosen and why? Are there rules for ‘best practice’ as regards the layout of books for Primary?

Finally I wish to thank Dejan and his crew for organising this fruitful and enjoyable network meeting.

Preben Späth