

LEARNING DIVERSITY (learning variability)

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RATIONALE

The philosophy of democratic societies is based on freedom and autonomy of individuals, improvement of diverse individual talents, abilities and their utilization in the society.

With the revolutionary development of computing capacity, informatics and communication, there is more and more potential to customize all products and services and to adjust life conditions in accordance with individual needs, wishes and interests. In line with these trends, individualization of learning, which is very relevant for each learner, is a desired quality of education. But in reality we still see mainstream education, driven by a concept of a 'one size fits all':

- *learning groups are often organized by the year of birth, despite psychological findings that learners of different age have a potential to influence each other through peer learning*
- *time schedules are often organized into lessons based on a linear week program – learners can't influence what and when to learn although teachers do their best to motivate the learners why the content is important.*
- *learners often have to spend the same amount of time by learning the same subject, topic, skills,.. despite different talents and interests*
- *the informal experience and backgrounds and the personal skills of the learners are not always taken into account.*
- *assessment of what is learned is often not customized to the individual learners.*

If we consider these features, it becomes clear that we have to work on a general mind-shift, first of all by the policy-makers and the leadership in schools so teachers will be able to work in changing overarching ideas on education, while taking on board and recognizing all the efforts that they have made in this direction.

In the UN CRPD (United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) one of the mentioned principles are concepts of

Universal Design and Reasonable Accommodations. UD and RA are very strong related to each other. We extend this concept to learning diversity in general. Universal design is based on the following principles: accessibility, individual accommodations made a benefit for all and a curriculum and learning environment that starts from diversity instead of retrofitting. Sometimes reasonable accommodations are needed and cannot become a benefit for all, e.g. Braille.

LEARNING VARIABILITY

We define this diversity field as the conditions that support the learning of every individual with his/her different needs, experiences, talents, interests, cultural and social background, language skills, motivations and learning styles.

These conditions include the following aspects:

- **The design of the learning environment and the curriculum** (e.g. school, class, library) including equipment, teaching aids, connectivity, ...
 - Is the learning environment fully accessible for everyone?
Are there barriers to learn?
 - Does the learning environment respond to individual learning needs, styles?
 - Is the learning environment equipped with tools, aids, resources, scaffolds, support?
- **The organization of learning** (including the curriculum)
 - Is the organization schedule flexible?
 - Are learning groups flexible?
 - Can learners choose how and with whom they can learn?
 - Can learners choose what to learn?
- **The teaching methodology – didactics**
 - Is the teaching/learning methodology accessible/effective for each learner?
 - Do teachers take in to consideration the different needs of learners? Does the teacher know the learners' needs?
 - Does the teacher start from the diversity in the classroom?
 - Are methods of (self) reflection, (peer)assessment included?

- **The culture of relationships** (the role of the teacher, the level of autonomy of learners, ...)
 - What is teacher's role in the process of learning?
 - Who is responsible for the learner's learning? Has the learner ownership of his or her learning

In this introduction we refer to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (@CAST). This concept provides options for representation, action & expression and engagement