

Some Kick-off Thoughts and Thesis

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Something is changing in our country, in Germany, quite rapidly. PISA did it. To tell you the truth, personally I don't very much believe in testing students continuously, ranking them, putting a lot of effort – and a lot of money!!! – into this. My main problem with this is: it takes so much more for a school to be, become or stay a good school which you will never ever be able to test, to compare, to rank. Wise educators know this and wise countries don't give the results too much of an importance – as a consequence, a school in Sweden was proudly presented to me as a school of real excellence, in which more than 90 % of the kids failed the national test after grade 4, with very good reasons, not only excuses.

Nevertheless, in Germany, PISA started something, which the researchers neither intended nor even imagined. Up to the PISA-results, most of the Germans thought that they had the best possible school system, that German „Bildung“ (you could never translate this word), was superior to all other systems. The conservatives in our country were convinced that the German Gymnasium and the almost holy German Abitur produces highest educational standard – even the more progressives, although they once had dreams about a comprehensive school in Germany, believed, that at least in the social-democratic-ruled countries children from lower class families had more or less equal opportunities to reach the top. Everybody agreed every now and then that schools could be modernized, that teaching might be more effective if you knew more about different methods of modern teaching. Every now and then, there were serious complaints about lack of knowledge of pupils, bad behaviour, missing interests and an unbearable lack of discipline! But those complaints can be found already in the words of Sokrates and Platon in ancient history, so nothing to be too worried about. Every now and then, the methods of teaching have been analyzed, but the results - in all these years more or less the same - didn't really shock anybody: up to 90 % of the teaching was done and still is done by the very effective method of straight teacher-concentrated lessons with the Sokrates-method of ques-

tioning in front of a whole-class. One correct answer by one pupil seemed to guarantee that the teaching aims had been reached. The teacher was not called to account if a pupil or even half of the class failed, but the pupils themselves and their parents, who, of course, felt guilty because they didn't help enough with afternoon homework. If the family is wealthy enough, the child has to take extra tuition outside school, which costs a lot of money – if the child is lucky enough, it doesn't have to repeat a whole year just because German literature and maybe biology and Latin were not sufficient enough - if the child is even luckier (and if parents are clever or influential enough), it doesn't have to leave school and settle for inferior quality – 40% of our 15-year-olds were *not* lucky or wealthy enough and went through this. Easy to imagine that they became quite discouraged and demoralized with all the possible psychological conclusions resulting.

Nobody really cared about this. It seemed to be the price for our best-possible system, which follows a simple logic: you learn best if you are among equals, otherwise valuable time for the fast achievers is lost by waiting for the low achievers. Last ones were thought to learn less with the bright ones always ahead of them, they would need special, more practically orientated help to learn, they would feel much better, if they didn't realize day by day that their classmates were faster, brighter, quicker and so much more brilliant. What a shock, when this logic obviously proved to be ineffective.

Our PISA-results are so absolutely out of this world that nobody, not even the political spin doctors, could help with excuses. Something had to be done – hectically, the ministers introduced, one after the other, change to their states. If you draw a line and see, in which direction all of them move, you will find this: our system, which totally failed, is now to be repaired with exactly those methods, laws and clauses, that led to failure - as if the failure had not been detected and stated at all! We failed? Well, then let's push schools and teachers and students into more examinations, standards, better methods of selection. We failed? Well, then let's stop the pedagogical and social welfare approach to school, the "hugging-education" (Kuschelpädagogik)! Too much valuable time might be lost by talking to children about their problems or by learning and teaching in groups or projects! After all, you as teachers lose control and you never really know if your students use their time efficiently. Letting

students find out solutions by themselves? Learning by doing? Valuing faults and roundabout ways in learning? Experiencing instead of repeating? Just a big waste of time! Hard work, effective testing, more – but of course fair!!! - selection instead! None of our politicians on role dare to even discuss another system than our divided system with at least four different types of school, hierarchically graded from top to bottom. It is *still* considered to be the only effective one or is at least considered to be the only one, which is politically acceptable if you want to win the next election. The four-tier-system itself demands and allows teachers to believe that it's the pupil's fault if 50% of a class fail a test because they are in a school that doesn't suit their abilities. So German schools are full of wrong children, who shouldn't be there, who only disturb the others, who make effective teaching impossible. Isn't it obvious that children can't be "wrong", but schools and a system, which leads to such an absurd (and deeply inhuman) thinking?

People in this country, who think differently and have to face all this, are close to despair. But if you take your profession in education seriously, you are not allowed to despair. So we are here today, have you with us for support, have to be grateful, that the discussion about our miserable school system has at least started and that all of those who were convinced that our system is top, are at least deeply consternated. In our struggle for a better common school for only "right" children, we – and I think I may speak for all the Germans who are here today – have found new allies in our struggle for better, inclusive and integrating schools. We never even dared to dream of having them on our sides: allies from business, trade and industry, foundations and parents' associations.

Another proof, that something is happening below the political surface is a suddenly increasing acceptance of the unique school in this country I am standing for, the Laboratory School in Bielefeld. This year we will celebrate our 30th anniversary, and the most spectacular thing about our school surely is this anniversary! For years, in almost every budget debate in parliament, the "to be or not to be" of our school was discussed. Only a very small group of politicians believed in us, most of them were convinced that it is absolutely impossible to have a common school attended by children from all social classes and backgrounds, abilities and disabilities between the age of 5 and 16 without being sorted according to their abilities into different groups,

classes or schools - without testing and competing, grading and comparing them with one another - with learning more by experience than by memorizing, in fields of learning instead of simple subjects - with living and working, playing and learning in age groups as well as mixed-age groups over three years - with teachers, who have to create new methods of teaching, try them out, evaluate them in their own research projects and present them to others in schools and universities. People from all over Germany and from quite a number of other countries come to visit us – “let’s play zoo again” is how some of the kids react to this every now and then – but although we are an experimental school financed by the state, the political authorities in education never really accepted or appreciated our work. The reason for this seems obvious: What we do, is just too much out of this German world of schooling. But whenever I was in one of your countries or met someone from Scandinavia to talk about my school, the reaction was always very polite as the Scandinavians surely are: „Well, nice school, but what is the outstanding or even special thing about it?” There is little in our school, which is not more or less standard in Scandinavian schools – on the contrary: there is so much to learn from your schools, which gives us new ideas about further changes into the direction of individualized learning in heterogeneous groups. A Finish colleague, who attended the same conferences in Frankfurt and in Munich I did and who had to listen to a presentation of my school, including a film, said: “I felt so much at home meeting and seeing your school, it almost makes me homesick”. And if you want to hear more about my school later on, I would be absolutely delighted to talk to you about it. But be careful to ask me *any* questions: I might not stop talking!

In this country, we have not yet accepted, that the diversity of our people, especially our children at school, should never be looked at as a burden. In this country, we have not yet learned, how to cope with heterogeneous groups, how to teach them, how to use their different degrees and characters of intelligences, their different social, cultural, political and religious backgrounds, their different experiences in life as boys or girls, as slow or fast learners or thinkers, as lively, depressed, joyful, sportive or handicapped boys and girls, their most distinguishable creative, practical or theoretical approach to world. In Scandinavia, I found many encouraging schools, where only “right” and never “wrong” pupils live and learn together with their grown-ups in

great respect for one another. But even there I found, that the lessons quite often were not as individualized, self-determined and in a shared responsibility of teachers and pupils as it could and should be – I saw less mixed ability work or multiplicity of learning aids in the classrooms as I assumed. So we might have a shared object in finding out and trying out more of this together, even though you have much better structures and conditions to start with.

Nevertheless, it's not as easy as it sounds to cope with heterogeneous groups, to try out new methods of teaching, to educate politically aware and socially responsible people whom we will once assign a world which might explode in global disaster, pollution, ideologically garnished violence and war. To think about schools for the future, we have to consider five important fields which must be viewed as a unit and can hardly do without one another:

1. We have to look at the **diversity of individuals** as our biggest treasure. On this basis, we have to accept our responsibility for every single child and have to put all our effort into the highest aim of schools, which is that every child gets the chance and all the help needed to accomplish its own potential. This is truly the highest possible standard of achievement an individual can and should strive for. To value diversity of individuals should include that every child is welcome and accepted, helped and challenged to reach its goal.
2. We have to get **diversity of life** into our schools – into all our institutions of education – in order to change our dull and dreary buildings (I'm talking about German schools!!!) into lively places of life. 'Make schools good places for kids to grow up in', as Goodman put it. After all, our kids and youngsters stay in those places during the most important and impressive time of their (learning) life (and even in Germany they will stay there more or less a whole day some day, not only a few hours in the morning). Life at school should be a good life of learning together and living together, enjoying one another and struggling with one another, finding out, by one's own experiences, necessary requirements and rules for a good and peaceful life together. School as a polis (as Hartmut von Hentig, the founder of the Laboratory School named it), a community and society in process where every individual from the very beginning has to take over responsibility for

the whole - in small groups at first, in bigger groups, in the community of the school and in society later on.

3. We have to meet the diversity of our students with a **diversity of learning and teaching methods**. We should look at learning from many different aspects and no longer consider rational thinking as the only approach to the world. Learning must be all of this: rational, of course, but also emotional, critical and accepting, structural and open for utopian ideas, free and rooted, imaginative and meaningful, materialistic and artistic, perceptible and empathetic, self-conscious and self-critical, organized and sorted, with a spirit of contradiction and the willingness to accept better arguments, reasonable and sensible, descriptive and creative, justifying and defending, intensive, full of experience and willing to act, qualified to judge and optimistic about changes, prepared to interfere, literal and rich in articulation, ... for this, all of us have to learn our job as teachers more or less completely new or at least, we have to extend what we do and know already.

4. We have to meet the diversity of our children, the diversity of life in our schools and the diversity of learning and teaching with a **diversity of accomplishment and performance**. Accomplishment should no longer be evidenced in tests only but made visible and noticeable. The results of their efforts should make pupils feel proud. They have to be taken into account when it comes to formulating aims of teaching and learning because it is them to take over responsibility for their learning. At the end of a school year, they should take home a portfolio, in which they collected what they valued themselves and by which they themselves become visible. No portfolio can possibly equal another if we really succeed in individual teaching. By being helped, influenced or even forced to do their very best, to fulfil their individual potential, they should all, without any exception, be encouraged to dare taking the next step.

Of course, we will never be able to really accomplish this, but it's worth striving for!

5. We have to transfer the **diversity of educational decisions** into the hands of the professionally trained educators - of those who do their job every day and should therefore know what is best for every student and what the right decisions are in the process of education. In Germany we have to learn how to trust teachers without continuously inspecting them. State regulations and rules in Germany come in gigabytes while Scandinavian countries make do with a few pages of directions and standards. Confidence in professionals is so profound in your countries that most of the relevant decisions are made by those who do the job – we are far away from this, but heading in your direction. To reach all these objectives, we have to conceive new teacher training curricula. They have to include diagnostic abilities to accompany children more efficiently on their different learning paths. Up to now, we have trained university students to become historians, biologists or mathematicians rather than teachers – and our heads are just the teachers with the highest teaching qualifications, which is quite good, but might not be good enough for all their different tasks.

Well, you see, it's just as easy as this: our teachers and educators – all of us – have to learn, how to deal with the diversity of individuals in our schools, the diversity of life within our schools, the diversity of teaching and learning, the diversity of accomplishment and performance and the diversity of educational decisions. We must get away from the notion that old dogs cannot be taught new tricks. No big thing really ...! Almost nothing at all ...! It's good, to have you here with us! Together we might – no, we will! - reach heaven, so let's get started!
