

Switzerland

The malaise of school reforms

Interventions at the heart of school

by Christine Staehelin,* Basel



Christine Staehelin.
(Photo ma)

In her article Christine Staehelin, a primary school teacher with a degree in education, deals with the insufficient justifiability of many reforms and analyses the serious consequences with trenchant precision.

In recent years, headlines such as “Teachers at the end – pressure on the concept of inclusive education”, “Early French and inclusive education – all wrong?”, “Early French at primary school has failed”, “Because of violence at schools – 1000 teachers had to go to the doctor’s”, “Many teachers quit because of heavy strain”, “Parents file charges against teachers more often”, “If we do nothing, primary school will go to pieces”, “Curriculum 21 in the barrage of criticism” have characterised the school discourse.

However, the headlines, the debate and the criticism all deal with superficialities. The school is no longer at the centre of the debate as a representative of culture and its task of transmitting it by means of an educational mission. This has primarily to do with the fact that the reforms of the last decades, which have shaken the self-conception of school, were purely superficial interventions. They have flooded this ponderous, basically conservative institution with new concepts. They derived their justification and thus their meaning neither from pedagogical practice or theory nor from the social task of the school, but ultimately solely from the idea of being new. Incoherently, with no theory, unsuccessfully and aimlessly, countless reforms – examples will be given below – were simply imposed on schools.

This has not only upset the self-conception of education at school, but also the pedagogical self-conception of teachers. The effects at dif-



Children need guidance from teachers who take responsibility – not coaches. (Photo keystone)

ferent levels show: It has weakened trust and credibility of the institution. In the debate surrounding the superficiality phenomena, one forgets that these are only the tip of the iceberg. It seems as if society no longer knows what public school practice can and should accomplish. Far too much is expected and at the same time constantly criticised. It is supposed to fix everything, but it is not trusted to do so. Society is being pedagogised, lifelong learning is demanded, but in schools the pedagogical aspect is disappearing. The child is supposed to decide for itself, choose for itself, organise itself, learn on its own, and the teacher is supposed to act at most as a coach and observer.

Innovations that are out of touch with practice

Curriculum 21 with its countless competencies was invented; new methodological-didactic concepts were devised that delegate more and more responsibility to the pupils because the older generation thinks that the younger generation knows better.

At the same time, the older generation abandons its responsibility; including all children was pushed ahead without considering that there are children who need remedial teaching according to their abilities to enable them to participate in society later on. Early French was introduced without taking into account that learning a foreign language at an early age is not simply better,

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but that learning something new always has to take place in an age-appropriate context as well, in order to be successful. Schools have been flooded with digital devices to prepare for digitalisation, whatever that means, without bearing in mind that learning and teaching is fundamentally a matter of personal relationship and that the use of technical tools is not an educational practice in itself.

The effect of the innovations

It can be argued that these are all just surface interventions, but they have hit school at the heart, since they have fundamentally reshaped educational practice.

The countless competencies of Curriculum 21, in their superficiality, lead precisely to the fact that everything essential is only touched upon. There is no time for in-depth study, for deeper understanding, for practising. Hectic and breathless attempts are made to somehow fulfil all the competences listed. While the teachers reach their limits, the list of competences is simply handed over to the pupils, together with corresponding assignments and so-called dossiers.

The methodological-didactical concepts push individualisation of teaching in various forms. The class as an entity moves out of focus, because the abilities and needs of each individual must be addressed; the common address – constituting school – and on which whole class teaching depends on, is discredited as “frontal teaching” (mere lecturing) and contrasted with the principle of individualisation as the guiding principle of teaching.

A school with inclusive education is a school for fewer and fewer

The concept of inclusive education has achieved exactly the opposite of its intention: never have so many children had such a “need for support”, never before have so many diagnoses been made, have more supporting measures been financed, therapies carried out in schools, and never before has it been stated so often that teachers are reaching their limits due to the increase in pupils with behavioural problems. A school with inclusive education is not a school for all children, but a school for fewer and fewer, because more and more need support to survive.

That early French would fail was predictable, because the concept of an “immersive language

bath” for two to three lessons per week, is neither justifiable nor comprehensible. But it is also a sign of the times that the experiment was the set choice and arguments in advance had no chance. The fact that several millions have been wasted with this concept, that the status of French as a national language has been further weakened, that children spend countless lessons in ineffective teaching, was accepted with no qualms.

“Turbo-digitisation” has not increased any learning success, on the contrary. It has been empirically proven that reading on a screen is more superficial than in books, that the vocabulary diminishes and the ability to write a text decreases the more digital media are used and that writing by hand is superior to writing with digital devices. Quite apart from that, the extensive use of digital devices in schools leads to a decrease in social interactions. Everyone is increasingly preoccupied with their device, the teachers disappear behind their screens and knowledge must be sought somewhere in the air. In short: school as a place where older people educate younger people is in a tragic state because devices can apparently do it better.

The debate of superficialities

The problematic effects of the superficial reforms that have now become visible lead to public debates in which everyone joins in, everyone gets upset, everyone criticises, everyone knows everything better. They lead to superficial discourses and thus, on the one hand, miss the fundamental problem of a possible failure of the public school and, on the other hand, they don't do justice to the complexity of the social task of school, its pedagogical practice and its contradictions. People talk about those phenomena of failure that are now becoming visible without asking about the actual causes.

A curriculum that formulates a long list of competences forgets that these cannot simply be produced and fundamentally precludes that education is much more than what can be utilised. A fixed formulation of competencies excludes curiosity, enthusiasm, wanting to understand and everything that is beautiful but perhaps not directly useful. It also makes the claim that there are authorities who know exactly what should be learnt in the first place. They take away the meaningfulness of pedagogical practice, which goes far beyond conveying what is

immediately deemed useful. And so, we discuss the formulation and number of competencies instead of learning collectively with the aim of appropriating the world to some extent and thus being able to contribute.

Individualising forms of teaching should meet the learning needs of the individual child; each child should be perceived as an individual and allowed to be itself; its current learning level should be ascertained, and specific learning offers geared to it should be provided or it should be able to choose what it wants to learn from a wide range of offers in a learning landscape.

In doing so, the adult world abandons its responsibility towards the next generation and increasingly leaves them alone and to their own devices. Increasingly, the focus is less on instructing and intervening and more on observing, assessing, and evaluating. This means the expectations remain the same, but they are no longer communicated directly; instead, the students have to discover them themselves, which is significantly more difficult.

We humans are social beings and live in a divided world. It is not the debates about how school could be even more responsive to the needs of the individual child that is purposeful, but the reflection on the fact that we are social beings. It is precisely this challenging practice, that even though we are all different, we share the world and must always negotiate anew how we want to live together. That is what we can learn in school.

We talk about how much extra funding and extra remedial provision we can save with inclusive education, instead of talking about the fact that there are a few children for whom a standard class cannot provide the appropriate setting because it does not address their specific needs. We are creating teaching situations that, with their growing complexity, increasing hustle and bustle and rising numbers of teachers and specialists involved in a class, are creating challenges for more and more children that they are no longer able to cope with.

Concentration and learning problems as well as behavioural problems are on the increase. This is then attributed to societal changes, even though the problems are systemic. We go so far as to describe an ever-greater number of children and young people as in need of support and therapy, instead of talking about how much we leave the pupils on their own because they

can even set their own learning goals, even though they know that hidden expectations lurk everywhere.

Although digitalisation is a very fuzzy term, this idea and the millions of Francs budgeted in schools has led to an increasing use of digital devices. Currently, there is a debate about whether AI and ChatGPT are a danger, a revolution, or a blessing for schools.

They are supposed to be able to create personalised learning programmes, to determine the special needs of pupils and to support them in their learning. Instead, we should publicly debate – as humans who pass on the knowledge in our heads to the heads of the next generation, enriched with our enthusiasm and experience, in an educational relationship based on trust, confidence, belief in pupils to tackle tasks and a sometimes-counterfactual-positive expectation – whether we really want to delegate all this to machines.

What we should be debating

These remarks aim to show that the superficial reforms of recent decades and the rampant impositions on schools, as well as the superficial public debates that have accompanied them, have irritated and unsettled pedagogical practice and the school as an essential institution of a democracy.

School as a place of contradictions, of possible failure, of broadening horizons, of personal pedagogical relationships, of enthusiasm and boredom, of learning in the collective, of gaining access to the world, as well as of friendships and disputes, is an extremely complex institution. It is dependent on a pedagogical self-conception that at least partially justifies its meaning.

This is the invisible but vital part of the iceberg that we do not debate. If we do not deal with it, but only with the superficialities visible above sea level, which everyone perceives, interprets and criticises from his or her individual perspective, then the invisible part will possibly have melted away one day without us noticing. And we will ask ourselves why the public school has disappeared, at the latest when no one will be teaching there anymore.

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