

# Today, «A-levels» mean guided thinking

## Significance of the PISA study

Interview with Professor Hans-Peter Klein\*



Hans-Peter Klein.  
(Picture [www.prof-klein.eu](http://www.prof-klein.eu))

*Hans-Peter Klein, professor of biology, is one of the most prominent voices in the German education debate. In an interview with Mathias Brodkorb\*\*, he talks about the disastrous results of the PISA study, educationally disadvantaged migrants, and the abolition of the achievement principle.*



Mathias Brodkorb  
(Picture [www.roletschek.at](http://www.roletschek.at))

*Mathias Brodkorb: Mr Klein, the results of the PISA study were recently published. The performance of German pupils in maths, German and science is worse than ever before. How do you rate the results?*

**Hans-Peter Klein:** Of course, they are a disaster. More than 20 years ago there was the PISA shock. Back then, Germany proved to be merely mediocre. After all the political announcements and reforms of the last two decades, it must be said: None of this has achieved anything and things have even got worse.

*However, PISA researchers point out that the results are also due to the coronavirus pandemic. Schools were closed for many months and there were hardly any lessons. So, it is hardly surprising that performance has plummeted. Can we still draw conclusions about a fundamental education crisis from the data?*

Of course, corona has also had a certain influence. But anyone who makes do with this argument is looking for excuses. The fact is that the performance of German pupils has been declin-

ing sharply since 2015 at the latest. Corona has only accelerated the downward trend. Yes, Germany is in the midst of a severe education crisis. And I don't see that changing in the foreseeable future.

*But it wasn't just coronavirus, there was also the migration crisis in 2015, which is another factor that is likely to have an impact on pupils' performance. The fewer pupils in a class who speak German, the greater the challenge for teachers and the less likely it is that they will achieve top results.* That's true, but it doesn't disprove my theory that the German education system has long since reached a downward spiral. The migration crisis only began in 2015 and yet the performance results of the same year were already declining. This decline in performance simply cannot be explained by the migration crisis. At best, it explains why things got even worse after 2015.

*And how do you explain the downward trend?*

The causes are complex, which is why we need to go into more detail. Firstly, corona, of course. But that was just a one-off event. The best we can conclude from it is how much Germany's politicians have done to their own young people by absurdly closing schools. In an international comparison, there are countries that have not seen such a drop in performance despite coronavirus. Secondly, there is the teacher shortage. This has only just begun and will take on completely different dimensions in this decade. Even tank drivers are already being employed as primary school teachers.

The third factor is the migration crisis. If a large number of non-German-speaking pupils flood into the system overnight, this will not be without consequences. At the same time, the shortage of teachers has become extremely acute, especially in primary schools. And fourthly, and this is the most important thing for me: even if all these problems didn't exist, Germany's schools would still be on the decline. The reason for this has nothing to do with money, but with the concepts pursued since PISA 2000.

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*Now that is irritating. It's actually the other way round: the first PISA study triggered a political shock and subsequent educational reforms. And these innovations are now supposed to have provoked a decline?*

Even if nobody wants to hear it, that's exactly what happened. However, this is also a little more complicated. PISA is an internationally organised test format of the OECD. And that's where the problems begin. You can't compare Mexico, Algeria, and Germany without looking at specific content. For example, it would make no sense to set tasks on the German poet *Theodor Fontane* worldwide. The German pupils would then have an advantage and the international comparison would be worthless.

The solution to this test-theoretical problem is competence-orientation. For the most part, the tests do not test knowledge at all. Instead, the students are given easy-to-understand texts that already contain all the answers to the questions asked. The students don't have to do anything other than read for comprehension. And then there is something else: because analysing complex texts would be too time-consuming, PISA consists mainly of tick boxes. The answer sheets can then be easily processed by computers using scanners.

*Like in the TV show "Who wants to be a millionaire?"*

The pupils are given a text that already contains all the information they need to solve the tasks set. They read it and then tick the correct answers. Think of it like "Who wants to be a millionaire?" by TV presenter *Günther Jauch* – except that you can even read through a piece of paper beforehand that already contains all the answers to the questions asked.

Even if you still have no idea which answer is correct, you still have a 25 per cent chance of getting four answers right. And with a bit of luck, you will be able to recognise the wrong answers as incorrect, even though you don't actually know the correct answer. This is exactly what "competence orientation" is, this is exactly what PISA is.

In the past, you were considered competent if you knew something about a subject. Today, you are considered competent if you can successfully guess despite a lack of knowledge. We owe all that to PISA. And politicians who don't even know what they're doing.



*A-level exams according to PISA. Even 9<sup>th</sup> graders pass without knowing the subject matter. (Picture ma)*

*Wait a minute: what you say about the PISA test formats initially only refers to a methodological test design. You don't have to turn it into a teaching concept.*

That's true, but that's exactly what has happened over the last 20 years. Not even the employees in the ministries understand this difference. And the teachers in the schools don't have time to deal with it anyway. So, PISA has developed a completely rudimentary model for education. PISA does not test education and knowledge, but only the preliminary stages. There were financial and economic reasons for this. But in the ministries and schools it was then understood as a model for modern education and has been practised in our schools for almost 20 years. The results can be admired in the current PISA study.

*Can you give a concrete example of this?*

No problem. We had a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from *North Rhine-Westphalia* take an A-level examination in biology. The result surprised even me: out of 27 pupils, only four failed. 14 achieved an "adequate", five a "satisfactory", three a "good" and one pupil even achieved "very good". Once again, these were 9th graders who had not studied for this A-level exam at all and did not even have any A-level knowledge. So, you didn't need any specialised knowledge at all. You just had to be able to read texts, understand them and do a bit of reasoning.

In the past, these were the skills that a good or mediocre secondary school pupil possessed. There is also a reason why universities today have to offer more and more tutoring courses for first-year students. Let's just tell it like it is: the German A-levels, invented by Wilhelm von Humboldt, used to be a mark of quality. But that's history today.

*Aren't you exaggerating a little? Couldn't it be that what you are describing were just teething problems in the implementation of the PISA idea?*

That would make me really happy. But that's not the case. Things don't look any better in more recent school-leaving examinations either. For example, there is a task on mussels and the invasive Pacific oyster. I don't want to bore you with it, but it follows the same pattern: a long text with all the answers already in it. Doubting the technical accuracy of the text, I submitted the task to a colleague at the *Alfred Wegener Institute* on the isle of Sylt for assessment. His judgement was devastating. Not even the facts in the task text were correct.

When I made the above task public in an interview in the "Süddeutsche Zeitung", a ministry employee called me and said something like: "Mr Klein, you still haven't understood competence orientation. We are not interested in specialised knowledge, but in dealing with knowledge." In other words, high school graduates of the future will no longer need to know anything themselves but should simply be able to work with the knowledge of others. Today, "A-levels" means something like guided thinking.

*Assuming you are right, what suggestions would you make to Germany's education politicians?*

I'm almost embarrassed to say this, but it's probably necessary anyway: the core of education is expertise. True expertise means mastering the facts and methods of a subject. Instead, the wokists' objectives amount to the abolition of the achievement principle. According to their

mantra, achievement is supposedly discriminatory, even racist, because it marginalises others who are unwilling or unable to achieve anything. However, equality for all only exists at the lowest level. Instead, the professional requirements must be clear and high. This is the only way to achieve an appropriate level of performance.

*We need qualified and sufficient teachers*

The second point is that politicians need to get a grip on the shortage of teachers. It simply won't work without qualified teachers. So put an end to pedagogical frippery and concentrate on the core business of teaching instead. Even if inter-sectional and diverse student clubs may be some fun, the situation is too serious for us to afford such gimmicks.

And thirdly, even if some world saviours don't like to hear it: If the unregulated influx of uneducated migrants is not stopped in a timely manner, the German education system will collapse and later the German economy as well. Schools cannot be the repair centre for wrong political decisions. And they must not be misused as a dumping ground for a misguided migration policy. The victims of this development are the teachers and the children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Their parents simply cannot afford private schools.

Source: <https://www.cicero.de/innenpolitik/ergebnisse-der-pisa-studie-heute-bedeutet-abitur-betreutes-denken>, 17 December 2023

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