# Questionable cascades of reforms in schools

## Children are expected to choose their own educational goals

*by Christine Staehelin\**



*Christine Staehelin.*
*(Photo ma)*

*Amid the current education debate – initiated by the Association of Head Teachers and Principals, followed by the Swiss Teachers' Association LCH and various "school modernisers" – there is also talk of learning landscapes, individualised teaching and learning coaches. For teacher Christine Staehelin in Basel, this is an indication of a helplessness as to what the actual task of the school is.*



*(Picture ma)*

Anyone who started teaching at elementary school 40 years ago knew what was to be conveyed according to the syllabus and textbooks; what else seemed important, meaningful and interesting; being aware that children are different; wanting to do things better than the previous generation of teachers, and like them, repeatedly failing to do so, because the core task of teaching, imparting knowledge and skills and guiding people to behave appropriately and decently as a group, cannot ultimately be achieved in a functionally targeted manner using new instruments, concepts and forms of organisation, but remains a fragile, interpersonal matter between the older and younger generations.

As early as 1959, *Hannah Arendt* aptly stated in her essay on the "The crisis in education": as a teacher, you have a double responsibility to assume, namely, to work "for the life and development of the child as well as for the continued existence of the world".

This duty has always been accompanied by the unease of not knowing exactly whether what was already being taught was, what would remain important for an uncertain future and whether, by anticipating the decision for what

was considered important, there would be enough room for the new things that the next generation would bring in.

Despite such concerns, there seemed to be a certain amount of trust in the institution of school that it could fulfil its social role in its existing form.

This began to change around 30 years ago. With the notorious reference to social developments, it was argued that schools were fulfilling their mission less and less, thus providing the justification for the introduction of a whole cascade of reforms that affected the teaching staff to an unprecedented extent.

These reforms included the reorganisation of schools through the introduction of partial autonomy, the implementation of professionalised school management and the implementation of so-called innovative teaching concepts such as self-organised and mixed-age learning. In addition, the new, competence-oriented curriculum was introduced, inclusive schooling was made the absolute norm, school entry was brought forward, early foreign language teaching and the increasing use of digital hardware and software were implemented.

All the reforms ignored the fact that educational activity is essentially a personal matter between the older and younger generations, meaning that the older generation pass on the knowledge in their heads to the younger generation and show them the world as it is. Appreciation and understanding of what already exists is

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therefore the basis for everything new that can be gained or developed from it.

Initially, many teachers were therefore quite disconcerted by the nature and content of the reforms. In the 1990s, they could not imagine that the business management ideas of *Ernst Buschor,* professor of economics at HSG St. Gallen, would have any meaning or significance for the benefit of educational practice. On the contrary. But there was never a public debate on the subject.

From the outset, the factual concerns and objections of the teaching staff were not met with arguments either, but instead questions were asked about what further information was needed to be able to agree; consideration was given to how resisters could be "actively involved" or time reserves were planned for those who would need longer to agree. And anyone who, despite all the options offered, still expressed objective criticism was not open to new ideas and against improvements, was old-fashioned and inflexible – attributions that were apparently so difficult to bear that even the last counterargument soon wasn't heard anymore. What remains is the silent contradiction, which is evident today in the increasing shortage of teachers, particularly at primary school level.

The core argument of the reformers was the idea of creating a school that would prepare pupils for an increasingly complex future. The future, and thus the uncertain, was seen as a certainty in contrast to the "school of yesterday". But this is not convincing. Because what is being expressed is that the older generation is no longer taking responsibility for the world. It is as if they themselves no longer know where they stand and in what direction they should go.

To any experienced educator, this idea that children can make important decisions about their own learning and actions completely autonomously seems extremely strange and denies reality.

It is precisely this transfer of responsibility to the younger generation by refusing to teach existing contents in depth that is reflected in current teaching: Children are expected to choose their own learning goals, organise their learning independently, motivate themselves and take responsibility for their own social behaviour. This means that teachers have been redefined as facilitators and observers. They are no longer the role models who represent the existing world



*Learning landscapes: de facto, the younger generation is thus thrown back on itself. (Picture ma)*

and stand up for it with all its beauties, shortcomings, problems, demands and unpredictability. Teachers are now supposed to see themselves as arrangers, moderators, *classroom managers* or merely accompanying development assistants for a younger generation, who they assume already know everything about the existing world themselves.

To any experienced educator, this idea that children can make important decisions about their own learning and doing completely autonomously seems extremely strange and denies reality. De facto, the younger generation is thus thrown back on itself and left alone to face the ever-increasing challenges of life; it is expected to look after itself and take care of itself. For those who do not manage this on their own initiative in the sense that adults expect of them as the problem-solvers of tomorrow, there are many support and therapy services available, compensation for disadvantages and individual learning goals, special settings, and qualified assistance.

It doesn't require a clairvoyant to predict that the shortage of teachers will become even more significant. Politicians are now considering countless measures to make the profession more attractive again. But they all miss the basic problem, because all the measures have lost sight of the purpose of school: the introduction of the younger generation into the existing world, from where they will naturally create something new as a generation.

If you look at the curriculum, which focuses on skills rather than content, it gives the strange impression as if it is embarrassing to emphasise the importance of acquiring knowledge and understanding the existing world. The current focus on self-learning blurs the fact that teaching

as a pedagogical activity is always character-ised by an asymmetrical relationship.

This is a banal, historically very old insight. Instead, the next generation is supposed to be miraculously able to become the innovative problem solvers of tomorrow, so to speak, of its own accord. This idea is also fed by current teaching materials.

The countless reforms have put schools in an uncomfortable position. The pedagogical self-image of teachers seems to have been shaken. The institution's reputation is declining, and on particular the so-called "integrative school" is increasingly being called into question and losing credibility. At the same time, schools are increasingly expected to anticipate and solve societal problems. In contrast, international school performance studies indicate that fewer and fewer young people can understand simple texts. And more and more children are dependent on support services.

Perhaps the institution is more robust than it seems. But the prescribed future orientation of this traditional institution is certainly not agreeable to it. And neither is the younger generation; they are ultimately left alone when the already existing loses its significance, and everything is uncertain. What are they supposed to build on when the older generation no longer represents the world and there are fewer and fewer teachers who are still able and willing to take on this task?

It is the task of those responsible for education in our country to realise and publicly discuss the long-term effects on society if the older



*The older generation must fulfil its responsibilities. (Picture ma)*

generation no longer assumes its responsibility to introduce the younger generation to the existing world, but instead sees them primarily as the problem solvers of tomorrow.

It is about much more than the reinterpretation of the teaching profession, about new forms of learning and teaching, about so-called digitalisation in schools, about the integrative task of schools, as it is currently being formulated, and about the shortage of teachers. Ultimately, it is about offering confidence in what already exists, and therefore also in the conservative institution, the public school, even in the face of an uncertain future that largely influences the present.

Because as *Helmut Kohl* said: "Those who do not know the past cannot understand the present and cannot shape the future."

*Source: https://condorcet.ch/2024/03/die-krise-schulischer-bildung-im-gefolge-fragwuerdiger-reformkaskaden/, 11 March 2024*

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*