

Pedagogy

Competence orientation?

Competence without education

by Béatrice Di Pizzo,* Zurich



Béatrice Di Pizzo.
(Picture ma)

Swiss primary schools are dominated by competence orientation, self-organised learning and inclusive support. The humanistic educational ideal falls by the wayside.

In a school in the prosperous Zürichberg district, an Eritrean, a slow learner and a Bosnian sit isolated and packed in the front row of a year two secondary class [equivalent to an 8th year of primary school, editor]. The class is in good spirits and cheerful in this early geography lesson because the teacher is obviously teaching his favourite subject. He jokes and encourages the youngsters to do their best.

The three of them keep their heads down, don't demand any special attention and scribble something on the worksheets handed out. However, no one speaks to them during the entire lesson. "Inclusive support", the teacher sighs, "the authorities want it that way".

According to its democratic mandate, state-funded school education is supposed to ensure equality and fairness by preparing young people for the market economy according to their talents.

"There are undeniably certain kinds of knowledge that must be of a general nature and, more importantly, a certain cultivation of the mind and character that nobody can afford to be without. People obviously cannot be good craftworkers, merchants, soldiers or businessmen unless, regardless of their occupation, they are good, upstanding and – according to their condition – well-informed human beings and citizens."

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This is how *Wilhelm von Humboldt* legitimised school education as a means of self-empowerment at the end of the 18th century, without any claims to measurable educational output. To educate oneself meant first of all to work on yourself, "to acquire shape", to counter society as a responsible and enlightened individual. Is this claim outdated?

Quite the contrary. The advancing globalisation and digitalisation of our working world inevitably leads to the development of professional fields in which a reflexive ability to act is the goal of all competence development. The conscious, critical, and responsible assessment and evaluation of one's own actions on the basis of experience and knowledge aims at the characteristics of an independent individual who places work practice in a social or professional context. Especially the use of artificial intelligence in many, also complex fields of work shows us: the computer is superior to us in process thinking, it is faster, more persistent and more exact. This makes holistic thinking based on humanistic values even more important.

Simple, measurable performance

Unfortunately, due to a paradigm shift in educational research in the 1990s, the humanistic educational ideal was sacrificed to competence orientation, which means that didactics, i.e., teaching techniques, now determine educational content. The increasingly multicultural background of the learners is of little interest, nor is holistic support sought. The competence orientation demands simple, measurable skills in reading, writing and arithmetic, also in the geography lesson mentioned. The University College of Teacher Education prepares teaching staff for this, and individualisation of teaching is its mantra. Since everyone is to be supported individually in the basic competences, this is done most efficiently with smart educational software.

Generation Z finds simple tasks

according to a set pattern to be an imposition

And that is what is happening. Accordingly, our youngest Generation Z is characterised by digital competencies. Having grown up in prosperity, these young people want to make a difference; they are looking for meaning and expect a framework in which they can develop. They find it an imposition to work through simple tasks according to a set pattern. Yet, due to the current pedagogical concepts, they lack the perseverance of those who acquired knowledge and skills through confrontation with role models. They are not aware of the social dimension of their actions and cannot orient themselves on any values.

While some of them are proficient in their self-staging due to years of intentional individualisation, others break down due to permanent comparisons. Many of them would like to show what they are able to do and present their own approaches. However, there is little room for imagination, creativity and genuine exchange in the output-oriented education system. Meanwhile, humanistic education has retreated into the private sphere. Values are only negotiated in cultural bubbles. Numerous studies show that this leads to a dwindling of equal opportunities.

Primary schools integrate too little

Such one-dimensional and measurable performance goals, i.e. competencies, can only be achieved with undignified, Prussian drill. In view of the heterogeneity of the classes, the University College of Teacher Education therefore propagates *self-organised learning* (SOL), in which each child, independently and intrinsically motivated, works out and checks the learning goals for itself, using worksheets or more complex dossiers, depending on the level. However, only the very intelligent or hard-working succeed in this, and they are not shy to attract the attention of busy teachers. There is competition among the children and therefore they all depend on their parents' support.

At the other end of the performance scale, functional illiteracy or illiteracy is spreading, currently affecting almost 20 percent of primary school graduates. Vocational educators in Switzerland complain about apprenticeship drop-outs, universities about students' lack of ability to express themselves in writing. These are signs of a lack of integration capacity in our education system.

Inclusive support, as practiced by the city of Zurich since 2009/10, is not working. At most schools, classes and teaching staffs are too large to establish a binding commitment. In addition, the job profile has changed: no teacher devotes him- or herself to a task not being responsible or paid for. School administrations decide on the allocation of teaching hours as they see fit; teachers are often employed for several years on a yearly basis and subject teachers are only employed on an hourly basis. Accordingly, staff turnover is high.

Professionalised indifference

Children, not only from migrant families, are thrown back on the resources and financial possibilities of their families and, if necessary, their subcultures, because only these offer reliable relationships and a normative context. In contact with Swiss civil society, on the other hand, they experience professionalised indifference.

Education enables social participation; it lets us recognise contexts and develop mutual understanding. Without shared knowledge, the segregation of society progresses, centrifugal forces are strengthened, and equality of opportunity dwindles.

We must overcome the one-dimensional competence orientation and jointly strengthen a humanistic educational ideal, because only this enables the holistic development of young talents.

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