

Humane energy comes from freedom

Reflexions on the current education policy

by Carl Bossard



Carl Bossard (Photo pma)

Those who accompany young people on their learning and life paths require freedom. This is often forgotten in reforms, including the recent restructuring of commercial apprenticeships in Switzerland. A plea for the renaissance of a buried concept.

tude of rules and regulations. This is only possible with extensive regulations. Let us recall the voluminous *Curriculum 21*, which is 470 pages long and comprises 363 competencies, divided into more than 2300 competency levels. However, too many directives paralyse the mind and inhibit spontaneity and creativity. The rule of thumb: the more voluminous and denser the set of rules, the more restricted and limited is freedom.

“Anyone who fears the use of freedom is its secret opponent.” Thus, wrote *Hans Saner*, philosopher and personal assistant to *Karl Jaspers*.¹ It is an impressive sentence. And Saner added: “many would like to grant freedom, if they only knew that no one makes use of it.”

Switching to “output control”

If you look at the school landscape and consider the many reforms of recent years, you quickly realise what has radically changed: schools are no longer told what to teach in terms of content. Today, it is decreed in detail and precisely regulated what the pupils must be able to do in the end – and in some cases also prescribed how this is to be achieved. (Individual) competencies are defined, and in extraordinarily minute details. In music, for example, a child is required to “be able to perceive his or her body in a sensorimotor way and to react in a music-related way”.

According to science, this means a shift in paradigm: the state strategy is switching from “input” to “output control”. In this way, the efficiency of education in schools is to be increased and teaching is to be measured by the operationalised output. Now, even five-year-old kindergartners are tested for letters and examined for numbers [formerly in grade one].

Everyday educational life is obsessed with regulation

Teachers therefore note a loss of professional freedom and the advance of a regulatory administration; it wants to be on the safe side and aims at achieving the qualification goals with a multi-

In the tentacles of administrative fetters

The great number of requirements demand agreements and coordination within the team; they lead to structurally induced extra work – this with increasingly heterogeneous and demanding classes. It is therefore not surprising that “many teachers are reducing their workload to protect themselves from work overload”, as *Christian Hugli*, President of the *Zurich Teachers' Association*, soberly states.² In the Canton of Zurich, for example, this leads to the fact that at the moment around 550 positions are still unfilled for the new school year.

Many teachers feel trapped in the tentacles of administrative fetters with its paralysing effect. They complain about the corset of artificially constructed complexity of today's school worlds. “Everything is so tightly structured,” explains a 31-year-old dropout.³ And an experienced teacher sums up his years of teaching with “school in chains”: there are ever more strict standards.⁴ It is therefore not surprising that every sixth teacher quits in the first year and half of the new teachers leave the classroom again after five years at the latest, according to a study. Teacher shortage is coming to a head.

Freedom has a correlate: responsibility

Freedom is “the first and indispensable condition” for education, wrote *Wilhelm von Humboldt*,⁵ the reformer of the Prussian education system and theorist of freedom. Presumably, the great education reformer knew that anyone working with pupils needs freedom. He or she needs them to teach like a morning coffee to wake up.

Freedom as an elixir! But it is not the unbound, uncontrolled freedom, but the freedom from unnecessary pro forma regulations and formal requirements, from norms and fetters. It is not the freedom for educational dolcefarniente, even for slovenliness or minimalism, no, it is the freedom to choose the “méthodos”, the path to reach the goal.

What is meant is the freedom to shape the school's mission and to work educationally with the children and young people – for the benefit of the class for which a teacher is responsible. And this last point contains the decisive correlate to freedom: responsibility. Freedom and responsibility form a junction – they are something like two important pillars of good teaching and good schools. They must not decouple, because without personal responsibility, freedom degenerates into arbitrariness.

The humane cannot be enforced with regulations

Taking responsibility requires freedom. That is why freedom must not be stifled in schools. It must be freed from the sand again and again, otherwise it will remain nothing but a missed reality. For most teachers, freedom is a basic prerequisite. In freedom lies the core of all pedagogical work.

Only on this basis can teachers react adequately to a situation, respond spontaneously to the children and allow creative things to emerge from the moment. Humour and wit, imagination and fantasy do not blossom in the tight corset of regulations; they need a humus of freedom. But the humane cannot be forced by rules. What appeals to us as human beings cannot be outsourced to numerical matters or controlled by bureaucratic fetters.

Humane energy comes from freedom

An effective education policy should believe more in people and less in systems and structures. Good teachers with empathy and professional passion are the be-all and end-all of schools. What they need is freedom – not primarily regulations. They need trust – not pressure through decrees. Humane energy comes from freedom, not from directives on teaching methods and operationally tight guidelines such as those imposed by the current education policy.

Politicians and administrators must therefore grant teachers more freedom again and at the same time encourage them to make use of it. This requires courage, because freedom can always be abused. If this is the case, school administrators must intervene. Quickly and with resolve. Settling a conflict over freedom is still better than teachers peacefully withering away in conformity, as the philosopher Hans Saner once put it.⁶

Source: <https://www.journal21.ch/humane-energie-kommt-aus-freiheit> from 12 June 2021

(Translation «Swiss Standpoint»)

- ¹ Hans Saner, *Die Anarchie der Stille*. Basel: Lenos Verlag, 1996, p. 154.
- ² René Donzé, Zürcher Lehrer sollen mehr arbeiten, in: *NZZaS*, 23 May 2021, p. 12.
- ³ Pascal Sigg/Sabine Kuster: Drang nach Freiheit: Warum viele junge Lehrer wieder aussteigen, in: *St. Galler Tagblatt*, 21 June 2016
- ⁴ Walter Meier: *Schule in Ketten*. Sachroman. Muri b.Bern: Eigenverlag 2015.
- ⁵ *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006, p. 22.
- ⁶ Hans Saner: *Zwischen Politik und Getto. Über das Verhältnis des Lehrers zur Gesellschaft*. Basel: Lenos and Z-Verlag 1979, p. 27.