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Children First!
Why Our Children Need Better Schools

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Just a generation ago, schools were seen as a learning workshop that stimulated all the senses – today, instead, they have become an often overburdened repair workshop: It is now impossible to do without youth social workers, school psychologists and mobile special educational services, which are in demand as never before; children are tested for partial performance disorders almost like on an assembly line. Terms such as ADD, dyslexia, hyperkinetic syndrome, autism and even Asperger's syndrome are now just as common as speech therapy, occupational therapy, pediatrics or psychological behavioral therapy.

However, intelligence is considered to be one of our most sensitive abilities. If, for example, a person does not feel comfortable in their learning environment, they hold back their intelligence, refuse to perform as required by the current environment or perhaps take refuge in daydreams or silliness.

The competition at school for attention and recognition of one's own performance by the system and teachers also leads to a paradoxical learning effect, namely that of perceiving other children as rivals. A paradox, because the same cultural system denies the existence of hatred between children. So they learn either not to perceive hatred at all or to pretend that they do not hate. This is how culture degenerates into hypocrisy – as the following example from school practice shows:

> An eight-year-old child is extremely reluctant to go to school – he is simply afraid. The mother therefore anxiously asks every day how it was on that particular day – which reiterates the child's suffering and puts a strain on the safe haven of the home; especially as the mother has no solutions to offer, but rather wants to be reassured herself, which the child then does by simply responding with »fine« on a trial basis. Now, the mother is satisfied and leaves

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the child alone.

In this way, the person is unconsciously educated to lie and be hypocritical, because this child still does not like going to school and also experiences being left alone with their problems. Erich Fromm comments: »When children are asked whether they want to go to school every day, and their answer is, »Of course, I do« – is the answer true? In many cases certainly not.« (Fromm 1941, p. 197.)

What children can accomplish

For a long time, Germany had one of the best education systems in the world by international standards. We have known since the first PISA study that this is no longer the case: we have slipped from the top places to the lower midfield and have remained there. There are reasons for this – it is not due to children's curiosity and willingness to learn:

A fourth-grade pupil calculates much faster in his head than his teacher.

A pupil in year three is already writing extremely readable multi-page essays »from a single source«, the literary quality of which could easily be published as a children's book.

One pupil says about a piece of music that is new to her, which she plays at sight and for which she writes down a set of notes for other players: »That's just a sixth above it!« This nine-year-old child then immediately notates a third part – only she doesn't yet know how to push towards a somewhat disharmonious resolution at the end – although she immediately understands this after a brief explanation.

The Vltava by Friedrich Smetana is being studied in the listening section of music lessons. The *leitmotif* of the piece is based on the melody of the children's song »All my little ducklings«. As the motif is accompanied by parallel minor chords, only a few listeners will notice this similarity, even if the melody is isolated. The tone sequence is sung along with the original composition.

Towards the end of the lesson during the feedback, where it is mainly about the emotional reception of the work, one child says with quite a bit of indignation: »She actually finds it outrageous that someone is using something that already exists and that someone else has already invented: It's unthinkable what a beautiful world it would be if everyone thought like this child!«

It is not only people like those in the examples mentioned above who should be supported by our society to a far greater extent than at present: all people – to borrow Erich Fromm's words from the conference – want to grow and be born whole! Because children really do have much more »up their sleeve« than many

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of us give them credit for. What children and young people could achieve if they were placed in a supportive environment that focused on their interests from the outset!

Of course, there are also limitations, as children's abilities are not yet evenly linear and are not equally balanced in all areas: On the one hand, children's intelligence is already very well developed, but on the other hand, children also need the realm of the imagination to compensate. The play required for a child's development should therefore not be misunderstood as an obstacle to learning performance, as it actually acts as one of its preconditions. Unfortunately, the growing number of authoritarian characters have little understanding of free and creative learning. They want authority and conformist conditioned learning.

School enrolment

As far as the right of pupils to a school that does justice to their own abilities is concerned, attention must be paid to the primacy of pupil orientation right from the start. Primary school should not begin too early if the child in question is still in the oedipal phase. This is because the superego and phallic aggressiveness would otherwise come into serious conflict, which would inevitably be to the detriment of the child's personality development. After all, the id is the oldest and first instance: our inheritance, which is brought with us at birth and manifests itself as an inner drive originating from the body's organization. For personality development, the ego must not become embroiled in a »two-front war«: the ego against the »old« id or the ego against the new superego. The beginning schoolchild should have integrated their id into their personality – and therefore »only« be at war with the superego. A strict and unapproachable teacher will lead to identification with the aggressor in this phase of socialization. Insecurity always runs the risk of seeking, if not finding, security in a seemingly secure authority (which is inherent in this pose). Hannah Arendt speaks – as can be seen in the current *Fromm Forum* – of a pronounced willingness to accept authority in latency. (Hannah Arendt, quoted from Teising 2024, p. 50).

What has such a fatal effect on the development of children's personalities in early childcare facilities such as nurseries and crèches is the fact that children have to get used to a dominant superego far too early; this suppresses the id instinct, which unnaturally inhibits the development of the ego. The superego should only appear in the latency phase – i.e. at school. Only then is the young person ready for it!

Moreover, the (rigid) superego must not be personalized in education; it is better to present a rule as common property and to follow it oneself in an exemplary

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manner than to make oneself the rule and judge. In the follower position, the already weak ego otherwise becomes alienated from itself. Only an ego that is as critical as possible from the outset can become an independent ego. Obedience education, on the other hand, would be the opposite of strengthening the ego. In order to grow into the superego situation, it is also necessary to assess the external impact of one's own stimuli, to weaken overly strong stimuli, but also to influence the outside world itself in such a way that it can be shaped to one's own advantage.

The right time is therefore literally everything: rationalizations, such as the statement on reading readiness (»If your child picks up a book, then they are ready for school!«) should not be the decisive factor. School enrolment should therefore not be arranged on an annual basis, but rather more flexibly (with the option of starting at the half-year point) in order to do justice to all birth months and not just those whose birth date and stage of development happen to correlate favorably with the late summer school start.

Current test example – school enrollment in 2024: this took place on the eleventh of March – school started on the tenth of September; a decision will be made six months earlier. But what happens in half a year of a child's development! Setting a deadline that is clearly too early is an apt example of the fact that the administration does not always naturally serve the children, but in some cases the reverse is also true: children tend to serve the administration here – but this happens in a reversal of the relationship and the Pious paradigm: does man serve the bureaucracy or should not the bureaucracy always serve man? It is certainly much easier to plan the formation of classes when there is almost half a year's time; however, if this is ultimately done primarily in order to streamline the formation of classes and not generate unnecessary overcapacity, then once again the necrophile would be placed above the biophile! The following therefore also applies to the administrative sector: only those who have a biophilic character themselves can educate for biophilia. Let's take our cue from Erich Fromm, who never suggested anything other than finding our true self, allowing ourselves to be helped along the way, or helping others in a complementary role and subordinating everything – but really everything – to the purpose of a vibrant life!

Different ways of learning

Behavioristic input/output learning and the conditioned methodology still represent far too large a part of both education and school teaching techniques in the classroom. On a superficial level, reward as a style of education gives the impression that a child is always free to choose. In reality, however, there is no alternative to striving for a reward for children. »Only the educators feel better because

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they believe that with the principle of reward, all decisions are left to the child's free will.« (Gruen 2016, p. 91)

»All opportunities that require identification with a teacher, spiritual leader, sage, or guru only strengthen the tendency to become dependent.« (Funk 2019, p. 156.) It would therefore make much more sense to reverse the relationship as a requirement: Teachers should rather love their students (whereby love is to be understood as an interest shown in people) – but not be dependent on favor from the students themselves. In particular, the conditional love of doing something for an authority figure so as not to disappoint them and always remain in their favor means nothing other than promoting the corresponding dependency! In addition, a hierarchically structured system attracts more authoritarian types of character anyway, so the authoritarian character must become more and more cemented over time.

The findings of psychology speak for themselves when it comes to pupils' learning and behavioral motives: school does not have a direct effect as a social representation, but rather via the »wanting to be like the others«, i.e. via conformism. After all, a school class is and always will be a group of people whose development is not yet stable and whose nature is characterized by a variety of regressions to previous levels. As early as the second grade, the social pressure to conform usually outweighs individual existence: children at this age already know exactly what they have to do and what they are allowed to say and not: »Thinking in accordance with the rules is rewarded by the teachers and the system, with praise and good grades, while deviant behavior is reprimanded and results in failure. In this way, young people are educated to become »trained citizens« who are only measured by their school-leaving qualifications.« (Betschart 2013, p. 117) Often enough, unfortunately, numerous contents and just as many characteristics are conditioned that do not correspond to the nature of the respective person.

Today's school lacks spirit: Where is the legacy of Goethe, Schiller, Hebbel, Fontane, Storm, Rückert, Droste-Hülshoff, Heine or Rilke to be found here? Where is the genius of Bach, Beethoven or Handel to be found here? Where can we find at least the beginnings of the thinking of Hegel, Copernicus, Bachofen, Nietzsche, Schweizer or Kant? »For Spinoza, Goethe, Hegel, as well as for Marx, man is alive only inasmuch as he is productive, inasmuch as he grasps the world outside of himself in the act of expressing his own specific human powers, and of grasping the world with these powers. Inasmuch as man is not productive, inasmuch as he is receptive and passive, he is nothing, he is dead.« (Fromm 1961, pp. 29 f.) This is a well-known statement by Erich Fromm that does not cast current didactics in a good light. »The most valuable thing in life is the development of the personality

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and its creative powers« (Albert Einstein, quoted from Lauster 2003, p. 167.)

The teaching methodology

»Everyone learned to read at school somehow!« – albeit in different ways, because all roads lead to Rome – so they say; but it's actually about the mental toll that has to be paid along the way: the state in which you arrive in Rome and how long it took you to get there. What counts above all, however, is whether someone will undertake such a journey again – in other words, anyone who has only learned to read with great difficulty is more likely to refrain from doing so in the future – usually even by a very large margin. We should therefore not only set ourselves the goal of learning to read, but rather to learn to appreciate reading! When a child learns to swim, for example, it is not just about mastering the technique, but rather about feeling comfortable and safe in the water. A child who has only understood the technique to a certain extent but remains afraid of the water will not often go swimming voluntarily. It is no different with reading – and many other learning contents.

When explaining something to someone, the great art is not just to do justice to the subject matter – but also to get down to the level of the recipient, fathom their expectations and understand them. Erich Fromm states that the age between six and eighteen is by no means as suitable for learning as is generally assumed. Of course, it is the ideal age to learn reading, writing, arithmetic and languages, but the understanding of religion is limited at this age. According to the Frommian view, finding the truth is also less a question of intelligence than of character. Today, I would like to emphasize the creative aspect of relating to the world more than Erich Fromm could have guessed at the time. Because far too often in school classrooms and especially more and more on tablets, we are once again working with cloze texts and multiple-choice tasks; however, these forms should, at best, be practiced as a supplement.

> Mandalas are handed out during a school lesson. Almost all the children start coloring immediately: some of them are in love with detail, others have a more tense, angular style. One child, however, turns the page over and draws something beautiful without a template: his posture is relaxed and casual and his facial expression is not distorted by the need to complete the task. The fact that the teacher reprimands this child for not doing as instructed is something I would like to mention only in passing. In fact, this schoolchild was the only person in this group who did what he was given by nature, namely to follow his individual will to express himself.

Let's take this example a little further in the direction of sociology: If you only

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finish prefabricated things, you consume them. The consequence of continuous consumption as a method is weariness. The consumer goods industry makes money by turning the goods it produces into waste as quickly as possible so that new disposable goods can then be sold again; behind this is the neoliberal compulsion: the more that is produced, the greater the gross domestic product and the higher the profits and commissions. All consumption satisfies for a short time and relieves anxiety, but it forces us to consume again after this brief phase of satisfaction – in other words, to use the same (non-)solution scheme again. However, the thing that is consumed is used up and destroyed in the process of consumer appropriation. However, man only grows on his own, which springs from his individual creative power.

The transition

It's not just entering or leaving the school system that starts with an exam – there are also hurdles that have to be overcome during the school years. If it is still sufficient to narrowly overcome the obstacle for promotion, stricter rules apply when transferring to other types of school: Here, it is not enough just to successfully complete the fourth grade – because now there is a different sorting process! To stay with the image of sport, it is not just overcoming the hurdle that is decisive here, but above all the height. However, the transfer takes place at two directly adjacent junctions: A major subject average of 2.33 applies for the German *Gymnasium* (high school) and 2.66 for the *Realschule* (middle school) – both with sixteen different options (1.0; 1.3; 1.7; 2.0; 2.3; [...] 5.3; 5.7; 6.0). To illustrate this visually, imagine a row of people lined up next to each other: The tripartite school system is decided at positions four and five. With sixteen rankings, there should be at least one whole grade level (corresponding to three positions) between grammar school or secondary school and middle school! Quite apart from the fact that only what little can be measured in numerical grades and attached word reports is assessed – and despite all consideration of practical achievements – it is mainly for the certificates and ultimately for the neoliberal-capitalist exploitation process that counts. The Kantian principle ultimately states that man must always be an end in himself and must never be a means to an end! (See Immanuel Kant, as referred to by Fromm 1961, pp. 53 f.)

Just as the start of the school years should be aligned with the child's developmental circumstances, the end of the primary school years should be aligned with the child's development. The decisive factor here is the transition from concrete mental operations to formal thinking. This happens around the age of eleven to twelve. We would therefore be exactly right if we were to extend the primary school period to five years accordingly – and this with a flexible and individualized

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entry and transition mode at the same time.

Conclusion and outlook

Teachers and school staff from countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Finland were guests at our school as part of an exchange program. At that time, Germany still enjoyed a very high reputation for education in Europe! However, when the European guests noticed that a class at the school we were visiting was without a teacher in their classroom, they were completely horrified: »Where are the teachers?« they asked in horror. The answer was truthfully that the teacher in question was ill. »Yes, but where is the other teacher?« came the immediate reply. We first had to explain that in affluent Germany there is only one teacher per class and no team teaching as in many economically poorer European countries. »Is there no substitute?« they asked again. This answer was also in the negative, to which the reply was completely uncomprehending – and I will certainly never forget this sentence and the memorable expression on the face of the questioner for the rest of my (professional) life: »But that's Germany!« Yes, this is Germany!

Economic liberalism and capitalist market thinking simply do not invest in non-profit areas: according to this informal ideology, every cost factor that does not generate a profit is both underestimated and kept to a minimum. From an economic point of view, however, orienting schools, the healthcare system or the social sector in general towards the business sector is outright »suicide« – even if this is done in stages and in installments. So it is not the heads that are lacking, but the minds – namely child-oriented and biophilic thinking that starts from the child and fundamentally places its nature and development as a biophilic emancipation process and education for maturity – to take up central concepts of this seminar – at the center of all education.

Team teaching, which is so helpful as a standard, would be the key to successful teaching and sound education anyway. In contrast, the current lone wolf situation is more negative: The teacher explains something to 27 children in a class; one child does not understand and needs the teacher. The teacher now goes to this child and helps him – but in the meantime, 26 others are waiting for the teacher to continue; understandably, they lose concentration, become restless or start talking to others. When the teacher stands in front of the class again, he or she first has to restore calm so that the lesson can finally continue. There are no such unnecessary interruptions to learning with team teaching: a teaching assistant can go to the child in question and the lesson continues undisturbed and uninterrupted. This one person how is a bit like the train driver also being the ticket inspector and having to interrupt the journey every time a new passenger gets on. The consequence – now back from the train comparison to the classroom – is that

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the proportion of mentally stimulating classroom discussion is gradually reduced and more and more work is done passively: Quiet work, exercise books and worksheets, but filling in worksheets is not actually teaching in the strict sense.

Teaching materials, computers or tablets can be purchased, real education has to be earned. This requires a love of learning and an interest in life at all levels! However, this requires that schools remain true to themselves and do not constantly look to some currently (and often enough, only in the short term) imitating successful businesslike start-ups but instead work out, articulate and successfully represent their own concerns – namely those of the children. Genuine education is therefore much more than just a fertilizer for the gross domestic product: education is primarily the ability to develop one's own thoughts and to think productively. If parents' careers come first and enjoy a higher priority than the well-being of children, then this means nothing other than that the present is more important to us than the future; therefore, the true, biophilic and humane basic direction is to: always think from the perspective of the child – children first!

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