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Review of Lesch, H. & Zierer, K. (2024). Gute Bildung sieht anders aus. Welche Schulen unsere Kinder jetzt brauchen [Good education looks different. What schools our children need now, transl. MS]. Penguin.[1]

Manfred Schewe

With their book, the authors aim to stimulate a broad discussion about the current German education system. They argue that Germany is in the midst of an education crisis and that a "revolution in the education system" is necessary. As Harald Lesch is a well-known science journalist, it is not surprising that he and education researcher Klaus Zierer also make high-profile appearances on social media and on television programmes such as the NDR programme "Das Rote Sofa" (The Red Sofa) on 5 February 2025.

The authors write in a reader-friendly style, creating a type of text that can be classified as somewhere between scientific and journalistic. Right at the beginning, they refer to

> an empirically significant correlation between a country's level of education and its economic power and capacity for democracy. (p. 8)

Anyone interested in positive economic development and a functioning democracy in Germany is likely to be interested in the critical perspectives presented in this book. As it deals primarily with school education, it is aimed in particular at parents, teacher training students, teachers and politicians.

At the beginning, the readers' attention is drawn to "times of educational crisis". This is followed by seven chapters that discuss what needs to change in the educational landscape in order to overcome these times of crisis. The chapter headings seem somewhat sensationalist:

[1] Please note that this book was published in German and that the authors focus on the German educational landscape. This English-language version of the review, in which quotations have also been translated, is intended to familiarize as many Scenario readers as possible with the authors' education reform proposals, in particular their plea for strengthening the arts in school curricula. DeepL (www.deepl.com) was used for a first rough draft of the translation which was then edited by the author.

each heading consists of a term related to the reality of school, followed by a hyphen and the word "different!" to emphasise the urgency of change. The first heading is "Curricula – different!", followed by the headings "Teachers", "School", "School system", "Teaching & Learning", "Parents" and "Pupils". In the concluding section, "A new era in education", the authors present the core elements of their vision of an education that prepares pupils as well as possible for life in a rapidly changing world.

In each chapter, the authors provide interesting perspectives and starting points for discussion. Only a few of these can be touched upon here and critically commented on by the reviewer, who has been committed to aesthetic-performative emphases in education for many years.

In **Chapter 1** (Curricula – differently!), the authors criticise the one-sided cognitive focus of the PISA studies and emphasise that it is much more important to "understand human beings in all their possibilities" (14) in the spirit of a humanistic understanding of education. The authors cite Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences as a current representative of such an understanding of education. However, the bibliography does not refer to a current source, but to a publication from 1983, and it remains unclear how exactly this theory can be implemented in educational practice.

One can at least agree with the authors' demand:

> Reform the curricula! And do so without fail! They are too full, they have a cognitive bias, and they also fail to address the real world of children and young people. (p. 15)

In connection with their criticism of the intellectualisation of teaching, the authors draw attention to subjects that should definitely be given greater emphasis in the timetable. They mention the subjects of sport, music and art, which are traditionally anchored in the timetable. Surprisingly, no reference is made to theatre or drama, which has now become established in the school curriculum of most federal states. However, Harald Lesch does at least mention theatre in an interview:

> I actually regret that far too little art, music and sport is taught, because these are the essential subjects in school that influence children's creativity more than anything else. Children who are athletic, who make music, who enjoy acting, painting... visual arts... these will be brains that can respond appropriately to questions that no one knows the answers to today.[2]

[2] https://musikschule-lk-oldenburg.de/harald-lesch-kinder-brauchen-kunst-musik-und-sport/ – see from minute 23

The proposed strengthening of the arts in education is grist to the mill of performative didactics, in which science and art are given equal status.[3] The authors associate embodied activity with physical education, but not with other subjects. In all subjects , the aim should be to place greater emphasis on embodied learning (and also teaching!).[4] Beyond strengthening the arts, it seems time to move away from educational models that have been too one-sidedly oriented towards the humanities, natural sciences and economics (keyword: economisation of education) in the past, and to explore the extent to which the arts are suitable as an educational model. As indicated in the above quote, the arts in particular could help prepare children for the challenges of an unpredictable future.

Although Lesch & Zierer's argument arouses the reader's curiosity in many places, it is often perhaps a little too programmatic. As a reader, one would like to see concrete examples of how this could be implemented in educational practice, especially since the authors call for a stronger practical focus in **Chapter 2** (Teachers – different!).

> Teacher training today primarily produces lone warriors who have learned a lot of theory but are unable to apply and implement it in school practice. What's more, it is structurally disastrous. (p. 32)

For someone like me, who was fortunate enough to complete his teacher training at the then reform university in Oldenburg in the late 1970s/early 1980s, it remains incomprehensible why the pilot project for single-phase teacher training was discontinued. From the very first semester, we students were involved in practical teaching and discussed our experiences intensively in university seminars. In the traditional two-phase training programme, which is still firmly in place, students do not come into contact with school practice early enough. In Chapter 1, the authors criticise the cognitive bias of the curricula, but their criticism could equally be applied to the two-phase teacher training programme, because the primarily theory-based studies in the first years of study inevitably lead to a more intellectual approach to teaching and learning. From a performative perspective, however, early on in training, the focus should be on addressing the aspect of (physical) presence in the classroom and, inspired by acting practice, developing performance skills. The structural problems of teacher training seem immense; according to the teachers union GEW, there is also a risk that around half a million positions will remain unfilled in 2035. The authors call for "less bureaucracy, more visionaries" when it comes to teachers. However, this demand should be tailored specifically to civil servants in ministries of education. The extent of poor planning when it comes to filling

[3] See, for example, the journal *Fremdsprache Deutsch,* issue 62/2020, which focuses on performative didactics
[4] See, for example, "Embodying Language in Action" by Piazzoli (2018) or "Barefoot Academic Teaching. Performing Arts as a Tool in Higher Education" by Tau, Kloetzer, Henein (2024)

teaching positions is, appalling when one remembers that in the 1980s, teaching graduates faced unemployment after four to six years of study.

In **Chapter** 3 (School – differently!), the authors call for less digitalisation and more focus on people. For readers of this journal, the following quote seems particularly relevant in this context:

> Technically, it is already possible today to eliminate the need to learn foreign languages because a computer can act as a simultaneous translator. But does this make sense from an educational perspective? Foreign languages are more than just words. They are carriers of culture, values, norms and history. It is not without reason that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote: "Those who do not know foreign languages know nothing of their own." (p. 64-65)

The authors are concerned with critical media literacy – in other words, understanding what lies behind the scenes of technology.

In this chapter, the authors also call for learning to take place less indoors and more outdoors. They mention experiential learning activities such as reading nights, camping trips, school trips to the countryside and tending school gardens. Their aim is to open up schools to the outside world and to anchor schools more firmly in social life as "democracy in miniature".

In **Chapter 4** (School system – differently!), the authors call for fewer politically motivated structural debates and instead for more educationally sound quality debates:

> It is not in pedagogy that there is a problem of knowledge, but in education policy, and consequently also a problem of implementation. Unfortunately, the findings of educational research are often sacrificed to political calculations. Politics is not about content, but about interests.

One does not even want to think about the immense damage that party political calculations repeatedly cause in education policy and in other areas, such as climate and migration policy.

In **Chapter 5**, the authors take up the demands of progressive education: teaching should take greater account of real-life contexts, the practical application of knowledge should always be considered, and not only the cognitive level but "all facets of the human being" should be addressed. For the authors, such demands were "revolutionary then as they are today". (102) They refer in particular to block teaching, which has its roots in progressive education, is common practice in Waldorf education and usually lasts several weeks, during which pupils deal intensively with a topic from the perspective of different subjects (for example, in a double lesson per day):

> The advantages of block teaching are obvious: it ensures a connection to the real world, creates space for interdisciplinary thinking, promotes social learning, implements democratic principles and allows time for discussion. ... In our opinion, block teaching offers excellent opportunities to exploit the potential of our schools to the full. It would be an opportunity to make schools fit for the future and enable pupils to take action in the open, in the unknown. (p. 109)

Block teaching is not new, but why does it seem so difficult to firmly anchor such contemporary, cooperative forms of teaching and learning in the curriculum?[5]

In **Chapter 6** (Parents – different!), the authors refer to Article 6, Paragraph 2 of the German Basic Law: "The care and upbringing of children is the natural right of parents and their primary duty" and criticise the fact that schools are expected to take on educational tasks for parents. Parents also have a responsibility, and the authors go so far as to give parents specific advice (139/140) such as clearing out their children's rooms, sending their children outside to play in nature, not interfering prematurely to control them, but observing from a distance what their children are doing and how they are behaving, listening to their children carefully, asking them questions more often, encouraging them to think, welcoming mistakes and, above all, being a role model for their children.

The chapter ends with a call to forge educational coalitions, i.e. to seek cooperation with all those who can support education, such as siblings, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers and, last but not least, teachers. Parents should see the school as a friend, if possible, who may occasionally need support themselves.

The subheadings in **Chapter 7** (Pupils – different!) convey what the authors are focusing on: "Less distraction, more effort", "Less planning, more boredom", "Less subservience, more courage".

The authors call for schools to open up more to society and encourage pupils to get involved in extracurricular activities, such as participating in charitable projects.

In view of the current increase in attempts to destabilise democratic systems, the authors of this chapter focus on promoting democratic skills as early as possible:

> A good school can make a decisive contribution to educating young people to become true democrats. It is the central institution that we as a democratic society must fulfil with the appropriate norms, values and

[5] In this context, reference should once again be made to the reform model of single-phase teacher training, which emphasised interdisciplinarity. Students worked together on projects over several semesters to examine a research topic from a wide variety of (subject) perspectives.

> procedures, and which we should understand as a training ground for "emergencies". (p. 169)

This raises the question once again: how exactly can schools achieve this?

With their book, the authors have initiated an urgently needed discussion on educational issues. It would be desirable for as many teachers, pupils, parents, academics and politicians as possible to participate in this discussion. In their book, the authors have made an impressive case for a "revolution in the education system", but the focus should now be on paying more attention to its implementation in convincing educational practice. Ideally, each chapter of the book (curricula, teachers, schools, the school system, teaching, parents, pupils) would be accompanied by inspiring practical examples described in an anthology and/or documented on film.

How can the "revolution" called for by the authors succeed in making the education system more fit for the future? Perhaps a good answer can be found in a poem written by Bertolt Brecht in 1938![6] It begins with the disturbingly topical line:

> in his country goodness had been weakening a little and the wickedness was gaining ground anew.

The poem is about the concentrated wisdom of a teacher, including the important insight “how quite soft water, by attrition over the years will grind strong rocks away. in other words, that hardness must lose the day.”

The fact that Theatre is now taught as subject in schools in most German federal states, thereby strengthening the artistic dimension in curricula, is thanks to all those who have worked tirelessly in schools, universities, theatres, professional associations, and theatre education centres to convince ministries of education of the educational value of theatre arts. Perhaps this is a good example of how, with concentrated energy and constant effort, a stronger emphasis on the arts in school curricula can be achieved – in other words, good education in the authors' sense.

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