

## **System School on the Test Bench: Challenges of the Present and Orientations for the Future**

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### **Abstract**

The article explores the question of what school is actually for. The starting point is the assumption that we usually consider school to be “normal” in the form in which we find it and have experienced it ourselves. Reference is made to the distinction between the functions of qualification, integration, enculturation and selection. Against this background, it is argued that the debates in the context of the World Education Fellowship have critically questioned the notion of a “natural normality” of schools from the very beginning. Instead, alternative forms of schooling were sought and corresponding models of practice were tested. Peter Petersen’s Jena Plan school model is a prominent example of this. When we put the function of school to the test today, the aspects of the postcolonial, the global, and digitalisation must be taken into account. The conclusion is that for the World Education Fellowship, the task is to continually re-explore the normality of by incorporating these three aspects against the benchmark of a child-centered pedagogy.

*Keywords:* School, education, alternative schooling, pedagogy, New Normality, World Education Fellowship

### **1. Functions of school**

What is the purpose of school? This question seems strange and irritating, since the institution of school obviously matters in our everyday life. The fact that there is a school, that there should be a school, is part of our normality (cf. Koerrenz & Berke-meyer, 2019). Sure, we all once went to school, sometimes more, sometimes less willingly. Some of us have loved school, others have hated it, and we all have survived this institution – somehow. However, school itself, school as an institution, the compulsory attendance of school – is not discussed. We usually have neither a room nor a language for those questions. School: Who - How - What - Why – For what purpose? Nobody prevents us from asking such questions as well (cf. Parsons, 1964). And then there are situations when doubt about this whole system arises in us, doubt about the sense, the value of this institution.

We live in times that almost force alike questions on us. In the face of the Corona virus pandemic, the strangest things happen. Suddenly, everyday life functions more or less well, more or less relaxed. Without children and young people going to a certain building every day. Without them gathering in certain groups and classes. Without them studying a certain subject at a set time, in the physical presence of a teacher. This situation sheds light on a previous normality that we regarded as seemingly unchangeable, almost God-given. Some things now become possible that previously seemed even unthinkable. However, in this light, many things become visible as shadows: for example, the limits of digital learning in the midst of all the opportunities and necessity. For example, the revelation that school is often a protective space for children and young people (protection often from their own families). For example, the realisation that unequal opportunities due to the family background cannot be over-

come by social measurement like teaching and qualifications. But those offers can deal with this inequality in a productive manner. School as a safe haven and an opportunity for greater equity? And to carry the novelty too far: many students express the desire to finally be allowed to go back to school. School as a place of longing? A seemingly strange desire, which above all sheds light on the generally privileged situation of growing up in economically highly developed societies. The appearing unfamiliarity of a crisis makes visible the strengths, but also the weaknesses of our previous normality. They demand us to think anew and differently about what school is actually supposed to do (cf. Dreeben, 1968).

Traditionally, the meaning of school as an institution has been the subject of controversial debates. Above all, the functions of qualification, integration, enculturation and selection can be distinguished (cf. Fend, 2008). Those functions justify and give significance to the institution. So far, so good. Let us take a closer look at the core statements of the functions mentioned. Qualification is about the fit between school and the economy, meaning it is about the reproduction and further development of economic conditions via the teaching of appropriate, professionally relevant skills. This happens through instruction and secondary socialisation at school (behavioural patterns that conform to society, such as reliability, punctuality, etc.). Integration also means focusing on a certain form of fit. But in this case, it does not only touch the economic but the political dimension of society. School imparts a framework of values that defines the boundaries of speech and action marked out by society. Enculturation focuses on the connection of the individual to the cultural orders of society. Literacy, language, interpretation, and judgment skills are understood as necessary elements for arriving in society as a cultural being. Finally, the logic of selection that inherently shapes the logic of schooling is clear to us – evaluation, grades and degrees, which are supposed to say something about our knowledge and ability, about our acquired “skills”. Overall, it is about fitting – making fit through school.

Very different voices unite here to form a chorus. In his 1902 lecture on education, morality and society at the Sorbonne, the sociologist Emile Durkheim identified this fit as the core of education as a whole. Education, he said, is about the social essence of human beings. “To form this being in us is the task of education,” (Durkheim 1902/1984, p. 46). Society defines the goals and methods of education. The idea is that society needs people to be socially acceptable and suitable within a framework (however narrowly or broadly defined). Very pointedly, Durkheim says: “The person whom education must realize in us is not the person whom nature has made, but the person as society wants her/him to be; and it wants her/him to be what its inner economy needs her/him to be,” (Durkheim 1902/1984, p. 44). The institution school also has to serve all of this. Siegfried Bernfeld, with his Marxist, psychoanalytic and Jewish backgrounds, sounds a completely different voice in the same piece in his famous writing “Sisyphus or the Limits of Education” (Bernfeld 1925/1973). He summarises his initial thesis in the equally terse and concise sentence: “The school - as an institution – educates.” (Bernfeld 1925/1973, p. 28). He started from the very simple observation that school as a whole “exerts certain effects on the growing youth, on those growing up in it, and likewise on those living outside it. The activity of the individual teacher, his teaching, is merely one factor in the whole of these effects,” (Bernfeld 1925/1973, p. 26). Decisive for the function of school, however, is ultimately a form of fit that is always economically defined. For the school arose out of a certain situation of interest, which in turn had to be understood “out of the economic - economic, financial - state of affairs, out of the political tendencies of society,” (Bernfeld 1925/1973, p. 27). Ultimately, it is always a matter of “securing the power of the ruling class” through the systemic constitution of institutions such as schools, (Bernfeld 1925/1973, p. 97). In this sense, Bernfeld comes to the sober conclusion: “Education is conservative. Its organization is especially so. It has never been the preparation for a structural change of society. Always - without exception - it was

only the consequence of the accomplished one. That means: there is no progress in education? No, there is none,” (Bernfeld 1925/1973, p. 119).

For if we have four elementary functions of school, it seems, that we have a choice. In the context of the discussion about the fit of school and society, there are these alternatives. This then is the initially seemingly unlimited openness of modernity - there are alternatives of choice. Determining these alternatives, however, is not limitless and free of presupposition. The suggestion is that it is “normal” between and within these functions to discuss the meaningfulness of school.

*Between* these functions, the issue is the hierarchisations between qualification, integration, enculturation, and selection. Empirically, it is then a question of which function practically has the “decisive”, leading role (without having to completely negate the other functions). The distinction of four possibilities opens up a marked out playing field of scientific and political controversies over which alternatives can be publicly argued under the gesture of necessary, never conclusive “progress”. That is why this structuring of discourse is not only a guide to empirical surveys, but also to normative debates.

The same applies to the understanding of accentuations *within* the different functions. What is the significance of religious education or ethics in a post-secular age for necessary framings of enculturation? How can the “right” way of dealing with the seemingly inescapable normality of comparison-based performance assessment be determined? For each of the aforementioned functions, a closer look opens up a field of discussion in which the right way can be publicly disputed. And this dispute seems to be inevitable and irrevocable, since at least in a social framework that calls itself “democratic”, the absolute determination of a point of dispute would cancel out the fundamental inconclusiveness and openness of the future.

If we put exactly this, this established chorus of the functional way of looking at things, to the test, we take a position of doubt. The position of doubt refers to the question(s) whether the functions mentioned adequately capture the meaning of the school system and whether there were or are not also quite other conceivable determinations. But then the order of the discourse would be misleading and deceptive with regard to the fading out of completely different possibilities to determine the function (s) of the system school. Exactly such possibilities are to be examined in a kind of bricolage.

## 2. Thinking school differently – traditions of alternative schooling

Many actors in the World Education Fellowship had the idea that changing the normality of the growing up process is actually only possible by founding a new, an alternative form of institution (Röhrs & Lenhart, 1995). By finding a radical answer to the question of school’s purpose, yes, school has something to do with fitting in. But the alternative educators were concerned with making fit for a particular way of life – an idea that was usually associated with the notion of child-centered pedagogy. One example of alternative school design (Koerrenz, Blichmann & Engelmann, 2017; Koerrenz & Engelmann, 2019) is closely associated with the University of Jena on the one hand and the World Education Fellowship on the other. As is well known, the World Education Fellowship had been founded 100 years ago as the *New* Education Fellowship (Koerrenz, 2019). The who’s who of alternative pedagogy debated took place at conferences organised by the New Education Fellowship in the 1920s – including a congress that was held in Locarno, southern Switzerland in 1927. There [in Locarno], Peter Petersen presented his school model, which, influenced by his academic background, was named Jenaplan. Petersen taught philosophy of education at the University of Jena and at the same time ran a school that was attached to the university. In this alternative school, he tried to develop a child-centered pedagogy. The new concept saw the teacher as a learning companion and promoter of children's talents. School

itself was conceived as a place of structured living together. Teaching in the narrower sense was only one element alongside others. Petersen's Jenaplan school model exemplifies the search for alternative functions of school in the face of a changing society. Petersen's Jenaplan stands for creating a school concept that highlights learning paths, learning needs, and learning talents of children and young people.

Petersen's school concept is critical of capitalism and society, based on Protestant-Theological motivation. The meaningfulness of school is uncoupled from the rules of the game of society based on principles of exploitation and utility (and therefore also contrasts with John Dewey's conception of school). Even if this basic figure of the Jena Plan, which is critical of capitalism, tends to go unnoticed today, it nevertheless shapes an alternative functional description of school that is worth noting. For Petersen, the juxtaposition of community and society is theoretically as well as practically guiding. Petersen sees the contrast of "community" versus "society" "in the formal structure, content, and goal of a community," (Petersen 1927, p. 9). Crucial here is the first aspect of "form structure," insofar as it refers to the different kinds of interpersonal connectedness in social constellations. Interconnectedness in society results from certain ends-means conceptions and an "external[ly] compulsion that somehow derives from the common necessity of life that brings people together, the struggle for life and the care of life," (Petersen 1927, p. 10). Leading in the society are "power interests [...], its next goal is the satisfaction of the practical need, for the sake of which this social form was formed. It does not know a higher goal, since it is in no way an end in itself, but must decay and be replaced as soon as it no longer serves the need that gave rise to it," (Petersen 1927, p. 10). People are connected in society in the perceptual pattern of the ends-means relation. The primary question is that of the utility and usability of communicative processes. The other human being is assessed - typologically pointed - on the basis of the benefit he or she brings with him or her as a means to a certain end. A school should not follow exactly this communication structure oriented to exploitation maxims. Community, on the other hand, is guided by a "spiritual idea" and not by means-end considerations. Here, the individual is never a "means to an end, servant, employee, boss, or the like, but always an end in itself," (Petersen 1927, p. 11). School is to be designed as a space in which "society" does not prevail, which is thus in this sense non-public or counter-public. How he envisions this in practical terms has been unfolded elsewhere (Koerrenz, 2020). What is important for the present context is that Petersen marks a counter-position to the functional keynote of understanding and conceptualizing school from its fit with public, social life. This leads him to a conception of school as a counter-public, as a space in which the rules of the game that Petersen associates with society do not or should not apply.

This constructive idea that school should be an alternative place for living and working together, following rules of mutual recognition, is still an important impulse for today. In times of social distancing, those impulses throw a new, a different light on the value of personal encounters. Asking about the characteristics of school normality today, against the background of the impulses just mentioned, we do not get clear answers but rather a set of tentative questions.

If we look more closely at the contours of normality today, we begin to doubt to a new extent: must that, what is, really be the exact way we find it? This question, this type of question is not new. It has accompanied Modern pedagogy, spoken from a Western European perspective, at least since the 18th century. Since that very time, the question of the right form of teaching and schooling has become a permanent subject of reformatory debates. To put it bluntly: Since the Enlightenment, from a Western European perspective, we have been in the mode of permanent reformatory debates.

In all of this, I am aware that in times of postcolonial and decolonial objections, social notions of normality above all are under scrutiny. And rightly so. And when we look at schools as the essential institution of society, questions of overt and

covert privilege and discrimination must be addressed in a new and frank way. This is not what the founders of the World Education Fellowship usually had in mind. Following Paulo Freire or bell hooks, we need to change and broaden our view in this sense. The Western European perspective must itself be put to the test. The following considerations are formulated from a Western European perspective, which tries to connect the child-centered orientation of pedagogy and the fundamental orientation towards human dignity. But, self-critical skepticism with regard to the relativity of one's own speaking position is thus one of the preconditions of the following considerations.

### 3. The New Normality

The discussion of normality, including the norm-giving power and function of school, has taken on a new dynamic in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century. Even if other, quite different perspectives could certainly be considered of particular importance, three aspects above all seem to determine today's thinking about the school system: the global, the postcolonial, and the digital. The far-reaching, unanswered questions are: Do those keywords, global, postcolonial, digital shape today's normality quite significantly? Should they? What does this mean for the functional definition of school as such? Can school still be thought of today while ignoring these keywords? Can school still function today while ignoring them? And above all: What does this mean in concrete terms?

The experience of a fundamental paradox moves into the center of thinking about the function of school. The paradox is about today's perception of what is normal for our comprehension of the human condition. The norms from "the" reality that put pressure on the school system. On the one hand, the absolute value and liability of universality and inclusion are normal. But on the other hand, at the same time the absolute value and liability of diversity and heterogeneity are normal. Both sides stand for challenges – challenging an individual has to overcome during their construction of a self-image, the social ego. However, school is an essential context for this process. The integration of different perspectives only succeeds with the greatest effort. However, both challenges together can hardly be sorted out in our minds, in our understanding. This is also a challenge to adequately determine the function of school. We face the task of simultaneously understanding ourselves as one and as different when regarding our relationship between the Self and the Other – or, at least we should.

In cultural studies terms, the meaning and distinctiveness of universality and heterogeneity have been developed in two seemingly opposing questions of normality. In reality, however, they are complementary. To this end, two theoretical framings have been created, each containing its own conception of the central learning challenges. This also touches upon the function of all organised and unorganised teaching. Both theoretical frameworks carry in them a perspective of what a person today should learn primarily if they want to unfold their humanity. Both frameworks put "normality" to the test and thus also test the functionality of a system like school. One questioning of normality can be described with the keyword "global". It builds upon the insight that we have to ask for fundamental rights for all human beings in a new quality today. It is about the question of universal equality for all human beings. Conversely, it means addressing the deficits (for example, in participation opportunities) that the field of universal and basic human rights reveals. Here, diversity becomes a central problem. For example, when thinking about access requirements to education and educational opportunities. In this perspective, justice and unredeemed equality are the fundamental questions. The UNESCO program "Education for all" represents a perspective that highlights participation through inclusion. Ultimately, the elementary rights of human beings can only be discussed and justified globally. This is especially true because otherwise one might look for gateways – to deny certain groups their

humanity or to try to distinguish between superior and inferior forms of humanity. In this context, difference is problematic – or at least plays a secondary role. “Global” is about the orientation towards and realisation of equal rights for all. It is about searching for a practical implementation of equalising human rights as participation rights and development opportunities – especially in the field of education and school.

This standpoint is met with justified objections. It makes sense to use the keyword “postcolonial” for the fundamental objection against universalistic and equalising tendencies. This is true even though it may be a systematisation that is perceived as problematic. But: From this perspective, emphasising diversity is not a problem. Quite the contrary – it means honoring a new, necessary (dis)order of thought. Critical thinking here arises from awareness of the unjust, problematic differences. It is about the differences that follow from exclusion and marginalisation due to power hierarchies and violence. It is about the denial of recognition of diversity. The manifold forms of non-recognition cover a wide field: from cultural attributions in the mode of generalisation (in sentence 1: all X are Y; or also in sentence 2: Z belongs to Y, therefore Z is also like all X in Y or has to be like that) to concrete forms of material oppression and exploitation. It is about a distrust of everything “universal” and thus also global attributions of the human condition. The suspicion is that universal statements serve above all to disguise and camouflage existing power structures and mechanisms of oppression. Especially regarding forms of exclusion and exploitation. Postcolonial perspectives call for a sensitivity for heterogeneous lifeworlds as well as for a non-colonial, non-paternalistic partisanship for certain groups of people. Self-critical empathy, listening and insight into the relations and conditions of one's own understanding are possible cornerstones for an according understanding of learning. Becoming aware of (and at least occasionally speaking out) one's own position and perspective then becomes the precondition of all speech, thought and action. Theoretically, one may quickly think that this does not necessarily have to contradict core concerns of global learning (as diversity in equality or vice versa as equality in diversity). In practice, the simultaneity of different kinds of respect quickly comes up against the limits of understanding: of being able to speak and being told to be silent, of taking sides and not being able to adopt marginalised positions. At least for me.

Regarding the functional description of school, one according conclusion could be: If we talk about normality today with regard to the school system, then the tension between global and postcolonial concerns must be inscribed in it. Whether this inscription can be translated into action, is a great challenge. Whether and how it can succeed is a question of attentiveness and sensitivity concerning both /manners and learning content in schools. In any case, the ability to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions should be at the focus of attention. However, this seems to be hardly compatible with social reproduction (especially in economic and political terms). The reason for this is that society cannot work with increased uncertainty. On the contrary, society is dependent on minimizing this uncertainty. This also applies to schools.

A third aspect that interlocks the two content-related cultural dimensions of global and postcolonial / is indicated by the keyword digital. It is one thing to ask for opportunities and technical possibilities of digitization and of digitalisation in terms of instruments. In this technical respect, there is undoubtedly great potential for development. This is blithely demanded and also established in terms of “the” digitalisation of school. However, the examination of digitalisation only then becomes pedagogically relevant / in a different sense. Digitalisation as digital transformation becomes pedagogical when it is not only seen as an instrument or technology. It is about understanding digital transformation as something that determines all preconditions and forms of learning today. Rather, it is a matter of culturally redefining the self-relationship and self-understanding of the human being as a learner. What does it mean that learning today is (co-)determined by the digital? That worlds of reality drift apart in the digital horizon? That talking of “the” reality becomes virtually contourless? What is the im-

pact of the digital on our basic understanding of human beings as learners, and what is its impact on education?

This is not just about technical possibilities and their implementation, but rather about the question of the extent to which the digital transformation culturally shapes and changes people's learning. And the function of schools? The digital as the abolition of the boundaries of reality also lead to a fundamental change in the relationship between the school system and its environment. Then the question arises as to what actually remains of reality. And with regard to school: How this image of reality changes, annuls, negates or readjusts the function of school?

This leads to a whole series of follow-up questions:

- In addition, how does this connect to the motifs of the global and the post-colonial?
- To what extent do universality and heterogeneity play out in the digital?
- Put it differently: do not universality and heterogeneity have a new quality in the digital?
- What does it mean to be human in the digital and how does the digital transformation change our conception of the human?, and
- How does this reshape the school system?

Thus, when we ask about normality in the pedagogical realm today, the three aspects of the global, the postcolonial, and the digital impose perspectives that put the school system to the test. More questions, fewer answers – so it seems to me. Significant challenges form the background: Who defines the rules of normality – and how? Who asserts / what in our social and societal game of comprehension? And by what means and in which kind of ways? In this context, arranging and re-arranging semantic fields is crucial, for example, what is considered normal and self-evident in the pedagogical field – and what is not.

In the international debate about schools, these aforementioned points must be included. In the final analysis, however, it is not about semantic fields, but about the concrete design of an institution. In its founding years, the World Education Fellowship was conceived as a large laboratory in which the theory and practice of schools were discussed in a controversial way. In the process, many models were put to the test bench.

## Conclusion

The history of the World Education Fellowship is characterised by the fact that the educators active in the WEF tried to deal constructively with the developments of the time. Particularly in the founding years of the 1920s, attention was paid not only to the cultural and technical challenges, but also to intensive discussions about the ethical standards for an institution such as a school. It was not only a question of the best possible fit with social developments, but also of which norms and values should guide the concrete design of the institution of school. On the one hand, the aspects of a child-centered or learner-centered pedagogy can be considered as such norms. On the other hand, against the background of the mass murders of World War I based on war technology, they were also the orientation towards a fundamentally new understanding of human rights and dignity.

Today, when we are confronted with the challenge of the global, the postcolonial and decolonial, and digitalisation, these norms of the World Education Fellowship from the 1920s continue to have a fundamental power of orientation. In doing so, we should ask how the dignity and rights of children and young people can also be taken into account in the organisation of schools when it comes to understanding and concrete design. The alternative concepts of school that were discussed at the WEF conferences continue to hold suggestions for this.

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