

About School Education: A Plea for a New Definition

by Annique Claussen, 18 January 2018

First day in middle school, Germany, back in the 80s. I have listened attentively to what the teacher told us about our schedule. A few days later there's some confusion, a change of classrooms, substitute teachers – I have no idea where we are supposed to be; I walk and look around and feel like crying. It's only weeks after this that someone points a pinboard out to me where all schedule changes are clearly announced. I feel humiliated. How could I not have known about it! Well, I didn't even think of asking, I was used to being told what comes next.

First day at university, Germany, in the 90s. I've been classified as a very good student all along, and now I have even learned about independent life during one year abroad. I have also learned that outside school nobody ever feels responsible for introducing me to the basics of what I am supposed to do; everyone is too busy to think about whether or not I know, and I need to figure out where to start asking and hope that someone takes the time to throw a piece of knowledge back to me. But university is a school, right? I have been attentive at getting my schedule right and sit down to listen to the professors. After the lessons, I always seem to feel some sort of Not-quite-sure-what-they're-up-to...? Homework? Of course I do my assignments. Still, anything missing...? It takes weeks for me to develop the idea that this studying thing might require some add-ons out of my own creativity. Go to the library, find a suitable book and do some self-study? Hm. Really? I don't believe that during my years as an official student I ever developed habits you would expect from an effective learner. Yes – we were told to go, study, do research. To what end? The question mark remained. This doesn't sound like the profile of an independent thinker or a committed, hands-on problem solver, does it?

I love to hear about the changes in education lately. A global trend seems to be budding which tries to shape young human beings less into accepting, insecure competitors in a rivalry of knowledge but more into self-assured, curious creators in search of the teams that help them thrive. The academically hierarchical mindset is being replaced by a mindset where each piece of the social mosaic is given its place and value. Ideally. How do we get there? Will it help if we adults show young students the perfect way – ah well, the way that we are used to from the past, so it must be perfect for the future too? I bet it won't. How are they supposed to develop the habits of asking, of thinking up ideas in a team and then go about finding ways to turn these ideas into something tangible? The future holds a massive array of problems in store for our children, problems which mankind has never faced before. If we go on defining “education” as showing our children bits and pieces out of the universe of knowledge that is readily available now, and nothing else – will those kids, once they are adults, have developed the tools it takes to solve real problems? I doubt it.

Our children are clever. Anyone who disagrees? So what makes us think that they are not clever enough to dream up their future, to figure out what is good and meaningful for them, and then: go for it? Maybe this could be where education starts to come into play? Can we please redefine the notion? I would much rather have education be comprised of a passion to help children (and, really, anyone) along the way of finding out their goals, plus some good advice on how to walk the path that leads to this goal. The one-solution-fits-all classroom system has expired. How can we make decisions about each chain link in a student's learning without even asking the student, yet expect that by the end of their formal studies, the student be fit for coping with a world full of unknown challenges? Let students take part in shaping their own future please. Let them take ownership of their learning.

Is education all about ranking? If so, we may continue to take standardised tests to see who passes and who fails. Or could education be considered a way to generate committed team players who

cheer at their personal success each time they have overcome hurdles and managed to produce a meaningful contribution? If we like this idea (I do!), we need to teach children these skills – getting to know what they really strive for, come up with different solutions, and see if any of these work in practice. Often they won't, and that is a crucial part of the learning. Later at work, nobody will care to take them by the hand and lead them to the perfect solution. If we take the experience of failure out of the curriculum, we bereave the students of one of the basics. But the educational framework surely needs to be firm and settled and must not fail? Well... What if any of the social systems that our children will live in starts to show cracks and the need to be re-shaped? Might be a good idea to let the kids experience at an early stage that no framework system is without flaws. It's all about showing them how adults go about trying to fix those flaws. This applies just as well to the educational system. Take the courage to try something new! Students won't get harmed if they are part of the process – but they will suffer if they have never been taught that change means opportunity.