
What Education should not forget to deliver

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Abstract:

Talking about education these days seems to be more important than ever. Challenges like the digitalization and the faster communication via various channels cannot be confronted with the old pedagogical recipes. The purpose of education is not to train students for the labor market but to educate them to be the best version of themselves. Focussing too much on standardized assessments and not on providing the youth with a broad set of competences can lead to a generation that loses its self belief. Having a critical youth is not only important for them to succeed in life but also for our democratic system. Any lasting change in our society can be traced back to educational initiatives which have a lasting impact. Consequently, I would suggest that education itself is the most sustainable lifestyle. This is not an academic paper. Most presenters at the Eduvision-conference work in the field of academics and my contribution would seem redundant. As an education expert working closely together with the Federal Ministry of Education in Austria and as a Blogger I depict daily challenges and anticipate what education should provide and what the current paradoxes are.

Keywords:

education, paradox, happiness, private school, collaboration, future classroom lab, awareness, democracy, parents, students, pedagogical interaction

Introduction

Isn't it paradox? We have bigger houses, but smaller families. There is more education, but less good judgement. We have a better medicine, but are sick more often. We have been to the moon,

but barely know our neighbors. We have a bigger salary, but are less happy. We ought to have a high IQ, but we lost track of our emotions. There are new findings permanently, but there is less wisdom. There are more human beings around, but there is less humanity.

Being an education expert and consulting a department of the Federal Ministry for eight years, I have been confronted with different absurdities in our educational system today. One can suggest that we are focussed on the assessment way too much and forget about the pedagogical interaction in the meanwhile. For years, I have stated the case that the teacher-centered approach ought to be banned from the classroom and should be replaced by the student-centered one. Concepts like the inquiry-based learning and the collaboration between students during a project work, are fine examples of that setting.

More than two years ago, my wife inspired me to start my own blog called innovationsschule.at. In that blog, I write about my experiences in over 20 European projects and discuss what education in the 21st century could and should look like. Tackling political issues as well as concepts of sustainability, the motto for my blog is pretty straightforward.

<Education is the most sustainable lifestyle>

In this paper, I would like to discuss how so and where the focal points of education should be in my opinion.

Education vs. training

The first big misconception is that the school should train the pupils with a specific set of competences catered to the needs of the labor market. The problem here is that 60 % of the pupils starting their educational career at the primary level are going to end up in jobs that have not been invented yet. I am a good example for that. 28 years ago, nobody knew what an education expert even is and blogging has not been invented yet. In fact, the internet as we know it today did not exist. Consequently, training the pupils to cater the needs of the labor market is an illusion that cannot be fulfilled. Worse, those pupils are going to need an extra training once they exit school and find themselves being jobless.

Therefore, education has nothing to do with training. Education should focus on teaching students the basic competences. Besides the ones we know, clearly there should be an emphasis on the digital competences today. But I would argue that this is not what makes education sustainable. Curious students are. Entering school at six years of age, one cannot find a pupil disgusted with school just yet. The experience tells us that pupils get disgusted with school over time and lose their curiosity that they started their educational career with.

Talking about sustainable education, I am interested on how a content is developed in the pedagogical process and how long it can be remembered afterwards. Concepts like the Future

Classroom Lab (<http://fcl.eun.org>) at the European Schoolnet (<http://www.eun.org>) in Brussels demonstrate, how effective it can be to split up the pedagogical interaction. To assign different learning zones to specific tasks is one way to go. In essence, the pedagogical interaction can be opened up in order for the pupils to address their talents much more effectively.

The responsibility of education

Imagine freezing a surgeon in his operation room in the 1950s and imagine defrosting him in an operation room of today. He would not have a clue where he is. Try the same thing with a teacher. The result would be slightly different. We are preparing the pupils for the changed world. We are teaching them not to live in the 1950s, but in the 21st century. Yet, the pedagogical methods used in school have not changed in centuries. In fact, they date back to the industrial revolution. Back then, it was suitable to organize lessons in strict 45 to 50 minute-sequences to fill the brains of the students with knowledge. The ultimate goal was to train people for the needs of the industrial age. But living in today's world does not only mean to face the labor market of today and be confronted with new challenges like the digitalization. Living today also means tackling different issues with much more awareness. The climate change is a suitable example. Nowadays, students need to understand more complex and interdependent issues and adapt their behavior accordingly. Understanding tons of facts and sort them out requires the ability to read and select valid sources of information. Consequently, the digital competence could be viewed as the ability to communicate and navigate through the digitally dominated world. Facts ought to be differentiated from opinions. People should be able to identify fake from actual news, which brings me to the next big responsibility.

We tend to forget that we teach students to be critical and reflected. Protecting our democracy, these assets are very important. In my blog, I often debate the role of education in the recent political developments. Is the election of Donald Trump a sign of a lack of critical education? Are tendencies of populism in Europa a sign of a lack of critical thinking? Maybe. Therefore, it is more important than ever before to teach students how to gather their knowledge. Having studied political science, I know that the role of active citizens is vital for any democratic evolution. But this means that active citizens need to study sources, select information and vote with a well-grounded opinion.

Any change in society, be it the awareness raising for specific issues or the behavioral changes initiated by every individual, is based on educational concepts being taught. When I state that education is a sustainable lifestyle, I mean that education is the only option to create a permanent effect.

Movement or progress?

At the end of the educational career, curious individuals need to turn into critical and responsible grown-ups who are not afraid to fail and who are not afraid to question the status quo. That behavior, to my mind, is often missed in the educational system itself. What do I mean by that? Scandinavian countries lead the P.I.S.A.-tests because of their ability to permanently question themselves. If a pedagogical measure, that looked fine a year ago, turns out not serving the purpose of education, it is going to be banned the following school year. We often are afraid to change anything because we fear that changes might effect students negatively. But one thing that harms students for sure is not changing anything. Because life is change and what better place to learn that than in school?

Often, and now I am speaking as someone working together closely with the Federal Ministry of Education, we confuse movement with progress. Changing anything, be it the label of the school or a name tag, means movement. Changing something for the better and improving constantly upon lessons made, is progress. What we need in the educational system, at least in Austria, is progress, not movement. Although, we do not even have that most of the time.

Being aware that the society needs to initiate change, teacher training institutions try to prepare the becoming teachers for the future challenges. A good example would be the focus on the digitalization. Just a few weeks ago, the Future Learning Lab (<http://www.fl.wien>) at the teacher training college in Vienna, the PH Wien (<http://www.phwien.ac.at>), opened its doors. Trying to adapt to the current developments, the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs and the Ministry of Education initiated that lab to prepare the future teachers to spread out their pedagogical interaction and use ICT in a modern pedagogical setting. The idea is that changing the pedagogical methods is independent from the classroom. Depending on the pedagogical interaction, new technologies can be adopted. But using technology just because you can is not the way to go.

Do you know the difference between cooperation and collaboration?

In the last couple of years I have been part of a European project named CoLAB (<http://colab.eun.org>). The goal was to establish new concepts of collaborative learning. Via MOOCs and seminars we tried to explain teachers and teacher-students the difference between cooperation and collaboration. During a collaboration each and everyone has a crucial part without which a given task cannot be completed. In a cooperation some students might lay back and let the others work. They would still produce a result which can be graded by the teacher. Having that kind of behavior during a collaboration, they would fail to be assessed positively. Concepts like the collaboration do not require a specific classroom. They can be implemented tomorrow. All it takes is a little effort, no money and no extra infrastructure.

Alternatives required by parents

Nowadays, parents experience an immense pressure. Their children almost need to be registered for kindergarten while being pregnant and pretty soon after giving birth, the school career should be designed. Bearing in mind that each and every individual is different and has a specific set of talents, it seems foolish to plan years ahead. Parents do not want to make any mistakes and often participate in that madness. At the time where this paper is written, my daughter was ten months old and we were still figuring out which kindergarten is best suited for her.

The number of growing private schools and kindergartens indicate that parents are not satisfied with the public institutions. They feel like there should be more than the commonly known. Maybe there are different institutions offering a pedagogical concept that fosters creativity and independence. In search for something different, parents tend to lean towards private institutions more and more. In 2016, almost 20 per cent of the students in Austria attended a private school. But to my mind, this is the label that I was talking earlier about. As long as the schools' autonomy does not address pedagogical aspects heavier than before, private schools are limited in their opportunities. Along the way, parents are going to get frustrated and students lose interest in school.

Resume

Concepts like mindfulness are best suited for an educational system that is fully aware of its role in students' lives. Mindfulness requires a critical and self-reflected individual and that is where education comes into play. The goals align perfectly. Mindful education, respecting one another, protecting our democracy, differentiating facts from opinions, teaching more competences and less facts and giving students the opportunity to live a fulfilled life, are based upon critical thinking which is provided by a successful education. When I say that education is the most sustainable lifestyle, I have these concepts in mind.

Sources:

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About the author:

Axel Zahlut is an education expert, contracted mainly by the Federal Ministry of Education, and a Blogger tackling issues of education, politics and sustainability on his own blog www.innovationsschule.at in over 570 articles since 2015. Since the year 2009 he has been involved in educational projects funded by the European Commission and has been the secretary general of the European Network of Innovative Schools Austria.