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School Development as Problem Solution:

A Middle Position on the School Reform Discussion

■ Jürgen Oelkers

A central question of school reform is when, and under what circumstances, schools accept *new* problems. This question will be answerable only once the learning processes *in* the schools are described. Schools do not simply react to demands for reform, no matter how urgent. However, schools have to accommodate all innovations in the existing organization. For this reason it must be determined more precisely how schools continuously constitute themselves and what it is that induces schools to develop in new directions if

they gain more from *not* doing so.

For good reason, schools are rather conservative institutions that do not chase after every latest fashion in education but instead start out from that which has withstood the test of time. This cannot simply be called «lethargic» but is instead the consequence of problem solutions that have so far been *unsurpassed*.

Established problem solutions guarantee survival in everyday life. This becomes visible when the knowledge dynamics in the schools are examined.

Schools are institutions of knowledge not simply in the sense that knowledge is imparted to pupils in the classroom but rather in a much more constitutive sense. Schools organize learning processes in view of curricular offerings; these offerings are very stable historically, and they are supported by a structure that does not reward constant change but rewards more steady conditions. Anyone wishing to change this must keep in mind how *know-how* develops in the schools and what it is that determines its dynamics.

Teachers use certain variations of handed-down professional knowledge that takes little reference from research but is nevertheless extremely effective. The media of learning contain decisions on didactics and methods that aim at plausibility within the knowledge horizon of the teachers. Pupils' previous knowledge must be coordinated with the tasks and achievements in the instruction. Teachers' theories are constantly subject to the test of experience, which tends to confirm the theories rather than change them. Once built up, the teachers' repertory, their everyday know-how, is difficult to influence, because it is connected with strong convictions. Or in other words, anything that is not taken up in teaching most probably will be lost.

This type of analysis of the knowledge in the organization school reveals teachers' professional competency, the central importance of the teaching aids in the steering of instruction, the silent knowledge in every school, change and stability of the cognitions in practice, the real building of knowledge in pupils and the handing down and innovation of working knowledge at all levels.

In terms of these levels and areas we can speak of *working knowledge* that is used constantly in the organization; the fact that it has been used for years does not make it unintelligent. How we teach and hold school is the result of problem solutions that convince the actors until it becomes possible to improve them.

The core issue in reform then is how the working knowledge of educational institutions can be improved without – as is done today when speaking of «education standards,» for instance – simply trusting only in the change of perspectives, which does not after all automatically change practice. Schools operate using an unshakeable stock of intelligent *working knowledge* that is not simply up for renegotiation just because politics demands education standards and the administration makes education plans, the scale of which alone indicates their uselessness. *Working knowledge* is the solution of practice, and if the aim is to improve the solutions, then they must be reached. For this it is not enough to conduct educational policy discourses and to assign the administration the task of implementing vague ideas. The administration, too, is only able to apply its own working knowledge.

If a different form of development is desired, this cycle of politics and administration must be broken.

To do that a change of the theory of school is needed, that is correct neither in a purely functional nor in a merely normative frame. I use here a historical variation of the theory of problem solving as developed decisively by John Dewey (1910).¹ This variation assumes that «problem solving» can be used not only on the learners but also on the organization. From this perspective, schools are not made up of an unlimited chain of *problems*, but a limited series of *problem solutions*.

The frontal teaching method known in German as *fragend-entwickelnder Unterricht* [teacher question-guided instruction], today called «teacher-dominated instruction,» is as much a problem solution as is the distinction between teaching aids to be used by pupils and teaching aids to be used by teachers² or the inventions of the syllabus, the grading system, or the organizational time unit of the school period. Without these successful historical problem solutions, which have been stable in the long term, school could not take place at all.

Many of today's illusions arise from the rhetoric of «learning systems,» which without historical reference and without consideration of the actual experiences of the actors are supposed to prove themselves anew each day as intelligent organizations. What sounds good are metaphors or more generally language constructions that are not connected with practice but rather with political rhetoric, which does not have to concern itself with feasibility. The rhetoric stresses the necessity for or inevitability of change and overlooks the fact that school is an *existing* object that has sufficient experience at its disposal to be able to help itself. There is also no need to call for the school to become a «learning organization»; the system is learning and has always learned, only stubbornly.

New methods of systems development have to prove effective, or they are adapted beyond recognition. I could also say that education reform does not reckon with the cunningness of the system, which has already successfully withstood other and very different reform attacks. This is explained by history. The modern school, namely, has no founder; its structure – still in effect today – was not created by any individual persons. It is the result instead of a long and drawn out process of development that requires the *school's own* ability to learn, to steadily improve the form, structure, and content of the school over a long period of time. In this way, «school» is first and fundamentally *school history*.

Today's school system is the result of a characteristic and in many ways binding historical process. More precisely, I should speak in the plural: The school system is the result of diverse and in many cases momentous developments that are linked together in complex ways. There is not *one* consistent history; instead there are different histories, which should not be presented as linear and one-dimensional. These closely connected histories must be assumed, if the aim today is to once again modernize

the school. It is important to narrow down and more precisely determine what innovation should actually consist in. Education standards themselves are neither innovation nor general quality assurance strategies implying that there have never been before attempts to improve the quality of schools. What is new is often only the language, which many teachers rightfully see as an unreasonable demand when it is not connected with any discernible practice.

Practice is always preceded by a historical development that must be taken up by any reform or, as it is called much more dramatically today, by any modernization of the system. What is interesting in today's discussion is that the representatives of modernization do not give any account of what in the proposals for innovation is actually a repeat of things that have long been well-known. It is not by coincidence that many highbrow theory discussions often end in a catalogue of measures, that without thinking twice comes back to the historical *Reformpädagogik* [progressive education] movement and treats as new insights, things that have been tried time and time again with varying degrees of success over the last hundred years.

But, again, real development is often unspectacular and for that reason successful, and it concerns other elements of school than those that are named in the modernization discussion. What is decisive is the usefulness for the actors and their institution. Whatever does not prove to be useful remains rhetoric or shifts its function. For example, curricula do not determine real instruction in a direct way but no doubt influence crisis management when parents make demands.

The development of the school should be first understood always historically, whereby the historical decisions often lie far in the past. School «standards» are not new, but the term is new. School is made up of «standards»; it is just that they were not called standards up to now. Anyone seeking to understand and handle a school problem today always refers to a development that was often, if not always, connected with improvements that were effective for a long time. What I call development are series of problem solutions that proved to be useful or even indispensable for the continuation of practice. This is easily demonstrated by looking at the things that determine the everyday life of the school, the things that must be reliably available for school to take place.

The basic elements of school organization (curricula and teaching aids, methods of teaching and learning, basic situations of instruction, tolerance zones concerning behavior, school subjects and

their hierarchies, role division between teachers and pupils, the organization of time, and the architecture of the space) owe their rise to historical processes that are very long-term, are also slow, were confirmed again and again, and have a *success story* behind them. In the face of many discussions, this is something that we hardly dare to state publicly, but waves of school criticism should not blind us to the fact that the school is an extremely successful system, when we look at the history of the last 150 years. Indicators for this thesis of a success story are, for instance size and differentiation of the system, privileges of the personnel, cultural jurisdiction, material equipment, social acceptance, exclusivity of the mandate, or long-term budget security.

Criticism of the school is often plausible only because it overlooks these indicators and ties itself down to moral categories. In fact, however, there are weighty historical factors at work that rule out that the system «school» will be fundamentally invented a second time. The system is adaptable *in* and *with* the given structure; that is why the only possible changes are changes that fit the structure and do not endanger it. Anything else is rejected or made unsuitable. This will also be the case with «education standards» and all other quality assurance methods, if they do not meet the criterion of fit.

This analysis allows the following conclusion to be drawn: Schools are «learning systems,» but they are learning systems that reference themselves and that perceive their relevant environments essentially from *that* point of view. The learning of the system takes place using the givens of the system, and it is not at all changeable at will. If my historical thesis is correct, schools are made of *solved* problems. The solutions are used in everyday practice without constantly calling them into question; they are not simply mindless.

Footnotes

- 1 The concept of problem solving is older, of course, and can be traced back mainly to game theories at the end of the nineteenth century.
- 2 Already in the middle of the nineteenth century, the compendiums of the basic primary and secondary schools noted that a distinction must be made between teaching aids for *teachers* and teaching aids for *pupils*.

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Die deutsche Fassung kann herunter geladen werden unter:

<http://ihbf.phzh.ch/content-n153-r483-sD.html>