

Quality management by marking schemes dumping Competence to compensate incompetence conceals the failure of school reforms

by Prof Dr Hans Peter Klein*

It has long been all over town: The methods of alleged “quality management” in education do not lead to greater knowledge and skills, rather they conceal the fact that students know less and are capable of less. Ever more beginners, particularly in the natural sciences, lack basic knowledge and skills to successfully take up and complete their studies. However, the kind of trouble caused by ministerial guidelines which teacher teams are facing and let out only behind closed doors, is something the public must know about.

How knowledge and skills develop as the basis of real education and how this can be achieved best during lessons, has been well-known for a long time. Why are teachers not given the freedom to take independent decisions how to organize their lessons according to their professional training? After all, they are the experts.

Performance explosion by competence orientation – a bluff package ?

Since the “PISA shock” politicians and their advisers from the field of empirical educational research claim that quality of teaching could be improved and a better PISA ranking be achieved only by educational standards, competency-based lessons, core curricula, comparative studies and central exams up to central high-school graduation. The logic behind this standardization is simple and not completely wrong. One is looking for a binding standard to measure the dubious status of skills and knowledge of students. May we believe the advocates of these concepts and the supporting press who claim that within a short time an increase in the high-school graduation rate has been achieved and the rate of failing students has been brought down to almost zero, the number of school dropouts, has been reduced underachieving students have been better promoted and their level of performance has been raised; the ability for studying has improved while getting rid of unnecessary knowledge ballast! For year after year the number of high school graduates with the dream grade of 1.0 (or better) rose while failure rates declined against zero. Who feels like grumbling? Peculiar though, the voices of crafts, SMEs and universities do not stop complaining about the lack and further decline of the quality level of school-graduates. Engineers and students of the natural sciences have become scarce

and craft apprentices that are ready to learn and let themselves be trained are urgently searched for. Are these merely the complaints of the diehards and dissatisfied? Or what is happening ?

New quality management – the prescribed leveling of standards

To uncover the cause for this discrepancy and to check the success reports for their truth would now indeed be an important work of research. But so far no one has been appointed to it. Apparently, the euphorics of quality management in the ministries and the KMK (Conference of the Ministers of Education and Culture) of the “Länder” are not interested in examining their own measures of quality management in an open scientific investigation. Upon inquiries at the ministries in one or another “Land”, one receives the reasonable information that such scientific research would certainly be of great interest, albeit only under the premise that the questionnaire, the aim of investigation and the handling of possible results were discussed in advance! It could not be clearer: research, yes please, but only politically and didactically correct! Otherwise, the imported quality assuring concept of formal technique and management doctrine might possibly be at stake, altogether.

A first disillusioning that “competence orientation” was the ostensible solution of all educational problems occurred by the study on the “Abitur” in biology conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia¹, presented below: Non-prepared ninth-graders had passed the final Abitur-examination in biology without any problem. Is this the secret of an unforeseen quality explosion? No, but all the answers were given in the text accompanying the questions, you only had to have some “literacy competence” in order to be able to copy and transcribe them. Expertise? Methodical skills? Wrong! This of course stimulated further, needless to say, undesired investigations. And now look at that: In math as well it showed that common knowledge, reading skills and a certain cleverness for the successful management of this type of competency-based tasks were sufficient for the central exam.² Students of the eleventh-grades of a high school (G9) were able to reach at least the mark “sufficient” in the complex task analysis, without having ever studied the necessary math basics of the twelfth and thirteenth grades that were required. Again, the trick is simple: In a task, which concerns the value of a cyclist’s pulse rate shown in a graph, the student does not have to conduct any arithmetic operations. It is suffi-

cient to describe the course of the curve and to draw the right conclusions from the given factual information with some common knowledge. The detailed work material supplies all information the student needs to correctly answer the question and to achieve the full credit points needed. Knowledge of mathematics is merely hindering, since pupils might assume that they would have to do complicated arithmetic operations for achieving the correct answer. Pupils in countries who are blessed with such exams see through this foul play: They feel they are not taken seriously. Corresponding comments can be read in the web – it was undemanding and pure copying of given texts. Expert knowledge was not required, there was no mathematical expertise demanded, etc.³

Meanwhile it seems obvious that all this is well-known at the top of the ministries of education and culture and no one denies it. Heads of department participating in this school form in some countries are instructed by the corresponding superior authorities in training sessions that pupils’ performance in all central exams are exclusively be assessed by working with the given material of diverse text and graph information. Basic knowledge or additional knowledge capacity which formerly used to be the key factor of the assessment are no longer allowed to be taken into account. Upon cautious inquiry by subject experts of the schools at the corresponding superior department, whether it was not known that almost all the answers were already given beforehand, the consternated teachers had to learn that this was very well known. One would try to make it less obvious in future examinations, was the information. Basically, however, teachers should not worry about it, since it was indeed politically intended.

Educational standards and quality management in the US – a cheating scandal

We have known for a long time what may be caused by a misconceived ‘quality management’. Lately, Professor *Diane Ravitch* from New York, who under *Bush* senior was greatly involved in the enforcement of testing systems, realized and publicly confessed her fatal error. Once being a fiery advocate of standards, tests, free choice of schools and Charter Schools, she openly admits today in her book ‘The Life and Death of the Great American School System. How Tests and Choice are Undermining Education’⁴ that particularly standardization and the including testing

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methods have the opposite effect to the one intended by undermining any educational standard. Tests were to direct greater attention towards low quality schools as well as to allow free choice of school for poor children:

"All of this seemed to make sense, but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. [...] But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw, the more I lost faith." (p. 4.) Since the beginning of 2010 and continuing in 2011 the whole of the US was shaken by a cheating scandal of unprecedented dimension. This happened although over the past few years the pleasant improvement of student performance notably in the southern United States was celebrated under the *Obama Administration* as a success of the testing methods, a law, entitled 'No Child Left Behind' that had been adopted under *George W. Bush*; a law that our politicians like to refer to. This law aimed at assuring an adequate level of performance for the largest number of students possible within twelve years and employed financial and personal bonus-and malus-points for well-achieving and poor-achieving schools. The cheating originated in Atlanta, where the questionnaires of those students with insufficient results were sorted out and replaced by forms correctly filled in by the teachers. One resorted to cheating in order to obtain a better position in the national ranking and to avoid sanctions for schools and teachers with poor student results. The press even believed that this was done in a silent agreement with the respective governor since in the USA this method of achieving better ranking positions has developed its own culture taken from the field of sport. Obviously, nobody can evade such ranking in the USA of today. Moreover, better ranking positions yield additional funds and reputation. By now it has been assumed that the series of cheating have occurred in several US states to an unknown extent. The scandal heightened criticism of such testing procedures: "It is this idiotic pressure being exerted on schools and teachers caused by the test results and I believe that those tests not only corrupt the results themselves but also education and schooling as a whole", said the well-known test expert Professor *Haney* from Boston College. Since this cheating scandal at the latest, the "No-child-left-behind"-law is considered as failed.

Educational standards and quality management in Germany – the subtler form of American "cheating".

Whereas in the USA the producers of these test methods tend to demand rising stan-

dards the opposite path is being tread in our own country. Insufficient graduation exams (Abitur) are being retouched at the desk; and centralized nationwide examinations are being softened at selected schools under strict nondisclosure until nobody can fail. Students, parents and the public were made believe that better results had in fact been achieved. Universities indicate that it is not true: A major part of the elementary students is insufficiently qualified for successful studies, especially in the field of sciences. Consequently, the "Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF" (Federal Ministry of Education and Research) that had sponsored the concept of empirical education research, of educational standards, orientation towards competences and all kinds of central and decentralized test procedures with multi-million dollar amounts during the last twelve years, is now spending another multi-million dollar amount in order to tutor the high-school graduates with a kind of supplementary courses. Simultaneously, the pressure on university professors is being raised to make them rigorously reduce the failing rates. Only students who complete their studies in the standard period of studying are funded by the state. The extremely high failing rates at several German universities in particular in mathematics and engineering sciences point to the fact that an ever-wider gap is opening between school subjects which are oriented toward competences and respective university subjects. Apparently, nobody asks for the actual reason: why do mathematics and engineering sciences require mathematical knowledge as a precondition, for which the mathematical and reading literacy of PISA is just not sufficient.

Outlook

It is high time we return to education in its fullest sense, and steer clear from reducing education standards by diluting and lowering standards with carnevalistic didactics and by forcing teachers into the role of mere teaching guides while forbidding them to teach the basics – above all in the field of science, which is neither a priori there, nor easily acquired.

We've known since long how to teach and develop knowledge and skills as the basis of genuine education in the classroom. Why do we not give the teachers the liberty to decide on their own how to conduct their classes on the basis of their knowledge, in view of the fact that they are the experts in their field, and not the empirists and gurus of all sorts, who are currently pulled out of the hat by many a German Land.

Hereby the decisive and sovereign role of the Finnish teacher, who has the liberty to choose from the various teaching methods those he considers appropriate, may serve as an example, as well as the most comprehensive comparative study in this field by *John A.C. Hattie* "Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating

to Achievement" (5) from 2009, which undoubtedly points to the overriding role of the teacher in the education process, a fact that still seems to be ignored in our country. It gets rid of the preconceived idea that solely student-centred learning can bring about better learning results. The results of the study show that the teacher's role as the "activator", giving clear instruction, is much more successful than that of the "facilitator", or learning guide. It is exactly the often criticised "reciprocal teaching", similar to the method of development by questions, which achieves top results. Other interesting findings are the poor results of "problem-based learning". Furthermore the Swiss-German longitudinal study on the quality of classroom teaching of mathematics comes to the conclusion that teaching success can be expected when the teacher disposes of a) a profound and differentiated knowledge of his subject, b) a well-organised lesson-structure, c) the necessary amount of discipline and d) a good atmosphere in class. To the amazement of everyone including the researchers, group teaching led to poorer results. Where is the teacher who could not confirm without reservations that the four points are fundamental? There is no other country in the OECD, which overemphasizes the methods over the results as much as Germany. In contrast to the Anglo-American and Asian countries, and our French neighbours, who all prefer the teaching-to-the-test method, which we would not necessarily like to describe as exemplary. The solution seems to lie in a methodological variety, which makes the lessons also interesting for the students. Instead, the teachers here are being degraded to hirelings of the empirical education researchers and constructors of this so-called better teaching, who have no better idea than to advise teachers to produce assessment programmes – within the frame of the unduly controversial competence development models – which the teacher is permitted to hand out and collect from the students, whereby closest attention needs to be given to avoid any falsification of the quantitative assessment. And more and more we are obliged to answer the question why we continue mending the crumbling ruins of the Potemkin-style education villages against all better judgement. ●

¹ Klein, HP (2010): *Die neue Kompetenzorientierung: Exzellenz oder Nivellierung?* (The New Competence Orientation: Excellence or Leveling?) Journal für Didaktik der Biowissenschaften JföB 1, 1–11

² Klein, HP, Jahnke, Th (2012): *Die Folgen der Kompetenzorientierung im Fach Mathematik.* (The consequences of New Competence Orientation in the subject of Mathematics) Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik (in print) www.uni-protokolle.de/jforen

³ Ravitch, D. (2010): *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Tests and Choice are Undermining Education.* Basic Books, New York

⁴ Hattie, J.A.C. (2009): *Visible Learning. A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement.* Routledge, Chapman & Hall, New York, <http://www.dipf.de/de/projekte/Pythagoras>

(Translation Current Concerns)