

The politicisation of education: a perspective from Germany

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Formal education, that takes place through the institution of the school, plays a significant role in socialising the next generation. It enables individuals to acquire literacy skills, imparts knowledge accumulated over generations, provides new insights, promotes critical thinking and intellectual debate, and teaches appropriate behaviour. One of the most significant responsibilities of a school is to pass on socially guiding and binding values, and by doing so, ensure the survival of humanity. Teachers name and correct what is unacceptable while reinforcing what is desirable. In school, children acquire the knowledge and skills that are essential to the development of society. Schooling is a huge asset, especially for children from less privileged backgrounds, as it opens doors that would have otherwise remained closed to them.

The [German school](#) system is often the focus of political and educational controversy. There are constant efforts to influence schools to promote a range of values, many of which derive from organisations with a distinct [political agenda](#). At present, this is most noticeable in two areas: gender and inclusion. Influential German academics and practitioners in educational policy have expressed concern that schools are becoming increasingly ideologically laden. [Josef Kraus](#), who served as the president of Germany's largest teachers' union for thirty years and [Mathias Brodkorb](#), one of the most revered politicians in the area of education in Germany, are among others now arguing that the original mandate of schools is endangered. This essay considers the possible impact of this ideological capture on both education and the individual child.

Gender confusion

Gender equality has become a [guiding principle](#) in European and German politics. Attitudes towards the roles of women and men have changed considerably over recent decades. This is to be welcomed: a more liberal and free way of life is possible because of these changes. Attitudes towards sexuality have also shifted which is, again, entirely positive. Nobody

should be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. One important role of schooling is to reflect these broad social changes to students. However, schools have been expected to go further: rather than reflecting shifts in social attitudes they have been expected to bring about changes in beliefs and behaviour, determined not by a majority of the population but by minority interest groups.

In relation to gender, schools are expected to do more than reflect changed attitudes and expectations in the roles of men and women or even to advocate for gender equality. Instead, teaching about gender has come to mean something entirely different. The guiding principle now seems to be that any assumption of differences between men and women is outdated and should be [erased](#). This new policy adheres to the principle: human beings are the creators of themselves and can [construct](#) themselves, according to [their will](#), as a man or woman or something inbetween. “Gender confusion” is called for, and is communicated to children in school, with the explicit aim of disrupting and destroying the previous order just as [Judith Butler](#) envisions, even for very young children.

In Germany, various [curricula](#) for pre-schools and schools promote this new thinking around gender. In some kindergartens, strict attention is paid to ensuring that no gender-specific classifications are made. In the Swedish kindergarten “[egalia](#)”, which is considered a model of free education, children are not addressed by name, but gender-neutrally as “friend”. All materials that refer to gender differences have been removed – picture books, songs, games and toys. The [belief](#) is that being freed from social expectations, conventions and constraints is the only way for children to develop unencumbered. There is no empirical evidence to support this view.

In German schools, it is now standard practice to provide children with information about different forms of sexuality and lifestyles. However, the choice of materials and topics is highly questionable. The now famous educational curriculum outlined by [Tuider et al](#) in 2012 prescribes the design of a ‘brothel for all’ for 15 year-olds. Fourteen year-olds, meanwhile, are expected to match sex toys, such as vaginal balls, handcuffs and latex clothing, to specific groups. Thirteen year-olds are asked to act anal sex in drama workshops. Some critics are concerned that these exercises are not simply the extreme

examples of a couple of overexcited sex education gurus but that they have a method and an agenda behind them.

Some suggest there is a [conscious attempt](#) to cause “confusion and ambiguity” and “to break up feelings of [shame](#)” in children and young people. They fear that personal and intimate boundaries are being [overstepped](#) when adults intrude into highly personal areas of young people. In addition, there is concern that heterosexuality and the traditional family are being pushed into a marginalized position. Many plans and curricula for [sex education](#) rarely cover heterosexuality and the traditional family other than through references to “[forced heterosexuality](#)”. All this has led to public and academic debates and protests with critics coming from a range of different perspectives, including [feminism](#). One primary concern is psychological [encroachment](#) and experimentation on children and the insufficient empirical evidence of the risks and benefits of such practices.

Full Inclusion Movement

In 2006, the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) was adopted by the United Nations making inclusive education a priority for schools in many countries, including Germany, which ratified the CRPD in 2009. The CRPD undoubtedly played an essential role in supporting equality for people with disabilities worldwide. However, ‘full inclusion,’ the policy envisioned by the CRPD was never clearly [defined](#). It has come to be interpreted as meaning that every child – regardless of their needs – must be educated in the general classroom, without exception.

In 2016 the UN passed [General Comment No. 4](#), an explanatory comment on Article 24 (the right to education). It states explicitly that children are only permitted to be taught in a setting other than the regular classroom on a short-term basis. Parental rights are called into question as inclusive education is considered the child’s right, above and beyond the wishes of the parents. Undoubtedly, the neighbourhood school and the regular classroom are often the best place for children with disabilities to receive their education. However, we question the proposition that it is the best setting for *all* children with special needs, especially since research continues to be [inconclusive](#) on this subject. The 2011 [World](#)

[Report on Disabilities](#), produced by the World Health Organization, also contends that there is no definite evidence that full inclusion works for all students with disabilities.

Normality of difference

Some [proponents](#) of full inclusion claim that disability is just another personal difference, such as ability, gender, ethnic origin, nationality, first language, race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, or physical condition. Disability becomes reduced to one characteristic among many and, in the process, risks becoming seen as less important. At the same time, the primary cause of disability is considered to lie not within a person themselves but within the [outside world](#): material barriers in the physical environment, a lack of finance or external support and, above all, prejudicial attitudes. There is no doubt that all these restrictions continue to exist and impinge upon the lives of people with disabilities. However, problems may occur when personal liberation is sought through a denial of differences.

Supporters of full inclusion propose to [remove](#) all categories of disability to avoid stigma and separation. They argue that those who describe others as 'disabled' assign children, young people and adults an unbearable status, and view this as a [human rights violation](#). While educators must be aware that special interventions risk highlighting an individual's disability and potentially separating them from their peers, there is concern that the denial of any differences permits a new form of adaptation and appropriation into which individuals are supposed to fit. The danger is that they are to be made invisible, to be like all others and absorbed in the "normality of difference".

[Dederich](#) speaks of neglect of the individual, of a "disappearance of people" in inclusion. The gaze shifts away from the person and their differences. The rejection of disability is accompanied by a request that all specialised settings be dissolved; everything else is seen as deeply inhumane. Exceptional educational support, i.e. "special education," is also now being [questioned](#) in principle. Advocates for full inclusion accuse special education of putting children into a particular role that is pedagogically both meaningless and ineffective. An education taught through general pedagogy is considered entirely sufficient. While

special education should be less **stigmatizing**, the full inclusion movement endangers the mere **existence** of special education.

Where full inclusion has gained acceptance, some children with disabilities no longer receive the support they need and are **overlooked**. This may be especially true of children from less privileged social backgrounds. There has been an ongoing debate about the over-representation of black students in special education. Recent empirical research however suggests that children from ethnic and minority backgrounds suffer from a **lack** of special education and, as a result, their opportunities for educational success are diminished. It is precisely these children who need intensive attention which considers their inner and outer life situation. Their disabilities cannot be denied based on ideological convictions. It is highly problematic for children with disabilities if what is evident to them is not acknowledged. What is a child to think of themselves when others refuse to recognise their condition? How can a young person integrate experiences into their sense of self and feel validated in their uniqueness when the person opposite no longer dares to perceive their reality?

Conclusion

Schools in Germany are expected to embrace more radical views of inclusion, gender and sex education. Many of those views and practices have found their way into schools and curricula across Germany and probably other countries in the name of progress. This is concerning because there continues to be considerable controversy surrounding these issues in academia and society as a whole. The ideas behind these agendas may be noble as their proponents strive for a more equitable and just society. Unfortunately, radical desires for **reform** have often led to painful educational aberrations. Instead, it could be argued that schools should protect themselves from ideological appropriation and concentrate on their core tasks, passing on society's collective knowledge and cultural achievements and socialising children to act with self-discipline in meeting their own goals.

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