

About learning

Guiding text of Section I (General Education) of the BMB

The school is a place of learning. Not the only one, but an important one. Learning children and young adults who are actively supported by teachers form the heart of school life, around which everything ultimately has to revolve. Learning and teaching therefore stand at the centre of SQA - School Quality in General Education.

Both aspects - learning and teaching - are understood in a very broad sense: *Learning* refers to the functional and interdisciplinary acquisition of competences by pupils as well as the development of their personality, social behaviour and linguistic competence. *Teaching* covers a wide arc ranging from the transfer of knowledge via learning organisation and learning support through to the highly personal support of pupils by teachers - which will probably only be possible in isolated cases.

What do we actually know about learning and its prerequisites?

About learning itself, strictly speaking - nothing. We could say a whole lot about the conditions under which learning functions better or less well, and we could investigate the outcomes of learning processes. We are presented with increasingly fascinating of the human brain - but they don't tell us anything about how electrochemical processes become ideas, experiences and emotions.

In this context, it doesn't actually matter. The topics here are education, teaching methods and didactics, and we can go a long way simply by looking at the most important scientific findings concerning the prerequisites for successful, sustainable learning:

- To begin with, a fundamental fact: Each person is unique. Personality, learning experiences, level of development, gender, talents - the number of distinguishing attributes is immense. For all the effort that school systems put in to classifying and categorising pupils, people are never homogeneous, not in themselves and certainly not in groups. They can never be that. Heterogeneity, in the sense of diversity, difference, is therefore quite normal.
- Moreover: Nothing is possible without learning. People are born to learn and are incapable of anything other than a life full of learning, consciously or unconsciously. Fortunately so, because we constantly find ourselves in new situations, having to find our way around. We don't always learn what we or others want us to learn, but cannot *not* learn.
- We also know that learning is about integrating the new into the existing. People always try to understand new information and experiences by putting them in context with what they already know and are capable of. In other words, it's not about simple addition, but an active, dynamic process that has a great deal to do with networks. The brain changes as it learns, and we have recently even become able to watch it at work. The more widely and deeply anchored the foundations, i.e. the existing competences, the better the chances of anchoring new information and experiences into them. And the more demanding the new, the more important it is to build on the existing competences.

- Learning does not function at the press of a button. If a person isn't motivated, they won't learn (what is desired). Curiosity and interest are such motivations, as is the desire to become more competent. These motivations are awakened when we are confronted with something new that we are unable to explain on the basis of our previous experiences or prior knowledge. We want to close this gap, but only when the topic appeals to us and we have the feeling that the effort is worth our while. Very small gaps aren't interesting enough, very large ones are quickly perceived as overwhelming or even threatening. So it's about the "medium-sized gaps" - particularly important for learning arrangements and the creation of tasks.
- People learn especially well when accompanied by pleasant feelings. What creates such feelings? Let's take a look at the mission statement of ÖZEPS, the Austrian Centre for Personality Development and Social Learning: "Each successful learning process is based on an appreciative, supportive relationship - that applies in particular to learning processes in school. Learners also need time and space to develop personal strength and to become socially competent." A positive relationship with the (teaching) person, especially at an early age, is an important prerequisite for pupils being able to find personal access to content - and thus meaning. Which naturally means that the teachers for their part have an in-depth relationship with the content they want to share with the pupils.
- And then there's the magic word: Trust. Trust in oneself, in the group and in the teacher(s). Worry and stress are bad teachers. Learning takes time and a stress-free space that allows mistakes - some would say enables mistakes - because we can only truly learn by making them. That's why it's also so important to clearly separate learning and achievement situations.
- Last but not least: Achievement. Achievement is encouraged, is important and strengthens the feeling of self-worth ("It was a difficult piece of work, but I did it!") and increases a person's willingness to take on new challenges, which leads to further growth in knowledge and competence. Positive learning outcomes and achieved targets set a spiral of motivation in motion - they can, in the truest sense, give us wings. Achievement and the joy of learning are therefore not a contradiction - quite the opposite!

What does that mean for teachers?

Above all that they are important. How teachers are and what they do makes the difference. There's nothing new about that. As Johann A. Comenius wrote in his *Didactica Magna* in 1632: "The first and last aims of our didactics should be to divine and explore the method of teaching, whereby the teacher needs to teach less, but the pupils to learn more; let there be less noise, tedium and useless effort in schools; in its place more freedom, pleasure and real progress." – Or about 370 years later, Heinz v. Foerster: "Learning is the most personal thing in the world, as unique as your face. But when the teacher teaches, the pupil becomes passive. One must realise that learning is not a process of copying. Learning is the most personal operation. Even more personal than lovemaking." Such findings fills libraries and many educators have long since made them their own.

However, only the pupils themselves can learn. In order for them to actually do so, they need a motivation. But people can only motivate themselves. We cannot motivate others, not even the best teachers can do that. What they can do, however, is create conditions in which people - in this case children and young people - are happy to motivate themselves, in which they are prepared to take on shared responsibility for their learning. Which also includes gradually learning to appreciate one's own knowledge and ability and to deepen one's knowledge about the effectiveness of one's own learning strategies.

Children and young people need stimulating learning opportunities ("learning environments") and they need active support and assistance in a stress-free setting. Sometimes, people need to be "seduced" into learning, because their interest isn't always a given from the outset. Sometimes, the pupils simply need information because the situation demands it. They constantly need help to undo "knots" in their learning processes, which in turn requires teachers to be able to look at the situation "through the eyes of the pupils" and give them time to explore their thoughts. And all of this needs clear

instructions and structures, more for the uncertain learners, usually less for the more advanced. To summarise: The “right” model doesn’t exist; its selection is always a question of the objective and ensuring that it is embedded in the overall methodical, didactic concept to the best possible extent. Which also means that teachers need an extensive repertoire in order to even be able to make a choice.

Of course, people are also social beings. We are not alone in the world, and we are constantly learning from one another, whether we want to or not. That includes, in particular, in school. Learning processes are always taking place within groups; they are essential for the acquisition of self, social and professional competence in children and young people. Their diversity fundamentally increases the number of learning opportunities, even in conflict situations; but the same diversity also places very specific demands on the teachers. Whether these learning processes succeed depends largely on their professionalism.

Educational, psychological, methodological and didactic competences are therefore required; however, they are not enough. Good teaching is inconceivable without substance, without professional competence. A deeper relationship to and personal enthusiasm of the teachers for the subject play an especially important role. For all the enthusiasm for the contents, we should, however, never forget that teachers teach children and young people - and not subjects.

Ultimately, it comes down to the attitude, a basic educational attitude, which gives every pupil the feeling of being welcome in this school, in this class, from the outset. Good teachers like children and young people at least as much as their subject; they assume that each of them has the potential for development, even if it is hidden from view. They want to help them to discover and develop this potential; in doing so, they search first of all for their strengths and talents, and not for their mistakes. Such teachers embolden and can also let go, they have the ability to empathise without taking the pupils in. They can take a relaxed view of things, but also set clear boundaries where necessary. And they are authentic: What they say matches what they do. Pupils very quickly sense whether that’s the case, and that’s important to them.

There is no doubt that it is often very tiring to show or maintain this attitude in everyday life, that teachers also have nerves, that the basic and surrounding conditions at school can sometimes be difficult. There are limits to what is possible, no question. What it does come down to, however, is that the personal *effort* around this basic attitude always remains perceptible and is connected with the willingness to be a learner oneself for one’s whole (professional) life. Subjecting the pupils and their learning processes as well as one’s own actions to ongoing reflection is considered to be one of the most important attributes of good teachers in the field of teaching and learning research. Evaluation and personal feedback help enormously here, even if they may sometimes be painful. – And last but not least: Nothing can happen without a bit of humour...

So where will the journey lead?

We have to finally say goodbye to the idea of wanting to constantly indoctrinate children and young people at school. This insight is nothing new, but it still hasn’t made enough headway in the classroom: Pupils are not vessels to be simply “filled” with knowledge – knowledge that is furthermore based around a fictitious “standard pupil” that exists only in the statistics. And a knowledge that remains “lethargic” if it can’t be tested and deepened in real life; a knowledge that can be passed on in examinations “at the press of a button”, but is then quickly lost again because it hasn’t become a competency.

The alternative? The current discussion about education is marked by two terms: Individualisation and focus on competency. This sounds a little awkward, admittedly, and provides some reasons for misunderstandings. In essence, however, it is as simple as it is obvious: *Individualising* learning and teaching means creating learning processes so that children and young people find sufficient opportunity to actively develop themselves, sometimes for themselves, sometimes in the community, in accordance with their individual personality and learning requirements. It would, however, be a mistake to want to create individual learning plans for every single child, because that would above all mean taking away the pupils’ ability to learn for themselves. It would mean thinking for them, instead of enabling them to assimilate things for themselves, to become competent.

Because that's exactly what school is about: the acquisition of competences. As is usually the case with important terms, countless definitions are available. In Austria, the one arrived at by Franz Weinert has above all made it to the fore; he defined competences as *"the cognitive abilities and skills that are found in individuals or can be learned by them in order to solve certain problems, as well as the associated motivational and social dispositions and abilities to be able to successfully and responsibly use the solution in variable situations"*. Competence therefore always means knowledge, ability and intention, and thus also has a lot to do with attitude and outlooks.

The term 'competence' has a wide range of meanings. It means technical competence in the sense of a well-founded general education and interdisciplinary competences such as the ability to communicate or solve problems. It encompasses self-competence, social competence, the orientation towards a supportive system of values as well as the ability and willingness to take responsibility for one's own learning.

Understood in this way, competence becomes the basis for life-long learning, something we need more urgently than ever before nowadays. While it used to be possible to amass so much knowledge at school that it was sometimes enough for a whole (professional) life, we are increasingly unable nowadays to predict what pupils will need by way of knowledge and ability in ten of twenty years' time in order to lead successful lives. Moreover, the amount of knowledge in our world is multiplying rapidly, the (social) environment is changing much too quickly, and it has also become far too easy to obtain information and knowledge from the internet. – Put another way, and more succinctly: The school is no longer the laboratory in which "learn for life", but is life itself, in which we are constantly learning. Assuming that we open every door...

And what do the lead projects of the BMB have to do with all this?

Lots. Whether educational standards, New Secondary School, Teacher Education NEW, the new school-leaving and diploma examination or daycare in school: All these projects, measures and provisions have one thing in common: for all the diversity of the concepts and accents, they all point in the same direction by...

- perceiving pupils holistically, as independent personalities, whose development as individuals and members of society represents the central concern of schools
- observing the diversity of pupils in learning groups as both a normal situation and an opportunity at the same time
- seeing the learning community as essential for the development of the individual
- seeing learning as an everlasting, independent, highly personal activity of every individual, whose success and sustainability depend significantly on ownership and successful relationships
- calling for the most diverse learning offers possible for all pupils in the sense of equal opportunities in an inclusive school
- availing oneself appropriately and responsibly of the possibilities of new information and communication technologies
- deriving from all of this the need for a shift in focus in the spectrum of teacher roles and teacher education by assigning more weight to active, encouraging and challenging "learning support" than before.

The **framework objective of the BMB from school year 2016/17** ("Further development of learning and teaching at schools providing general education in the direction of individualisation and competence orientation and inclusive settings") reflects this strategic alignment. SQA – School Quality in General Education serves as an instrument and tool for the planning, implementation and verification of focused measures.

Of course, none of this is new and several schools have long since proved that learning and teaching understood in this way can succeed in practice. The legal framework also provides some information; it is interesting, for example, to read the “target section” (section 2 SchOG) in this light, and even more so the general parts of the current curricula and a number of decrees. Good things come to those who wait...

This guiding text of Section I of the BMB is based on numerous sources, in particular the study entitled “Visible Learning” by John Hattie (in the commented summary by Ulrich Steffens and Dieter Höfer) as well as on texts and materials by Franz Weinert, Manfred Spitzer, Gerald Hüther, Reinhard Kahl, Brigitte Schröder and Ingrid Salner-Gridling. – The author thanks all colleagues from the general education school system who contributed to the production of this text with their valuable feedback.

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