

Germany

Turning The School Of Learning Into A School Of Life

Geseko von Lüpke

THE school of the future — where is it? The school for ecological learning, the school of democracy, the school of new solutions, the multicultural society? Indeed, the school of the information age, of global interlinking via inter-active media, the school of earth's citizens? The bold design, the visionary plan, the urgent reform concept are still not in sight.

For more and more parents, however, a "proper school" means an institution capable of preparing their offsprings of the problems of the future. This includes not waiting any longer educational bureaucracy lays down what must be done. "Because that's exactly the attitude that we must not pass on, i.e. that people just wait for someone in high office to tell us what to do," says educational planner Gerold Becker who calls for structures for the modern school in which those concerned get together and work jointly on the challenges.

In the meantime, an increasing number of schools in the federal area are now experimenting: learning how to learn, open and exemplary learning, learning from nature, learning with all the senses, less content and more play are no longer pipe-dreams. In the case of reform planning, educator Roudolf zur Lippe, has long been recommending the Federal Commission of Inquiry "Education 2000" to be guided by the experiences which have originated far removed from institutional terms of reference. Reforms — i.e. for teachers, parents and pupils: enlarging, in small steps, the scope for action which the framework curricula allow.

Project instruction and free activity — concepts which Italian educator Maria Montessori coined 100 years ago — are already being implemented at private and even state schools. Things are being tried out in pilot schemes today, such as the "Bielefeld Laboratory School," which may be common practice tomorrow. Here the school has no classrooms: Lessons are taught in family-like and small mixed-age groups. Timetables have been abolished, content and structure are decided on anew daily. "It is a school of life," says Annemarie von der Groben the didactic principal. "And the hypothesis is that the achievements are all the better, the more they have to do with the life of the children." Instead of learning "for the sake of a university entrance certificate, life is to be learnt in such a way that it corresponds with the development stage of the child concerned: playing and in competition, travelling

ing and in work experience.

Marks and written class tests, designed to check repeatedly whether the same things has taken place in all heads, do not exist at the Laboratory School. These have been replaced by individual performance records and differentiated assessments. "If school generates fear, it hampers the development of personalities which our country and our whole globe needs, who feel themselves responsible for the future and who do not say 'none of my business,'" says Charlotte Roder who is working on the establishment of a "holistic school" in Cologne and has initiated school experiments on an integrated basis throughout the world.

But reform is not only being tried out in laboratory conditions and visionary projects. In increasing measure, the classical awarding of marks or grades is being dispensed with nationwide in the first four or six years at primary schools (Grundschulen). Even in reform-sceptical Bavaria they are being done away with in Classes 1 and 2 next year. The death knell for the old cramming school, which shovels knowledge into pupils' heads, has long sounded. Central organisation, inflexible rules, learning content, competition and marks are being slimmed down. Instead, cooperation is given as the learning objective and practised in group and project work.

Whereas the majority of education institutions are still enjoying a deep sleep, some have been awakened by the present crisis and are following completely new paths. These include the Helene Lange School in Wiesbaden which was awarded the Comenius Prize for its courage in March: here, every fourth class-classroom has been torn down to make room for exhibitions, handicraft, group work, encounters and drama. Many little "schools within schools" have been set up to turn the huge anonymous learning factory into a home. Teachers have their own classrooms, there are material rooms and individually designed and decorated rooms. Project work here means that all subjects are grouped around a subject area which the young persons, inside and outside the school walls literally explore without time limit. And every day, at one O'clock, the pupils clean the whole school themselves to pay for a professional stage director with the money they save thereby from the budget. "It is more strenuous than instruction. It means work from morning to evening, often at weekends and in the holidays," school principal Edja Riegel points out. "As a result, however, we launch a wonderful project which

imparts a very different sense of self-esteem than a test in which a pupil gets the mark satisfactory." Violence is unknown at this school because the young persons are able to lay tracks different from aisles of destruction. In this context, the school becomes a lebensraum, a place to gain experience, instead functioning as a funnel of knowledge which only begins on completion of school.

In the Odewald School in Oberhambach, Hesse, on the other hand, the attempt is being made to convey experiences to the pupils which are exemplary for social life. "It should, in principle, be possible to make pupils aware of the fact that everything adults do can also be done by young persons and children," explains Wolfgang Harder, the school principal. "The grown-ups indulge in school policy, the pupils have a parliament and raise taxes, the adults instruct, the pupils teach each other things in teams."

In other words, the holistic school includes the learning of democracy, policy, organisation and co-determination. As in the case of classical school subjects, it is also imperative that learning takes place as much as possible with the application of all the senses and with the object concerned. According to didactical research, knowledge only influences behaviour in the daily round if a sensorily experienced environment becomes the object of the learning process.

Only recently has it emerged that all the sections which have been hitherto assigned to environmental education only, are also applicable to other subjects. "Community Education" is the key-word. One example of this is Nikolaus Himmelstoß's class at the vocational training school in Altötting: instead of sticking grimly to the curricula, this teacher extended the instruction to include non-school problems and, together with his pupils and colleagues from the domestic science, carpentry and electrical engineering departments, designed a solar hotplace which is now in use in 30 different countries.

In this context, experimental and playful learning does not mean saying goodbye to modern scientific instruction, tried and tested experimental facilities and new media.

On the contrary, says Ervin Laszlo, systems theorist and co-founder of the Club of Rome. Computers can help to make something comprehensible as a whole. But new media are purposeful if combined with new methods. "Children play with computers anyway. Why don't we use them more modern

by showing them how it influences my family, my village and my country if I, as an individual, do something?"

Anyone who is to understand correlations must learn to recognise connections. This is a difficult task as long as school knowledge is set out like a cupboard with many separate drawers. The counter-model is project instruction to which all other subjects are assigned, where intellectual, manual and linguistic experiences gained inside and outside the school collaborate and the 45-minute rhythm of imparting knowledge is dispensed with. If free activity and project instruction establish themselves, this would be equal to a gentle revolution in the education system. Routine would be ousted by experiment, knowledge would acquire concrete reference to action, inclination would replace obligation and the school of learning would possibly become the school of life.

If learning is to transcend school walls, every class will land in its community with its own problems, social structures and environmental conditions. Not only the popular initiative "Better school," but also many educationalists are consequently calling for greater autonomy for individual schools, as has already been tried out in Bremen, Hamburg and Hesse. In Bavaria, on the other hand, any school trying to establish its own image still runs into resistance. "With their educational mandate on behalf of the state, local schools cannot deal with subject matter and choose their own point of main emphasis as they please," says Hans Zehetmair, Bavarian education minister. "However, local schools can make use of the already existing scope, the enlargement of which could be discussed."

The pioneers need the support of parents, professional associations, trade unions and political parties. Education for tomorrow will function in the schools of yesterday. But the experience of inadequacy can lead to changes. History tells us that reforms from above are effectual. There is no stone cold for the school of the future can only be newly formed time again via many timely experiments.

The future has begun, says social researcher Ludwig von