

Education for a responsible and mature citizenship or ideologisation of students

by Marita Brune-Koch

Educating children and young people to become responsible citizens is one of the most important goals of primary and secondary school. They grow into our democratic systems and will shape them in the future. However, the question of how best “to educate responsible citizens” is once again the subject of fierce debate. The discussions range from the point of view that political education should begin in kindergarten¹ to the demand for neutrality of schools and teachers in political and ideological matters.



*Exploring an issue from all sides in a class discussion.
(Picture ma)*

A revealing exchange in the Bernese cantonal parliament between *Mathias Müller*² and *Alain Pichard*,³ members of the Grand Council, highlighted clear positions. In a motion, Müller called for schools and universities to comply with the requirement of neutrality. Specifically:

1. Political neutrality in schools and universities must be promoted and enforced.
2. Political propaganda in any form on school grounds is to be prevented; instruction is to be neutral.
3. The politically neutral civics lessons should be promoted to teach students about the importance of our democratic system.

“Teachers are not eunuchs”

This was contradicted by *Alain Pichard*. In his opinion, it is not enforceable to ban political flyers, banners and the like at universities. He rejected this demand. He took a clear stand on the demand for neutrality in teaching: “Neutral teaching is a chimera,” he explained, “schools are not neutral, teachers are not neutral, they are not eunuchs.”

Instead, we must focus on professionalism, that is, take the educational mandate seriously, which means that we have to educate schoolchildren to become responsible citizens who can form their own opinions.

Pichard’s arguments cannot be dismissed. Teachers are human beings; they have opinions and attitudes. They cannot be completely “celibate” in matters of opinion if they want to come

across as authentic personalities. On the other hand, the school – especially in a direct democracy – must be neutral. School attendance is compulsory for all children, but the state does not have the right to impose one point of view on all children and thus on all citizens. How can this dilemma be resolved?

This question was already being asked in the 1970s. At that time, political discussions also caused quite a stir and naturally reached the schools as well. An agreement was reached on the so-called “Beutelsbach Consensus”. Because of its significance for the question that arises, we quote it here verbatim:

1. Prohibition of overpowering.

It is not allowed to take the students by surprise – by whatever means – in the sense of desired opinions and thus prevent them from “gaining an independent judgement”. This is precisely where the line is drawn between political education and indoctrination. But indoctrination is irreconcilable with the role of the teacher in a democratic society and with the – generally accepted – objective of the student’s maturity.

2. What is controversial in science and politics must also appear controversial in the classroom.

This requirement is closely linked to the above, because if different points of view are ignored, options are suppressed, alternatives remain unaddressed, the path to indoctrination is taken. The question is whether the teacher should not even have a corrective function, i.e. whether he or she should not particularly elaborate on points of view and alternatives that are foreign to the students (and other participants in political education events) from their respective political and social backgrounds.

When stating this second basic principle, it becomes clear why the teacher's personal point of view, his or her scientific-theoretical background and political opinion are relatively uninteresting. To take up an example already mentioned again: The teachers' understanding of democracy does not pose a problem, because opposing views are also presented.

3. Pupils must be put in a position to analyse a political situation and their own interests, as well as to look for ways and means of influencing the political situation in line with their interests. Such an objective includes a strong emphasis on operational skills, which is a logical consequence of the two principles mentioned above. (...) ⁴

The "Beutelsbach Consensus" applies throughout the German-speaking world, including Switzerland. The *Swiss Union of Teachers* (LCH) bases its demand for more political education on this document.

However, when *Dagmar Rösler* of the LCH calls on schools to "put political events into context", ⁵ the question arises as to what is meant by this and whether it corresponds to the above-mentioned consensus.

"Put into context" – we have recently heard this term in the media, with journalists wanting to "put into context" events for us citizens as well. In the media, the presentation of different perspectives and approaches usually falls by the wayside, as journalists believe they know how to properly assess what is happening and act as educators of the people. Teachers, however, must present or bring to light different perspectives on a topic at school, in accordance with the principle of neutrality.

Crises and wars – controversial?

Let us take the topic of "crises and wars in the world" which Ms Rösler addresses. She demands that it should be discussed at school. Well, but that means that when it comes to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, for example, both the point of view of Ukraine and that of the West supporting it, as well as that of Russia and the countries supporting it, would have to be presented. And all the nuances in between. The teacher would also be allowed to state his point of view in such a context, justify it, but leave it up to the students which view they want to follow.

Would such a discussion be possible in one of our schools today?



In a democracy, weighing up the pros and cons is an important skill to learn. (Picture ma)

Corona – controversial?

Or take the corona question. A topic that has affected all students directly and personally. Here, too, the studies and statements of the government, the official bodies, and the scientists should have been heard and analysed, as well as those deviating from the official view and citing scientific evidence for it. Would a teacher have been allowed to do that at the time? According to the "Beutelsbach Consensus", this would be the professional thing to do and would help to empower students.

Gender – controversial?

Let's look at another hot potato: the question of gender and sexes. *Dagmar Rösler* finds events such as a "Gender Day" useful for dealing with "relevant social issues". However, to ensure that such a Gender Day does not become a one-sided treatment of the topic by representatives of the LGBTQI+ lobby, further perspectives would then have to be presented on another day, perhaps on a "Sexes Day".

Of course, the students would also have to be given the opportunity to examine both – or several? – theories based on scientific facts so that they can then decide which one they consider to be correct. Representatives of the transgender theory often visit schools, but would it be possible today to invite a biologist or a medical doctor to school who could explain that nature only provides for two sexes? Wouldn't the Antifa be standing in the playground?

How else should Rösler's demand be met: "It should not be about everyone having the same opinion at the end of the day, but about having dealt with it and being able to form one's own

opinion". But that is only possible if the whole scientific and ideological spectrum is brought to the students' attention.

Does "wokeness" lead to maturity?

Dagmar Rösler demands that our schools should be "woke" and refers to the Duden definition of the term, according to which "woke" means "to be attentive and committed to racial, sexist and social discrimination". Yes, that is how the term was originally intended. But terms undergo change. Today, the term "woke" often refers to a narrow spectrum of opinion, and anyone who does not adhere to it puts their reputation, career, and position at risk. This does not exactly correspond to the "Beutelsbach Consensus".

It would be exciting and necessary to review curricula, teaching materials and projects, theory and practice, to see to what extent they take into account the "Beutelsbach Consensus" or oppose it. After all, it is about the maturity of our youth and future citizens.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ E.g. *Dagmar Rösler*, President, LCH (Swiss Union of Teachers)

² *Mathias Müller*, Professional officer and psychologist, Swiss Peoples Party

³ *Alain Pichard*, secondary teacher and editor of the *Condorcet-Blogs*, formerly a member of the Green-liberals

⁴ <https://www.bpb.de/die-bpb/ueber-uns/auftrag/51310/beutelsbacher-konsens/>

History of the "Beutelsbach Consensus": "Despite widespread polarisation and polemic, the dialogue between experts on the foundations and objectives of political education continued unabated in the 1970s. Of the many conferences at federal and state level, that of the Baden-Württemberg State Agency for Civic Education in the Swabian town of Beutelsbach in 1976 was of particular importance.

Hans-Georg Wehling summarised the common ground of the authors in dispute in three points. These became known as the "Beutelsbach Consensus" and were used in further discussions." From: Bernhard Sutor: Politische Bildung im Streit um die "intellektuelle Gründung" der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, External Link: From Politics and Contemporary History: Political Education [B 45/2002]) [https://www.lch.ch/fileadmin/user_upload_lch/Politik/Positionspapiere/240524_Positionspapier_PolitischeBildung_Kurzversion_publiziert.pdf](https://www.lch.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/lch/Politik/Positionspapiere/240524_Positionspapier_PolitischeBildung_Kurzversion_publiziert.pdf)

⁵ <https://www.lch.ch/aktuell/detail/lehrpersonen-sollen-werte-vermitteln-und-duerfen-dabei-auch-ihre-eigene-meinung-einbringen>