

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Free Alternative Schools in Germany Matthias Hofmann, Dipl. Paed., Berlin

“As a movement for radical reform of school practice [the alternative school movement] plays an important role in the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG: West Germany]. This role is by far not fully played out yet. For Free Alternative Schools it is not only about changing individual elements of school practice. It is rather about designing school as a whole anew with a view to address changing educational and social challenges. Exactly for this reason they are also of utmost importance for the development of the entire school system” (Maas, in Borchert & Maas, 1998, p. 17, all translations by author).

Abstract

In this essay the roots of Free Alternative Schools (FAS) are depicted and their history in Germany over the last 40 years is sketched. The educational concepts of the schools are presented and a critical appraisal of their current situation is included.

Early days

The first project that retrospectively can be seen as a free alternative to school was

organised by Leo N. Tolstói (1828– 1910). On his estate he taught the children of the servants. Participation for the children was voluntary. They were offered a meal (something not to be underestimated as an incentive to attend school at the time). A boy who came every day and simply lay down at the furnace to rest was left to himself by Tolstói. After a few months this child was able to write (apparently simply by passive observation). This for Tolstói confirmed that there are many different ways to learn something.

Further alternative school projects were established in Spain by Francisco Ferrer (1859–1909) and his *Escuela Moderna*, or also the school of A.S. Neill (1893–1970) called “*Summerhill*,” in Suffolk, England.

When the first free schools were founded in Germany in the 1970s the texts of A. S. Neill, George Dennison (1925–1987) and Francisco Ferrer had been circulated widely as bootleg copies within circles of the political movement following the student’s revolt in 1968. Less attention however was given to the first radical school projects during the Weimar Republic.

It is possible that this potential historical reference was largely neglected because of the eradication of the entire

libertarian-alternative school reform movement during the time of fascist rule in Germany. Only a few radical left wing teachers like Minna Specht returned from exile after 1945 and got involved in the establishment of democratic forms of schooling in West Germany. Another reason could be that the proposition of the term “reform pedagogy” by Hermann Nohl (1963) assembled a “movement” of a peculiarly wide spectrum ranging from the left wing radical Karl Marx School in Berlin-Neukölln to school concepts with clearly racist basic positions.

First establishment of schools

The first Free Alternative Schools (FAS) in the FRG were founded at the beginning of the 1970s. The oldest schools are the Freie Schule Frankfurt and the Glockseeschule Hannover. Since their early days FAS represents a diverse movement. In different towns the beginnings varied a lot:

Since 1974 the Freie Schule Frankfurt had to fight a legal battle over 12 years for its right to exist and to get the state’s recognition. This fate—years of running a school without state funding and under pressure of illegality—was shared by many other schools in the FRG, e. g., in Würzburg, Kassel and Bremen. (Maas, 1998, p. 16)

Irrespective of personal motives of the founders there are three main strands of motivation and conceptual references that played a role for the alternative school movement.

- a) Historical references are found in the Reform- und Versuchsschulbewegung (reform and model school movement). In land reform schools, Jenaplan and Montessori schools it was assumed that education “from the position of the child” needs to be holistic, including “heads, hearts and hands” (Maas, 1998, p. 15). Target groups for these schools were children and adolescents, in particular also from a working class background.
- b) Political struggles against capitalism and the state’s structures throughout the 1960s led to the development of potentially critically minded people. From within these (often student’s) circles the anti-authoritarian Kinderlaeden originated. A centre of the Kinderlaeden movement was Berlin. In the Kinderlaeden anti-authoritarian lifestyles were practiced (with reference e. g., to Summerhill school). The target groups of Kinderlaeden were children before official school age (i. e., children under the age of six).
- c) The third point of reference for the establishment of FAS was the free school movement in the US. In big cities in the US, schools had been founded in which particularly children and adolescents of lower social classes were catered for. An essential element for these schools was the voluntary attendance of lessons (Maas, 1998, p. 16).

These three strands—which can be summarized as reform and model schools, anti-authoritarian Kinderlaeden and voluntary attendance of lessons—provided

the basis for the first Free Alternative Schools (FAS) in the FRG.

It took until the end of the 1970s for this development to gain some attention in the public sphere at a time when the debates of school reform were no longer dominated by the topic of comprehensive schooling. A first national meeting of FAS (and start-up groups) was organised in 1978. New input came from the side of the ecological and the peace movement. Elements of ecological education and intercultural learning played a role in the further development of the alternative schools. By 1988 there were already 18 such schools in the FRG. This development also led to the establishment of a national umbrella organisation: Bundesverband der Freien Alternativschulen (BFAS).

“While in the old FRG the ‘Free-School-Founding-Euphoria’ of the 1980s ebbed significantly during the 1990s there was new drive and hope coming for the alternative school movement from the East with the unification of Germany” (Maas, 1998, p. 17). At the end of the 1990s there were 36 FAS operating in Germany as a whole (East and West reunified) with a total of 1600 students.

Alternative schools today

There are now nearly 100 Free Alternative Schools and start-up groups as members of BFAS. The vast majority of these schools operate as independent schools, some are run by local authorities. As of September 2012, there were 5000 students registered within FAS. The schools offer a full day programme, with 20 of the schools also running a day-nursery. Forty-eight of the schools include primary and secondary school level, and one of the schools leads

up to the German Abitur (numbers taken from 2012).

Normally parents pay a school fee according to their income level. This is meant to allow also children from families of lower income strata to attend the schools. In principle every school fee is an obstacle to all inclusive participation. Only if FAS were funded exactly in the same manner as state schools would it be possible to assess their strengths and weaknesses in a fair comparison.

What the member schools of BFAS have in common is the wide ranging participation of students in all aspects of school organisation, group activities, and decision making. Students are involved in the everyday tasks within the schools, tidying, cleaning, but also offering learning projects, and a variety of extra activities often planned and carried out as mixed age activities.

FAS rarely limit themselves to one particular “educational line.” The school concepts hardly ever provide such a “pure doctrine.” Instead there is a creative eclectic reference to diverse educators and model schools and in this manner a concept is designed that can take care of the individuality of children and of changing social conditions.

There is however a risk that a kind of educational arbitrariness creeps in that allows schools to act differently on a random basis, changing from day to day. Strong personalities often find great scope for their ideas within alternative schools. As long as such influence is exerted in the context of a school’s concept and to the benefit of the children it is normally a gain for everyone involved.

Where personal (biographic, religious-esoteric, ideologic or other) attitudes of

teachers in alternative schools become dominant factors an essential point is lacking: FAS are there for the children and adolescents to allow them their own experiences and to enable them to develop their own attitudes. A central idea in this context is the concept of self-regulation, or autonomy.

This concept needs to be understood via its counterpart: control. In the state's schools there are quite detailed regulations that have to be followed, so that teachers experience their situation as being controlling. The concept of self-regulation in FAS is meant to apply to all actors. Nevertheless it is particularly important for the children.

For teachers this means to reflect on their own practice and avoid unconscious transferences. It is of secondary interest that working in FAS for teachers also means a great deal of educational freedom. Every "I know what is right for child X" bears the risk of patronizing and manipulation, whereas "Free Alternative Schools see themselves as an experiential space in which children are inspired to engage on their own initiative with those learning topics which they choose themselves" (Maas, 1998, p. 32).

The common basis of Free Alternative Schools

The BFAS is mainly concerned with legal topics (school recognition), advice and support of start-up groups, organisation of the annual conference of FAS and PR work on a national level.

The common basis of the Free Alternative Schools is described in eight theses. These were agreed by the member schools of BFAS in 1986:

- The present and future problems of society (environmental problems, wars, poverty, etc.) can only be solved democratically by individuals who are able to live according to the principles of personal responsibility and democracy. Alternative schools seek to offer children, teachers and parents the opportunity to practice self-regulation and democracy again and again in everyday life. This is the most important political dimension of alternative schools.
- Alternative schools are schools in which childhood is understood as an equally respected phase of life with the rights of self-determination, happiness and contentment, rather than simply a training period for adulthood.
- Alternative schools create a space in which children can satisfy their own needs, such as the needs for freedom of movement, spontaneous self-expression, independent time management and intimate friendships.
- Alternative schools renounce the use of coercion for disciplining children. Rules and restrictions are created through group processes of conflict resolution, addressing both conflicts between children and conflicts between adults and children. These rules, however, can be changed by the group at any time.
- Educational subject matter is discovered naturally through the

child's own experiences and determined in cooperation with the teachers. The selection of subject matter is a continuous process that involves the experiential background of children and teachers. The complexity of learning is taken into account through varied and flexible forms of learning that involve play as well as the everyday life and social environment of the school.

- Alternative schools do more than simply impart knowledge to their pupils. They support emancipatory learning processes that open new and unusual paths of insight for everyone involved. In this way, such schools can help to lay the groundwork for the solution of present and future problems of society.
- Alternative schools are self-governed. The design of the self-government is a meaningful experience in democratic collaboration for parents, teachers and pupils.
- Alternative schools are places in which every individual's attitudes and opinions can be recognised as open and changeable. In this way, they offer the chance to experience adventure and learn about life. (BFAS, <http://www.freie-alternativschulen.de/index.php/about-us-in-english>)

In autumn 2011 the principles of the BFAS were extended in the form of a declaration:

Free Alternative Schools are diverse. Each school is different.

1. Free Alternative Schools are communities that are cooperatively created by everyone involved. The experiences and the knowledge gained in this process encourages and enables them to face social problems, work out constructive solutions and try out new forms of social life.
2. Free Alternative Schools are autonomous schools. Practicing self-governance is an influential experience of democratic sociality for children, adolescents, parents and staff. They create their own rules and structures that at the same time remain open to change. This fosters a sense of community, non-violent conflict solutions and appreciation of the situation of others.
3. In Free Alternative Schools children, adolescents and adults enjoy similar rights for self-determination and protection. Everybody's needs are valued equally.
4. Learning presupposes reliable relationships. At Free Alternative Schools respectful togetherness and the deriving trust are the basis for all relationships.
5. People at Free Alternative Schools understand learning as a life-long process. Elements of learning are also play, social and emotional experiences and the interests of children, adolescents and adults. This leads to

individual ways of learning that can initiate emancipatory learning processes.

6. Free Alternative Schools are spaces of learning and living that are characterised by sensitivity and openness for change and development. They integrate diverse educational ideas in their concepts and implement them in diverse manner. (BFAS, <http://www.freie-alternativschulen.de/index.php/ueber-uns/selbstverstaendnis/14-grundsaeetze-freier-alternativschulen>)

For the last 40 years FAS have been experimenting with new ways of relating between adults and children, with alternative lifestyles and with new forms of “doing school.” A trendsetting culture of learning and living in a holistic, radical democracy and with solidarity is meant to be practiced and developed.

Therefore FAS are quite relevant as models of future schooling for the general school system. All it needs is the willingness to engage with their potential.

At the same time the erroneous belief should be avoided that alternative schools are better than the state schools: “The elitist consciousness of the historic alternative school movement is pointedly summarised by Negt’s sentence: ‘There is no alternative to alternative schools!’” (Maas, 1998, p. 28).

If alternative schools are compared to or evaluated against state schools the question is always: What are the parameters applied? An elitist attitude in my opinion is neither justified, nor wise, nor intended.

Today, just as 20 years ago, the paramount aim of Free Alternative Schools lies in the establishment of the ability to organise learning processes with freedom and self-responsibly. To develop this ability children need teachers who are willing to give up their monopoly on lesson structuring and who see their end goal as rendering themselves dispensable. (Maas, 1998, p. 33)

To find suitable staff for alternative schools often remains a problem. On the one hand administrative regulations from the side of school authorities make this difficult, on the other hand teachers have rarely had experiences in their own education and training with self-determined learning. Teaching in FAS requires a great openness for collective reflection and a renunciation of metaphysical constructions: “Instead of results the teacher shows the ways to reach them, s/he stimulates the activity of students, creates exemplary problem situations, advises on sourcing material and helps in the development of abilities of self-regulation” (Maas, in Borchert & Maas, 1998, p. 33).

Radical democracy as educational task

Oskar Negt wrote: “Democracy is not sustainable without democrats. To educate them, to support autonomy and obstinacy on all levels (...) is the main task nowadays (...)” (Negt, in Borchert & Maas, 1998, p. 9).

Free Alternative Schools are places of participation for the children. There are different focal points in the spectrum of alternative schools. They reach from

weekly school assemblies (with or without voting power for adults) over representative models to juridical committees. In all alternative schools participation is a central topic.

Free play

“Free play” is a reoccurring element of alternative educational concepts. It is neither restricted to the space of a school yard nor is it restricted to certain phases of the school day. Free play enables children to have innumerable experiences and they can try out what they learned.

Observations of children’s play demonstrate its big similarity with the serious activities of adults. Children invent games and apply themselves to them with interest and an energy that can only be stopped by tiredness. Children imitate everything they see adults doing. (R. Columbiè in Ferrer 2003, p. 69).

Everything that children learn in their contacts with adults they can explore in free play amongst themselves. In turn this means that adults need to design every project, every assembly and every conflict mediation in a way that allows children greater autonomy and lets them test their experiences in free play. “If learning is a constant enacting of individual constructions of reality it can be seen as a constant process of winning and losing. Winning and losing are essential characteristics of play” (Düwell 2005, p. 16).

A school where there is no space for free play is restrictive and closes off one of

the most important fields of learning for children.

Grading

In alternative schools there is essentially no grading. This principle is only negotiated by school laws. In Berlin for instance the education law stipulates that all primary schools have to conform to the enrolment criteria of secondary schools. The secondary schools, however, accept enrolments only on the basis of graded certificates.¹

Based on randomness and arbitrariness the exams enjoy a reputation and general authority such that they are not only enforced on people, but also the work of the people. It is a pleasure to expose the defects of this system. In it we see a legacy of tyrannical history. It is always the same centralisation, everywhere we find the same official intrusion. (Ferrer 2003; p. 94)

A counter model to the system of grading is the individual observation. Children and adolescents should as far as possible recognise their own processes and products.

“In the area of personal activities, always remaining within the own self, the child should be used to, and be able to apply the own abilities not only on instruction, but rather on the own initiative. And this self-reliance should be experienced as

delightful.” (Reichwein 1993; p. 33)

A common prejudice says that children who attended alternative schools are in trouble when they are confronted with grading in secondary schools. There are at this stage numerous studies to prove that the transitory difficulties disappear after a few months. (Köhler & Krammling-Jöhrens, 2000, Altenburg, 1996, Reyher, 1999, Rüdinger, 1997, Haan, 1992, Wiesemann, 2000)

Albeit that alumni from alternative schools may sometimes have transition problems in certain subject areas they are in general recognised in further education institutions for their distinct autonomy, team player abilities and willingness to cooperate with others. They are confident enough to ask if they don't understand something and quite often they play an important role in the social fabric of the new class structure. Potential deficits in knowledge are thus mostly adjusted within a short period of time (de Haan, 1992 in Maas, 1998, p. 33)

Alternative schools and reform-pedagogical context

“Whoever, like the alternative school movement, cuts the ties to these [reform-pedagogical] contexts and experiences simply on the basis of ignorance will at the same time be victim and active agent of abandonment of history under late capitalism” (Rang & Rang-Dudzik, 1978; pp. 23-24). In 2015 this critical statement

from 1978 warrants a new comment. Many alternative schools explicitly refer in their concepts to protagonists of the reform-pedagogical movement. The question is more whether such references are based on personal preferences of school founders, or are they based on a non-prejudiced (probably even scientific) process of developing a school concept. Such a process can indeed lead to the establishment of meaningful references in favour of the aims of a given school.

There is a danger, too, of uncritical reference to pedagogues or concepts of the reform-pedagogic spectrum like the land reform schools or Waldorf schools. The critical aspects of these models are discussed in the first part of my recent book (Hofmann, 2013).

Apart from a literary reception of reform-pedagogy there is also a spontaneous adaptation of reform-pedagogical ideas, demands and practices in the alternative school movement (van Dick, 1979). This is most likely in reference to the free school movement in the US.

It is a basic task (not only this but key) for alternative schools to gain a critical and differentiated stance in relation to reform-pedagogical concepts.

Alternative school in neo-liberal context

The idea is not new that school should be first and foremost a place where children and adolescents learn to learn. But only since leading personalities from the economic sector started complaining in recent years about the lack of autonomy and team player ability of many

school leavers does opinion gain ground that it can no longer be the task of the school to teach children as many facts as possible for them to be only able to regurgitate this type of knowledge. (Maas in Borchert & Maas, 1998, p. 32)

As pointed out already alternative schools have their roots in a context of criticism of capitalism. If nowadays leading business representatives formulate demands on schools that seem to meet the values of alternative schools, this is misleading in that the compatibility is only on a surface level. Children and adolescents experience their environment and the organisation of a free school as open to change. Students have a say in all aspects, even the most basic ones. In the context of their areas of responsibility they have equal rights as teachers. This is not really what is meant in a neo-liberal economy if employees are requested to think. They may be required to act autonomously at the place allocated to them, and they may be asked to help in developing certain areas. The injustice of the system itself, however, they are not invited to question.

In alternative schools children and adolescents experience a “micro-society” open to democratic change. In the ideal case they learn there that they can best decide for themselves what is right and good for them. This is something different to the autonomy promoted in the business sector. The assumed protagonists in business also have an understanding of parliamentary democracy that differs fundamentally from the experiences of democracy afforded to children and adolescents in alternative schools.

Effect

Rainer Winkel concludes: “Without them [FAS]—we can assume – many reforms would simply be unknown: “free work” and “open lessons,” “community education” and “project weeks”—and obviously their superficial mockeries neither...” (Winkel, 1998, p.8). If alternative schools indeed had such an influence in the past it seems there is little left from this glory. To gain ground again and live up to the idea of model and experimental schools, and to influence educational and political debates in Germany, FAS should publicly depict those areas of their practice that are true witness of their name.

These areas certainly still include the self-determined and autonomous learning, the radical democratic participation, unconventional learning methods, and the flexible and speedy introduction of new concepts (gender sensitive education, inclusion...). Further areas could be explored. The situation is one where:

All basic educational ideas have gone anti-authoritarian already; what is missing is not originality of ideas, but rather their practical application. These “archaic ideas” of education include for instance ideas of self-regulation, deschooling, learning free of fear and coercion, project work, experience as basis for the concept of learning. (Negt in Manzke, 1981, p. 17)

Alternative schools in the context of general school critique

On a fundamental level the question has to be asked what is the function of school in

general, and of alternative schools in particular. In Germany the false belief is widespread that school is there to convey knowledge. This belief originates in a historical era when knowledge was not generally accessible. Many parents could teach their children only in very limited areas of knowledge, and teachers had a rather all-round knowledge. When I attended school I learned about Goethe and Schiller through my teachers. With the exception of the public library there was no other place where I could have accessed such important authors. The development of the internet and the increased mass access to it has made a massive difference. Nearly all aspects of general and specialised knowledge are at all times accessible for those who want to gain access.

Nearly all lesson content is available in more or less instructional form in the internet. Together with opportunities offered by skype and other software it is possible to communicate with people in nearly every country around the globe. No teacher can compete with this.

The function of conveying knowledge is no longer a sufficient legitimation for a special institution like school. To be clear: All children and adolescents in Germany are subject to compulsory schooling. They spend five days every week up to eight hours in an institution whose legitimation is obsolete.

The true function of the institution of school is the allocation of a place within the area of labour and society. School is the central agency of social differentiation. There are only a certain number of places in universities. The number of schools leading to the German Abitur² is limited. There are structural targets as to the

number of students allowed to achieve the Abitur. The result of school is the reproduction of the social stratas in society. This is supported further by the effects that the family background has for the school career of children.

It could be just as well a task for school to break up the hierarchical character of our society and allow social upwards mobility for whole families. But this is not wanted. The higher strata of society want to prevent competition for the best jobs. They rather remain amongst themselves and assume the responsibility of the lower social strata's lack of social rise lies with their supposed unwillingness: a cynical systematisation of inequality. In fact, parents of these lower social strata invest proportionally more of their means in the education of their children. The German school system stabilises and reproduces social inequality and therefore supports a hierarchical society.

Our future is largely uncertain. The next generations will be confronted with question for which we have no answers: climate change, economic exploitation on a global scale, famines that are simply tolerated. Indeed most of the questions that will come up for future generations we are not even able to anticipate.

What then does a person have to learn if the task is to react to previously unknown questions? I suggest two focal points that would also allow for a new function of the school as an institution. First there is the ability and willingness to allow for diverse explanations. I can describe the function of an ant-state for the eco-system of a forest. I can try to compare the social structure of ants with the one of humans. I can determine the use-value of ants in farming, or I can

explore the fascination of children who are watching the traffic on an ant's pathway. In school the type of question to be asked is generally predetermined by the subject area. Here a new function of school would be to allow for as many diverse explanations as possible.

On the other hand the ability to improvise would be a formidable competency. An exam would not consist of questions that were prepared in lessons. A test would be a confrontation with something unexpected.

Those who know the series "McGyver" will quickly grasp the idea. Here the hero is exposed to new and unknown situations in every episode. Most interesting are the skills that he applies in the stories. The basis for him is a wide range of knowledge of chemistry, physics and other sciences. In this sense acquisition of subject specific knowledge would not be the goal, but rather the basis for the competency of improvisation.

Another example is the competency to cook a meal. So far school teaches cooking according to a recipe. But this is obsolete because recipes are available online in nearly all languages of the world, as text, video or audio file. The new function of school would be to build upon the basic techniques of cooking and create something out of formerly unknown ingredients and devices. That would also be a preparation for a world in which not everything required as per a recipe will be available in rich Europe at all times any longer.

In this regard alternative schools could be trailblazers. They are small schools and can react quite well to the challenges of our times. Necessary for such a new direction would be however that the

function of school is critically assessed and defined in a new way. This requires courage and the willingness to put all habits and routines through a check.

In my opinion the future significance of alternative schools depends on their ability to accept this new role in a similar way to the phase of establishment of the first Free Alternative Schools some 40 years ago.

Notes

1: With the exception of 30% of school places that are allocated via a lottery system.

2: Final certificate needed to gain entry to university.

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