The disempowerment of teachers

Schools are not corporations. Yet today they are run as if they were. When will the focus finally return to learning?

*by Cäcilia Gmür**

Schools face a curious problem. The more people talk about leadership, the less the focus seems to be on teaching.

School management teams today deal with quality management, organisational development, change processes, strategic leadership and communication. All of this may well have its place. But a school is not a corporation. Pupils are not customers. Parents are not shareholders. Teachers are not a department for operational implementation. Teaching is not a marketing project.

Nevertheless, in some schools it now sounds suspiciously like management consultancy. There are development, management, evaluation and transformation. There are quality cycles, management tools and development processes. Sometimes you feel like shouting out: "It's a school! The children are supposed to learn to read, write and do arithmetic."

Particularly noteworthy is the way experienced teachers are treated. The more professional experience someone has, the more often they seem to be told how good teaching works. Here are teachers who have taught generations of children over decades. Parents trust them. Former pupils often still remember them years later.

Nevertheless, they are regularly confronted with new concepts, new methods and new professional development programmes. They are then expected to record in reflection forms what they have learnt from these for their own teaching practice. One inevitably wonders who, in this situation, could really learn from whom.

The situation is similar when it comes to classroom observations. In fact, the crucial questions would be quite simple: Are the children learning? Do they understand what is being explained? Is there an atmosphere in which they can concentrate on their work? Yet simple questions have a hard time in modern organisations.



Cäcilia Gmür. (Picture Einsiedler Anzeiger)

So, observation grids, quality criteria and feedback protocols are drawn up. After the lesson, one knows precisely how often open-ended questions were asked, which learning styles were evident and in which areas there is still "room for improvement". Only one question is surprisingly easily overlooked: have the children learnt anything?

Good headteachers are invaluable to a school. They know their teachers, trust them, set priorities and take the pressure off them. Above all, they can do something that has become almost revolutionary in today's schools. They say no.

No to the next project. No to the next educational fad. No to the next training course, simply because it has been decided somewhere that everyone must now be "brought on board" once again.

For an education industry has long since established itself above the schools. Universities, specialist bodies, associations, consultants and school development experts reliably churn out new ideas about how schools should function in future. Teachers are then left to implement them.

And because every reform is, of course, important, hardly anything is ever scrapped. The new is added. The old remains. Schools are increasingly like a lorry onto whose flatbed more and more is constantly being piled. At some point, nobody asks any more how much weight the axles can still bear. They simply carry on loading.

New concepts. New documentation. New evaluations. New training courses. New expectations.

* *Cäcilia Gmür* has 35 years' of experience as a primary teacher in the area of Einsiedeln (Canton Schwyz).

The burden is always borne by the same people. Anyone who eventually asks whether all this is necessary is quickly labelled as “reform-weary”.

Anyone who objects that a particular method isn’t working in the classroom is supposedly resistant to change. And anyone who, after thirty years in the profession, says, “We’ve already tried that three times”, is thereby proving above all that their attitude still has room for improvement.

This is precisely where the disempowerment lies. Experience only counts if it fits in with the currently accepted approaches.

Yet it is precisely experienced teachers who should be listened to more often. They have taught generations of children. They know which fads have come and gone. They often recognise quickly whether a teaching idea works in the classroom or merely looks impressive on a PowerPoint slide. Yet it is precisely this knowledge gained from experience that is astonishingly undervalued.

The consequences are plain to see. Many experienced teachers are leaving the profession as soon as possible. Not because they’ve had enough of the children. Not because they no longer enjoy teaching. But because they are tired of constantly having their profession redefined for them.

As a result, schools are losing precisely those people whose experience they need most urgently today. Schools do not suffer from a lack of reforms. They’ve had more than enough of those. They suffer from a lack of trust.

Modern school management has achieved something astonishing. It has turned experienced teachers into mere implementers, lessons into areas for development, and schools into perpetual building sites. Teachers are expected to constantly learn how they could do their job better.

Headteachers, on the other hand, seem surprisingly rarely to consider that their own approaches might be part of the problem.

Perhaps that is why the crisis in schools does not lie in the classroom, but in the offices of those who have been producing the solutions for years. The more of their prescriptions are imposed, the sicker the system becomes.

However, hardly anyone considers the possibility that the remedy itself might be part of the problem.

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