

“Individual Curricula and standardized testing in *Productive Learning*: challenge or unsolvable contradiction?”

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear partners and friends,

in the international debate on learning and education the focus has shifted from the „supply-side“ – the institutions and the curricula – towards the „demand-side“ - the conditions for successful learning from the perspective of the student. The picture of the “vase to be filled” serves only for cartoons – just like the idea that the earth is flat and the sun moves round it – and the research focuses on the active and individual process that is needed for the acquisition of any knowledge and skills, at any stage and on every level: from writing the letters of the alphabet to understanding Einstein’s theory of relativity.

Due to this “learner-centric” paradigm the individual preconditions and interests gained more and more attention: each child is different and this should be considered in the educational institutions and programs. In Germany you find this target for example in the 12. Report of the government on “childhood and youth” (already 2005): A quotation: The “curriculum vitae and the learning biography of the growing up shall be the center of all educational offers” – that means also in school. A segmented school system (“gegliedertes Schulsystem”) is certainly not a sufficient answer. On the contrary: there are strong hints that it is an obstacle for individualization in school education. As you probably know Germany is very reluctant to give up the idea that you can form homogenous learning groups through 3-4 types of schools – from high to low achievement of the students. Nevertheless internal differentiation” (in German “Binnendifferenzierung”) and individualization are key elements of school development in the international debate on education and in Germany as well.

Another international trend in school development is standardized testing. Country- or nationwide test serve two purposes:

- a) monitoring purpose or “diagnosis” – the tests shall give a survey of the competence level at different age groups, concerning certain domains (e.g. language, mathematics, science, problem solving) in different regions, schools, with regard to social backgrounds etc. The most prominent example is the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), many more for all age classes exist.
- b) “comparability” (“Vergleichbarkeit”) and quality control of certificates – more and more central exams substitute the school-based-exams on all levels. In Berlin we had central exams for the *Abitur* (the qualification for university entrance and the *Mittlerer Schulabschluss* (“mean school leaving certificate after 10th grade”) first, since this year we have central exams and tests for any level of school leaving certificate down to the 9th grade.

A key question is: how do standardized tests fit the goals of individualized education?

Promoters of standardized tests and exams usually don’t see any problem. Just the opposite: They see “freedom” in curriculum and school development and standardized testing as “two sides of the same coin”. The tests assure that the different ways lead to the same results, they assure comparability, quality, justice (in terms of marks and certificates). The question of justice is usually not discussed with regard to different personal and social backgrounds.

Critical voices see many risks and disadvantages, especially with regard to the individual learning when standardized tests “count” for marks and exams: They reduce the grade of freedom, that

means the individuality of learning itineraries. Following personal interests, in-depth reflection of topics, “detours” (German: Umwege) in learning processes become dysfunctional, concentrating on skills and topics which are likely to be tested seem to be more efficient (“teaching and learning to the test”). Opponents of standardized testing point out that there is no empirical prove that central exams rise the quality in the tested domains (comparison of countries/regions with/without central exams).

It needed this recall and survey to come to my topic: How about standardized tests in *Productive Learning*? Are they a challenge or an unsolvable contradiction?

I am not able to answer this question in a satisfying way in the second half of my key-speech. I am not willing to try as well, instead I will try to flashlight some aspects to be considered. Maybe you have the chance to talk about them with *PL*-students and educators in Berlin schools tomorrow. On Wednesday afternoon there will be a chance to discuss the topic internationally and from the perspective of different *PL*-projects.

- Theses 1:** **We can accept (maybe even welcome) standardized tests for monitoring purposes.**
They could help to professionalize the self-evaluation of learning progresses in *Productive Learning*. If these tests focus on basic competences in the “culture technics” (e.g. native language, text understanding and production, mathematic understanding, modeling and calculating skills) they do not interfere with our educational goals and form. *Productive Learning* aims to develop these skills (beside others) through learning in real-life situations, reflection of experiences, using them as tools. Notice: The German ministers of education explicitly agreed that the standardized test “VERA” in Germany, where all kids of the 3rd and 8th grade take part, is not used for school marks!
- Thesis 2:** **Central exams bear a risk for the main characteristics (“specific quality”) of *Productive Learning* and we need to think carefully about how to deal with them.**
Individualization in *PL* doesn’t only mean “different speeds and routes to the same prescribed results”. It means that also the goals, the activities in real life, the topics dealt with at the practice site and in school are agreed upon with a certain grade of freedom to meet the interests and needs of the individual. This is a key factor for success, especially for students with difficult carriers and opposition towards former classroom learning. Central exams standardize the expectations – that’s what they are made for – and reduce the opportunities for individualization in *PL* in the described meaning.
- Thesis 3:** **We have to deal with them and that’s why we should reflect the impact of central exams in a “differentiated” way.** Which subjects are concerned? How are the central exams designed: do they request essential competences or do they force to teach and learn a long list of “topics” to be successful? Which of the competences expected and tested can we develop well in and “through” *Productive Learning* – and which cause difficulties and why?
- Thesis 4:** **Central exams do have positive effects for *Productive Learning* too** – at least this is my impression after a couple of years of experience with the “mean school leaving certificate”. They “protect” *Productive Learning* form the suspicion that the certificate is not equivalent. We have to decide: Does that balance the risks – if yes how far?

Thesis 5: **Central exams can rise the risk of “exclusion”** – we strive for the opposite for “inclusion in education”, right? A student of mine in university declared very openly a few weeks ago during a seminar: “Our teachers prepared the topics of the exams very well with us. I think today with central exams I would not reach the university entrance diploma any more.” And after a short break she added: “I am the first in my family who reached Abitur and I am proud of that”. It’s worth thinking about that a little longer, but not now.

Thesis 6: **The more subjects are included in central exams the more they affect *PL* and the success conditions.** In Germany, Math and English and German are tested centrally so far. But what about history and politics – aren’t these subjects of high significance for our democracy and the educated citizen? Or science (physics, biology, chemistry) – our economy and the technological development really call for more attention to these subjects, right? If you follow this line: Where is the end and what will be left of the individual approach after all?

Conclusion:

We should use the conference to reflect this topic using the international experiences in this field. I speak for seeing standardized tests as challenges if possible and work on suitable strategies to include them in our educational form. But I speak also for a in depth analysis of the negative aspects and the risks. If we risk to lose the conditions of success in our educational form we should tell this in clear words and also in the political arena. Maybe we can contribute in a constructive way with our assessment culture and experience. Portfolio assessment is one example dealt with in a workshop on Wednesday.

I discussed the topic with my 14 year old daughter last weekend – a student of *Productive Learning* in Schöneberg. She suggested to compare the results of students before and after the introduction of central exams. I would like to close my key speech with her words: She said (in German): “Bringen die Prüfungen etwas oder stehen sie den Menschen nur im Weg? Ich meine nicht den Schulabschluss sondern für das Leben und für einen guten Job.“. In English (word by word): “Do the tests give the people something or do they only stand in their way. I mean not for the certificates but for life and a good job”. This question could be an adequate touchstone for the necessary discussion.

Thank you very much for your attention.