

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

National Conference of German Free Alternative Schools in Dresden: A Briefing

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In Germany there are very few options for children to live and learn without taking part in the program of the state school system. One of them is the sector of the Free Alternative Schools (FAS).

These are schools that follow a set of principles centering around the idea of self-regulated learning experiences and democratic organisational structures. The first FAS were established in West-Germany at the start of the 1970's, often against strong resistance from the state.

Since then there has been an increase in numbers and by 2014 there are 90 FAS organised in a national federation (BFAS). The schools all subscribe to eight theses:

- 1.** 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.

- 2.** 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.

- 3.** 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.

- 4.** 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.

- 5.** 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.

6. 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.

7. Alternative schools are self-governed. The design of the self-government is a meaningful experience in democratic collaboration for parents, teachers and pupils.

8. 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.

Here is a link to the site where these can be found: [Freie-Alternative Schulen](#)

Other Education is preparing a forthcoming special issue on the Free Alternative Schools (FAS) ([Special issue info here](#)). Obviously it is of interest then that in September, 2014, the annual conference of BFAS took place in Dresden. There were 200 delegates from schools all over Germany attending.

The BFAS conference has a number of functions. It is a formal event and the AGM of the federation is embedded in it. It is an event for reflection and debate. It is a gathering to establish, renew or refresh personal and institutional contacts. It is a demonstration of solidarity.

The organisers in Dresden had decided to abstain from putting together a fixed

schedule of talks, presentations or lectures. Instead they provided open-space for all participants for contributions under the heading: Critical questions, contradictions, uncertainties and utopias in Free Alternative Schools.

The open-space concept relied on the initiative and activity of the participants of the conference. In Dresden six time slots were scheduled over two days and the organisers had prepared rooms for meetings and workshops in the school. Every morning a plenum took place in which all participants could suggest a workshop or meeting to address a particular topic. Rooms were allocated on the spot and in this manner the schedule for the day was worked out collectively.

A most beneficial aspect of the exchanges during the annual conferences is that there are always different perspectives brought together. People from schools that have been in existence for 10, 20, 30 years can report from their experiences; people from new schools can learn how the old schools have addressed certain issues. People from new schools bring their aspirations and expectations into discussions; people from old schools can check their own routine against these newly formulated ambitions.

The open-space concept as applied in Dresden facilitated this exchange. Seen in the summary below, there were many aspects brought up in the discussions.

The downside of the open-space concept is that discussions were often ad-hoc and not prepared in a manner that would allow for more stringency, scrutiny or coherence in addressing a topic. Depth, which could be lacking in these discussions, would have been possible in more structured workshops (talks).

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However, in the context of the national organisation BFAS also offers events that cater for these more in-depth-discussions.

Over the two days in Dresden 25 workshops took place with these titles:

- ADHD – experiences with a project
- Burn-out in FAS
- Capitalism and schizophrenia – the exciting daily routine of FAS
- Computer games in FAS
- Does self-regulation prevent experiences
- Drugs as topic in FAS
- Duties, rights and tasks of members of boards of directors
- Elementary education in FAS
- Evaluation amongst friends: peer review clusters
- Exams for students of FAS
- Free schools and selectivity/exclusivity
- Help! What if a school grows?
- If teachers are sick
- Jam session
- Lifedance – a project of dance and theatre in fragments of scenes
- Money and relationships in schools
- Motivation: the tension between self-regulation and demands
- Participatory school decision making
- Quality assurance in FAS
- Scientific advisory board for BFAS
- Seeing children differently—new ways of togetherness
- Sociocracy as a FAS organising model
- Transition from school to learning a profession/trade
- We enrol parents, not children
- Why do adults in FAS slave away more than children?

There is a compilation available of brief summaries of the discussions in the workshops. It can be requested by e-mail from the organisers in Dresden: info@fas.dresden.de.

Of particular interest was the presentation of an empirical study of “Students in Free Alternative Schools.” A team from Alanus University (Bonn/Alfter) conducted a survey amongst students in classes 7-10 (age: 13-17) of FAS member schools. The study is still a work in progress. The presentation in Dresden showed tentative results, trends, but not yet a definite proposition made by the researchers (Dirk Randoll, Ines Graudenz, Jürgen Peters). A report on the presentation has been published in the German newspaper “die tageszeitung” ([See link here](#)). The final results of the study are expected by next summer.

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