

Special Issue Introduction: Free Alternative Schools in Germany

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This is the first special issue of *Other Education*. Its topical focus is on the Free Alternative Schools in Germany. Despite their often quite experimental character there is relatively little research done on or with the Free Alternative Schools (FAS), either in Germany, or elsewhere. When the topical focus for this special issue was decided, it was intended to raise awareness internationally of the existence of the Free Alternative Schools. Myself and the participants in this special issue consider that the history of FAS, their current practice and also the contradictions and tensions that are inherent in their existence, provide a rich field for educational research.

The earliest of these schools were founded in the 1970s in West Germany. Set up as a counter program to the state schools, the Free Alternative Schools were originally often branded as suspicious experiments. The success of these schools over the last 40 years, however, speaks for itself.

Finding or founding an educational alternative in Germany is a rather difficult exercise. Home education is legally prohibited. Parents who try to home educate their children are often criminalised. Setting up an alternative school on the other hand is allowed but as an alternative provision it is a process requiring an incredible amount of time, strength and tenacity. Bureaucratic processes are extensive and financial hurdles are high. Hence it requires a determined group of people to make an alternative school “happen” in the first instance. Nevertheless 40 years after the first alternative schools were established there are now 90 schools organised in the national association of Free Alternative Schools.

Projects at the margins of official (mainstream) systems are often social laboratories in which future solutions for mainstream social problems have already been tested. Regarding the early days of Free Alternative Schools this certainly holds true. A lot of innovative elements introduced in mainstream schools in Germany over the last few decades were in fact successfully implemented already in the alternative schools,¹ albeit that this was less a result of systematic research. It was rather a growing practice often led by simple child-centred and democratic approaches.² How much of this innovative potential is currently still present in FAS is a matter of debate also amongst the protagonists of Free Alternative Schools.

It is not up to the *Other Education* special issue to decide on such matters. What we can do with this special issue is to put a range of topics out in the open that are eminent in and for the Free Alternative Schools. This range is surely not exhaustive. It merely provides an entry, and whoever starts digging a bit deeper in the complex scenario of Free Alternative Schools will certainly find further topics worth exploring. However, we have to start somewhere and we are quite happy with the collection of articles we can present here. They cover a good bit of ground already.

Matthias Hofmann provides an overview of the history of Free Alternative Schools. Olaf Sanders presents a philosophical underpinning of a concept of school without conditions. Ulrich Klemm traces the lines of libertarian education and alternative schools. Stefan Blankertz looks at the political dimension of free and home schooling. Ulrike Nicolaus raises the issue of internships in Free Alternative Schools. Silke Trumpa in her peer-reviewed article looks at the learning experiences of parents who become part of a Free Alternative School collective. Bertrand Stern locates the discussion on Free Alternative Schools in a wider context of debates about the status of children and the idea of freedom in education. Cornelia Schlothauer initiates a discussion of the issue of children's access to money at school. Dirk Eiermann compares the present day practice of the two oldest Free Alternative Schools, and in a second contribution he discusses children's participation and the role of adults in the school. Two book reviews in this issue are specifically of publications that deal with Free Alternative Schools. Annette Ohme-Reinicke reviews Matthias Hofmann's book on the history of the schools, and David Gribble comments on the book about Monika Seiffert that was published by Wilma Aden-Grossman. The compilation of contributions is eventually completed by another short piece written by Dirk Eiermann in which he offers a view on self-regulation.

Self-regulation is a central topic that time and time again comes up in discussions amongst members of Free Alternative Schools. The autonomy of each individual, their embeddedness in a social context incites a constant engagement with the ever so simple questions: who is allowed to do what, when, with whom, how and where? And the answers are not at all so simple. Status, institutional roles, legal frameworks, social constraints, formal and informal hierarchies are constantly negotiated amongst the members of a given school community, irrespective of their age. Hence adults and children meet in a field that was described by Gerold Scholz as: schools of negotiation (1996, p. 84). There is a fluidity of constant change in the social relations in Free Alternative schools.

In furtherance to Gerold Scholz, I have pointed out that negotiations about the way "reality is articulated for the cognitive endorsement of all" (Bell, 1992, p. 131) are an ongoing process in all schools. They happen constantly in FAS and mainstream schools alike. What however differs is the way negotiations take place

and the position from which the partners in negotiations intervene, particularly where negotiations between adults and children are concerned. Put in simple terms one may suggest that the notion of “schools of negotiation” suggests that in Free Alternative Schools these negotiations are taken seriously by all involved and all involved are taken seriously in the negotiations—irrespective of age (see also Hamm, 2014, p. 54–61).

Such a practice is fragile. It runs counter to a whole world of generational boundaries. Viewed from this angle it seems appropriate to say that the micro-physics of Free Alternative Schools are indeed a laboratory for social experiments. As such they are also a most valuable source for supra-individual learning processes, hence models to be looked at for their practice and for their theoretical underpinning.

A matter of concern in a reflective engagement with theory and practice of Free Alternative Schools is however that their character as social settings and their character as learning environments are not always clearly distinguished. We all know that learning does not depend on school, and we also know that what happens in schools is much more than learning—unless every social activity is defined as a learning activity, but this is inflationary in a way that diffuses analysis.

It seems necessary to come to a clearer understanding of the separate strands of analysis. Learning (of subject matter) always happens in situated contexts. Every such context is always characterised by rules, regulations, norms; hence some actions are explicitly required, others are accepted, some are illegitimate, some are downright prohibited. That human beings in social entities need to regulate their affairs is a basic condition that obviously also applies for FAS. How exactly the social relations are regulated influences what is possible in relation to learning (of subject matter). Thus in the concrete practice of children and adults (here: in FAS) their learning/teaching activities have to be always understood in their situated context. Nevertheless, due to the explicit character of school as a social institution where learning (of subject matter) is supposed to happen, it makes sense to also think about learning as a human activity separately. Results of such an engagement with learning, and learning theories, can then be brought back into discussion with results of similarly separated engagement with theories about the regulation of social relations. For anyone engaging in such a process (or processes) of theoretical investigation and reflection it is necessary at the end to bring the different strands together again. Decisions about concrete practice (in a given school) can then be made by considering the reciprocal effects, thus opening a more informed and conscious basis for the shaping of everyday life in school.

The Free Alternative Schools are not all the same. In their practices they differ, according to local developments, but more importantly also according to underpinnings in terms of educational philosophy. Influences are manifold: Psychoanalytic Pedagogy, Montessori, Summerhill, Critical Psychology, Emmi

Pikler, Rebecca Wild, Sudbury Valley and many others. There is quite a mix worked into the concepts of different schools. Here is also great potential for meaningful academic research. It would be most beneficial work to scrutinise these various underpinnings, trace the public and personal theories (Griffiths & Tann, 1992) that are prevalent in the schools and compare them to the concrete practices. There is definitely enough material in such a project for more than one doctoral dissertation. We would be delighted if our special issue could help inciting any projects in this direction.

From the perspective of Free Alternative Schools another dimension is possibly opened up by way of our special issue. The international distribution of *Other Education* offers a chance for a perspective beyond the national framework alone. Only a minority of the German schools are involved in international alternative education networks like EUDEC, IDEC. It is quite understandable that the organisers and practitioners in Free Alternative Schools are largely consumed with their local tasks. Nevertheless it is fruitful also to risk a view across borders, be they geographical, organisational or topical. By putting the Free Alternative Schools on display in *Other Education* we hope interested parties from outside Germany, and from other educational backgrounds, mainstream or alternative, will get in touch with our authors and these schools and start exchanging ideas.

In the hope of inciting further debate,
Robert Hamm
Sligo, August 2015

Notes

1: The transfer of practices from FAS to mainstream schools always involves elements of displacement. Be it the replacing of numerical marking schemes in end of year certificates by written reports in form teachers' letters to children and their families, be it the flexible formation of learning groups in attempts of increased differentiation, be it forms of self-governance like class-council or circle-time: they will always have a different character in mainstream schools than in FAS. The underlying concepts, didactics in mainstream schools, mathetics in FAS, are fundamentally different. For an example of the grinding effects of a practice (here: circle-time) "travelling" from the margins to the centre see e. g. Althans & Göhlich (2004).

2: With this I do not purport an innocent naivety on the side of the Free Alternative Schools. Hartmut von Hentig submitted an expert statement in the court case about recognition for the Freie Schule Frankfurt. He raised awareness of the fact that the Freie Schule Frankfurt in its concept followed to a high degree the recommendations of the German Bildungsrat and also the framework of guiding principles of the state of Hessen for mainstream schools. Von Hentig's comment that the demands for school reform that were included in these guidelines and recommendations are largely utopian for mainstream schools rather supports the assumption of naivety (or massive blind-spots) on the side of politicians and official school administration (see von Hentig, 1985, p. 50).

References

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