

A Massacre in School, Arts Education and School Reform in Austria

Michael Wimmer/EDUCULT

Recently I went to see the theatre performance “komA” – a coproduction between a school and a professional theatre company which took place in a Viennese school building. It was not slight fare as was about a school massacre. The performance started with statements from the hereafter of the students and teachers who had been killed. When one of the students tried to explain what he felt when confronted with the classmate attacking him he said: “How could I do something unexpected if I up to now only learned to behave as expected”.

In a series of episodes throughout the school building I learned quite immediately what is happening in a school community, what students – and teachers – worry about, what they are suffering from and hoping for, whom and what they love and hate, with what they come to terms with and what leaves them helpless. For the audience it was immediately obvious that school is not just a knowledge transfer machine but a multifaceted micro cosmos where unpredictable social and cultural processes take place.

In the role of a theatre critic I would say: This was a great performance. The students did not just try to impress their touched parents but acted as professional performers. As a pedagogue, I would remark that the students gave evidence that they have learned a lot: first of all presence on stage and convincing acting – including countenance and assertiveness, as well as the use of rhetoric and the use of body language and the ability to slip in other roles. Furthermore they learned teamwork, organisation skills and technical applications and by all that the ability to express themselves in a comprehensive way. As a parent I would be fascinated to find out that my child has more personal facets than I am aware of and I would be proud.

The chance to take part in unexpected events like this is maybe the reason why I am working in the field of arts education. At the moment there is a lot of political support in Austria to make arts education a priority in cultural and education policy. It becomes common sense to look at the arts as one of the thriving forces to further develop the traditional school system which is in urgent need to foster creativity and innovation not only of a few gifted children but of as many as possible.

There are already a lot of teachers around who know about the importance of fostering individual potentials which go beyond literacy and numeracy. Their teaching methods are not only about academic skills but equally about imagination, intuition, empathy and creative self-expression. As Austria is at the moment confronted with considerable demographic changes, the realisation of cultural diversity becomes crucial. For schools this means not just to make all newcomers speak German as the official language but to make use of the different cultural backgrounds coexisting in the classroom and by that to give an idea in which way aesthetic multilingualism can contribute to communication and mutual understanding.

In this context my institution EDUCULT recently finished a report on arts and cultural education in school with the title “Diversity and Cooperation”. On the one hand we found a lot of individual initiatives trying to establish a new culture of teaching and learning and to make school a cultural centre cooperating with cultural institutions in the neighbourhood. On the other hand it became clear that there are still a number of structural barriers which complicate cultural projects in school. This concerns mainly the marginality of the arts subjects in the curricula, constraints of narrow time lines or the insecurity in cooperation within the schools (mainly between teachers representing different subjects) and with possible partners of out school.

To solve at least some of these problems we formulated a series of recommendations directed towards the school administration but also towards teachers, artists and other representatives of cultural institutions willing to cooperate with schools. In this respect we recommend to give schools and teachers more autonomy in organising interdisciplinary projects, to enable flexible time management, to cooperate with cultural institutions, to offer further training programmes for teachers to become cultural mediators or to invite schools to develop cultural school profiles.

At the moment the Austrian minister of education, the arts and culture has appointed a commission of experts with the task to elaborate proposals for further school reforms where I have the honour to take part. And of course issues like efficient use of resources, qualification of teachers, social inclusion, parents as partners, school as a place to work and live, schooling for very young children, life long learning are on top of the agenda. But after a long discussion the members of the experts agreed to make “school as a cultural centre” the very first priority. And this seems to be a positive revolution in my country.

I don't know if all members of the commission had visited the komA performance, maybe they participated in another one and made a similar key experience like me that changed their minds. Anyway, by taking the arts and culture in school serious they instinctively expressed their intention to put henceforth children first in school. We never should forget that it is due to the young people and their multifaceted potentials and talents why schools are in existence. Enabling adequate aesthetic forms of expression makes schools places of creativity and innovation.

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