Talking point

Project in progress – remaining challenges for education reform in Germany after PISA 2009

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If you’d like to find out more about the latest PISA survey, how current progress is to be assessed against the backdrop of structural change and what challenges lie ahead, we’d suggest you read the following Talking Point.

Encouraging news from the headquarters of the OECD, which administers the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a worldwide education survey. Ever since the shock at Germany's poor PISA ranking in 2000 the country’s education system has moved in the right direction.

For one thing, the reading literacy of school students in Germany has improved significantly. Germany now has an average ranking among the OECD countries. Also, Germany is one of the six OECD countries whose average scores in the mathematical literacy section have risen significantly since PISA 2003. Germany’s level in scientific literacy has also increased to far above the OECD average.

Is education reform starting to bear fruit?

Germany is heading in the right direction, but much remains to be done. Despite progress in restructuring, the difference in reading literacy between students born in Germany and those with a migration background remains too high at an equivalent to roughly one year of schooling. Much too high in view of demographic changes. Besides, the restructuring measures have not yet resulted in a healing of the schisms in society. Student performance is still much too dependent on a person’s socio-economic background.

The revamp of the education system in Germany is taking place in the midst of extensive changes in demographic, economic and social structures. This is making education or, more precisely, learning more important than ever. The opportunities of this structural change towards glocal, risk-tolerant, temporally flexible, knowledge-intensive, creative and collaborative forms of value creation will mainly benefit those who have obtained additional skills, expertise and know-how as well as individual, biographical, social and cognitive competencies.

Therefore, besides the principally correct declarations of intent from the standing conference of the German ministers of education to further improve the quality of teaching and take a more targeted approach to early, individual promotion of school pupils, Germany’s schools should have more autonomy as to how they use their resources and shape their curricula. Another requirement is greater transparency concerning funds used and the advances made in learning.

Germany stands to benefit from a rethink while restructuring its education system. Going loosely by the aphorism that education is what is left over when we forget what we have learnt, the restructuring of Germany’s education system ought to be geared more to the learning processes of human beings. Such an approach reveals many more projects in progress than just school education. First of all, Germany should seek to develop more pre-school education with communities of practice involving all aspects of early childhood learning and childcare. At present, pre-school education is more or less like a building shell: nursery facilities in the west German states are on average not even able to accommodate one child in twelve of the under-three cohort.

Furthermore, we require better, less expensive test procedures to show what talents students have in order to be able to improve their learning processes. In general, more teachers and teaching assistants obtaining more education and further training are required in all K-12 levels of school education to improve learning.

There is also a need to “learn different”: practice-, production- and project-oriented learning methods inside and outside school are promising in this respect. People also learn informally – whether with or from family and friends; whether playing to pass the time also with mobile phones and other information and communications technologies. If instead of looking at education we were to focus on learning processes, as people do in South Korea, this would also mean to further develop learning technologies in collaboration with mobile phone operators, creative minds and educators.
There is also a need for other offers for people working in the tertiary education sector and in further education and training. Today, learning doesn't stop at school – in future, milestones and degrees passed will no longer count as much as the roadmap and learning journeys forward. What counts will be constant upgrading of skills to be able to use new technologies, products and process innovations in nearly all walks of daily life.

All these things are to be achieved via increased private commitment and above all via greater collaboration and moderation, more autonomy and support, and more partnerships and networks. Above all, we need a solid foundation. Long-term financing commitments for pre-school education facilities, schools, training facilities, universities and further education initiatives with clearly defined expectations and a coherent policy frame including elements of competition based on social-market economics are just what is needed now.

The restructuring of the German education system is a long-term project. For this reason, what counts now are concrete stimuli based on new funding instruments, long-term partnerships between business, social and political actors and framework programmes with clearly defined quality criteria for all education improvement projects instead of isolated, short-term reform projects; this should enable more people in future to make progress in learning so that as educated citizens they can help shape their own future and that of society at large.

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