

As the new school year begins

Why freedom needs a foundation

by Carl Bossard*



Carl Bossard.
(Picture ma)

(Journal21) As the new school year begins, attention turns to new skills, digital opportunities and the demands of a changing world. Yet before children can think for themselves, make judgements and take on responsibility, they need something more fundamental: a foundation. Freedom grows out of experience, guidance and trust.

These days, thousands of children are once again standing outside their school gates. Some are still holding on to their mum's or dad's hand, whilst others are already hurrying bravely ahead. They're all carrying a school bag – and many expectations. For them, a journey is beginning whose destination nobody knows exactly. Nor is that necessary. What matters far more is this: what must school enable children to do so that they can one day follow their own path in learning and life?

We demand a great deal – but rarely ask about the foundations

Today, we are debating educational goals: skills, digitalisation, independence and artificial intelligence. All of this is important. Yet we talk surprisingly rarely about the prerequisites from which these goals actually spring. Not: "What should children be able to do one day?", but rather: "What are the foundations of what we may rightly expect of them later on?" That is precisely where the real question of education begins.

We want independent young people who take responsibility, think critically and will one day find their way in a rapidly changing world. These are

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Someone's around. And that's exactly why I can go my own way. (Picture keystone)

legitimate goals. Yet goals are not the same as prerequisites. We demand independence before it has had a chance to develop. We expect sound judgement before critical thinking has been practised. We call for flexibility before children have found the stability that enables them to be flexible in the first place. Without stability, freedom cannot be sustained. Perhaps this is precisely where a weakness in our debate on education lies: our focus is constantly on the goals. Hardly ever on the ground from which they spring.

The small hint that enables independence

This question is not decided in education policy programmes. It is decided day by day in the classroom. Everyday school life tells a different story. Shortly before the summer holidays, I sat in on a lesson. The pupils were working independently on a challenging task. Each on their own. As they did so, I observed one pupil. He started, faltered and didn't know how to proceed. The teacher sat down beside him. She didn't solve the problem for him. She asked two questions, gave a small hint – and walked away again. A few minutes later, the boy was continuing to work with concentration. Not because the task had become any easier. But because someone had given him exactly the support, he needed to take the next step.

A child does not become independent simply by being left to their own devices. They become independent because someone shows them

how, practises with them, believes in them, corrects them, encourages them and, step by step, lets them go. Independence is the fruit of good guidance – not a substitute for it.

**Why freedom
without support does not set us free**

Anyone who has ever experienced that their own thinking sustains them gains confidence in themselves. This is how children learn: thinking can grow – step by step. Independence rarely arises on its own. For freedom is not a starting point, but a result. It grows where support enables the next step to be taken independently.

This is precisely where the real challenge of artificial intelligence lies. It does not change the educational mission; it makes it more demanding. Machines provide answers. People must learn to evaluate them. Machines cannot replace independent thinking. It only becomes dangerous when we ourselves give up the practice of thinking. That is why critical thinking is becoming a key competence for the future. Yet it does not develop at the flick of a switch. It needs to be practised time and again.

Reading is more than just a cultural skill. Those who understand texts gain an insight into the world – and thereby gain a measure of independence.

The future needs people who think

That is why the dichotomy between digitalisation and tried-and-tested education is misleading.

Digital tools open up new possibilities. But they replace neither careful reading nor the patient grappling with language, nor the shared exchange in the classroom. The real choice is not between digital and analogue. It is: superficial information or in-depth thinking.

**Education is more
than just preparation for exams**

As the new school year begins, a simple reminder is worth noting. School does not primarily prepare children for exams or careers. It creates the conditions from which educational goals grow: so that young people learn to think, make judgements and take responsibility. It is only from this that what we may rightly expect of them later on can develop.

**The courage
to forge one's own path begins at school**

School does not dictate children's path through learning and life. But it can give them the courage to follow it themselves. As children once again shoulder their school bags these days, more than just a new school year is beginning. A new chapter in their lives is beginning. No one knows where their path will take them one day. Perhaps education begins precisely where a child realises: someone believes I am capable of taking the next step.

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