

A truly universal school subject

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What do chess, climate change, nutrition, health, business and 'everyday skills' have in common? All of them have been proposed as new school subjects to make up for some supposed deficit in our society. But how are they supposed to be squeezed into the curriculum?

MEDIA LITERACY AS A UNIVERSAL BASE

The proposals have something else in common. They all focus only on one specific thing that they single out as uniquely important. But there is a subject that links them all together, along with many other topics, one whose name has been circulating in professional circles for years: media literacy.

'Young people need to be equipped to distinguish fact from fiction, to think about the connections between things, to reflect on their own views. They will then be able to educate themselves about topics that interest them and that they consider relevant to themselves or society.'

In this subject, students don't just learn about what's currently happening in the world, they also learn how they can educate themselves on any topic. Whether they're reading a newspaper or blog, or watching a five-minute video on YouTube, a modern subject like media literacy teaches them how to recognise, understand and evaluate news, information and sources, so that they can critically question statements and avoid being taken in by populist demagogues.

All German federal states say they want to promote media skills, but these ideas rarely make it off the paper they're written on. Initiatives like the computer and media training offered by the Freiherr-vom-Stein School in Hessisch Lichtenau, Hesse, remain the exception rather than the rule. And this hasn't gone

without consequences. A representative study by the Leibniz Institute for Media Research shows that 66% of young people aged 9–17 never or only rarely watch, read or listen to the news. 'Hard news' about politics and the economy is a particular turn-off. Media literacy classes could present these topics in an exciting way that encourages young people to proactively learn more.

CRITICAL QUESTIONING OF INFORMATION HAS TO BE LEARNED

Nowadays, anyone can share news with the whole country in a matter of seconds via podcasts, videos or social media posts. Some people take liberties with the truth and twist it to their own ends. 'Fake news' spreads six times as fast on German social media as factually accurate information, according to a study by the University of Oxford. Teaching media literacy in schools could break this cycle of rapidly circulating untruths. The classes would explain that algorithms tend to give people lots of recommendations for topics and content they're already interested in, at the expense of presenting alternative perspectives on current affairs. Students would also learn how to check and critically analyse the sources of influencers, politicians and journalists and form their own judgements.

THE POPULARITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES SHOWS THAT THERE IS LITTLE TRUST IN POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

News influences the development of people's personalities and opinions. Our experiences during adolescence determine how actively we will participate in and contribute to society in later life. A new school subject wouldn't instantly solve all problems and mean that all young people would be equally interested in the news and able to distinguish fake from 'real' news. But it would help make young people from all backgrounds aware of the importance of news. The coronavirus pandemic shows how political

decisions can have a direct impact on people's lives, while the growing popularity of conspiracy theories reveals how little trust people can have in politicians and the media, and how susceptible they can be to such ideas.

REFLECTING ON ONE'S OWN VIEWS SHOULD BE LEARNED IN SCHOOL

Young people need to be equipped to distinguish fact from fiction, to think about the connections between things, to reflect on their own views. They will then be able to educate themselves about topics that interest them and that they consider relevant to themselves or society. And isn't that precisely what schools should be empowering young people to do?



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