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Health and safety: a neglected topic in the realm of education[*]

This article approaches the topic from three different angles. It is not so much our intention to propose solutions to the issues raised as to set out some of the key distinctions and problems.

Aspect 1: Health and safety as a condition for learning.

As a rule, health and safety is not regarded primarily as an educational issue. If the topic does come up in the context of teaching, learning and education, then it is generally understood to be a question of the *conditions* that need to exist or should be guaranteed in order for systematic learning and teaching to be possible. If people's health is impaired, it is likely that this will also impair their learning ability and restrict the educational avenues open to them. The same principle applies when a person's safety is threatened. When an individual is confronted with dangers that require them to protect themselves, everyday activities including teaching and learning, are either restricted or interrupted. If a person becomes aware of safety or health hazards in their surroundings or the equipment they are using, their focus will be on self-protection, self-defence or fleeing the hazard, an attitude that is hardly conducive to learning and education. The perception of danger can cause people to be so frightened that they become paralysed and are unable to think of or take alternative courses of action. When people perceive a threat to their safety, their learning ability tends to be blocked or at least restricted, as they focus exclusively on protecting themselves against the danger in question.

As such, health and safety is undoubtedly relevant to the field of educational practice. It is one of the conditions without which teaching, learning and education cannot be undertaken, or at least not satisfactorily. However, concern about health and safety does not appear to be a specific feature of education, nor does it seem to have any structural affinity with educational activities. Health and safety is *not specifically* part and parcel of education, since it is also a precondition for other cultural activities and phenomena. Social organisation, the economy, the law, politics, science and the arts, indeed any goals or activities of a certain importance and duration are obviously

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dependent on health and safety. Accordingly, healthcare and protection against health hazards are by their very nature not tied to any specific area of social and cultural life and activity, but are rather a requirement for all of these to be possible. Consequently, the principal overall goal of health and safety measures is not so much connected with education as with safeguarding people's existence in the face of foreseeable threats and providing a basis for allowing them to pursue a broad spectrum of goals and activities with as little disturbance as possible.

Aspect 2: Health and safety as an educational topic.

In a general sense, however, it is also true to say that the conditions required for culture to exist also need to be cultivated in their own right, meaning that they too should be learned about and taught and are not something that can simply be taken for granted. They are not simply there, waiting for us to take advantage of them, particularly in the modern era, where our traditional world has increasingly been changed and shaped by humankind and its scientific discoveries, with all the new dangers that these bring in the shape of unforeseen side-effects. Consequently, it is also necessary to take specific measures in order to guarantee the conditions required for the existence of culture. The passing on of culture from one generation to the next, its development, criticism and the prospects for promoting cultural diversity, as well as the practices and institutions associated with this, all require understanding and communication and therefore rely on education, teaching or supervised learning. Knowledge about health hazards and learning the methods and techniques to protect against them also form part of cultural diversity. As such, they can be said to fall squarely within the scope of educational activity and can justifiably stake their claim to a place in the overall realm of learning and education. Of course, none of this says anything about the nature, venue, content or time spent on safety education, about how it might be integrated into existing curricula and institutions, or about how to generate the will and means to do this. The next section addresses just some of the structural features of the educational side of health and safety.

Before proceeding any further, there is, however, one general observation that needs to be taken into account: experience teaches us that specialists in a specific field and people who are trying to raise awareness of a particular undertaking, gain recognition

for it and achieve its implementation have a tendency to get somewhat carried away by their enthusiasm and to overlook the question of their subject's *relative* importance in a broader context. One might imagine that the temptation to fall into this trap is particularly strong in the case of universal issues that clearly affect each and every one of us – and ensuring that people have healthy and safe lives undoubtedly fits into this category. It is particularly easy to lose one's sense of proportion when dealing with an issue like this. This could lead to the danger of health and safety precautions appearing to be of such paramount importance that they would be required to be in place at all times and in all situations and would be regarded as non-negotiable elements of supreme significance. Such an attitude could result in the assumption that, in practice, the role of education in connection with health and safety is to ensure that all cultural activities are equipped with both an appendix on health issues and a safety index. In this scenario, health and safety and the associated prevention techniques would be treated as fixed entities that were cast in stone – it would then simply be a matter of conveying them to or instilling them in successive generations of individuals.

Such an approach simply constrains and distorts the issue. Health and safety cannot always be at the centre of our attention, and it cannot be accorded absolute and supreme importance compared to other considerations, irrespective of all the different activities carried out by individuals and communities. In fact, the priority attributed to health and safety will vary depending on the situation and tasks we find ourselves facing. The frequently expressed sentiment that 'health comes first' and should be foremost in our considerations is in fact by no means a given. What we need to do is to gauge and learn how to gauge the importance we attach to it within the complex web of different situations that make up our lives.

Learning to gauge the importance of health and safety issues involves an analytical assessment of the different individual cases that arise in the course of relevant situations and experiences. This includes learning to recognise distinctions derived from the recurring requirements of different cultural activities, such as the specific safety hazards associated with various types of occupation. Furthermore, both the process of learning to gauge these issues and the educational support for this process involve developing principles and attitudes. Principles provide us with a

framework for dealing with recurring or ongoing tasks. They act as guidelines and contingencies for shaping our foreseeable future as individuals. Appropriate principles enable us to live our lives according to a set of basic attitudes that we have chosen to adhere to, and to some extent afford us a degree of protection against the vagaries of life. At the same time, they do not provide us with a ready-made rule for how to respond to each and every unforeseen situation that simply needs to be applied as and when the situation arises. Principles confer temporary order on our lives and provide us with a preconceived idea of what is right that is not dependent on whatever situation we may currently be experiencing, although it is also true that conflicting experiences can cause us to review our principles. As such, principles are not just rigid mechanisms or ways of automating our lives.

It is through the establishment and modification of principles and attitudes that we can hope to achieve sustainable and lasting recognition and attention for education on safety issues. Sound principles and the associated attitudes come about on the basis of experience and as a result of interactive dialogue and communicative negotiation of meaning. When we formulate principles, we are not doing so with exclusive reference to a specific area in isolation, but rather we are addressing the *relationship* between the areas of action and meaning in which we find ourselves and which form the basis for planning the future. We use principles and guidelines to establish who we would like to be and what we wish to stand for, and this goes beyond merely describing what we would like to have – for example insurance cover.

This does not mean that education should adopt a vague 'holistic' approach to health and safety issues. However, it does mean that in seeking to promote appropriate attitudes and principles, education should take into account an individual's overall classification of tasks with all their preferences, sub- and co-classifications. This general rule for principle formulation[1] is doubly important in the field of health and safety if we accept that health and safety is not an independent, absolute or ultimate purpose of human culture, but rather that it is by its very nature 'only' a precondition for other activities. Apart from extreme situations, it is clear, upon reflection, that nobody wants to be healthy and safe to the exclusion of everything else. We desire health and safety so that we can pursue other goals, tasks and aspects of our lives,

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[1] Cf. Alfred Petzelt: Grundlegung der Erziehung. Freiburg 1954, Chapter V.

and it is these that give health and safety its relative importance. We cannot therefore exclude these further contexts that do not specifically concern safety from the process of formulating principles and attitudes with regard to health and safety. This means rejecting a special branch of education focussed just on health and safety. But that does not mean opposing educational practitioners having specialist professional knowledge in this area. It simply means pointing out that the pedagogical problem will not be solved if it is approached purely from the perspective of isolated individual fields of knowledge and their apparently absolute normative implications. There is no doubt that specialist knowledge is important for tackling health hazards in a responsible manner. Nonetheless, as far as principles and attitudes are concerned, information and knowledge about health and safety are not the decisive factor - they are just relative factors that we have to rank in relation to all the other factors that govern how we lead our lives. Their importance is relative to all these other attitudes and they can even come into conflict with them. For example, we draw a distinction between the basic principle of taking safety considerations into account on the one hand, and an overanxious or cowardly avoidance of any dangers or risks at all on the other.

There is one further observation concerning the current emphasis on preventive health projects. One might gain the impression that the large number of preventive health campaigns is linked to the general trend towards a problematic individualisation of the responsibility for health and safety. It is important to make sure that a misconceived call for greater responsibility does not result in education's contribution to this field lending ideological support to the privatisation of healthcare at the expense of social justice, the undermining of social security systems, and the risk of people developing a guilt complex about being dependent on social benefits. It is true, as Kant put it, that responsibility involves making the effort "to use one's understanding without guidance from another", and this also applies to an individual's health and people's responsibility for protecting themselves against risks and dangers. At the same time, however, responsibility by no means excludes either mutual consultation or a distinction and division of labour between lay people and experts, or between burdens that can be expected to be borne by the individual and those that can only be borne by society as a whole. Consequently, it can be said that the overall problem of the integration of health and safety into society constitutes an

indispensable part of the approach that education needs to take to this subject. The target demographic for education in this area comprises especially young people and adults. Thus, a pedagogical approach to health and safety in the workplace would need to be clearly distinguished from the promotion of behaviour apparently derived directly from the technical imperatives of specific tasks and situations in the workplace.

Aspect 3: Negativity as a fundamental problem in educational approaches to health and safety.

Teaching, learning and education are generally expected to result in an increase in people's knowledge and skills. Even if the educational process may sometimes require efforts on behalf of the learner that are currently often viewed as unpleasant or 'negative', the ultimate outcome of education is a net gain for the learner and it is therefore seen as something positive. Learning helps people to develop their opinions and skills and overcome a variety of weaknesses. Education opens up new ways of thinking and acting, and seeks to improve and perfect people's innate abilities. If unilateral emphasis is placed on this positive side of education and its ability to expand the individual's horizons, then it is inevitable that anything to do with health and safety is going to seem very out of place. Preventive health and safety is all about restrictions. The field has an intrinsic 'negative' side, since prevention always involves avoiding something. This would not be so difficult if there were not so many temptations, basic urges and abilities encouraging the opposite behaviour or lifestyle. These 'negative factors' tend to be overlooked in an educational environment that focuses overwhelmingly on the 'positives' - growth and development.

For some time now, certain authors have quite rightly been reminding us of the fact that, despite a widely held belief that education is a fundamentally positive process that develops the individual and expands their skill sets, there is also a long tradition of "negative education", that continues to deserve our attention today.[2] This is not a reference to anti-education or to a return to the formerly widespread educational

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[2] Lutz Koch: Bildung und Negativität. Grundzüge einer negativen Bildungstheorie. Weinheim 1995.- Development-oriented 'positive' educational approaches and restrictive 'negative' ones can be combined into a single coherent vision if the core principle of a sceptical or confrontational common-sense approach is adopted.

methods based on threats and punishment that has resulted in 'education' often coming to be regarded with a degree of contempt. We are referring to the fact that a properly thought-out education involves more than just the promotion of learning. Education is also said to embrace efforts to unlearn certain views and attitudes or prevent them from being acquired in the first place – attitudes that are a part of human nature or to which human nature is inclined, and for which society provides incentives, temptation, encouragement and rewards, but which it can also impose. Unemployment and poverty, for example, are socially imposed constraints that either prevent or discourage precautionary or preventive measures and against which education cannot be used as a palliative or cheap substitute for genuine reform.

There can only be a space for health and safety in an approach to education that also recognises its 'negative' side – this might be described as a 'sceptical' or 'confrontational' common sense-based theory of education.[3] However, the *pedagogical* application of this space is not a preventive measure with direct, long-term impact. It is only possible to talk in terms of education if intended effects are removed in favour of interactive and communicative negotiation of meaning[4] - without any prior guarantees that a consensus will be reached - in other words if it is not simply a question of implementing policies that are perhaps desirable for political, business or insurance reasons. The very essence of education is that arguments are weighed up against each other thereby also allowing room for contradictions when dealing with the tasks we are expected to perform and their ranking and assessment in the broader context of how an individual runs his or her own life, rather than manipulating people's views and training them to behave in a particular way.

Knowledge and practices relating to prevention are 'negative' insofar as they are associated with restrictive judgements and actions involving restraint, avoidance, renunciation and resistance. Such 'negativity' that asks people to refrain from doing certain things, hinders communicative negotiation of meaning and makes it difficult for people to change their attitudes. This has led to repeated attempts to find a recipe for making efforts to refrain from particular behaviours more palatable or for

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[3] Cf. Wolfgang Fischer and Jörg Ruhloff: Skepsis und Widerstreit. St. Augustin 1993.; Christian Schönherr: Skepsis als Bildung. Würzburg 2003.
[4] For communicative negotiation of meaning, see Klaus Schaller: Pädagogik der Kommunikation. St. Augustin 1987.

disguising them as something else, or for fooling people into believing that their horizons are being expanded when in fact they are being restricted. One might counter this approach with the argument that there is also a place for discipline in education and that there is no need to conceal this fact as if it were something to be ashamed of. To abandon all self-discipline would be to yield to what Kant described as "a despotism of desires", a form of tyranny that would completely suppress any culture of freedom and indeed take all the pleasure out of a cultured existence. On the other hand, a culture where the greatest possible individual freedom could coexist with the freedom of all other members of society would provide a general rationale and justification for individual self-discipline vis-à-vis constant threats to health and safety. However, in the specific case of communicative negotiation of meaning that uses discipline to change attitudes, it would also be necessary to hold out the prospect of gaining some additional degree of freedom. After all, discipline 'for its own sake' is just as pointless as health and safety 'for its own sake', and could easily end up being used as the basis for pursuing barbaric ends. Safety, the desire for safety and safety precautions are ambivalent phenomena[5]. Any balanced educational approach to these issues will necessarily have to reflect this ambivalence.

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[5] Cf. Andrea Liesner: Zwischen Weltflucht und Herstellungswahn. Bildungstheoretische Studien zur Ambivalenz des Sicherheitsdenkens von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Würzburg 2002.