

Rethinking school

School is a static and inflexible institution? Educationalist Till-Sebastian Idel and his team disagree. They have been analysing new concepts for years, including research on a long-format system in which pupils don't change schools between primary and secondary level. For Germany, this would be a whole new type of school.

By Deike Stolz



Till-Sebastian Idel, pictured here in the foyer of the Integrierte Gesamtschule Flötenteich in Oldenburg, has seen more schools from the inside than most people. The educationalist does his research where new concepts evolve, where they are tested and embraced.

Red, blue, orange, green, pink. The schoolyard, pupils, parents and staff of the PRIMUS School in the town of Minden in North Rhine-Westphalia are covered in a multi-coloured cloud of corn-starch powder of the type used during the Indian Holi festival celebrations. At the start of the summer holidays, the German pop song “Auf uns” (To Us) plays on the loudspeakers. The school is celebrating its tenth anniversary, celebrating itself. And above all, celebrating the young people who were the first to take part in an ambitious school experiment that ran from their enrolment in 2013 to the end of Year 10, and who now have their intermediate secondary school-leaving certificates under their belts. In German, the acronym PRIMUS stands for the integration of the – traditionally separated – primary and secondary schools, or, as Oldenburg education

scientist Prof. Dr Till-Sebastian Idel likes to put it, for an “all-in-one school”. Idel has been monitoring the experiment, which is being conducted at five schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, since it first began.

Since 2013, the participating institutions have been testing “nothing less than a whole new type of school”, as Idel and his research associate, Dr Sven Pauling from the Institute of Educational Sciences, described the undertaking in a paper they wrote together. Idel explains that there is an ongoing social debate according to which schools in Germany are too inflexible and static. This does not reflect his own perspective: “We focus on schools that see themselves as highly adaptable. And this is what is so exciting here – to see that schools can perhaps change, after all.”

Just like the schools in the PRIMUS project. One of the goals of this school experiment is to make it possible for

schoolchildren to have uninterrupted educational trajectories – which in Germany means not having to change school after Year 4 – in educationally innovative, high-performing progressive schools that are also inclusive and provide equal opportunities. What will schools in Germany look like in future? More “all-in-one”, like in many other countries? As we see it, the idea of a school that goes all the way from Year 1 to Year 10 has enormous potential,” says Idel, who heads the School Pedagogy and General Didactics team at the University of Oldenburg and oversees the research accompanying the PRIMUS experiment together with a colleague from Münster, Prof. Dr Christina Huf.

Idel and his team conduct research on schools and school culture, on lessons, on teacher professionalisation, and on how all these things change – which automatically leads to what he describes as a “wide-angle per-

spective”. This is extremely helpful for monitoring and analysing the school experiment, which touches on several aspects of a current school education reform agenda: one lesson for all in the name of inclusion; the opportunities offered by learning with other pupils of different ages and education levels; the interplay of teachers and other professionals in a Ganztagschule (all-day school, as opposed to many German schools where the school day ends around 1pm). In essence, schools that offer more than “just” lessons. The accompanying research is still underway, but group discussions and interviews with children, teachers, parents and head teachers, as well as participant observation of everyday school life, already deliver initial findings.

Idel's research is primarily qualitative. In other words, it is not about creating the broadest possible data base, as with PISA, IGLU and other standardised studies. Instead it focuses on

gaining specific insights: “We're interested in things like how the teaching staff of a school reflect together on the development of their school, whether in committees, working groups or the like. What problems they identify, and how they talk about them. What solutions they find, and how they implement them,” Idel explains. The solutions can be very different at each of the five PRIMUS schools. “We observe, we're there in the background, and at certain intervals we conduct interviews with those involved.” Then they supplement this work with quantitative data, numerical material that can be evaluated statistically.

The numbers show, for example, that not having to change schools – one of the key features of the PRIMUS school profile – has quantifiable results. As Idel points out, research on this topic has already indicated “that the transition common after Year 4 is a neuralgic point at which disad-

vantages and inequalities arise in the education system.” This, he continues, is to a certain degree the result of a form of “self-selection” by parents, who tend to shy away from pursuing a higher level of education than their own for their child. Similar considerations also mean that teachers err on the side of caution with their recommendations as to which type of secondary school a child should apply for: a Hauptschule or Realschule that also prepare for vocational trainings after grade 10, or a Gymnasium, which is more academic and focuses on preparing for the Abitur, Germany's higher education entrance qualification. “For all the talk of permeability in the public school system, it is rare for a child to ‘upgrade’ to a higher level of secondary school than the one recommended.”

The PRIMUS schools show that it is easier for pupils to exceed the expectations of school recommendations if they are outside Germany's standard



As a general trend, pupils at Primus schools achieved a school qualification that was one level higher than the one previously recommended by their primary school. Forty-eight percent qualified for upper Gymnasium classes – far more than the anticipated nine percent.

multi-tracked school system. This is because in the early years of the experiment three of the five PRIMUS schools enrolled pupils in Year 5 as well as in Year 1. The researchers were thus able to compare the school-type recommendations of 193 pupils who started in Year 5 with the actual secondary school qualifications they went on to actually obtain in 2020. The results: 95 of the students – about half of them – had come to one of the PRIMUS schools with a recommendation for the intermediate school type Realschule, another 60 – so almost one third – for the basic Hauptschule. Only 17 – less than one tenth – were recommended to continue their education at a Gymnasium. However, as a report compiled by the researchers for the Ministry of Education states, the general trend was that these pupils “achieved a school qualification which was one level higher than that which they had been recommended to aim for.”

„If I want a good future I have to learn effectively“

This translated to 50 pupils obtaining a basic school-leaving certificate

like from a Hauptschule – including special needs pupils, some of whom had been transferred to Year 5 without any recommendation at all. 41 obtained an intermediate school-leaving certificate, and a 93 – almost half of the students – achieved the necessary grades for a place in upper Gymnasium classes where pupils prepare for the university entrance qualification. In other words, the number of pupils who left PRIMUS schools with a school-leaving certificate qualifying them to pursue the Abitur was five times higher than would have been expected based on the recommendations. “We are talking about centralised exams here,” Idel emphasises. And in these exams, just as in statewide surveys of learning levels in Years 3 and 8, PRIMUS schools “performed very well in comparison with other schools with similar pupil configurations,” he adds.

He reports that parents of PRIMUS school pupils speak of how the schools allow young people to experience the “joy of learning without the pressures of deadlines and grades” and – because they don’t have to change schools halfway – enable their children to form lasting bonds with other children as well as with teachers. At the same time, qualitative interviews with more than a hundred pupils from different PRIMUS schools showed that their learning efforts were driven above all



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by the desire to optimise their own performance – irrespective of grades or the desire to achieve a certain school qualification. According to the interviews, this is because many of these children and young adults have understood how important learning and the learning process is for their future: “My future is ahead of me and I still have everything to experience, and if I want a good future I have to learn effectively,” one pupil explained. In another still ongoing study, the researchers are following the subsequent educational paths of PRIMUS graduates.

Change of scene: “Money, money, money...”, the voices of the Swedish pop band ABBA ring out in the classroom at the beginning of an English lesson. The rows of desks are filled with Year 8 or 9 pupils. The teacher announces a brainstorming session to see how many words related to money they can come up with in the foreign language. He makes a hand signal and the pupils call out English words in a staccato response – until education scientist Idel presses “pause” on his office computer. He is playing back a video of a lesson similar to many that he and his team, always on the lookout for “an interesting situation”, record for their research and for use as visual teaching material. “This is a typical start to a teacher-led lesson,” says Idel. “A conversation among the class that is structured by the

teacher and in which the teacher assigns tasks and determines who gets to speak.”

Idel likes to contrast this example of frontal teaching with footage from a mixed-year learning group in Berlin. Instead of straight rows of desks there are room-dividing elements. The pupils work on exercises individually or in groups, moving around the room freely to share information or ask others for advice, or to join the queue forming in front of the teacher’s flipchart and find answers to their questions there. “A typical open lesson,” Idel explains. In this classroom, known as a “learning office”, there is naturally a lot more “hustle and bustle”.

This teaching format is also used at the PRIMUS schools. Individualised learning at a pace and level that suits each pupil and, as Idel emphasises, “with different content and targets for the same subject matter”. The learning material is organised into so-called “spiral curricula” which offer pupils access to content on a subject at the various levels of an imaginary rising spiral. With this method, pupils in different years and with different learning levels can all work on a topic simultaneously, without older pupils in the learning group having to repeat the previous year’s material. Each pupil can access knowledge according to their own goals and ability. In this type of lesson teachers guide the learning



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process rather than leading it, shaping the lesson plan together with the pupils and providing individual feedback at regular intervals.

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Lessons like this challenge schools to keep evolving – including the PRIMUS schools in Minden and Münster, where the learning groups up to the end of Year 9 span three different year groups. Here the researchers observe how teachers seek ways to implement the school experiment as effectively as possible. For example, in the Level II learning group where pupils from Years 4 to 6 learn together, teachers who are specialised in different levels of school education – namely primary and secondary school – set aside these differences and work together. The researchers watch how the teachers move away from the standard methods based on different textbooks for each level and develop their own teaching materials.

They also observed that discussions among Level III teachers about the best way to organise study time can get

pretty contentious. Opinions diverge on whether subject teachers or class teachers should supervise the daily individual study periods during this level leading up to the final year: What should take priority? The relationship between pupil and class teacher, or knowledge of a specific subject? In the end, the teaching staff decided on a mixed model with a focus on specialised teachers.

It has yet to be decided whether these long-format schools will remain in their current form after the experiment ends in 2027, and whether the future legislation of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will open up the possibility of establishing more such schools elsewhere in the future. But PRIMUS schools can already serve as a source of inspiration for other schools, Idel says. “Successful concepts are easily transferable – whether they’re about assessing performance without using grades or organising the teaching of a subject into ‘learning offices’. However, every school is different: the problems are slightly different, the people involved are different, the social environment is different,” he emphasises. “There is certainly no one-size-fits-all solution that could be replicated here.” So when it comes to the future of schools in Germany, it’s probably a bit like with the different colours at the school event in Minden: it’s all in the mix.