# Peace education as basic cross-curricular topic at schools

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## ABSTRACT

Cross-curricular themes like peace education have a long tradition of being part of curricula but are not really part of the subjects at school. The German pedagogue Wolfgang Klafki tried to solve the link between subjects and goals of general education with the idea of introducing students to „key problems "of our time like how to gain and maintain peace. The paper will summarize his theory and derive consequences for peace education with regard to the curriculum and the school system.

## KEYWORDS

Peace Education; Cross-curricular Topics; Key Problems; Curricula at Schools

## INTRODUCTION

For many people in Europe times of war are luckily an experience of the past, the times of our grandparents or great-grandparents. With the fall of the iron curtain in 1991, we even thought that we had overcome the West-East-Conflict and the threat of nuclear war and that we could live in peace with the countries of Eastern Europe and the former countries of the Soviet Union. In 2022, with the Russian attack on Ukraine, we are getting an impression of what war means, very close to our countries. The necessity for peace education and the awareness of the fragility of our living conditions has never been more important. In the 80's, when the arms race was at its peak, Wolfgang Klafki developed the idea of the "key problems" of our time as cross-curricular themes to solve the question of a core curriculum for schools. In the following article his ideas, the underlying theory and the consequences for school curricula with regard to the current challenges of the 21st century skills will be shown and discussed.

## 1. The theoretical framework of Wolfgang Klafki's general didactics

Especially in Germany, many different didactical models have been developed to help teachers plan their lessons and to have a theoretical framework to rely on so that they are able to justify the chosen topics and the way they are presented to the students. One of the most prominent models is the critical-constructive model by Wolfgang Klafki, which

is based on the categorical *Bildung*[1] theory developed by him in the 1950s (Meyer & Rakhkochkine, 2018, p.20). Wolfgang Klafki's basic idea is that the didactical analysis is central to the preparation of the instruction. Meyer & Rakhkochkine (2018) summarize the idea:

> Klafki invites pre-service and in-service teachers to analyse educational content ('Bildungsinhalt') they want to teach with respect to its educational substance ('Bildungsgehalt') and finds substance in content when it is at the same time concrete and general, thus allowing students to develop categorical competence.

That means that a teacher has to analyse thoroughly which content of a subject can be chosen. According to Klafki, one has to see "what wider or general sense or reality does this content exemplify and open up to the learner?" (Klafki, 2000, p. 151). To illustrate Klafki's idea with an example: In the subject of Biology, you introduce the students to the classification of animals and you start with the class of the Mammalia (mammals). In preparation of the lessons, you pick one example of a mammal to explain the class of the mammals, for example, "the cat". You don't give more examples, just one which is concrete (all students know cats[2]) and you can show all the characteristics of a mammal ("wider of general sense") with the example of the cat. The idea is to be very precise with one example and to look at it from different perspectives rather than to pick more examples of mammals and be more superficial due to the lack of time. The thoroughly explained example in this way becomes a "good example".

Klafki poses even more questions in his didactical analysis (Meyer & Rakhkochkine, 2018, p.21). For my purpose it is not important to explain all the details of his theory, but to show his basic presumptions like his concept of *categorical Bildung:*

> Klafki constructs an opposition of subjective or formal and objective or material perspectives on *Bildung* in order to synthesize the two perspectives. He writes that this process has to be simultaneously concrete and general because otherwise learners cannot develop competence to understand the world and act in it in situations which cannot be totally anticipated during school time. Therefore teachers have to search for fundamental, elementary and exemplary phenomena if they want to realize categorical *Bildung* in their classroom instruction. They have to take subject matter/content ('*Bildungsinhalt*'), analyse it with respect to the developmental stages reached by their students, and discover what will have enough power to open up, for them, the concrete themes and at the same time 'the general' ('*das Allgemeine*') behind these themes (Meyer & Rakhkochkine, 2018, p.21).

This is the central idea of Klafki's didactical approach and it is really convincing because it takes into account that we have limitations at schools, i.e., the time, the number of

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[1] The German word *Bildung* is hard to translate into English because the term comprises more than education and learning. It combines the education and gaining of knowledge of an individual with the personal development. In English the term "formation" is sometimes used as a possible translation.

[2] In Italy or Germany all students know cats and so the example has significance for them and they can imagine cats and they might even have a cat at home. In other countries like tropical countries, you have to pick different examples like a monkey to be concrete.

lessons and that we have to prepare students for an uncertain future. Therefore all the didactical reflections and the didactical material teachers produce or use have to be "fundamental, elementary and exemplary" on the one hand, and to some extent "open", meaning they should leave room for adaptations, on the other hand. Consequently, Klafki does not stick to a certain set of traditional subjects with specified targets at school, but suggests so-called "key-problems" (*Schlüsselprobleme*) as some kind of core curriculum:

> Basing his model on the works of Jan Amos Comenius, Wilhelm von Humboldt and many others, Klafki defines the 'objective' or 'material' side of the learning process producing general education by identification of the key problems; he defines the 'formal' or 'subjective' side of general education as the faculty of self-determination, co-operation and solidarity. The model is – in this respect – a more concrete version of the categorical model.
> Klafki finds the problems via sociological, political and other publications (e.g. by the 'Club of Rome' on the future development of the world or by Ulrich Beck's conception of risk societies; cf. Klafki, 1985/1996: 64‑69). Klafki suggests the following key problem tasks (knowing that others will come over time):
> - how to gain and maintain peace in times of nuclear and chemical‑biological weapons;
> - how to balance out the interests of nations and nationalities in relation to internationality and interculturality;
> - how to solve environmental problems and how to take care of sustainability;
> - how to solve the problem of a rapidly growing world population;
> - how to overcome inequality in society – in our own country and across the whole world; and
> - how to solve gender problems and balance out the different interests of sexual orientations, including homosexuality (Meyer & Rakhkochkine[3], 2018, p.25).

So with the idea of introducing students to „key problems," Klafki tried to solve the link between subjects and goals of a general education: "In his critical-constructive didactics, Klafki defines a world of key problems ('Schlüsselprobleme') in which students must be competent enough to understand and willing enough to communicate with others if they want to realize 'general education' ('Allgemeinbildung')" (Meyer & Rakhkochkine, 2018, p.25). Although he developed his ideas of the 'key problems' in the 80's, it is still valid. His first suggestion for a key problem is the question of war and peace, the education for peace. In the 80's, under different political circumstances, it was the threat of a nuclear war between the superpowers United States and Soviet Union, today we see the necessity of peace education not only with Putin's attack on Ukraine but also with the growing interests of the new superpower China. Klafki's cross-curricular approach can also be linked to the idea of 21st century skills and can be a very good explanation for the importance of social skills seen as the third challenge for our future. The first challenge

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[3] I quote the publication of Meyer & Rakhkochkine and not the German original by Wolfgang Klafki because the article is in English and they did a very good translation of the difficult German words and concepts.

is environmental, the second economical due to the OECD publication "The future of education and skills Education 2030. The future we want" (OECD, 2018, p.3).

## *1.1 21st-century skills as part of the OECD Education 2030*

In the OECD Education 2030, the ideas of 21st century skills as they are expressed in different catalogues of different (influential) groups are integrated and put in a new shape. For example, the P21 group which was formed by the company Cisco with many other global players in soft- and hardware production saw the necessity of teaching "new" skills at school because "We are currently preparing students for jobs and technologies that don't yet exist... in order to solve problems that we don't even know are problems yet." (Fadel, 2008, p.9). The P21 group has a network with different states in the US and around the world. The identified 21st century skills are considered important because of workforce requirements such as critical thinking, problem-solving, oral and written communication, teamwork, diversity, information technology application and so on (Fadel, 2008, p.8). The framework of this group comprises subjects like languages, arts, geography, history, mathematics, science, government/civics and the 21st century themes of global awareness, financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy and health literacy (Fadel, 2008, p. 13).
In a further stage, the P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning / A Network of BatteleforKids, life and career skills, learning and innovation skills comprising the 4 Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity) and information, media and technology skills were added (P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.). And the project ATS2020 co-funded by the EU aimed at "transversal skills" like "Information Literacy", "Autonomous Learning", "Creativity and Innovation" and "Collaboration and Communication" to reach the overall target of "Digital Literacy" (ATS2020, n.d.). The most elaborated idea of a new way to meet the challenges of the 21st century, which also "contributes to the UN 2030 Global Goals for Sustainable Development (SDGs)", is the OECD Learning Framework 2030:

The **OECD** Learning Framework 2030
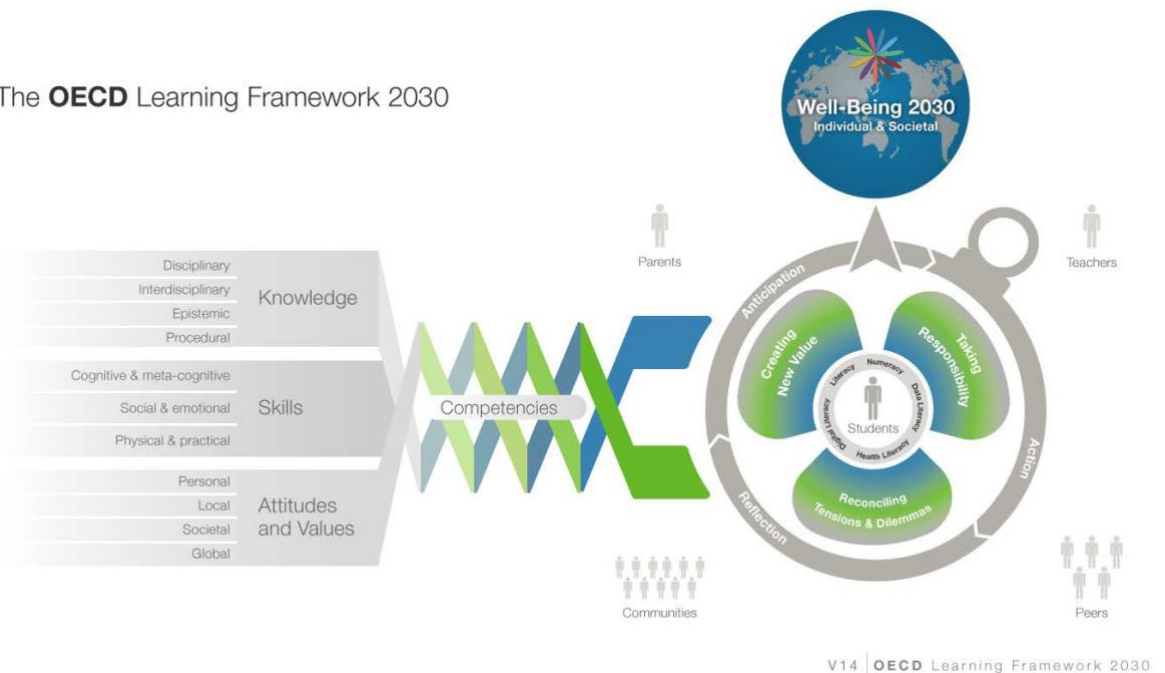
(OECD, 2018, p. 4).

The students are in the centre of this framework. Through knowledge, different skills and comprising attitudes and values with the help of competencies (literacy and numeracy) students are able "to exercise agency, in their own education and throughout life" for the individual and societal well-being 2030 (OECD, 2018, p. 4)[4].

The OECD framework 2030 gives good reasons why learning in the 21st century has to be different and why schools have to adjust to it. It is obvious that our living conditions are different from the last century, and they are now changing even more rapidly in Europe than we could have expected. Under the impression of the Russian attack on Ukraine and its consequences, the German chancellor Olaf Scholz used the word "turning point" (*Zeitenwende*), meaning that we are entering a new era. After half a year of war in Ukraine, most people realized that this is true. It affects us all in our daily lives and we have to try to find answers to the economic and social challenges triggered by the current developments in Europe. The framework tries to give answers and can also give hints on how to deal with the uncertainty students will face. The framework is very sophisticated and tries to cover everything regarding learning and development of the student. But will it work?

### 1.2 The OECD Learning Framework as a new curriculum

The framework shows very well what students need for individual and societal well-being and it tries to integrate all the "stakeholders" of education: Apart from the students

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[4] I summarized the framework of the OECD in my words, for a detailed explanation see OECD, 2018, p. 3-6.

themselves, it includes parents, teachers, peers and communities. It is very interesting that the OECD approach to the needs of the 21$^{st}$century centres the student, the individual:

> Most importantly, the role of students in the education system is changing from participants
> in the classroom learning by listening to directions of teachers with emerging autonomy to
> active participants with both student agency and co-agency in particular with teacher agency, who also shape the classroom environments (OECD, 2019, p. 13).

This is a too simplified position, students have always been active as well and not just listeners[5]. Already at the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century, pedagogues of the progressive educational movement (*Reformpädagogik, Educazione Nuova*) like Maria Montessori, Hermann Lietz, Alexander S. Neill, John Dewey, Paolo Freire (just to name some of the most prominent representatives) criticized education and learning at school as too strict and not considering the needs of the individual. And some of them focused on the individual and societal well-being, most prominently John Dewey (Dewey, 1916). It seems the OECD underwent a paradigmatic shift putting the child, the student, in the centre. With the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) "15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges" (OECD PISA, n.d.) are measured and the results of the participating countries are compared like in a league table. Since the first release of PISA results at the beginning of the 21$^{th}$ century, a shift towards standards, tests, and competencies was observable. The countries which took part in the PISA tests reacted differently to the results but most of them (like Germany or the UK) introduced new ways of testing and consequently teaching very quickly and the students were made responsible for the results. Of course, the school systems run by the governments are responsible for the success of the students at first sight, but with the idea of self-efficacy and the introduction of economical thinking in the educational institutions, students got the impression that they have to be more competitive concerning the output of their learning. They have to think about themselves, their grades, and their certificates to be successful in life. It is going to be very hard to make students aim at societal well-being if they are socialized this way.

And it is not a new concept. The idea of societal well-being can even be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. In Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, happiness is the ultimate value of your life, meaning not seeking pleasure for a moment (Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, 1098a18, n.d.). You can also find the goal of a "good life" in Buddhism as part of the idea of balance, which is typical for Eastern philosophy.

To stress the importance of the individual in the educational process and the personal development of a student is not new and neglecting the consequences for the curriculum is also common if new challenges meet the school system. The OECD paper "The future of education and skills Education 2030. The future we want" calls on "National, regional

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[5] In the OECD publication "OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030. OECD Learning Compass 2030 A Series of Concept Notes" this rather black-and-white perspective is even illustrated with "typical classrooms" of different centuries (OECD, 2019, p. 9-13).

and local governments to share their policy design and curriculum design experiences related to the learning framework" (OECD, 2018, p. 7) and "the curriculum analysis will shift its focus from "curriculum redesign" to "curriculum implementation" (OECD, 2019, p. 17). But how can this be done? With every new topic coming up like health and sex education, inclusion, media and digital literacy or sustainable development goals, schools should react and redesign the curriculum. But not the contents of the subjects usually change, cross-curricular topics are introduced on top, examples in English are the "national curriculum in England" (National curriculum in England, n.d.) or the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). Therefore, cross-curricular topics have a long tradition of being part of curricula but are not really part of the subjects at school.

## 2. Peace Education as cross-curricular topic

We have core subjects at school like languages and mathematics (literacy and numeracy) which are part of all school curricula, among other traditional subjects like sciences, geography, history, religious education, physical education and arts. The challenge for the redesign of a curriculum is to ensure the connection between different subjects. That means interconnecting subjects and taking parts of the contents of each subject to aim at a cross-curricular topic like peace education. Of course, you can try to teach peace education with different subjects like history, geography, languages (literature dealing with the topic), or ethics/religious studies at school. But how can it be done practically? It may work with a class teacher who combines different subjects to give the students learning opportunities for the question of peace and war. But with specialized subject teachers at the secondary level, it won't work at school.

There are different reasons why cross-curricular topics as the ones suggested by the OECD play a minor role at schools. The more academic a type of school, the more specific are the subjects. Therefore, teachers at secondary schools study one or two major subjects at university. At some universities in Europe they also do some studies in educational sciences or didactics, like in Germany. But there are for example no academic subjects like technology skills or media/digital literacy at Würzburg University, which has a long tradition in teacher education. We have specialised subjects at university and not subjects like „sciences". So future teachers are not prepared to teach sciences, because at university we have no „science education", but biology, chemistry and physics education. And in teacher education at university, some people still believe if you are good at e.g. history you can also teach it. The how to is to a great extent left out. Secondly, most teachers do a good job and they try to give attention to cross-curricular topics but very often they are forced to concentrate on the curriculum of their subjects because of the bulk content of the subjects. Thirdly, students learn for their tests in the core subjects and are less interested in cross-curricular themes because they want to get good grades for their high school diploma to get a place at a good university or a good job. If you want to change their attitude and the probability that cross-curricular topics like peace education are taught, you have to consider the following points.

The redesign of curricula has to take into account that all subjects have to consider the key problems approach of Klafki. In all subjects taught at school, the perspectives have to be opened and widened towards topics of general education, i.e. cross-curricular topics/key problems. That means you have to scrutinize the different subjects and try to connect the contents at different levels to peace education, for example. This way, peace education could become part of the subjects and would also be accepted as important content taught at schools. That also means that you have to abolish some contents of the subjects because if you introduce a new topic you have to discard an "old" topic[6]. But this is also part of Klafki's didactical approach to find "substance in content" (see paragraph 1.). Apart from this rather formal step, students and teachers should be given the opportunity to work together with "new" teaching methods. You have to break up the instructional frame, especially at secondary schools. Peace education cannot be taught in a traditional way with the teacher in front of the class instructing the students. Questions of peace and war have to be discussed and thought about. Teachers must be given the opportunity, that means the time and space, to work with their students for example on projects. That could be the first step to introducing a cross-curricular topic like peace education. Ideally, teachers of different subjects have the opportunity to work together with students of a class to do a project. So you also have to reconsider the lesson plans at schools if you want to do this, to insert time slots for project time for example. And above all teachers have to be aware of their role for the students. They are role models for them, the way they interact with students and their colleagues. John Hattie (2002) summarized the influence of the teacher:

> Interventions at the structural, home, policy, or school level is like searching for your wallet which you lost in the bushes, under the lamppost because that is where there is light. The answer lies elsewhere – it lies in the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act – the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling.

The teachers make the difference and they have to be aware of it and reflect on their attitude. Teachers at a school who care about their influence on students, who are not "just" polite and just (these are prerequisites for teachers) but discuss with them what is right and wrong, good and bad, will constantly "teach" peace education. And if the majority of the staff at a school will act this way, the whole climate of a school will be influenced in this direction.

## CONCLUSIONS

Schools are small communities or even small societies. They are public institutions which help students to get along in "real" society and form a bridge to the big world around

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[6] This is a basic rule of curriculum design. In the OECD paper from 2018 the "curriculum overload" is seen (OECD, 2018, p. 6) and in 2019 the process of the redesign of curricula is described as "curriculum change" but this sounds rather euphemistic concerning the deletion of contents.

them. In democratic societies, students also learn democratic rules at school, rather formal as contents and rather informal but more effectively in their everyday life at school in relationships with their peers and their teachers. The governments of the free world have to be aware of this vital function of schools. They have to guarantee a framework for schools which enables them to give all students free access, to evaluate the students by their individual performance and to work pedagogical, not driven by markets and profit. If these conditions are given, peace education is possible and can have a great impact on society:  Concordia domi, foris pax[7]

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[7] Inscription of the Holstentor of the city of Lübeck/Germany.