

# The disappearance of teachers – a play in four acts

by Christine Staehelin\*



Christine Staehelin.  
(Photo ma)

*Teachers embody the subject. They stand for the content. It is their task to pass on culture and tradition so that something new can emerge. In addition to knowledge, this requires, above all, pedagogical and methodological-didactic skills. Teachers can be great role models or the opposite.*

*They can encourage or discourage, be taken seriously or ridiculed. As counterparts in the educational context, they always play a role, yet in recent decades this has increasingly been pushed off the stage. We present Christine Staehelin's speech, which she delivered at the press conference of the "Bildungswende" group [turning point in education].*

## The Disappearance of the Voice

In the 1990s, politicians began to talk more and more about schools. Yet teachers were scarcely involved in these discussions. If they dared to raise objections to the planned reforms – objections that were entirely professionally justified – they were accused of being stuck in the past. Their role in the discourse on education policy became that of mere extras. When it comes to teaching, however, they remain the most important actors, as research continues to emphasise time and again.

## The disappearance into the background

In the 2000s, the role was redefined within the school context as well. Teachers were no longer expected primarily to teach, as the designation might suggest, but to prepare the material in the form of so-called learning environments. It is no

longer about personally imparting knowledge, but about transforming it into tasks which the pupils then work on in a self-organised manner. In this process, teachers remain in the background as organisers and coaches. This results not only in a loss of meaning for the teaching profession, but also for the knowledge itself, which is reduced to mere tasks. It is thus stripped of the meaning that the teacher could previously have imparted through their enthusiasm and passion for the subject. Teachers embody the knowledge in their minds and give it its meaning. That is why they must take centre stage as active participants to fulfil their role.

## The disappearance behind the screen

In the second decade, screens are gaining influence. The digitisation of tasks promises adaptive, individualised learning and immediate feedback. The subject matter is presented digitally. The teacher's role is limited to resolving or delegating IT issues, monitoring pupils' screens, occasionally sitting with a pupil in front of the screen when they get stuck, and reading evaluations.

Direct interaction with pupils is often limited to disciplinary matters – so-called classroom management. Yet every lesson always combines everything: imparting knowledge, facilitating understanding, championing the subject, and strengthening a sense of community with the aim of fostering autonomy. This interpersonal aspect cannot be delegated to screens. That is why teaching must reclaim its personal dimension.

## The replacement by artificial intelligence

The replacement of teachers by screens is now being followed by the replacement of knowledge by artificial intelligence. Neither the teacher's presence nor their knowledge is required; there is no longer any talk of teaching. The chatbot knows better. This fundamentally calls into question the role of the teacher. Occasionally, the importance of the pedagogical relationship is highlighted. Yet in the educational context of the school, there is no relationship without a connec-

\* Christine Staehelin, born 1963, is a primary school teacher, holds a master's degree in education and is an author. She has been a member of the Education Council of the Canton of Basel-Stadt since 2021 and is head of the Education Working Group of the Green Liberals in Basel-Stadt.

tion to the subject matter. It is the teacher who conveys the significance of knowledge as something to be understood, guiding pupils towards it, assisting them in the process, and providing the foundation on which pupils can ultimately rely on.

Delegating teaching and knowledge to a machine robs the teaching profession – and the institution of the school – of its meaning. This loss is significant first and foremost for the pupils. They are dependent on guidance. Education arises from shared understanding, not from the retrieval of information. Without teachers, knowledge remains meaningless. Education policy must therefore strengthen teachers' pedagogical responsibility, safeguard their role as medi-

ators, and subordinate technical tools to the educational mission rather than outsourcing it to them.

Where the teacher disappears, the school loses its centre. Education needs people who stand up for the cause, take responsibility and provide guidance. If school is to be more than just the management of information, teachers must once again become visible, audible and effective – so that children and young people are not left to their own devices.

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