Why Go to School?

A Comparison Study of the Japanese and German Sociology of Mentality Concerning Questions of Motivation for Learning and Performance

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It is a fascinating task to compare the German and Japanese mentalities with respect to the prevailing conceptions of performance in these two societies. The differences arising from this comparison display the different status stratifications of these societies: in Germany, a clear preliminary decision of pupils' destiny regarding educational and professional chances can be demonstrated due to their social and economic capital (cf. Pierre Bourdieu). Whereas in Japan, the parents, originating from all social layers of society, strongly see to it that their children receive the best chances in the education system. For some time now, both school systems are facing a great danger: in the best sense of the word, education degenerates more and more to a flexibly applicable competence according to the demands of the market and the economy. Contrary to the original intend of Wilhelm von Humboldt, education does not produce autonomous individuals equipped with reason, independence, and majority, who, as cosmopolitans, concentrate on supporting peace, justice, the exchange between cultures, and the preservation of nature. Instead, education strongly orientates at values provided by consumption and economy.

Let us begin by talking about the situation in Germany.

**Performance And Motivation For Achievement
In The German School System**

The German school system possesses a selective structure fixing pupils' destinies already at a young age: after the fourth grade, the teachers decide which school the now 10-year-old pupils will attend fol-

lowing primary school. At this point, it is decided which professional career will be possible for them and whether they will be allowed to study or not. This selection function is deeply imprinted into the German mentality and constitutes one of the *five societal functions of the German education system* as described by Helmut Fend in his book "New Theory of School" (2006: 51). The other four functions are the enculturation function, the function to qualify for the economy, the integration function, which materialises as responsibility towards the political system, and the allocative function, which describes a person's status in the social cooperation. The qualification function enables people to an "independent professional lifestyle"; the allocative function results in the competence allowing "the professional [...] advancement and the professional position through own efforts and good performances at school" to be taken into own hands. Finally, the integration function makes it possible "to form and construct the own social identity, identification and the social relationship functioning as basis for social responsibility" (Fend 2006: 53).

**Equal Education Opportunities Are An Unattainable Goal
In The German School System**

Forty years ago, Ralf Dahrendorf provoked a discussion concerning fairer chances for education by publishing his book "*Education is a Civil Right*". He was filled with indignation about the fact that the pupils' *social background* constitutes the decisive factor for their educational success. Thus, the selection function does not refer to individual capabilities but rather to external circumstances. In stating this fact, Dahrendorf touched a weak spot of the German education system. He demanded for the much-trumpeted equality of educational opportunities to be realised by an education policy taking into account the pupils' social background during the design and organisation of the school instructions.

Following the book's publication, the German Education Council launched an initiative in order to facilitate all pupils with the *equal starting conditions* when entering school. Germany's reunification entailed the introduction of the West German education system in the new federal states of former GDR. After the *Wende*, the general attention con-

centrated on the *objective opportunities*: all pupils were to achieve equal education degrees with corresponding facilitation. Since the results of PISA functioned as a wake-up call for the German education policy, the new ideal is to achieve both: today, pupils are to begin with *equal starting conditions* and to have *equal objective opportunities*. The FRG's current understanding of performance and achievement is implied in this rather unrealistic goal: teaching everything to everyone (cf. Tenorth 1994) in order to provide everybody with the same career opportunities. Since the Bologna Declaration, this principle is now asserting itself at the universities as well.[1)]

However, this intention led to implementation problems. Although thereby contradicting the very principle, the German conception assumes that the pupils' innate intellectual capacities of development are distributed dissimilarly. In the education policy's discussions, this has led to providing the less talented children—even more so than gifted pupils—with a special support, which they would not receive in their "normal" social environments, i.e. their parental home. In its annual report of 2007, the German "Action Council for Education" established that the socio-economic status of the parental homes' constitutes a significant factor for the decision of children's school career. The discrepancy is so significant that a child from a privileged, higher social layer is four times more likely to attain the "university maturity" than a child originating from a lower strata of society (cf. Blossfeld et al. 2007: 51–52). The "Action Council for Education" (ibid: 13) criticises that:

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1) A further reform affects the academic education at the universities, which was initiated by the so-called Bologna Process. This initiative to standardise the prevailing European system of higher education was born of a joint statement by the Ministers of Education of the then four largest EU-member states in 1998. The "Bologna declaration" basically is an appropriation and extension of the Sorbonne declaration's intentions. 29 European nations' Ministers of Education decided as well on the introduction of a consecutive, two-staged system of final qualification. Its degrees are mostly called "Bachelor" and "Master". In Germany, the Bologna Process was taken as an opportunity to effect the largest course reform in post-war history. In the German implementation of the Bologna Process, a key element was the introduction of an accreditation system for the new Bachelor and Master courses, which follows the American model.

"Migration background and/or the membership to a so-called education-distant layer of society have to be considered as special risks for the non-participation in higher education measures and degrees."

Therefore, the demands for full-time schools, which are unusual in Germany, have to be understood in the way that the desired fading out of unfavourable family influences could best take place in such an institution. The real question needing to be asked at this point is whether nothing could be done to change the inequality of education opportunities although the children were to be left with their families? However, the latest international comparison studies TIMSS and PISA indicated clear references of changing potential: as demonstrated by the examples of Japan and Korea, not all nations facing a similarly challenging situation comprising of multiculturalism and heterogeneity in school classes display such a gloomy picture of social inequalities in schools like Germany. An attempt to answer the question of why this might be this way will follow now.

Disadvantages Since The Beginning
Today, school is required to develop new fields of work in order to reduce and finally eliminate social discrimination, performance difficulties, and school fatigue. Besides talent and the support and facilitation through the parental home and school, *learning and performance motivations* are considered as prerequisite for a successful school career. At the same time, these motivations are, however, the product of successful learning biographies. Especially in the first years of school, pupils are developing these motivations, which later on will accompany them during their learning and instructions. So, where do learning processes begin if that what has to be considered as their condition (cause) also appears to be their result (effect)? In connection with these questions, a special significance must be attached to elementary school: it thus becomes the most important institution in the school career. The basis for a successful school career is created here through the pupils' experiences with the instructions, the teachers, and the class' social interactions. These foundations also decide whether pupils are always able to keep up sufficient motivation for wanting to be successful in

school despite the failures, which they also may experience. Of course, the structural regulation concerning the selection, which is taking place already at a young age, has to be considered as problematic: pupils who display too little success orientation in elementary school are quickly counted among the losers.

Parents Often Function As Obstacles

Generally, many German parents are not altogether willing to stand by their children concerning the question of their school performance. The missing support and encouragement's results (cf. Dreikurs 2001) have a decisive effect on the children's learning enthusiasm. The goals that the parents cannot accomplish, the teaching staff is not able to compensate. Therefore, the "Twelfth Children and Youth Report" of 2005[2] demands that a third instance is to take part: the extracurricular institutions of the Children and Youth Welfare. They are supposed to cooperate with both the schools and parents in this matter.

Already some years ago, Jegge (1980) and Stierlin (1982) have pointed out that underprivileged parents often display an anti-educational attitude, which can be explained by three factors:

~ biographical roots (the parents did not learn anything themselves),
~ current-individual roots (the parents are afraid to be deposed by their higher educated children) and
~ social roots according to the dictum: "One has to know where one belongs!"

Thus, the parents' role always is to be considered sceptically and not in all cases, their children's destiny in school can be left to them alone completely.

Teachers Are Not Always Dedicated Either

Since the 1960s, the German educational sciences examined which changes take place in the learner under the influence of peda-

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2) Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend: ‹http://www.bmfsfj.de/doku/kjb/data/haupt.html› 2010.08.26

gogical situations (Schwarzer 1980). On the one hand, it is assumed that learning and performance motivations result from the family's primary socialisation. These motivation are expected as prerequisite (as so-called "school maturity") for the lessons by the school. On the other hand, the school leaves it up to the pupils alone to develop their hopes for success or their fears of failures (Heckhausen, 1974) based on their own experiences.

However, next to the parents' attitude, which often needs to be evaluated critically, a laissez-fair attitude of the teachers can be discovered, too. They accept the seemingly normal fact that pupils either are positively reinforced through success in order to develop learning and achievement motivations, or simply do not develop these motivations due to negative feedback. This attitude of teachers materialises as possible danger for the pupils (Seligman 1980; Heckhausen 1974). Thus, the emergence of the cumulative deficit does not appear to be the sole problem of the pupils but as well of the parents, the teachers, and the schools.

Coming To Japan

Even more than in Germany, the children's willingness to perform is the most decisive factor for their later social status in Japan. Generally, Japanese parents consider it natural to support her children with all possible means on their way to a successful career. On the one hand, this is true for the financial aspect: the parents do not shun any efforts to obtain the expenses for their children's education. On the other hand, it is as well normally considered natural for Japanese mothers to help their children to do their homework in the evenings. Even so-called education-distant parents support their children and are willing to pay large sums to private tutoring institutions or cram schools (*Juku*), which prepare their children for their various final and entrance examinations.

The reason why Japanese parents act like this can be found in history: after the defeat in World War II, the Japanese education system at first was oriented of a strongly elevated economic growth. It implied that now the individual living standard would be depended on own efforts and on how much was invested into one's education. "In order to

achieve a good job and a better living standard, one now has to acquire a higher career of education, which is supposed to enable people to function in a society amid the economic growth." (Imai 2010) At this point, it became clear that particularly at a time of the economic growth, the school was expected to produce an appropriate "output" of graduates in order to meet the growing demands of the starting international and industrial competition as well as the companies' demands for highly qualified employees. These graduates were expected to be equipped with loyalty, discipline, industriousness, and endurance. During the economic growth, those adapting to this system became the "winners of life" (Hori 1996).

Soon, the school's developing function as supplier of high-performance young adults for the Japanese economy became more and more obvious. Starting in elementary school, the Japanese school system formed a streamlined way taking careful and well-considered steps, which were supposed to lead each individual to a predestined social position. Despite the comprehensive school system, which obligatorily had to be implemented in all prefectures through the American occupation forces' introduction of the new education act (*Gakkô kyôikuhô*) in 1947, the Japanese school turned into an arena of competition and selection.

Educational reforms, like the ones taking place in the 1970s and 1980s, did not change this function of school at first. Therefore, it is impossible to understand the present motivation of Japanese pupils without taking into consideration the reproduction power of the economic interests transported by the school. The Japanese education society (*Gakureki-Shakai*) first came into being due to economic interests and their suction force soon captivated all classes of society (cf. Imai 2010).

Since the 1980s, the competition for educational opportunities and chances escalated due to the increasing efforts of many parents to provide their children with the necessary educational prerequisites to study at one the renowned universities. Soon, it was referred to in this context as "overheating of education" (*Kyôiku no kanetsu*). As a side-effect, many parents developed a growing dissatisfaction with public school's quality because it did not provide their children with the necessary preparation to pass the entrance examination: first, into sec-

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ondary schools and after that, into the universities.

Since then, an "education market" developed parallel to the public school system and is spreading quickly. The Japanese sociologist Takehiko Kariya (2010) sharply comments on this development. He calls it an extraordinary imposition, which consists of the fact that the official education policy arranged itself with the convenient situation that parents privately have to compensate the deficits of the school system. Considering the high moral assessment of excellent education, the parents attempt to provide their children with the best possible education even if they have to do it by financing costly additional, complementing and private tuitions and cram schools.

All in all, this provides an understanding of why various sociologists (primarily Horio 1996 and Rohlen 1998) use the name "meritocracy" (*Nôryoku shugi*) for the modern Japanese society since the 1980s. Thereby, it is expressed that, in a certain way, the traditional Japanese class system returns in the form of a social society oriented at performance.[3]

In having of such characterisations as "performance marathon" and "examination hell" as description for the Japanese school situation, the impression arises of an inhuman approach to life. However, this impression is not entirely correct because harmony was and still is regarded as the most important social principle in today's Japan. Within the Japanese culture, the reluctance against any kind of profiling roots deeply. According to the Japanese perspective, education is not supposed to serve the transportation of an individual's characteristics. This would lead to the creation of outsiders, who simultaneously generate a burden for the community. Although being practiced on a high intellectual level, ordinariness, as well as the trouble-free social integration necessary for this way of existence, is seen as a warrantor for a happy and harmonious life (cf. Schubert 1992; Haasch 2000).

As Yasuo Imai demonstrated in several of his papers, a turning point emerged in the development of the Japanese educational science since 1980, which is influencing the population's performance mentality

3) The English sociologist Michael Young published his book "*The Rise of the Meritocracy*" 1870–2003 in 1958.

gradually.

As the manual "*Kodomo no Hattatsu to Kyôiku*" (Horio et al.) was published in 1979, the education policy was shaken. School violence, refusal of school, and school fatigue: this manual listed and analysed all phenomena, which are as well to be found in Germany. Neither the parents nor the economy, but school itself was accused of causing these phenomena. Now, school had to react to these accusations and to reform itself. This was realised by taking the pressure out of the instructions. The "Extraordinary Council of Education" (*rinkyôshin*) now wanted to ensure that all pupils meet the same conditions in school and that rivalry and competition do not rank first. Due to considerable increasing and strengthening of the individual schools' autonomy, it was tried to reduce the rivalry between the schools in order to initiate qualified school development. Additionally, the learning conditions were supposed to be improved at a pedagogical level for pupils due to the reduction of teaching contents and the shortening of lesson's time.

Being conducted since 2002, the curriculum's revision points out that consequently, the last reform of the educational system was intended as relief.[4] The public school was supposed to minimise the competition between pupils, and teachers are not to participate in selection processes. This new concept is expected to better the adjustment of school education to the conditions of an information society, which does not function by following a competitive but a cooperative achievement principle. Formerly oriented on output, the knowledge was replaced since by the conception of comprehensive competences representing the ability and readiness to achieve key qualifications.

Nevertheless, the parents' wishes for their children still contradict with these intentions: parents still continue to orientate themselves at the demands of the labour market and subsequently at performance and competition. This dividedness does not only split the education system but by now, displays effects on the pupils' psyche, too: on the one hand, they are supposed to compete and on the other hand, to cooperate.

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4) At this point, it has to be mentioned that slowly, a "natural" moderation of the entrance examinations can be observed, which, however, can be explained by entirely the decline in birth rate.

The comparison of the Japanese and German situations is difficult because Germany does not comprise of such a pronounced mode of achievement-orientated and meritocratic thinking. In the German pedagogic everyday life, the desire for particularly first-class school performances is neither important for every pupil, nor for all teachers, and as well not for most of the parents.

The Quest For A Common Solution

As we have seen, school is a relevant location for children to plan their autonomous life and to prepare for their future status in the social community. They have to develop a necessary habitus, which is needed for this future status, and thus, they are able to determine the feasibility of how large their family income probably will be.

Thus, school has taken over a function of defining the children's future, which additionally is relevant to the individual first and foremost, as Helmut Fend stated in his views about school's significance for *society*. Therefore, school ought to be considered primarily from the perspective of relevance for the individual.

Publishing his book "Assignment of School Today" approximately ten years ago, Neil Postman hit the core of the current problems of school exactly. Unfortunately, the discussion around his posed question of "What are the tasks of school today?" was replaced quickly through the popularity of the international performance comparison study PISA. In Germany, the discussion focused on the *efficiency* of school ever since.

What Is The Purpose Of School?

If attempting to discuss the topic of the pupils' willingness to perform seriously, we will have to return to Postman's *question of meaning*. Thereby, two important tasks of school are concerned:

1. School's *pragmatic* task is concerned with the question of instructional techniques: of *formal education* (*how* should pupils be taught?) and *material education* (of contents; what are they supposed to learn?).
2. In extension to the point mentioned above, school's *ethical-*

philosophical task has to be concerned with the provision of reasons of why pupils should attend school, why they should learn at all, and why even extend it into lifelong learning!

Postman emphasises that if ideal meaning of school does not exist, it will result into an identity crisis not only for individuals but for the general public as well. Such meaning has to include the desire and the motive for the preparation of a self-sufficient and self-responsible life.

Accordingly, school's assignment would be the preparation for a future still unknown. A vision is needed for it. Being referred to as social, methodological, personal, media competences, and decision-making and responsibility, the purely formal key qualifications are to be welcomed. However, they solely do not provide sufficient meaning for a good life in a philosophical sense beyond these qualifications (cf. Steinfath 1998)!

> "Without meaning, learning becomes senseless. And without meaning, school becomes […] a place of emptiness and not of teaching." (Postman, 1998, p. 10)

If now, as Postman claims, the true meaning of school is missing, what purpose will school have today? Firstly, school aims at learning in the sense of *economic utility*: the purpose of learning consists of preparing pupils for entering the acquisition and economic life. This has already been demonstrated at the example of Japan. "The message is to teach young people how to earn their livelihood but not how to live their life", Postman criticises, (1998, p. 13). Here, PISA's objective as well becomes transparent, which examines the proceeds at schools of the participating OECD countries. PISA's fundamental question of research is in studying the positive or negative ability of schools to convey the "basic competences necessary for the participation in the social, economic and political life in modern states." (PISA 2000, p. 1)

The second—and currently prior-ranking—meaning is *mastering of technology*. It is one of school's main purposes to adapt the young generation to technological change. But instead of treating pupils as passive addressees only, it could prove to be more efficient to integrate the next

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generation into the development of innovative projects. Thereby, they would already assume responsibility for sustainable projects and would be appreciated as equal partners together with the teaching staff of these projects.

If we look critically at the mastery of technology, it will become apparent that only little is said about the nature of those current problems that permanently require new technical solutions to be developed (cf. Postman, 1998, p. 16). This concept can be explained by looking at the etymological roots of the word "technology": deriving from classical Greek, "téchne" denotes, in its philosophical meaning, more a concept of what man is able to achieve and to accomplish due to existing intellectual abilities. Subsequently, "téchne" denotes knowledge referring to both the production of something as well as the action with something. Knowledge and action both consist of ethical moments, which have to be taken into consideration during each action with technology. Thus, the main focus has to be applied to problem solving but not only to the feasible. Therefore, the current global and national problems should be more integrated into the discussion about the mastery of technology. However, the initial question remains: are these problems sufficiently dealt with in schools?

As a meaning of school and lessons, the *economic utility* has to be taken into critical consideration as well. It must not to be dictated by the consumption economy alone because excessiveness and greed can turn quickly into functional although unintended education objectives: either property, consumption, competition, or the own integrity in society—where now to place the main emphasis?

This Discussion Is Already Older But Was Forgotten

The "old" critical sociologists Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcus, and Erich Fromm of the German Frankfurt school have developed theories with reference to these questions, which are worth reading again today. Already in the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse feared a development of a society without opposition: the technological progress might make it possible to increase the living standard but, however, it will as well cause and satisfy wrong needs which leave the individual being completely depended on work and

state. Also, Marcuse distinguishes between true and wrong needs here:

> "Being suggested […] by advertising and its methods, the need for products will be wrong if they promise to serve alleged recreation and pleasure while mainly being oriented at consumption. Even though the satisfaction is delightful at first, this luck does not exist forever or even can be protected because it falls into the category of the wrong needs, which will have a long-term destructive effect on the individual and society. In contrast, the true needs comprise of an absolute entitlement for satisfaction because they consist of vital needs such as the desire for nourishment, clothing, and housing at the achievable cultural standard." (Marcuse 1970, p. 25)

As well, I would like to remind of Erich Fromm's critical essay titled "Having or Being". "Having" is the bondage of the present civilisation—the permanent greed for fortunes, recognition and superficial satisfaction. The individual defines itself via possessions: "I am what I have." In contrast and as stated by Fromm, being is an ethical dimension and presents the only possibility of living a fulfilled—and not alienated —life.

School has to support economic utility and mastery of technology together with and through its other meanings. For the public educational system, meaning has to be found, which includes a preventive (prophylactic and preparatory) as well as a sustainable development corresponding to the needs of the current generations. However, this needs to take place without endangering the opportunities for future generations (cf. Hauff, 1987).

Conceptions Of Man Belonging Together

If school wants to take its task seriously, it will have to reintegrate two marginalised conceptions of man into the pedagogic concepts: the first comprises of the basic assumption that people always try to do good. This idea can also be found quoting Jean Jacques Rousseau's "*Man is Good*" (cf. Rousseau, 1971). Pedagogy could be successful for cosmopolitans and peacekeepers if we can assume that people commit themselves to act as keepers and guardians of a vulnerable world.

Therefore, every human being's sense of responsibility and committal towards the social and ecological environment can always be assumed. Consequently, the paramount social action strategies consist of dialogue and cooperation and thus, they can be considered as real education objectives as well. Human reason facilitates the comprehension of the interdependency between individual humans as well as the necessity for solidarity and global cooperation.

The second basic assumption is that people make mistakes! *To err is human*! The fact that humans are imperfect beings is taken into account too little in an open and unsparing manner in the schools as well as generally in all situations in which knowledge is being imparted. As also stated by Postman, if human errors were to be taken seriously, it would have resulted already into teaching curriculums for schools which would consider knowledge as permanent challenge to overcome mistakes (in order to be more precise: *human* mistakes). Since Thomas Kuhn's book "*The Structure of Scientific Revolution*" was published in 1962, it actually should have become obvious that even scientific theories lose their validity eventually and are being superseded by alternative theories. This implicates that even the putatively objective scientist's researching is prone to errors. In such an atmosphere, pupils would (be allowed to) know that their schoolbooks, teachers and their own convictions are filled with errors and prejudices.

The Misapprehension Of Objective Education

School imparts education. However, education is not objective but rather dependent on subjective prerequisites. In order to continue this discussion, the existence and degree of people's malleability has to be determined at first.

In the first case, it can be proceeded from the thesis that *man is shaped completely by its environment* (cf. Gehlen, 1940). Man is unable to avoid learning (cf. Watzlawick et al., 1969). Man is designed for indefinite formation and in fact, all life long. In the 17th century, this opinion was held by John Locke (the newborn is seen as a tabula rasa); it is represented by anthropologists considering man as liberal-minded beings, and it also is publicised by newer sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who attributes the fundamental forming to milieu and parental homes.

Accordingly, the milieu determines not only the individuals' habitus but as well their social capital. Thus, the surroundings influence the malleability, which varies from person to person.

Secondly, it is known as well by today that man is determined considerably *by biology* in motives, behaviour and feelings. On the one hand, physical needs are seen as amplifiers and motivators for learning and on the other hand, psychological needs as well such as the feeling of security, of being accepted, of the own validity, etc. However, differently placed emphases need to be considered.

If school thus mediates education, then it will have to reckon with both influences: the inner, individual nature of man and the outer formation by the environment. Therefore, a fact stated once again, which often is regarded as trivial but nevertheless is not to be underestimated: people are different; they are learning differently and possess very diverse education interests.

"What Kind Of People Possessing Which Virtues And Qualifications Does The Present World Or Our Country Need For Mastering The Future?" (von Hentig 2007, 32)

Now, the school education's problem becomes obvious again and von Hentig rightly asks whether it is possible "at all to have permanent conceivability of and stable convictions for the 'course of events' in such confusing and pessimistic times." (von Hentig, 2007, p. 33)

Do we really know enough about what has to be known for successfully mastering future problems? Do we honestly even want to deal with these future problems or does everybody simply tells a fairy tale fitting to own wishes and imaginations? And anyway, what can be learned about current problematic issues and possible solutions relying on information available from public sources?

Especially during the assessment of former, present and in particular future situations and problems, the discourses often proceed following the determination of special lobbies. "Truth" is becoming relative and dependent on the respectively valid (scientific or political) opinion.

School Is Supposed To Prepare For Life!

Currently, great refusal towards school can be observed with

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adolescents due to the reason that they do not learn for life anymore, as insisted by the Latin proverb: "non scholae, sed vitae discimus". Instead, they are only learning for school ("non vitae, sed scholae discimus").

School turned education into school education but it also comprises of an adaptive system (cf. Rolff, 2007) and thus, it is able to transform again in order to further its development. Therefore, we should not give up hope for the idea of a better school yet.

> "Learning schools are not only institutions that pupils learn in but institutions being capable of learning themselves. Exactly like individuals at first, they have to cultivate and partly even to build up learning structures and capacities." (Rolff, 2007, p. 40)

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Why Go to School?
A Comparison Study of the Japanese and German Sociology of Mentality Concerning Questions of Motivation for Learning and Performance

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This article deals with the comparison of two rather different views on the willingness to learn and to achieve. The distinction results from historico-cultural preconditions which can be explained by sociological analyses of mentalities. Firstly, I will introduce two education systems. Secondly, I will compare their respective particular sets of problems to each other. And thirdly, I will discuss which appropriate measures subsequently could be taken by politicians for education.