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FRIEDRICH ADOLPH WILHELM DIESTERWEG

(1790-1866) Karl-Heinz Günther¹

The work of Friedrich Adolph Wilhelm Diesterweg, one of the most significant German educationists, greatly influenced the German teaching profession in the nineteenth century, especially during the second half. He was one of the great inspirers and pioneers of a genuine school for the people, and his impact, which went far beyond the then German boundaries, can be felt even today.

Diesterweg was born on 29 October 1790, one year after the French Revolution. Thus he was a contemporary of Kant, Goethe, Schiller, Pestalozzi, Schleiermacher, Comte, Herbart, Fichte, Beethoven, Fröbel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Robert Owen, Spencer and Tolstoy all these names being of epoch-making significance, and Diesterweg may claim a worthy place among them.

In his lifetime, Diesterweg saw the downfall of the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleon's victory over Prussia, the Prussian reforms, the wars of liberation against Napoleon, the Congress of Vienna, the foundation of the German Confederation, the weavers' uprising, the 1848 Revolution, and Prussia's war against Denmark. It was during his lifetime that capitalism developed in Germany and that the first attempts were made to organize the working class.

In a nutshell, we could say that Diesterweg, together with Fröbel and K.F.W. Wander, was one of the great German bourgeois educationists of the nineteenth century, whose work brought classical teaching to a supreme climax. These educationists were the intellectual followers of Comenius, Ratke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Basedow, Salzmann and many other educationists of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Diesterweg most consistently applied the following great classical educational ideas to primary school (the *Volksschule*) and primary school teachers: all people are originally equal and educable; education must aim to develop an all-round and harmonious personality; and education must be there for all. He associated these ideas with the problems of practical education, accessible to everyone, and sought to make them tools for the primary-school teacher in particular.

During his lifetime, problems of primary education and its teachers became more and more the focus of his manifold activities, although his first few professional years took quite a different course.

After graduating from the Latin school in Siegen, where he had enjoyed everything but a good educational experience, he studied mathematics and physics in Herborn, Heidelberg and Tübingen. He later obtained his doctorate with a mathematical-cum-philosophical paper. He originally intended on taking up a technical profession, but the German events at the time prevented him from doing so. At first he was a private tutor, then a mathematics teacher in Worms and Frankfurt, before joining the Latin school in Elberfeld as a deputy headmaster in 1818. Under the influence of Pestalozzi's ideas, taught to him at the Frankfurt model school by former pupils of Pestalozzi, he gradually resolved to devote himself to primary education. From

1820 he was head of the Prussian teachers' training college in Mörs and from 1832, of the Berlin teachers' training college. In sum, these were twenty-seven successful years during which Diesterweg trained teachers for the primary school.

He was removed from office by the Prussian educational authorities in 1847 and compelled to retire in 1850. The reasons for this disciplinary step against an educator who had already become a celebrity in all German states were given by the Prussian educational authorities as follows: Diesterweg's had authored 'subversive writings and raised the question of the relationship between school and Church', 'statements and views (...) which contradict the principles followed by the State administration on education', revealing a 'link with party activities' and even 'socialist-communist and demagogical leanings'. Such arguments, which also served as a pretext for banning Fröbel's kindergartens somewhat later (in 1851) had nothing to do with Diesterweg's and Fröbel's real ideas and projects. The real reasons were political ones. Under the influence of the Prussian reforms (started in 1807) and the war of liberation against Napoleonic oppression, the primary school and the training of primary school teachers received a clear impetus during the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. Rousseau and Pestalozzi's ideas and the educational activities of Humboldt and Süvern encouraged this development.

The period following the German wars of liberation, i.e. the Restoration and the creation of a German Confederation based on a feudal model (1815–47) was characterized by stagnation and restriction, which turned into downright reaction after the 1848 bourgeois-democratic revolution. The representatives of the ruling nobility ascribed Democratic and nationalistic ideas and initiatives by the people, especially the petty bourgeoisie, primarily to the primary school and its teachers. A senior official of the Prussian Ministry of Culture, which during the years of the Restoration up to 1848 and the ensuing reactionary period never stopped urging that the educational level of the primary school be kept as low as possible, once said: 'It always made a most repugnant impression on me to see the kind of presumptuous and arrogant teacher, alienated from the Christian faith, who came from Diesterweg's school.'

These trends culminated in the Prussian Regulations of 1854. They strictly limited the programme for primary schools (which were, as a rule, single-class) and primary school teachers' training colleges to a very low level. Education provided to children and student teachers was placed under control of the clergy, schools were directed by the religious representatives, and the salaries and educational standard of primary-school teachers were kept to a strict minimum. All the ideas of bourgeois classical pedagogics on the importance of a general education for all children were rejected. While the rapid development of a capitalist industry demanded a higher level of education for the people, the ability of most young people to read and write and carry out the four fundamental operations of arithmetic was considered sufficient for the time being, and all other demands could be ignored.

Throughout his life Diesterweg rejected this official educational policy more and more resolutely and put forward a democratic educational programme that also took the social problems of workers into consideration. These were probably the real reasons for his 'official shipwreck', 6 as he called it.

Diesterweg pursued this democratic educational programme not only as the director of teacher training, but as a member of the Prussian Parliament, a speaker at numerous teachers' meetings, and an initiator and supporter of the German teachers' associations. His literary work, as documented and scientifically commented on in his collected works, was very political by nature and consists of about twenty volumes totalling more than 10,000 pages. It is also certainly incomplete since only part or excerpts from Diesterweg's textbooks have been included. He wrote fifteen textbooks and nine guides for teachers, which saw a total of 120 editions during his lifetime. Some of the textbooks were translated into Polish, Russian, Dutch, Danish and several other languages. They were mainly written on the subjects of geometry,

arithmetic, geography, astronomy and the German language.

Diesterweg's best-known educational work is his *Wegweiser zur Bildung für deutsche Lehrer* [A Guide to Education for German Teachers] (1835), which had four editions during his lifetime. The purpose of the book, starting out from theoretical considerations and leading to direct guidelines for action by teachers, was 'to give instructions on how the teacher, or he who wants to become a teacher, will be able to improve his knowledge and teaching skills, which method he has to adopt for the teaching of particular subjects and which tools he has to use'. The 'Guide' is an excellent example of Diesterweg's belief that 'all [educational] theory separated from practice' must be rejected in the educational field. Further, Diesterweg published many small papers such as *Die Erziehung im allgemeinen und Schul-Erziehung insbesondere* [Education in General and School Education in Particular] (1820), *Die Lebensfragen der Zivilisation* [Vital Questions for Civilization] (1836/37) and *Pädagogisches Wollen und Sollen* [Educational Intentions and Obligations] (1857).

Between 1827 and 1866, Diesterweg edited the *Rheinische Blätter für Erziehung und Unterricht mit besonderer Berüksichtigung des Volksschulwesens* [Rhenish Journal for Education and Instruction with Special Reference to Primary Education], where he also published hundreds of articles written by himself. In these articles and in thousands of reviews and annotations of contemporary educational literature he took up directly the issues of teaching and educational policy of that time. From 1851, he published the *Jahrbuch für Lehrer und Schulfreunde* [Yearbook for Teachers and Friends of the School], contributing many important papers to it. During all his life he remained devoted to the natural sciences, and his book *Populäre Himmelskunde* [Popular Astronomy] (1840), which went through numerous editions, was an exemplary scientific book for the general public.

In his writings Diesterweg dealt with all educational fields, ranging from educational aims to methodological details concerning almost all subjects of instruction. As the years of his life advanced, marked by numerous confrontations and disputes, he defended certain political points of view in a more and more outspoken way.

It would be too simple to assign, without reservations, Diesterweg's political position to the broad spectrum of liberal thought of his days. While he placed his hopes in a constitutional monarchy, his expectations for education went far beyond liberalism. He regarded the equality of all citizens, in terms of both rights and duties, to be the governing political principle. In 1863, summing up his political views, he wrote:

The presence of democracy requires the following conditions: free movement of citizens according to their individual needs and aspirations; equality in rights and duties for all citizens of the country; participation of the people in the legislative process, regulated by law, through the agency of freely elected representatives. These are the main elements of the democratic constitution from which everything else follows: freedom of the press, of worship, of thought, freedom of association, self-determination in community matters, free movement of people and goods; and many more rights the main lines of which already exist.¹⁰

Diesterweg quite early started to deal with social problems based on the situation prevailing in the Wupper and Rhine industrial areas. He wrote that millions of people lived there 'who shamefully lack the means to satisfy the most essential needs for food, clothing and shelter; (...) a staggering number of children are deprived in their early youth (...) of the growth and training necessary for strengthening the body and developing the mind.' But such critical insights did not lead Diesterweg to revolutionary conclusions. Like many eminent progressive bourgeois educationists, he believed that social reforms and the 'propagation of correct attitudes', especially through education of the people, were the ways to improve the situation and to guarantee the conditions for the free development of individuals and their self-determination.

He aimed at such development for all people, having in mind a concept of man which was essentially humanist, rationalist, enlightened, anti-dogmatic and anti-Church (but not antireligious). It was largely influenced by Rousseau's views on man's original goodness and was not marked by the doubts Pestalozzi tended to have. Diesterweg, with respect to his conception of man, took up the ideas of his great exemplar Pestalozzi primarily with regard to the latter's ideas on development, his basically optimistic attitude and confidence in man and his powers, in his capacity of being reasonable and kind, and able to lead a meaningful life in an upright community. Diesterweg's conception of man can briefly be described as follows: man is capable of development and improvement; activity as the reason for existence and a condition of development; faith in reason and a dialectical relationship of thought and action; trust in the nature of man; the rejection of metaphysics; taking pleasure in the world's variety; man's aspiration and ability to subject the world, nature and society to his own harmonious ends and organizing them accordingly; unity of the personality in its manifold aspects; harmony between the individual and the community; development of all human powers to the benefit of the individual and society; fundamental equality of all men; and the unlimited diversity of human nature. These views on the nature of man determined the most general aim of education as formulated by Diesterweg, who associated himself with German classical ideas: to direct man's activities towards the truth, the beautiful and the good. In the Wegweiser he stated: 'Perhaps the expression "self-activity devoted to truth and goodness" should be given preference to any other, since it contains a basic principle: self-activity; and a material one: the truth and goodness, or better still the truth, beauty and goodness.'13

In the last years of his life, and especially after the 1848 Revolution, the idea of carrying out one's own activity, or free self-determination, and the development towards it became more and more pronounced in Diesterweg's educational thoughts, in particular concerning schools, and was set against all the restrictive political and educational measures dictated by the Prussian ruling nobility and its bureaucracy. Evolution became the central concept of his educational theory. According to Diesterweg, the principle of evolution corresponded with the principle of liberty in that it demanded that everybody should be allowed to develop his capacities and individual possibilities and that this should be ensured by social institutions. To this is related the principle of equality, which calls for society to guarantee all these opportunities to all children. Such reasoning led to the conclusion that a general *Volksschule*, a school of the people, be set up to ensure equal educational opportunities to all children. Diesterweg wrote in the Hamburg School Plan:

Nature has provided the child with talents but leaves it to man to cultivate them. (...) Society takes on the task of developing the talents that are equal in nature; (...) Since nature establishes equality, society follows suit (...) by providing equal educational instruments to all people, who are all equally in need of education.¹⁴

Diesterweg applied this idea of evolution to the most various branches of education, leading him to imagine a project as follows:

The educational principle of evolution demands in the educational field: respect for human nature and of the individual; its stimulation to full development, expression, activity and initiative; natural, hence joyful, experience of life; stimulation to develop the senses, strengthening the body, to explore, to be lucid and to discover things; providing the minds with suitable nourishment; constant progress. It forbids: arbitrary assumptions and manipulations of human nature; any encouragement to act blindly and mechanically; any kind of drill; rote learning; uniformity; force-feeding with subject-matter that is not understood, etc. 15

In line with his principle of evolution, Diesterweg's demands were that general education should be provided to everybody and that the keynote should be educating the individual to become a human being rather than a member of his/her class. From this position he advocated a considerable improvement in the educational level of the primary school, for example by

presenting good literature, science teaching, physical training and education for work, and he stressed in particular the idea of developing the abilities and skills of each person.

Diesterweg coined the democratic expression: 'First educate men, before worrying about their professional training or their social class, [because] the proletarian and the peasant should both be educated to become human beings'.¹⁶

Thinking about the essence of the general education of man which means, in modern terminology, a general education serving the all-round development of personalities Diesterweg arrived at the conclusion that the essential function of general education was to lay the foundations of a personality development which enabled everybody to prosper in civil life through his/her own activities. This makes it necessary to concentrate the subject matter of instruction on the essentials and to remove all non-essential elements from the educational programme; what he wanted was 'to provide the genuine fundamentals of knowledge and education', ¹⁷ so as 'to give each child all the education which will make a human being worthy of this name'. 18 When defining what is essential, it would be necessary to demand far more pertinently than the educational programmes of that epoch not only about the 'educating power' but also about the 'living conditions of the population'. From this point of view Diesterweg sharply criticized the somewhat sketchy texts and teaching materials used in primary schools in accordance with the Prussian Regulations, as well as by other German states. In his work entitled Didaktischer Katechismus oder Kurzer Unterrichts-Wegweiser in Fragen und Antworten [Didactic Catechism or a Short Teaching Guide by Question and Answer], Diesterweg attempted to outline the subject matter 'which must not be missing in any teaching system aimed at a complete basis for human education'. ²⁰ There he defined the aims, the content and the methods of the natural sciences, arithmetic, geometry, physics and astronomy. Even this still incomplete programme shows, with respect to the content of general education for the general primary school, how far he went beyond the education the ruling aristocrats were prepared to concede to the working-class children in the majority of primary schools. Nature study was designed to prepare the child through study of the surrounding environment ranging from the classroom to the locality for instruction proper and to help develop language skills. In Diesterweg's eyes, geometry was essential for all children because the pupil who 'does not know the nature of space, has no idea of the form of objects it contains, which is equivalent to not knowing about being itself'. ²¹ He regarded physics and astronomy as indispensable elements of a general education to be provided to all children, as they constituted a value in everybody's life without which man would have a deceptive knowledge of nature.

Elsewhere Diesterweg identified other aspects of general education that must form part of general primary education, for example mother-tongue teaching, history, sports, literature, geography and drawing. What is important about this is the tendency to design a high-level, universal, educational programme, which was amazingly broad for those days, and to contrast it with the very limited opportunities existing at that time.

Already in his *Wegweiser* Diesterweg had put special emphasis on the idea of forming intellectual potential. Later on, he said:

The official goal or purpose of instruction is to stimulate, develop and strengthen mental powers, in particular the higher ones - judgement, understanding and reason - whose development enables man to properly conceive the world and control his basic instincts using his intellect and his will. It is in this way that man, mainly through the development of the intellectual side of his being, really becomes - man.²²

The progressive method, also called the individualizing or induction method, was to carry out this task. This method proceeds from facts to arrive at a theory, from the material world to that of ideas, from experiment to axiom, from the concrete to the abstract, from observation to concepts, from the particular to the general, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from variety to unity. Using this method, the teacher's role is that of a stimulator of the pupil's initiative. In his

work entitled *Pädagogische Rück- und Vorblicke* [Pedagogical Retrospects and Prospects] Diesterweg explained the method:

On the basis of attention and illustration the pupils' intellect is awakened in an elementary way, which liberates their minds and their tongues, encouraging the development of language and thought. The mind's reasoning powers are improved by contact with reality, and these powers are internalized for later use. This is done through the teacher stimulating the pupil's own activity.²³

The Wegweiser zur Bildung für deutsche Lehrer contains mainly from the aspect of stimulating the children's own activity in the educational process a system of didactic statements. In regard to the goal of education, the conception of man and the idea of an all-round education of the personality, all the essential knowledge of progressive bourgeois pedagogics is condensed and arranged in such a way in this Wegweiser as to form a useful and readily available 'guide' for primary-school teachers. This is what Diesterweg intended: to write teaching guidelines in the form of clear instructions to the teacher. This is evident from the way in which he addresses the teacher:

Teach naturally! Organize instruction according to the natural developmental stages of the children. Start teaching from the pupil's point of view and direct his progress steadily, firmly and thoroughly. Do not teach anything for which the pupil is not yet ready and do not teach anything with which he is already familiar. Teach in a lively manner. Proceed from the familiar to the unusual, from the simple to the complex, from the easy to the difficult, from the known to the unknown. Do not teach in an academic way (in other words the lecture-type teaching methods used in higher educational institutions), but simply! Always remember that you are aiming at the abstract (increasing the intellectual capacity) and the material (provision of the curriculum) at the same time. Never teach anything that the pupil cannot understand as yet. Ensure that the pupils remember what they have been taught. Accustom the pupils to work. Take each pupils' personality into account, etc.

A necessary consequence of Diesterweg's devotion to the cause of primary schoolchildren was that he attached much importance to the training, qualifications and social role of school teachers. He was an outstanding champion for raising the social standing of primary-school teachers in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, even though, during his lifetime, his ideas and demands remained unrealized.

What mattered to him, as Diesterweg wrote in the *Rheinischen Blätter*, were three main aspects: 'the educational (didactic, methodological, disciplinary, etc.) competence of the teachers, the independence and autonomy of the school, and a secure position for the teachers, especially with respect to a satisfactory salary'.²⁴

All his life Diesterweg championed a thorough and scientific training provided to the primary schoolteacher. He stood against all restrictions concerning the operation of teacher training colleges, especially after the Prussian Regulations were enacted in 1854. First of all, he demanded that teacher training should be organized on a scientific basis. He wrote that many people thought that it was sufficient to train school teachers in their own narrow, special field and that they were unable to 'cotton on' to anything else, if they did learn to 'cotton on they would break away from the narrow circle assigned to them once and for all, forever, and they would quickly become unsupportable.' In contrast to this, Diesterweg demanded: 'Confidence in education, confidence in progress, confidence in man and a readiness to cope with all the consequences of acquiring knowledge.'

He came out in favour of freeing primary school teachers from supervision by the clergy and demanded instead that people with experience of education should exercise such supervision. Diesterweg demanded that the teacher should be given a seat and a vote in local bodies (the school board, membership in important associations) which had something to say about school matters. He kept fighting for improvement of the teacher's social position and demanded in his articles and parliamentary speeches that primary school teachers should be

adequately paid by the State to free them from their degrading material dependency on local despots, especially landlords. He expected the State to secure the material position of teachers' widows and orphans. Diesterweg kept calling on teachers to organize their own associations, where together they could defend their interests, contribute to their further education and thus serve the development of education for the people.

In this struggle for the primary school and its teachers, Diesterweg stressed some basic principles: the need to dissociate Church from school and to regard the school as a public institution (together with the teaching staff) financed and maintained by the State; the need to provide an education system continuing from the kindergarten, which he on the basis of Fröbel's ideas strongly supported, through to higher education. He expected the State to guarantee 'to every child an entire, uncurtailed primary education and in addition, if necessary, education provided by the pre-school establishment or day nursery and, later, by further or higher education in a specialized institution'. ²⁸ In 1849, he wrote that a new time would come when education was no longer provided according to the weak powers of each individual, but that 'the whole society would declare itself jointly committed' to making it a possibility for the entire nation. He went on:

Thus the State meets and fulfils a general human right, the right to education, without which a human, moral life beneficial to the public is not possible. Without education, a person would be unable to fulfil neither civic nor human duties within the family and in human society at large.²⁹

On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, Diesterweg received honours and congratulations from all parts of Germany. He had become an acknowledged pioneer of educational progress and in the struggle to raise the standing of the primary-school teacher.

Friedrich Adolph Wilhelm Diesterweg died in a cholera epidemic on 7 July 1866.

Notes

- 1. *Karl-Heinz Günther (Germany)* Professor of the history of education (1962–90); vice-chairman of the Academy of Educational Sciences of the formaer German Democratic Republic. He was also chairman of the Commision on the History of Education and the School in Germany (1978–90) and member of the World Association for Educational Research. Author of some 400 publications dealing with mainly the history of education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Co-editor of the History of Education (1957, in German); he also supervised among other things the German editions of the works of Robert Owen (1955), K.D. Ushinsky (1963), N.K. Krupskaya (1967) and F.A.W. Diesterweg (1989).
- 2. F.A.W. Diesterweg, *Sämtliche Werke* [Complete Works], Vol. IX, Berlin, Volk & Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1967, p. 40.
- 3. Ibid.
- 4. Ibid., p. 45.
- 5. Quoted from *Geschichte der Erziehung* [History of Education], ed. by Karl-Heinz Günther, et al., 12th ed., Berlin, 1976, p. 269.
- 6. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. IX, p. 17.
- 7. F.A.W. Diesterweg, *Sämtliche Werke* [Complete Works], ed. by Heinrich Deiters, et al., rev. by Ruth Hohendorf, Vols. I-XV, Berlin, Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, 1956- (incomplete).
- 8. F.A.W. Diesterweg, *Wegweiser zur Bildung für deutsche Lehrer und andere didaktische Schriften* [A Guide to Education for German Teachers and other Didactic Writings], selected and introduced by Franz Hofmann, Berlin, 1962, p. 68.
- 9. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 363.
- 10. Pädagogisches Jahrbuch 1863 [Educational Yearbook, 1863], p. 35.
- 11. F.A.W. Diesterweg, *Schriften und Reden* [Writings and Speeches], selected and introduced by Heinrich Deiters, Vol. I, Berlin; Leipzig, Volk & Wissen Verlag, 1950, p. 117 ff.
- 12. Ibid., p. 137 ff.
- 13. *Wegweiser* . . ., op. cit., p. 59.
- 14. Rheinische Blätter, Neueste Folge [Rhine Newsletter, Latest Series], Vol. 18, 1866, p. 266 ff.

- 15. *Pädagogisches Jahrbuch 1855* [Educational Yearbook, 1855], p. 85.
- 16. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. XII, p. 285.
- 17. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. XI, p. 216.
- 18. Ibid.
- 19. Ibid.
- 20. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit.,, Vol. XII, p. 151.
- 21. Ibid., p. 158.
- 22. Schriften und Reden, op. cit., p. 303.
- 23. Pädagogisches Jahrbuch 1866 [Educational Yearbook, 1866], p. 191.
- 24. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 413.
- 25. Sämtliche Werke, op. cit., Vol. V, p. 283.
- 26. Ibid.
- 27. Ibid.
- 28. *Sämtliche Werke*, op. cit., Vol. VIII, p. 42.
- 29. Ibid., p. 113.

Selected works by F.A.W. Diesterweg

Reference to the complete works of F.A.W. Diesterweg is made in notes 6, 7 and 10 above. The reader's attention is drawn specifically to the following titles:

Diesterweg, F.A.W. *Die Erziehung im allgemeinen und Schulerziehung im besonderen* [Education in General and School Education in Particular]. 1820.

Rheinische Blätter für Erziehung und Unterricht [Rhenish Journal for Education and Instruction]. 1827-66.

Wegweiser zur Bildung für deutsche Lehrer [A Guide to Education for German Teachers]. 1835. 4th ed., 1850-51.

Die Lebensfrage der Zivilisation [Vital Questions of Civilization]. 1836.

Populäre Himmelskunde [Popular Astronomy]. 1840.

Jahrbuch für Lehrer und Schulfreunde [Yearbook for Teachers and Friends of the School]. 1851-66.

Pädagogisches Wollen und Sollen [Educational Intentions and Obligations]. 1857.

Selected works about F.A.W. Diesterweg

The literature in German on Diesterweg is enormous. A selected bibliography can be found in:

Günther, K.-H. F.A.W. Diesterweg: Volksbildung als allgemeine Menschenbildung [F.A.W. Diesterweg: Education of the People as All-Round Education]. Frankfurt/Main, 1989.

Another useful source is:

Fichtner, B.; Mencq, P. (EDS.) *Pädagogik der modernen Schule* [Education in Modern Schools]. Weinheim; Munich, 1992.