

Normal Is the Difference: Maxims for Successful Integration

By Henning Köhler

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[Note on vocabulary: Mr. Köhler is making a strong case for a new kind of integration, which is quite radical. I have tried to use the words “integrative” or “differentiated integration” where he speaks of this new kind of tolerance, and “integration” or “integrating” where he refers to the old style of integration.]

In this article the curative educator and well-known author Henning Köhler develops concepts to counter a society that is increasingly marginalizing those who are different or disabled, actually threatening to eliminate them altogether. His radical ideas about tolerance bring him to radical maxims for a differentiated integration. This article is a greatly shortened summary of a lecture given on March 13, 2009, in Leipzig, at the founding of the Initiative Integrative Waldorf School.

We stand at a turning point.

It is an open question as to what direction our society and individual human beings will develop. One can be concerned, having the feeling that it's all heading rapidly downhill, when one sees that, apparently, all human intelligence and creativity are directed exclusively towards the development of new technology, and human beings work towards becoming the creators of a new human being. Tiny chip-driven robots could be placed in the bloodstream to keep watch over the individual's health. Psychotropic drugs and genetic technology could allow for many kinds of manipulation of human beings. One hopes that all illnesses could be eliminated, and human beings could be made immortal.

Others fear that new weapons of destruction will arise that can no longer be contained, and they will be used, nevertheless, to rule. On the other hand, a longing for spiritual life lives in society, especially among young people. Spiritual life is seen to be tied to the great social-ethical questions, including the

questions of what to do so that human beings no longer suffer hunger or injustice, and also that those who are different, who deviate from the norm will not be shut out, literally, not be excluded from life, as has already been happening for a long time as a result of prenatal diagnostics.

Spirituality today cannot be imagined without a social ethic capable of meeting and transforming the future. And perhaps both can be connected with new technologies, upon which something like a new age, in the best sense, can begin.

Can we get a grip on everything with psychotropic drugs?

The French philosopher, Michel Foucault (1926–1984), was perhaps the greatest theoretician on power, its structures and its psychological backgrounds. Foucault took up the theme of integration early on, making clear that not only exclusion but also inclusion (the German word *Einschliessung* is ambiguous, as it can mean “internment” or “integration”) are both instruments of power. He describes how modern strategies of standardization or normalization, the inner disciplining of human beings approaches forms of absolute power. In this connection he also spoke of the development of a new power that he called “biopower.” What he meant by this, to put it briefly, is discipline of the spirit through discipline of the physical body. The power to inflict or threaten social or physical death has become the power to rule and control the lives of human beings. And the means by which human lives are controlled, in part without even being noticed, have become ever more subtle.

It begins with education and training and continues in employment dependent on payment, as well as with consumer pressures, applied through the fashion and entertainment industries and the influence of the media. We are regulated by the government and subjected to standardization through the educational process—an organization of the masses by means of which, expressed in neurobiological terms, the brains of human beings are conditioned to certain thought patterns, basic convictions, and structures of consciousness.

The American cultural critic, Francis Fukuyama, has written a book with the title *The End of History and the Last Man* (2002). He warns about the newest developments in genetic technology and pharmacology. He sees these as the greatest dangers of the present. Fukuyama devotes one chapter to the madness with which so-called hyperactive children are treated. He sees in this an indication of what he calls “social control through psycho-pharmacology.” According to his view, there are forces at work that intend to control the population down to the smallest details with available chemical and genetic means, to bring about in this way “social peace,” to control everything that appears to be different. Would this be the triumph of biopower?

Normal is that which does not stand out.

The concept of integration is already loaded. It refers to a whole, the members of which play specific, assigned roles in the functioning of the whole. The members are not thought of as individuals at all. A human being who does not fulfill his expected role as a part of the whole is a human being in need of integration. The prototypical case of a society of human beings in which every single person is totally integrated, that is, in which every impulse of individuality is brought to a halt, is the military. The military marching order is an example of complete integration.

What does this mean for the foundation of an integrative school? If we say we have twenty-five children, four of whom are in need of integration, what do we actually mean by this? Do we mean that we have a class of normal children, and then four or five abnormal children are added, who, in the course of two or three years if it's a good integrating school, will likewise become normal? Is that what we want? This is basically the central idea of many integrating institutions until now: normalization. Integrating a few unusual children into a larger group of normal children so that the behavior of these eccentrics is ever more adapted to the norm. Can that be the point?

Normal is the difference.

The ideal thought that one can oppose such a point is the concept of the individual. Every person has the right to be accepted into the community and, indeed, in such a way that his own individuality is not threatened, is not brought into question, but rather, to the contrary, is encouraged and promoted. From this point of view, it seems to me to be appropriate to speak of a differential integration (DI), as opposed to ordinary integration.

DI intends that human beings with obvious differences should be received by others, without the background thought being that these differences should be driven out. DI means giving up the expropriating of an individual's life-destiny through reference to an abstract average standard; it means that the difference of the other person, even when we experience this, to begin with, as something strange, will be affirmed and carried by the community.

Normal is the difference. We welcome variety. We celebrate the differences. In the ideal case we will do all we can to find forms of community-building in schools and in other places in which this great variety is allowed to live. For all the theoretical stress on the individual over the past one hundred years, we certainly have not yet come very far in discovering what tolerance means in reality.

Genuine tolerance is radical.

True tolerance—I would call it radical tolerance, because it actually goes to the root—does not mean to simply tolerate the difference of the other, but rather take joy in it. This is a tolerance that leads us to discover a new field of enthusiasm: Just as you are in your unbelievably interesting and, for me, also at first mysterious, otherness, just so would I want you to be. For me, it is a continual occasion to wake up the otherness of the other person to perceive, to fathom, and to appreciate.

In my view, the true curative teacher would be one for whom the so-called handicap of the so-called handicapped person is a constant source of joyful astonishment, which by no means excludes that he feel compassion when he meets suffering, but that impulse is not reserved for the so-called realm of the so-called handicapped; opportunities for compassion can be found every day and everywhere. It should fill us with enthusiasm that every human being is a universe unto himself—and where can this be better studied than in curative education? That would be an active, radical tolerance that can become a trend-setting, community-building force. Besides, these ideals are also just as true for “normal” teachers and, actually, for all who have to do with education.

More and more ways of behaving are being seen as pathological.

The boundaries for what is considered normal and acceptable have been increasingly narrowed in the last decades. The internationally used lists of psychological disturbances of children and young people have expanded explosively since the middle of the 1980s. There are constantly new syndromes. More and more types of behavior, formerly seen as variations of the norm, are now classified as pathological. For these reasons it is at least an open question whether we actually have more disturbed children than in earlier times.

The increasing categorizing of deviant behaviors as pathological, the swelling of therapeutic programs, the shifting of pedagogical problems over to the realm of medical responsibility—all this does not help us get on top of the situation. Children as they are today do not need ever more therapy and ever more regulation and ever more standards and ever more integration. They need more social warmth. And more attention. These are the decisive factors: warmth and attention. Warm attention. Attention from the heart.

What is not meant here is the supervising, controlling, assessing attention towards which our time tends so strongly. There is another kind of attention that is something very much of the future, but which we can already begin to practice today. Rudolf Steiner describes this attention as a new, purified form of interest in the other person, whose education has put us in the position to see the “divine” in that person.

We should take the trouble to develop the new kind of seeing that brings about an inner transformation with reference to how one looks at children, in particular how one looks at special children, how one can distance oneself from false ideas of standards, and from that “gaze that searches for errors” that we all are more or less conditioned to use.

Maxims for a different kind of integration

In the following I would like to set forth the fundamental maxims for a differentiated integration, that is, an integration that is “free from standards.”

1. Dividing people into handicapped and not-handicapped is, first of all, tactless with regards to the supposed handicapped people, and second, it’s an untruth. To be handicapped is such a definitive criterion for being human in general that one can say with certain correctness: A person’s humanity really breaks through only when he perceives and accepts in himself his own fundamental handicap. This concerns every one of us. In that moment when I perceive and accept myself in my own handicapped situation, I have an inner insight that forbids me ever again to say to, or to think of, another human being: “In contrast to me, you are handicapped.”

2. To be sure, there are varying gifts and talents in specific areas. If one takes all human beings as a totality, the scale from “less gifted” to “average gifted” to “highly gifted” would be unnecessary. Every person is equally highly gifted, but not all are able to reveal their gifts equally well, and not all have the good fortune to gain recognition for their talents.

3. Standardized measurements for intelligence give information, at the most, about a very small portion of the spectrum of intelligence. To certify a person as being of lower intelligence is speculation. Our interest should be directed not at the degree of intelligence a person shows, but rather how and where his intelligence is expressed or why it cannot express itself.

4. To equate normality and good health is neither plausible nor sensible. Normalization is not an ideal of pedagogy, or of curative pedagogy.

5. The monopoly of the neurobiological interpretation in the curative realm cannot be tolerated. It is historically a throwback. Thirty years ago it seemed that the time of believing that all deviant characteristics and behavioral types could be traced to a single cause of defects in the physiology of the brain was finally over. But now the phrenology of the 19th century is making a rousing comeback in newly expressed forms. Besides, we Germans especially should never again fall into the error of viewing so-called handicapped fellow human beings as biologically defective. After Auschwitz, that should be finished once and for all.

6. Within the conceptual framework of differential integration, we will champion certain ideas that have been systematically mocked and discredited in postmodern discourse—ideas such as “I,” “soul,” spirit” and “destiny.” It is a matter of newly characterizing and justifying these ideas in the context of a post-materialistic anthropology capable of working into the future. It is not enough merely to postulate them.

7. Schools, and most especially integrative schools, should be places where children—as Jean Paul once expressed it—would be strengthened to withstand the “illnesses of the times.” They should not be places where children are trained to behave as “inconspicuously” as possible. Almost nothing stands in the way of a true curative-pedagogical view as much as “the demand for conformity.” (Juerg Jegge)

8. The philosophy of the differentiated integration proceeds from the understanding that every human being enters the world with a biographical impulse or intention. One could also speak of an individual’s “guiding will,” as Goethe called it. Besides genetics and environment/education, there is a third element [in the development of a child.] This third element should be sacred to us. We are called upon to develop an “appreciating feeling” for this element. (Edmund Husserl) Strong, passionate will impulses of a child must never be fought or shown to be laughable—even when we doubt that it’s an expression of that inner guiding will. We could be mistaken. Unswerving, stoical refusals by a child must never be contemptuously passed over. It could have to do with an “inner imperative” whose meaning is still hidden from us.

9. The current practice of blaming parents for the misbehavior and school failures of their children is unproductive and mostly factually inaccurate. Children are not just the products of their education. Parents are partners in a good integrative school—and not just those who come, bowed and heavy with guilt, to enter into an alliance when we are dissatisfied with their child.

10. Respect for the “otherness” of the other is the great learning objective. Rudolf Steiner called the highest form of this respect “awe before destiny.” A child must never be humiliated.

11. The lessons, as far as possible, should be arranged in such a way that the different constellations of talents and varieties of intelligence find equal consideration. Each child should experience, at least once a week, his competence, and feel his particular areas of interest addressed. In this regard, the results of recent research into intelligence and talents should be called upon.

12. Bullying among the children will lessen the more the adults make the effort to arrange the life of the school so that a social field of warmth is created.

It's a matter of setting the example of social competence. Exhortations fall on deaf ears. The "good" (trust, fairness, helpfulness, and tolerance) must live in the air, to a certain degree, so that the children can "smell" it. They will register, with joy and relief: "Here the people treat each other respectfully, and us, too." Here the teachers and parents speak with each other in such a way that true recognition is perceptible. So, where it has to do with the social climate, let us begin with ourselves. It will pay off!

13. What we think about the children has exactly the same effect as if it were spoken. Our speech, for example in the conferences (child studies), should always be very careful. Then we will notice that our thoughts also gradually become more careful.

14. Every lack or defect that we believe we have seen in a child must be balanced out with at least two good qualities, strengths, beautiful aspects that we have discovered in the child in our contemplative judgment. Then we will have the inner attitude with which the differentiated integration can succeed.

