

# Smartphone or pencil?



The aim of the pilot project is to prepare children for the digital world.

Digitalization permeated all levels of our education system some time ago. The Goldau project school shows what digital school life can look like today. Students at this school work on their personal phones and tablets in class. Aspects visited the pilot school.

Text: Anja Fiebiger Photos: Sophie Stieger



The children's own mobile phones are part of everyday school life in the Goldau project school.

It is 8 a.m. sharp. Melanie Hediger is standing in front of the board and greets class 5a with the words: "Good morning, we have a lot to do!" Just a moment ago, children's voices flowed through the open window of the ground floor classroom of the Zwergarten school in Arth. Now it is quiet. "In French, you'll find a tile with a phone conversation between two people. Read the conversation, perform the dialogue, and put the best version on learningview.org," says Hediger, explaining the task to her students. A few minutes later, after the final explanations of the day's goals in math, English and German, some children grab their mobile phones and leave the classroom.

Class 5a is in the Goldau project school. It is part of the standard elementary school system for the municipalities of Goldau and Arth. It has also served as a kind of laboratory for the neighboring

Schwyz University of Teacher Education (PH Schwyz) since 2004. Together, they want to find out how education is evolving with digital media.

Two boys from class 5a jump up and down simultaneously on a mini trampoline. The mini trampoline is next to the entrance to the school building. In complete unison, they shout out an English word every time they jump. "House!" – "Home!" – "Cool!" The two class 5a students are practicing their English vocabulary. A third boy sits cross-legged on the floor and reads out the German terms on his smartphone in time. Not far away, three girls sit on the steps testing each other.

#### **Collaborative project with PH Schwyz**

Since 2009, children at the project school have been working with their own devices in class. Christian Neff, head of the Goldau school district, brought crucial attention to the "I-Phone project" through a blog entry he had written about the wealth of possibilities offered by smartphones in school. "Beat Döbeli from PH Schwyz read the blog, came to me, and said they would

run it as a project," recalls Christian Neff. At that time, he was a teacher – he now leads the project school.

The idea still seemed absurd at the time, and there was a lot of opposition. The project initially started with a single class. Today, the dust has settled and acceptance among parents is high. "We don't leave parents to deal with the problems of smartphones and the internet on their own," explains Beat Döbeli from PH Schwyz. Now, all 230 elementary school students in the municipalities of Arth and Goldau use personal IT devices in Grades 5 and 6. There are rules governing how they are used in lessons: When the teacher is speaking, smartphones, tablets, and notebooks are placed at the side of the desk with the display facing down. It works.

Digitalization has changed how the teachers conduct their lessons. Individualized learning requires a lot of space. That is why the children choose their own place



Students also work independently in digitalized lessons.



to learn. This also means the teacher is able to provide more intensive support for each individual child.

“Bonjour ... ça va?” Nik practices a French dialogue in the classroom. Although the text is printed and stuck on a white cabinet directly behind him, he prefers to use his device. Why is that? “Because it’s faster and easier.” His neighbor Jermaine, by contrast, is using a pencil to improve his German text about a man in the Middle Ages. Smartphone or pencil? That is not the real question at this school. Fundamentally, it is not about the device, but rather preparing children for the digital world.

LearningView is a tool for personalized and individual learning. It was developed jointly by PH Schwyz and the project school. The tool is based on tiles that contain worksheets and their answers, as well as tests and homework. “The test tiles are red, the homework tiles are blue, and the special ones are yellow,” Egzona tells us, explaining how LearningView is organized. She can barely imagine the school without it: “That would be hard!” The children upload their work such as dictations, films, and photos to the tool themselves and check off completed tasks for the teacher. Since the introduction of digitalization, the

children have to work more and they have to do so more independently,” says Melanie Hediger.

#### **Personalized lessons thanks to smartphones**

In a shady part of the school building, Janosch sits on a bench, deep in thought. He’s looking at feedback. “Here you can indicate how you learned and read other people’s comments,” he says. “Other people’s tips help me to learn!”

Corinne Kennel teaches class 5b. The school room is on the upper floor. Here, a student turns a red die in his hand and compares the view with a sketch in the math book. “You’re not allowed to peep at the answers,” he tells us with a glance at his teacher. So is there not an app for a spinning die? The boy thinks that would be unnecessary and explains: “My die

is more convenient.” His response demonstrates an emancipated use of the device, which is the project school’s vision.

At the end of lessons, a screen high above the board displays a list of student names, tasks, and check marks. At a glance, each child can see which tiles they have already completed compared to their peers. The moment of truth. Do the devices not distract the children too much? The temptation is there. “But if we can get students to work sensibly despite smartphones, we can say hooray, we’ve solved one of the biggest problems in dealing with the devices,” says Beat Döbeli. And how do you do that? “With good class management, control, and education.” Is there another way? “I doubt it,” says Döbeli: “When schools shy away from digitalization, children question how school is still relevant to their lives!”