

In the land of poets and thinkers – of yesteryear

Two teachers from Berlin set out to explore the world of education and discover how Germany has lost its way | By Clara Schaksmeier and Alexander Brand

Do you remember the sound of your old school bell at recess? The smell of the hallway, the color of your classroom walls? The teacher's desk stood in front of the chalkboard; the students' benches were in the back. Our memories of classroom setups are all fairly similar. For a long time, we, too, only knew of our own school experiences – until we made the switch from student to teacher and found ourselves on a journey to classrooms around the world.

When we enter a Berlin classroom today, at first glance, the basic setup remains the same: the blackboard and the teacher's desk are in front; the students' benches are in the back. In the past few years, the chalkboard may have been replaced by a smartboard, sluggishly moving the German education system into the 21st century. The system's rigid nature is also reflected in the structures of the teaching profession as a whole. Teacher shortages, lack of collaboration and high workloads deprive educators of opportunities for exchange, further development and the space to broaden their horizons.

It was our desire for a broader perspective – which we struggled to find in the German school system – that drove us to

go abroad. Armed with curiosity and the financial support of several scholarship programs, Clara gained teaching experience in Canada, Vietnam, India and Georgia, while Alexander – eager to see how high-performing education systems achieved their results – spent five months visiting schools in Finland, Estonia, Japan and Singapore.

In India, Clara worked closely with Kavita, a biology teacher and curriculum coordinator. Kavita is not only passionate about her subject, but also has an open ear for her students. Some days, after school, a long queue of young people stretches in front of her office, filled with students asking her for help of any kind. You can often find Kavita talking to her charges after work, listening to them, advising them and sometimes even accompanying them outside of school.

And then there's Ms. Nguyen, a German teacher from Ho Chi Minh City, who is committed to her interactive and progressive didactic approach. She independently educates herself in the afternoon and on weekends with books and websites to break away from the classic lecture approach most frequently applied at her school. She strives to make her class as exciting as possible, and as a result, her lessons are

the highlight of the week for many of her students. She willingly shares her knowledge of interactive teaching methods with her colleagues and is currently developing a compendium of methods on her own initiative.

All over the world, there are teachers who do their job with the greatest passion and dedication, who love to be of service to their students, and who are deeply committed to them. They are driven by the knowledge that they are having a positive impact on the lives of young people. It is through these teachers that the system's vulnerabilities are defied.

Learning about other school systems can reveal our own system's strengths and shortcomings. At times, other countries' strengths highlighted Germany's long-diagnosed weaknesses. In Finland, the teaching profession is so popular that training programs are flooded with applicants and can cherry-pick the best. In Estonia, technology has found its way into every classroom. Every school employs an educational technologist who manages the hardware and provides training for teachers. Meanwhile, most schools in Germany consider a staff IT specialist a luxury. For

decades, the Estonian government has prioritized equipping its entire society with digital skills, so teachers of all ages are comfortable integrating technology into their lessons.

Being abroad also challenged our perceptions of what school can be. Hanna, an Estonian teenager who had spent a year studying in a German high school, reported that her strangest experience there was how once the lessons of the day had concluded, everyone headed home. In Estonia, school was where she met up with friends in the afternoon, organized clubs and enjoyed a game of table tennis. School was her second home.

On a policy level as well, looking abroad can reveal how the German education system lags behind in ways rarely discussed in the media. The Singaporean government recognized that the skill of teaching is so complex that teachers need lifelong support for professional learning. Teachers there have significantly smaller teaching loads compared to those in Germany and spend one hundred hours a year on professional development. They meet weekly in professional learning teams to collaborate on lesson planning, reflect on their teaching and discuss pedagogy. Spending time in a school system that genuinely


invests in teachers highlighted how our system does not.

At the same time, our encounters with systems from around the world made us appreciate some aspects of our system we had taken for granted.

In Japan and Singapore, admission to one of the few prestigious universities takes on anxiety-inducing significance in students' lives. Consequently, the pressure to perform academically dominates the school system. While German students certainly face societal pressure to attend *Gymnasium*, the school track with the quickest path to university, Germany does not have an equivalent of an Ivy League. Instead, resources for higher education are spread equally across the country. Germany's dual vocational training system, with its interlinking of theoretical and practical learning, is also a model for many countries.

And it's not just countries in the Global South that struggle with low teacher wages. Many Estonian teachers also work overtime to compensate for their inadequate wages. Kaarel, a teacher close to retirement age, confessed that he would have to continue working for the foreseeable future and that teachers over 70 years old are no exception. When young

teachers enter the profession in Estonia, often without proper training, they tend to leave fairly quickly for a more lucrative career. There are several steps we need to take in Germany to make the teaching profession more attractive. Fortunately, increasing pay is not one of them.

Curious teachers who spend time abroad will bring a treasure chest of inspiration back home with them. When we enter our classrooms in Germany today, the school bell and furniture have stayed the same. But we have not. We have returned with new ideas, a different perspective and an appreciation of things formerly unnoticed. We no longer see only the system's flaws, but also the potential that lies within it. 

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