

This edition of Educare includes an article by Katha von Dessien on the German education system and the transition from life overseas to the educational system in Germany. This is a follow-up to an article in the September 2019 issue of Educare, in which we covered the UK educational system. The first part of the article may be of special interest to school principals, and those who work with or teach the children of German families, but the second part includes helpful tips for the return to the passport country which are relevant in any culture.

Katha von Dessien is an ATCK from Uganda and South Africa. Her mother apparently always knew that Katha would be a teacher - it only took her daughter about twenty years to realise it herself. She now lives in Stuttgart (Germany) where she works in a *Gymnasium* with a lot of students who are not yet aware that they are actually cross-cultural kids. Her passion is to help her students discover the gift their biographies can be for them and the world they will enter into.

The sections in italics are about Katha's personal experience.

Education in Germany, and the transition from overseas

It's Friday morning and I'm still tired as I enter the classroom of my tenth-graders. Thirty excited faces look up, it's their first lesson with me. Even though the schedule says we should do the history of Europe, I choose to talk about culture. The students have brought objects, clothes or food that symbolize what culture means to them and how it has influenced their life. We hear stories about family heirlooms, African dances, Italian food, Romanian greetings. In their presentations, the students switch between German, English, their mother tongues and a lot of laughter. Most of them have a German passport, but not everyone can trace back their family history within Germany. My classroom is diverse in skin colour, languages, values and histories – and it's a reminder that school today looks a lot different from the school we went to. It's a symbol of the changing education landscape that Germany is experiencing at the moment.

The German school system is heavily influenced by its Prussian heritage, the main goal of which was to educate disciplined soldiers, and some features still permeate the present. In the so-called “deficit-culture”, the teacher's main job was to find everything that was wrong with a student. Young people were trained to fear and obey authorities and believe everything the teacher lectured in class. With the growing research of child development and psychological components, schools are slowly moving towards a more affirmative way of teaching and grading. Subjects like

history or politics invite students to discuss and state their own opinions instead of repeating standard answers. Topics like general discipline in classrooms, the quality of feedback and the effectiveness of punishments lead to regular debates in schools and in the public sphere. Far too often, there is no solution or consensus across the system.

Now, when I say system, I should actually use the plural form because in Germany, we do have a total of 16 different educational systems. Due to our federal structure, all states (*Länder*) have the right to design their own curricula and educational principles. While every state has to educate their students according to the Basic Law (the ideas of freedom, human dignity and democracy), the path to obtaining a degree can look quite different depending on the state you live in. There are private schools run by churches or businesses as well, but they are still bound by the general curricula; the only difference might be in additional subjects or rituals throughout the year. A church school would have weekly devotions or celebrate holidays, for example.

Pre-school education can vary from ages 0-6; most children attend kindergarten at age 3, but more and more parents choose daycare for younger kids as well due to their work schedules. Four years of elementary school are mandatory for everyone, but afterwards parents can choose which secondary school to send their child to depending on their abilities and grades. *Hauptschule* (five years) and *Realschule* (six years) prepare you for vocational training; the *Gymnasium* (eight or nine years) allows you to pursue studies at university later on with the *Abitur*. (The *Abitur* is the end-of-school qualification at age 18). It is possible to move between the different schools, you can leave the *Gymnasium* if it becomes too difficult and vice versa, you can always continue towards the *Abitur* after graduating from the *Realschule*. Some states have tried to connect the various secondary schools a bit more; therefore, we have vocational *Berufliche Gymnasien* which already have a practical focus like communication, design, technology or social studies. There are also *Gesamtschulen* (comprehensive schools) which allow you to take the same subjects at different levels based on your abilities.

The choice of secondary school used to be made jointly by elementary teachers and parents. The teacher would give a recommendation for the child based on their observation in grade four and the parents could choose based on this statement. If your child did not receive a recommendation for the *Gymnasium*, you could not enrol your child there. With a fundamental change in the country's economy and society, politicians have become aware of an educational disparity between German native speakers and migrants, children from high- and low-income families. They began questioning the *Gymnasium* as an elite institution and ultimately revoked the

principle of recommendation. Though well-intentioned, it has had profound impacts on the educational system: secondary schools are no longer considered good enough, many parents send their kids to the *Gymnasium* which can't deal with such numbers of students who often are not prepared for a more academic way of learning and teaching. Grades drop drastically and the universities are flooded with ill-equipped students. The overall value of vocational training has been lost as many people consider only a university degree to be an appropriate education. Businesses struggle to find apprentices and many young people feel like a failure in the academic education system. **Somehow the idea that craftsmen and practical workers are second class human beings has seeped into public belief and I as a teacher have a hard time telling my students and their parents that they are valuable and important no matter which education or career they choose.**

Depending on the kind of school you go to, subjects and methods may vary. Every student is required to learn English from an early age; based on interests and abilities, students may then choose more languages such as Latin, Spanish, French or Italian, or they focus on science and technology, computer science or music. Religion is being pushed further to the sidelines, given the changing clientele of students (my inner-city school has 70% of non-religious or Muslim teenagers). Nevertheless, teachers demand an increase in ethics lessons to provide students with some sort of moral framework, which is often not taught at home anymore.

Even though many schools now offer bilingual classes (subjects mostly taught in English or French), German is of vital importance in school. Most lessons are taught in German, and German is a subject itself. With the number of non-native German speakers and refugees coming into the country, schools have begun to change their approach. Many students stumble across German words they don't know, thus they're not able to solve a task they would normally be able to understand. Quite a lot of textbooks are written in a style of German that does not reflect the contemporary spoken language used by young people. Teachers face the challenge of making content linguistically accessible to all their students while maintaining and promoting a certain level and growth of German. People who want to work and study in Germany need to be able to speak and understand the language - it's a vital part of culture. Nevertheless, we cannot expect newly-arrived refugees to know everything straight away, which is why more and more German language learning classes are being offered in schools and communities. Many classes are filled quickly and might not always deliver the expected quality since they are aiming to prepare young people and adults for all kinds of careers. **Returning TCKs who already know some German might be better off following the regular German lessons at school and doing the extra work at home.**

I spent some of my teenage years as an MK in Uganda. My mother did not want us to go to boarding school and we therefore chose homeschooling. The programme was from a German organisation, so we were taught the necessary German. I had stubbornly decided to learn Latin as well, which proved to be quite a challenge in the Ugandan bush when no one could explain grammar or vocabulary to me. If I didn't understand the written explanation in the book, I was left to fight on my own. Upon our return to Germany, we were simply enrolled in a German school in Southern Germany. With the different educational systems in the individual states, the homeschooling company had followed a different curriculum from the one we now entered into, so they did not want to accept the schooling we had had overseas.

The German states are quite proud of their own systems and often also competitive with each other. Despite our globalized world today, education still seems to be rather focused on the individual states. Approving qualifications from different school systems can be rather difficult in Germany, as the individual states are quite particular about their required standards. There is no standard answer, as it always depends on the type of qualification and the circumstances TCKs return to. It is however possible to repeat a class to catch up or to attend special classes in order to have your qualifications approved (*Fachschule*). Some might count at an advanced level, which allows students to study at colleges of applied sciences (*Fachhochschule*); these are similar to universities with a more specific focus on science and practical application while universities are mostly about academics. Slowly but surely, more and more subjects are being taught in English at universities in order to prepare young adults for the international market. Friends of mine from New Zealand and India have completed degrees in geoscience and microbiology and then returned to their home countries. Depending on the subject (mostly scientific), it is possible to do your entire studies in English at a German university; other subjects such as teaching or law are rather geared towards the national market and are therefore taught in German.

With these challenges in mind, here are some things that might be good to know if you plan to return to the German school system, or any other system:

1. Get your facts right

Take enough time before your return to find out about the school system you'll be entering, which options are available and which of the credits you have obtained overseas might be approved in that state. For secondary education, it is possible to enrol your child in a school of choice, so research the schools, talk to principals and find a suitable match.

2. **Talk with the teachers**

Before your child enters a new class, talk to the teachers and let them know where you come from and what kind of education your child has experienced so far. Talk about teaching and learning methods, find out about the teacher's expectations of your child. Many teachers work in multicultural environments, but very few are actually trained to appreciate and incorporate different cultures into their lessons. Don't lecture them, but help them understand how your child grew up and what an asset their cross-cultural experience could be to the class.

3. **Observe before you judge**

Just like any new country or city, schools have a 'culture' of their own. Simply because you as parents might have gone to school in the country to which you are returning does not mean that school is still the same. School 'culture' relies a lot on the principals and their visions, on the teaching staff and the students who embrace their surroundings. They might look very different from the school environment your child is used to in terms of clothing, rules or subjects. Before you judge the new system as better or worse than what you had before, observe this new 'culture'. Have a look at how people interact with each other, what a normal day at school looks like, what might appear fascinating or strange to you. Ask a lot of questions, talk to teachers, classmates, other parents. You might learn a few new interesting things along the way.

4. **Embrace the freedom**

If you listen to other parents or politicians, it seems that school is a one-way street to success. You are only allowed to go forward and collect good grades along the way - everything else is considered a failure. While it is not wrong to always give your best, it is certainly not a problem if your child might want to repeat a year because they do not feel ready for new challenges and want to get used to the school and class as a whole before taking on new academic tasks. Given the different school options in Germany, it is very possible to start at the *Realschule* and complete your *Abitur* later on, if the *Gymnasium* seems too demanding at first. In the long run of your child's career, it won't really make a difference if they spent an extra year in school or not – no matter what the media might tell you. In fact, your child might be a more stable teenager, better equipped to cope with puberty and reverse culture shock.

5. **Listen to your child**

While our parents pushed us to give our best and take every chance we could get, they never made decisions for us when we returned. They would always consult us and wanted to know our opinions and ideas. Taking away a teenager's independence and deciding everything for them will hinder their sense of responsibility and self-confidence that they so desperately need in their life. If your child wants to take on the challenge of a certain school option or another language or a completely different course than you had imagined, listen to them.

Both university studies and vocational training are valuable options if they fit your child's ideas and abilities. Assure them that their worth is not tied to their grades and that their fragmented cross-cultural biography is an asset they should never underestimate.

At the end of my cultural lesson, I hand out empty booklets to the students and ask them to write down their story. What kind of cultures do you experience in your life and how have they shaped you so far? Reading these reflections later on is one of the greatest privileges I have had in my teaching career. There are thoughts of cultural confusion, questions of belonging and identity, stories of loss and grief. But in the end, these students discover that their cross-cultural stories are an immeasurable treasure for themselves and those around them: "Thank you for letting me tell my story. Thank you for listening."

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