

Teachers Under Communism— The Case of East Germany

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IN OUR always ongoing attempts to improve the education and professional status of teachers, we have often looked outside of our borders for comparisons and ideas. Generally we have observed the democracies, where political ideas have much in common with our own, and sometimes the Soviet Union, with which we are obviously in competition internationally.

However, there is one European country—Germany—which could be of special interest to us, since its western part, the Federal Republic, has developed a democratically-oriented school system, while the eastern part, officially called “Deutsche Demokratische Republik” (German Democratic Republic) or DDR, offers us a classical example of just what happens to teachers in a communist society. How training and employment of educators in that state compare with conditions in a free country will be described briefly in this article, based on the writer’s recent on-the-spot observations and research in East Germany, which were facilitated by his native command of German and previous teaching assignments in the Federal Republic.

In essence, the schools for which edu-

cators in East Germany are trained are completely public and administered by a central Ministry of Education. In 1965, the DDR’s parliament, which has a statutory majority of the “Socialist Unity Party,” entirely reconstituted the school system, which—not counting vocational and other specialized schools—consists of three basic elements.

There are, first, for children aged one to six, various types of voluntary preschool institutions, and latest statistics show facilities exist to accommodate 62 percent of children below age six.¹ All children within the compulsory school ages (6-16) attend a ten-year school with a virtually uniform curriculum. Its unusual features are the required study of Russian starting in grade five and an elective second language (usually English) two years later, plus far more mathematics and science than are obligatory in either West German or American schools. There also is systematic “polytechnical” instruction,

¹ Helmut Klein and Wolfgang Reischok. *Bildung für Heute und Morgen*. Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1971. p. 49.

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East Berlin's "House of the Teacher" is a center for in-service education.

dealing with both the technical and economic aspects of production and offering concurrent work experience in industry.

The third major element of East German education is the two-year "Extended Secondary School" attended by only a minority of 16- to 18-year-olds, who have a choice of curricula stressing, respectively, the classics, modern languages, and mathematics and sciences. In contrast with Western practices, the selection of students must, to quote a recent party report, take into account "the social structure of the population," thus favoring children of workers and peasants.²

A Communist System of Teacher Education

For work in preschool institutions, training is given in two years on a vocational-school level in "Pedagogical Schools," to which students are admitted after completion

² Heinz Kahra *et al.* "Förderung der Arbeiter- und Bauern-Kinder unter den Bedingungen der Gesellschaftlichen Systems des Sozialismus." *Pädagogik* 25: 1020; 1970.

of the ten-year school. Even prospective teachers in grades 1 through 4 are similarly accepted at about age 16 into "Institutions for Teacher Education," where the four-year curriculum includes some disciplines like those required in democratic countries: the mother tongue, arithmetic, an elective major field, and pedagogical subjects. In addition, however, there also is great stress, from the start, on political education and on practical work with children in youth movements and schools, plus 15 weeks of full-time student teaching in the last year of training. There also is a lengthy paper on a topic within a research area assigned to the institution by the "Academy of Pedagogical Sciences."

To teach in grades 5-12, students must complete the full twelve-year education, then pass the "Abitur" (school-leaving examination) and apply to a university or "pedagogical academy" offering the two subjects they plan to teach later. "While a student may not be accepted by the particular institution to which he applies," an educators' trade-union official told this writer, "no one is turned down entirely." The four-year training

"Continuous preservice involvement in practical school work and research activities seems to give East German teachers a relatively good preparation."

covers the two academic subjects, their methodologies, and educational history and psychology.

One of the traits distinguishing this teacher education from what is done in the West is the fact that "polytechnics" is regarded as a teaching subject. Also, prospective teachers must take a three-year course in "social science" (Marxism-Leninism), plus sports and military training. Finally, their progress is tightly controlled by membership in "seminar groups" of about 25 members led by a faculty member. Throughout their training, these young people are involved in many practical experiences, such as vacation-camp duties, guided action research, a practicum on a specific topic, videotaped teaching performances, and extended student teaching. This program, plus participation in party-sponsored youth organizations, takes more of the students' time than do academic programs in a democracy.

On the other hand, young East Germans, unless their parents' income is above a specified level, have stipends covering maintenance and fees. As a result, it appears that the percentage of children from workers' families is higher in DDR universities than in the Federal Republic,³ and the common American practice, gaining ground in West European countries also, of students being employed for pay is not in evidence in the DDR. On the other hand, correspondence and evening study are very much a part of East German teacher education, especially for educators already working in "Kindergärten" or in the four lowest grades but wishing, by such academic courses, gradually to qualify for positions in the upper grades.⁴

In the field of in-service education, East Germany, more actively than its western

neighbor, is urging its educators to strengthen their professional background—and, in addition, their allegiance to the regime. For their benefit, the state maintains "Cabinets for In-Service Education," and the teachers union has "Houses of the Teacher," both existing in many cities. In East Berlin, both institutions are combined and boast one of the most elaborate pedagogical libraries in the country. Among means of thus providing in-service training are vacation courses in Marxism-Leninism, teaching methodologies, and school administration. "Cabinets of the Good Experiences" are maintained, where published reports on successful methods initiated in any school are made available to educators elsewhere.

Observations by teachers in other classrooms are strongly encouraged.⁵ In fact, while in Dresden, this writer learned of schools where vacation schedules are set so as to facilitate such visits. For each school subject, the state publishes a course of study indicating goals to be achieved. An advanced French class, for example, must enable stu-

⁵ Deutsches Pädagogisches Zentralinstitut. *Lehrplanwerk und Unterrichtsgestaltung*. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1970. pp. 290-92.



Identical construction reduces costs of new Ten-Year Schools.

³ Horst Siebert. *Bildungspraxis in Deutschland*. Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann, 1970. p. 77.

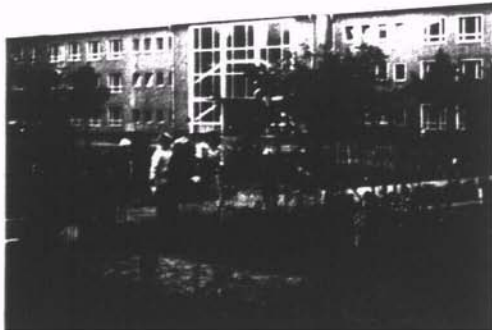
⁴ Wolfgang Richter. *Die Lehrerbildung in der DDR*. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1967. pp. 129ff.

dents to report to French-speaking foreign guests "the important achievements of socialism in the DDR."⁶ Guidelines supplementing courses of study often prescribe even the exact number of hours for each topic within a given subject, such as history.⁷

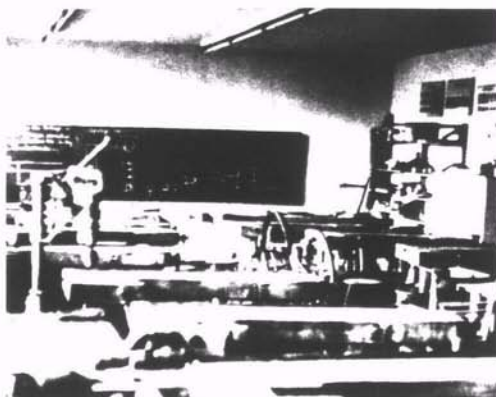
From the standpoint of the American observer, the important question is simply this: Does this communist-style teacher education program produce a superior teacher? The answer, to be meaningful, should be based on specific criteria for each grade level and subject. However, this being said, some general conclusions can be drawn. For teachers of the first four grades, the brevity of their total schooling (14 years) raises doubt as to how much future teachers can reasonably learn in that time. The enormously large portion devoted to political indoctrination in all teacher education programs raises further serious questions in this regard. Conversely, the continuous preservice involvement in practical school work and research activities seems to give East German teachers a relatively good preparation, and polytechnical training in his own background probably strengthens the teacher's ability, especially in mathematics and the

⁶ Ministerium für Volksbildung der DDR. *Lehrplan für das Fach Französisch*. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1970. p. 7.

⁷ Bruno Genter. *Geschichte, 11. Klasse-Methodische Hinweise*. Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1969.



A school garden serves as a laboratory for polytechnical instruction of young pupils.



Polytechnic instruction is an important part of many teachers' jobs.

sciences, to teach applications of material learned to life outside the school.

Positions and Salaries

Once hired, East German teachers doing satisfactory work not only enjoy the same job security as their West German counterparts, but strong attempts are made to retain women teachers after marriage. Three months before and after childbirth, they are on paid leave and then, even though no longer drawing a salary, can return to a school job within a further period of nine months. With regard to teacher load, progress made is an achievement of which East German educators seem to be particularly proud, as shown by a pupil-teacher ratio of 1:19.7. The current figures of 24 hours of teaching per week in grades 1-8, and 23 hours per week in grades 9-12,⁸ cannot be compared with similar figures for Western countries, since teachers in the communist state spend much out-of-school time in only theoretically "voluntary" youth movement and similar activities. In fact, a British observer notes that political pressures on teachers are even stronger in East Germany than in some other communist countries.⁹

⁸ Klein and Reischock, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-75.

⁹ Nigel Grant. *Society, Schools, and Progress in Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969. p. 231.

Teachers' salaries in East Germany are determined by a large variety of factors. The most important of these are level of training; length of service; grade being taught; and administrative responsibilities, if any. While some of these factors also are determinants of salaries in Western countries, including the United States, other elements of East German salary policies are without a true equivalent in the West. One is a 30 percent income tax exemption for teachers. Another is the celebration of June 12 as the "Day of the Teacher," when numerous educators are officially promoted in rank (from "Lehrer" to "Oberlehrer," "Studienrat," etc.) or are granted various medals or titles, generally accompanied by added remuneration. One can only speculate on the extent to which the state thus encourages the most effective teachers or those most loyal to the regime.

It is difficult to describe the actual salary situation in East Germany. The basic monthly salary of 700 East Marks for a bachelor without teaching experience corresponds to about \$170.¹⁰ Since rents are unbelievably inexpensive, staple foods like bread and potatoes cheap, and medical care free, this low salary still gives teachers a decent living, and East German authorities picture teachers' salaries as being higher than those of "average citizens of the Republic."¹¹ On the other hand, there are housing shortages, and some perfectly ordinary foods are often unavailable.

One must remember that, even though East Germany is economically strong compared to most other communist nations, its territory has always been poorer in resources than the area west of it, and that since World War II the "German Democratic Republic" has not enjoyed outside help, such as West Germany had from the Marshall Plan. In fact, the Soviet Union has often placed its satellite at a disadvantage in trade negotia-

¹⁰ Based on West German government estimates of the purchasing power of the East German Mark (*The Bulletin*, Bonn, Vol. 19, August 24, 1971) and on the exchange rate between West Germany's DM and the dollar on June 30, 1971.

¹¹ W. Rosenkranz et al. *Polytechnical Education for All*. Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1965, p. 42.



Teaching duties in East Germany include youth movement work.

tions. All of this explains why East German teachers have a much lower living standard than their West German colleagues—let alone teachers in the United States.

End of Isolation?

If there are any indications of current trends in communist German education, they should be evident from two recent major developments. One of them is the coming to power of the new leader, Erich Honnecker, whose pronouncements on education at the 1971 party congress indicate that he will rigidly adhere to the present Soviet-style school system. East German teachers will thus continue to pay a high price for whatever advantages they may have in professional training and status.

There also have been the recent negotiations involving the Western allies, the Soviet Union, and the two Germans. The result may be an increase in visits of West Germans to the East, but the idea of East Germany permitting its citizens to travel to noncommunist countries, except under very unusual circumstances, or to receive Western publications has never been discussed. Only if and when that isolation is substantially relieved will East German teachers be able to make significant contributions to a peace, which is just as vital to them as it is to us. □

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