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An East German School Official Reports on her Experiences during the *Wende*
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A school official in the Marzahn-Hellersdorf district of East Berlin describes the legacy of the GDR dictatorship in the East German education system, analyzes the various challenges associated with the introduction of Western structures and practices, and tries to summarize the successes and failures of German unification in the area of education.

Schools in Upheaval: Teachers and Teaching in the New Federal States during and after Unification

1. The East German School System in the Year before German Unification

After I had worked for about a month at the Ministry of Education of the last (democratically elected) GDR government, a coworker led me to a safe in his room, opened it, reached into the back corner, and took out a bundle of papers tied together with a string. They were copies of letters addressed to Minister of Education Margot Honecker.¹ The 250 or so letters were all written in the lead-up to the 9th Pedagogical Congress that convened in June 1989; they contained diverse proposals by GDR citizens to improve the educational work of the schools. For example, they called for equal education opportunities for all, for the de-ideologization of the curriculum, the abolition of military instruction, and instruction in nonviolent conflict resolution. Some called for instruction that would spark students' creativity, imagination, and their desire to learn, instruction that would promote greater self-reliance and that would, above all, give students more individual attention and support. The letters also commented on the introduction of new subjects and on methods and forms of instruction. Here, I should note that members of the public had been expressly asked to comment in writing on current education issues.

I quickly realized why these letters were lying in the safe. All of them had a stamp on the front that had been blacked out but could still be deciphered: "No response, MfS [Ministry for State Security]."² Because of the critical nature of their contents, Margot Honecker's undersecretary

¹ Margot Honecker was also the wife of East German leader Erich Honecker, the last General Secretary of the Central Committee of Socialist Unity Party of Germany [*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*] and the last Chairman of the Council of State of the GDR – eds.

² The Ministry for State Security [German: *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*] was commonly referred to as the Stasi – eds.

had evidently sent them directly to the Ministry for State Security. Luckily, the feared secret service only had a few more months to “process” these well-meaning but unwanted letters.

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This episode speaks for itself. It shows the mercilessness with which the leadership of the state party [i.e. the Socialist Unity Party] of the GDR followed and prohibited any and all criticism of existing conditions. The need to reform the long fossilized education system was ignored since it called into question the control and instrumentalization of the education system. For the SED, the education system was an instrument they believed they could use to achieve a permanent ideological influence on individuals and, at the same time, political stability and ideological conformity within society.

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The outcome of the first free elections on March 18, 1990, marked the end of the GDR as a state. At the time, however, hardly anyone suspected that the unification process would gather such a strong forward momentum. This momentum meant bidding a swift farewell to the original plan to initiate the GDR’s own, comprehensive education reform. At the very latest, after the signing of the State Treaty on the Creation of a Monetary, Economic, and Social Union on May 18, 1990, and after the Law on the Establishment of the Federal States in East Germany on July 22, 1990, it was clear to everyone that German unification was going to take place in the foreseeable future. A new or re-organization of East Germany’s education system in accordance with the West German model seemed to be the only sensible approach to reconciling two German education systems that were so diametrically opposed – on the one hand, there was the socialist unity system, which was subject to the power monopoly of the SED and the state; on the other hand, there was the Federal Republic’s system, which was marked by state federalism and social plurality.

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When I started working at the GDR Ministry of Education shortly after the *Volkskammer* elections in March 1990, there were hardly any new staff members. It was mostly just the top leadership that had been replaced – the minister and his undersecretaries. The new leadership had very little experience in education policy but could rely on the expertise of the staff. I was asked to work in the policy division [*Grundsatzabteilung*] and in the department for general education schools. The working conditions were disastrous by West German standards. One coworker spent hours, if not an entire day, getting a telephone connection to the capital of the Federal Republic. There were no fax machines. There were strict limits on the number of copies one could make, and they had to be registered in advance, since there were only two copy machines in the entire ministry. Therefore, I gladly accepted the offer to move to another office in the nearby West Berlin Reichstag building (today the German Bundestag), which had

outstanding technical equipment. Little by little, the staff of the education ministry also started mustering the courage to avail themselves of the opportunities there.

At first, my main responsibility within the scope of the ministry's policy division was to prepare a strategy for political education in the new federal states and, in the department for general education schools, to collaborate on an overall plan for social studies, the subject that replaced the former, ideologically burdened subject of civics. However, a good deal of my time was spent explaining the organization, structure, and curriculum of the West German school system to individual staff members. The knowledge deficit was immense.

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2. The Transformation of the School System after Unification on October 3, 1990

The Unification Treaty of August 31, 1990, upheld the sovereignty of the federal states [*Länder*] in the area of culture and education; at the same time, however, Articles 37 and 38 established the basic parameters for the reorganization of the system of education, and science and research. The few regulations pertaining to school law dealt mostly with transitional provisions, for example, the recognition of degrees. Accordingly, state-recognized school, professional, and academic degrees awarded in the GDR retained their validity. The agreements that allowed for this were made by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States [*Kultusministerkonferenz* or KMK]. The KMK was tasked with drawing up transitional regulations for recognizing teacher certification examinations. In order to ensure the smoothest possible adaptation of GDR teacher training to FRG teacher training, the last GDR government asked the Science and Humanities Council [*Wissenschaftsrat*] of the Federal Republic to draw up proposals for the reorganization of teacher training. Based on this, in September 1990, the GDR *Volkskammer* passed a teacher training act that reflected the West German dual model – academic studies followed by a period of student teaching.

According to the Unification Treaty, the five new federal states had until June 30, 1991, to pass their own school laws and start reorganizing their education systems. In this effort, the new federal states received increasing support, in the form of both personnel and funds, from the [old] Western “partner states.” The federal state of Saxony, for example, received support from Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania from Schleswig-Holstein, Brandenburg from North Rhine-Westphalia. In the period immediately following unification, they received additional support from the successor institution to the dissolved GDR Ministry of Education, the “Joint Institution of the New Federal States for Educational and Scientific Affairs” [*Gemeinsame Einrichtung der neuen Bundesländer für Aufgaben in Bildung und Wissenschaft* or GEL]. Together with personnel from the West German ministry, a small team of former GDR ministry employees was responsible for advising the new federal states on education issues. The growing presence of the West German “partner states” in East Germany, however, made this institution superfluous after only a year.

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Not only in Saxony, but also in the other new federal states, the new school regulations were geared almost exclusively toward the West German model: that is, a three-tiered, secondary-school system consisting of a vocation-oriented *Hauptschule*, an intermediate-track *Realschule*, and an academic-track or college-preparatory *Gymnasium*; sometimes the system was supplemented by a comprehensive *Gesamtschule*. Only after a later modification of individual school laws (and the attendant structural changes) were new approaches cautiously ventured. In Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia, for example, *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* were merged into an intermediate school [*Mittelschule*]; in some federal states, this type of school was also called a standard or secondary school. In Berlin, on the other hand, West Berlin school law was imposed, in its entirety, on East Berlin in 1991. The existence of different regulations within the school system of a single city could not be justified, and above all, it was not in the interest of the students.

With the start of the 1991-92 academic year (a year later in Saxony), the GDR unified school [*Einheitsschule*] ceased to exist; this marked the beginning of an unprecedented experiment in Germany, and hardly anyone had been sufficiently prepared for it. Everything was foreign to everyone. From that point on, school life was shaped not only by new school and administrative regulations, but sometimes also by entirely new curricula and teaching methods, which no teacher had worked with up to then. New faculty teams and school classes, and new, politically and ideologically unburdened – albeit inexperienced – school administrators had to try to get along with one another and to learn together, sometimes in unfamiliar school buildings whose condition, equipment, and furnishings often left a lot to be desired. The main thing was to bid farewell to pedagogical practices that involved – in addition to the ideologization of all aspects of everyday school life – curricula that were prescribed down to the very last detail and overloaded lesson plans, as well as authoritarian modes of interaction, teacher-centered instruction, insufficient differentiation in pedagogy, and a lack of individual, self-directed learning.

A teaching staff that had learned and practiced their profession largely under GDR conditions had to adapt to these new school requirements. Only about ten to twenty percent of teachers – depending on the federal state – stopped teaching or were laid off. All school principals were dismissed from their positions, but they could generally continue as “mere” teachers.

The Unification Treaty listed the following reasons for dismissing teachers: deficient specialized knowledge or personal aptitude, redundancy, violations against the principles of humanity and rule of law, and work for the Ministry for State Security. The individual federal states used these criteria in their own review and dismissal procedures, but they drew different conclusions from the results or set different priorities. One of the first personnel policy measures was to subject the so-called Modrow teachers³ and teachers of subjects that were especially ideologically

³ Teachers who quickly arranged seemingly secure jobs for themselves in the transitional period under Hans Modrow – trans.

tainted, such as civics and Marxism-Leninism, to a personal and/or subject-specific aptitude review. Furthermore, there was also a general teacher review conducted by the Gauck agency (named after the first commissioner for the Stasi documents), but it got drawn out for years. The federal state of Saxony was by far the most rigorous in its review procedures. In its rankings, personal integrity took clear precedence, whereas in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Saxony-Anhalt, for instance, subject-related qualifications were considered the most significant criteria.

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Ultimately, in the years immediately following unification, the personnel decisions made by various state governments and the Berlin administration resulted – in contrast to the area of higher education – in a relatively high degree of staff continuity in the area of school education, which prompted an ongoing process of rethinking and relearning. This has been very demanding for all those involved.

3. One Decade after Unification: Successes, Disappointments, Failures

A question that – in retrospect – needs answering a solid decade after unification is whether a different kind of personnel policy might have been more beneficial in giving the East German school system a new orientation. From the outside, the transformation appears to have been successful, as most schools in the new federal states adapted – sometimes at a substantial cost – to the West German standard. Teaching staffs have become teams and new principals have been confirmed in their positions. Instruction is carried out according to new curricula and lesson plans. However, more than a few former East German teachers are still having trouble adapting to the new system, with its unfamiliar instructional formats, curricula, and teaching methods, and some still view the statutory participation and cooperation of parents and students in school-related initiatives with suspicion. “Educational freedom” in the selection and sequence of subject matter within the curriculum and the opportunity to assume responsibility make them feel insecure. The breaking down of hierarchies and transparency in decision-making processes are rejected rather than welcomed.

It will take a long time to democratize schools in Eastern Germany. All the continuing education measures for political education could do little to change that.

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In conclusion, it can be said that the sense of unity among the people in the two parts of Germany has not developed very strongly up to now. Prejudice and mutual distrust determine relationships all too often. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for the East to make a determined effort to deal with the past, and for the West to have more understanding of the difficult nature of the adaptation process faced by their Eastern compatriots and to show more appreciation for their lifetime achievements.

Schools in both parts of Germany could make a significant contribution to this within the scope of an interdisciplinary subject of political education.

Source: Heike Kaack, "Schule im Umbruch: Unterrichtende und Unterricht in den neuen Bundesländern während und nach der Vereinigung" ["Schools in Upheaval: Teachers and Teaching in the New Federal States During and After Unification"], *Deutschland Archiv* 36, no. 2 (2003), pp. 296-303.

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