

Berlin school turns teaching upside down

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Make notes in the box. Then, use your notes to talk about the school system in your country.

age children usually start school:
age children usually leave school:
core subjects:
possible school-leaving qualifications:
grading system:
cost:
alternatives to state school:

2 Key words

Find the key words in the article and write them next to the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. introduced a new product, system or service _____ (two words, subtitle)
2. having the opposite result to the one you intended _____ (para 7)
3. become very successful _____ (para 9)
4. do something so slowly that people become annoyed with you _____ (para 9)
5. likely to be successful or very good _____ (para 11)
6. a large room in a school where all the pupils and teachers regularly gather _____
(two words, para 11)
7. the activity of showing respect and love for a god, for example by singing or praying
_____ (para 11)
8. when a child is welcomed into the Christian religion by being touched or covered with water
_____ (para 11)
9. when the amount of money you have to pay for something changes according to your income. If your income is low, you pay less money and if it is high, you pay more money _____ (two words, para 12)
10. allowed to ignore something such as a payment _____ (para 12)

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No grades, no timetable: Berlin school turns teaching upside down

Pupils choose their own subjects and motivate themselves, an approach some say should be rolled out across Germany

Philip Oltermann

1 July, 2016

- 1 Anton Oberländer is a persuasive speaker. In 2015, when he and a group of friends were short of cash for a camping trip to Cornwall, he managed to talk Germany's national rail operator into handing them some free tickets. The management was so impressed that they invited him back to give a motivational speech to 200 of their employees. Anton, it should be pointed out, is 14 years old.
- 2 The Berlin teenager's self-confidence is largely the product of a unique educational institution that has turned the conventions of traditional teaching radically upside down. At Oberländer's school, there are no grades until students turn 15, no timetables and no lecture-style instructions. The pupils decide which subjects they want to study for each lesson and when they want to take an exam.
- 3 The school's syllabus reads like any helicopter parent's nightmare. Set subjects are limited to maths, German, English and social studies, supplemented by more abstract courses such as "responsibility" and "challenge". For challenge, students aged 12 to 14 are given €150 and sent on an adventure that they have to plan entirely by themselves. Some go kayaking; others work on a farm. Anton went trekking along England's south coast.
- 4 The philosophy behind these innovations is simple: as the requirements of the labour market are changing, and smartphones and the internet are transforming the ways in which young people process information, the school's headteacher, Margret Rasfeld, argues, the most important skill a school can pass down to its students is the ability to motivate themselves.
- 5 "Look at three- or four-year-olds – they are all full of self-confidence," Rasfeld says. "Often, children can't wait to start school. But, frustratingly, most schools then somehow manage to untrain that confidence."
- 6 The Evangelical School Berlin Centre (ESBC) is trying to do nothing less than "reinvent what a school is", she says. "The mission of a progressive school should be to prepare young people to cope with change or, better still, to make them look forward to change. In the twenty-first century, schools should see it as their job to develop strong personalities."
- 7 Making students listen to a teacher for 45 minutes and punishing them for collaborating on an exercise, Rasfeld says, was not only out of sync with the requirements of the modern world of work but counterproductive. "Nothing motivates students more than when they discover the meaning behind a subject of their own accord."
- 8 Students at her school are encouraged to think up other ways to prove their acquired skills, such as coding a computer game instead of sitting a maths exam. Oberländer, who had never been away from home for three weeks until he embarked on his challenge in Cornwall, said he learnt more English on his trip than he had in several years of learning the language at school.
- 9 Germany's federalized education structure, in which each of the 16 states plans its own education system, has traditionally allowed "free learning" models to flourish. Yet, unlike Sudbury, Montessori or Steiner schools, Rasfeld's institution tries to embed student self-determination within a relatively strict system of rules. Students who dawdle during lessons have to come into school on Saturday morning to catch up, a punishment known as "silentium". "The more freedom you have, the more structure you need," says Rasfeld.
- 10 The main reason why the ESBC is gaining a reputation as Germany's most exciting school is that its experimental philosophy has managed to deliver impressive results. Year after year, Rasfeld's institution ends up with the best grades among Berlin's *Gesamtschulen*, or comprehensive schools, which combine all three school forms of Germany's secondary system. 2015's school leavers achieved an average grade of 2.0, the equivalent of straight Bs – even though 40% of the year had been advised not to continue to *Abitur*, the German equivalent of A levels, before they joined the school. Having opened in 2007 with just 16 students, the school now operates at full capacity, with 500 pupils and long waiting lists for new applicants.
- 11 Given its word-of-mouth success, it is little wonder that there have been calls for Rasfeld's

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approach to go nationwide. Yet, some educational experts question whether the school's methods can easily be exported: in Berlin, they say, the school can draw the most promising applicants from well-off and progressive families. Rasfeld rejects such criticisms, insisting that the school aims for a heterogeneous mix of students from different backgrounds. While a cross adorns the assembly hall and each school day starts with worship, only one-third of current pupils are baptized. Thirty per cent of students have a migrant background and 7% are from households where no German is spoken.

- 12 Even though the ESBC is one of Germany's 5,000 private schools, fees are means tested and relatively low compared with those common in Britain, at between €720 and €6,636 a year. About 5% of students are exempt from fees.
- 13 However, even Rasfeld admits that finding teachers able to adjust to the school's learning

methods can be harder than getting students to do the same.

- 14 Rasfeld still has ambitious plans. A four-person "education innovation lab" based at the school has been developing teaching materials for schools that want to follow the ESBC's lead. About 40 schools in Germany are in the process of adopting some or all of Rasfeld's methods. One in Berlin's Weissensee district recently let a student trek across the Alps for a challenge project. "Things are only getting started," says Rasfeld.
- 15 "In education, you can only create change from the bottom – if the orders come from the top, schools will resist. Ministries are like giant oil tankers: it takes a long time to turn them around. What we need is lots of little speedboats to show you can do things differently."

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions with information from the article.

1. How many pupils does ESBC have and where is it situated?
2. How much does it cost to send a child to the ESBC?
3. What subjects do pupils have to learn at the school?
4. If the students don't want to take an exam, what alternative do they have?
5. What unusual challenge are 12- to 14-year-old pupils at ESBC given?
6. What is the average grade for ESBC school leavers?
7. What does the headteacher say is the most important skill a school can give its pupils and why?
8. How does ESBC's system differ from that of other "free learning" schools?
9. What aspect of the German political system has allowed the school to be successful?
10. What is the biggest staffing challenge for ESBC's headteacher?

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4 Expressions

Reorder the words to make expressions from the text. Then, match each expression with its definition.

short helicopter out of cash at of follow
 someone's little of mouth word of
 parent their own sync wonder capacity lead full

- without much money (three words)
- a mother or father who always try to watch and control what their children do (two words)
- incompatible; working in a different way (three words)
- without being asked, forced or helped by someone else (four words)
- containing the largest number of people that will fit in a particular place (three words)
- communication that consists of comments that people make to each other in an informal way (three words)
- not at all surprising (two words)
- copy what someone else has already done (three words)

5 Quotes

In education, you can only create change from the bottom.

Nothing motivates students more than when they discover the meaning behind a subject of their own accord.

The more freedom you have, the more structure you need.

- Discuss these quotes made by Margret Rasfeld. Do you agree with her?
- Explain her analogy about oil tankers and speedboats in paragraph 15.

6 Discussion

- How does the school system described in the article compare to the one you talked about in task 1?
- Do you think that the ESBC school system would be successful in your country? Why? Why not?
- Would you send your children to a private school? Why? Why not?

7 Webquest

Find out more about the other school systems mentioned in the article:

- Sudbury
- Montessori
- Steiner

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KEY

1 Warmer

Teacher's tip: If students have trouble getting going with this task, offer these example answers and prompts to help them:

core subjects: *maths, English, sciences*

possible school-leaving qualifications: *A levels in the UK; Abitur in Germany*

grading system: *A* or 1 = best grade*

cost: *i.e. Do parents have to pay fees, buy a school uniform, buy books etc?*

alternatives to state school: *home schooling, private schools (What kinds?)*

2 Key words

1. rolled out
2. counterproductive
3. flourish
4. dawdle
5. promising
6. assembly hall
7. worship
8. baptized
9. means tested
10. exempt

3 Comprehension check

1. 500; in Berlin
2. Fees vary between €720 and €6,000 depending on the parents' income. Some do not have to pay fees at all.
3. maths, German, English, social studies
4. They are encouraged to think up other ways to prove their skills and abilities in that subject.
5. They are given €150 to spend on an adventure.
6. 2.0
7. the ability to motivate themselves because the requirements of the labour market are changing as is the way in which young people process information
8. It tries to embed student self-determination within a strict set of rules.
9. Germany's federalized education structure
10. finding teachers who are able to adjust to the school's learning methods

4 Expressions

1. short of cash
2. helicopter parent
3. out of sync
4. of their own accord
5. at full capacity
6. word of mouth
7. little wonder
8. follow someone's lead