

# A German Perspective on Indian Education

My observations and ideas on teaching at Blue Star English High School, Villianur, India

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After the annual Symposium of the Melton Foundation in 2009, I got the chance to do an internship at the Blue Star English High School in Villianur close to Pondicherry from August 26<sup>th</sup> to September 23<sup>rd</sup>. I was observing classes in different subjects, as well as teaching a few classes myself (English, spoken English and Mathematics). However, due to upcoming quarterly exams and the ongoing 'revisions', I did not have the chance to teach many high school classes myself. Instead, I joined the kindergarten (KG) classes (upper KG, lower KG and pre-KG), observed the teaching, supported the teachers and even contributed some new ideas. After my stay at Blue Star English High School, I also got the chance to visit two other schools and interact with the children there; one of them being a rural primary school in Kanjanur Village, Villupuram district, the other one being a secondary school in Gingee, both in Tamil Nadu.



In this essay, I want to summarize my observations and compare teaching methods I have seen in India to teaching methods I have seen during volunteer services in Kenya and Ghana as well as to teaching methods I know from my own school time and my education for becoming a teacher in Germany. I will not only look at teaching methods but also at the interaction in class and the general conditions for teaching that are present in the respective countries and settings.

I want to stress at the beginning that I have only seen one Indian school in depth and two others during short visits so when talking about “Indian” teaching methods it implies a generalization which might not always be correct. The schools I visited were not the top schools of that area. However, they were – according to the teachers and school authorities – amongst the better schools of the region (measured in performance during exams, number of extra-curricular activities, school fees and enrolment).

### **Variety of Indian schools**

I have already seen huge differences between the village school in Kanjanur and the Blue Star English High School in Villianur, close to Pondicherry. I have also met children that attended the top rank schools in Pondicherry and through talking to them also got an idea of their knowledge (mainly their ability to speak and understand English). So even during this short stay, I have come across a large variety of Indian schools. In this essay, I will mainly focus on the experiences I have made at Blue Star English High school even if I am absolutely aware that this is only one example and not representative for all Indian schools. However, I hope to be able to mention some points that might be valid for a larger number of schools in India and can possibly be generalized to a certain extent.



The variety of schools in India (even within small areas) is much higher than in Germany. I met Indian students in class 8 that could not even form a single simple English sentence. However, I also met students from other schools that could perfectly communicate with me in English even if they were just in class 6. I believe that in Germany, even if there are differences in the level of education as well (also between different types of schools and areas with a high and low percentage of people with immigrant background), such extreme cases are rare. I think one reason is that there are only very few private schools in Germany while quality in Indian schools seems to be closely related to the level of school fees.

### Teaching goals

I think that the approach to teaching in Germany and India is very different. I had the impression that even the teaching goals are slightly different. That again strongly influences the teaching methods.

In Germany, according to the “Kultusministerkonferenz” (the leading political organ responsible for country-wide questions of school education), apart from the pure learning of facts and competencies in the respective subjects, the students should also learn a lot more life skills. They should be able to judge issues independently, act responsibly, be productive and creative. Moreover, students must be educated to be tolerant and respect others, be aware of ethical and cultural norms and value freedom and democracy.

Another important goal of school education according to the “Kultusministerkonferenz” is to foster personal development. The students should be educated to be responsible citizens, who are self-critical and constructive in organizing their work and private life and who are actively participating in the social and political life ([http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen\\_beschluesse/2004/2004\\_12\\_16-Bildungsstandards-Konzeption-Entwicklung.pdf](http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2004/2004_12_16-Bildungsstandards-Konzeption-Entwicklung.pdf)).



At the same time, it is currently discussed a lot that the German approach to teaching must change in the modern world since we are living in an information society. Educationalist stress that the need to have knowledge of facts is reducing (since information is available easily). Instead teaching should focus on “learning how to learn”, meaning to be able to find, assimilate, judge and work with the required information and be able to create knowledge about a new area of expertise through independent studies. Since the upcoming generation in Germany will most likely be forced to work in different jobs and fields, this ability to independently and continuously learn new things becomes more and more important.

I am not sure about the official Indian goals of education, but from what I have seen in praxis, the main focus seems to be:

- give students theoretical and reproducible knowledge of facts and procedures with the main goal of good performance in the final exams
- educate students to be persistent, persevering, ambitious, competitive and independent in their studying/revising



- educate the students to respect other people and (cultural as well as specific) rules and thereby enabling them to successfully integrate in society
- give students the opportunity to develop their skills also in non-cognitive areas such as music, dance, sports and yoga and thereby also introduce them to important cultural and traditional aspects of the society.

There are several similarities in the teaching goals in Germany and India. In both cases, the students should learn to study independently. Educating students to responsible citizens also plays a major role in both education systems, even if it is interpreted differently depending on the culture. In India, integrating into society is only possible by respecting hierarchy and showing respect to elders while in Germany, the focus is more on the ability to communicate personal needs and interest appropriately and integrate them with the needs of other people. Hierarchy plays a minor role, on the contrary, students expect to be treated with the same respect as teachers and thereby learn an important value of our German culture: equality.

Nevertheless, in India as well as in Germany, students should be able to develop their personality. At Blue Star English High School there were extra-curricular activities every Saturday to give students the possibility to develop in other fields such as music, dance or sports. Similar activities exist at German schools, often in the form of clubs in the afternoon.

Even if there are many similarities in the teaching goals, the importance of the final exams in India is much greater than in Germany since depending on the performance, the rest of the life is determined (choice of university/ college or not to continue education) and the pressure on the children is rather high. In Germany, the interest and motivation as well as the discipline are much lower and the pressure for the final exam is lower as well.

At the same time, there is less pressure in India on the teacher to justify the need of a particular subject or area of studying. I found that studying in India is usually less connected to the practical use. The studying of an item can be justified simply by its appearance in the exam. In Germany, children will always want to know the use of certain topics for the rest of their life. So generally, I had the feeling that India is much more centered on exams than Germany.

### **Importance and type of exams**

I had the impression that the exams in India focus more on reproduction while in Germany the exams have to include three stages of exercises (reproduction, connecting and using different knowledge in familiar situations, transfer and apply knowledge to completely new situations). Thereby, German students are forced to understand what they are learning (otherwise they would not be able to transfer their knowledge in an exam). In India, I often had the impression that the focus is more on knowledge of facts which are memorized than on understanding. Children often learn answering by heart instead of understanding the concept.

The exams in the lower classes (1-8) at Blue Star English High School were purely questions from the book. So the students memorized all the questions from the book including the respective answers instead of understanding the concept and making up their own answers. There were several questions where students had to say "true or false". Instead of understanding the meaning of the sentences, the students remembered one word of the sentence (e.g. "water") and memorized ("water" – false). That made them successful in the exams even if they did not have the knowledge of the subject at all.

When the teachers knew that the exam question would be writing of e.g. a letter to ask for permission for leave, the teacher made the students memorize the whole letter he/ she had written before herself instead of them writing an own letter with their knowledge about how such a letter should be written. Of course, correction is much easier when everyone writes the same, so this is a clear advantage for the teacher. However, students do not learn to write their own English sentences and they cannot be creative at all.

### **Focus on understanding**

One evening, I had a long discussion with the headmistress at the school. She herself was brought up as a child of a millionaire's family and she went to an international school where interactive and participatory teaching methods were commonly used. She decided to develop and establish a school together with her husband even if she would have had the money for bribe to get a job in a government school as well. She was very interested in passing on values; she believed in the importance of education in a society and the importance of education and guidance of the children, because they are the ones to change the world.

According to her, some students in class 8 did not even know the meaning of the word "and" because they only memorized and never understood anything of what they learned. In Mathematics, some students only learned the answers for the questions (e.g. the numbers) instead of understanding the calculation. If the questions are repeated with identical numbers they are successful, as soon as they are changed they are unable to solve them.

The headmistress also told me the story of a student who could successfully fill the blank in the sentence: "\_\_\_\_\_ is the capital of India." However, he could not answer the question: "What is the capital of India?" Because he neither knew the meaning of the word capital nor where Delhi is situated in India nor that Delhi is India's capital city. He had just memorized the sentence.

Sometimes, culture also impairs interaction and activity in the classroom. Use of a lot of gestures is seen as not culturally appropriate for the classroom. As a woman, when talking officially or for example to your mother-in-law you must cross your arms in front of your body. As a European, it is usually interpreted as being afraid, defensive or disinterested. In India it is rather a sign of respect. At the village school, the students were trained to get up and cross their arms in front of their body before they answered a question.

However, if the teacher uses body language the lessons are usually more vivid and clear through the demonstrations. The headmistress had understood the importance of clearness (gestures, drawings), participation and involvement (students making their own exercises in Math etc.). She also focused on the importance of understanding and raised the need for teachers to be creative with their question making instead of purely relying on the book with the questions the students can and will memorize.

According to her, some students perform well in Math but if you send them to go shopping they cannot do simple calculations and apply their knowledge there. So she said in such cases even them scoring 100% is absolutely useless. In her opinion, the current teaching system leads to a situation where the students can write down all the numbers from 1 to 1000 but if you ask them which number comes after 7, they cannot tell. Nevertheless, they are successful in the exams.



The headmistress also told me that at some schools the situation is much worse than at her school. There are some schools which obviously do not even teach the content of a subject but they use all the time directly to solve and memorize multiple choice questions. So they do not care about understanding at all.

She also explained to me, that the schools have a lot of pressure from the parents because they want the children to perform well in the exams. The parents do not care about understanding as long as the students score high in the exams. That is why she criticized the parents as well as the Indian education system for setting exams which demand so much memorized knowledge from the students and giving the exams such an immense importance.

I also felt that in India, the amount of acquired knowledge (in contrast to skills) is immense: students in 10th grade learned to use the formula for geometric progression in Math and were handling infinitesimal sums. All of that is taught only at university level in Germany. Most of my fellow students (including myself) do not know these formulas by heart. At the same time, only algorithms are taught. Given a specific mathematical problem, the students know exactly (because they are trained or rather “drilled”) how to solve such a problem (which steps are necessary). As soon as they get a new problem where they need to be creative in problem solving and integrate different methods, they are having extreme difficulties. However, the mathematical calculation skills (speed and accuracy of calculation) are fantastic compared to Germany.

During the tuition, I saw how students memorized whole pages of texts about heat zones of the earth. Instead of organizing and summarizing the information (e.g. in a table), they learned the complete text. In some cases, the teacher had even told them during class which sentences to memorize and which sentences to neglect (they had marked it in their books). The memorization included filling words, e.g. a student learned “There are different heat zones. They are as follows...” At the same time, they did not know which heat zone India is in and had not understood the general concept. Nevertheless, the main problem is that students do not learn to extract the most essential information from a text. That is a skill which is needed everywhere in life and also builds the basis for independent learning. However, this is not possible for them anyway, since they hardly ever understand the meaning of the text they are reading because of the lack of English-language-knowledge.

On the other hand, students learn a lot of English vocabulary through this method. I was always impressed about the memory of the students. The amount of memorized information is immense.

The lack of understanding is definitely generated by the way of teaching. I want to give an example of a lesson in social science which I observed. The lesson started with the teacher and the students reading a text together from their book. The teacher was reading one sentence and then the students repeated in chorus. After that, the teacher asked the students: “Which are the hard words?” She wrote them on the blackboard and the students practiced the spelling of the words. One student

came to the blackboard and read letter by letter and the other students repeated. After that, the teacher dictated the words and the students had to write them down in their exercise books. They controlled each other in pairs afterwards.

This lesson sequence is well organized and contains important steps in the learning process (learning, revision, self-control). However, during the whole time, there was no translation or explanation of the meaning of the words. So, at the end of the lesson, the students were able to pronounce and spell the new words correctly but they did not know their meaning.

### **Asking questions**

Often students did not ask their teachers when they did not understand – according to the headmistress often because they felt shy in front of their friends. The headmistress said that the idea of a question as something positive was yet to be established. In Germany, you often come across a similar problem. Just as in India students fear to ask questions because their friends might laugh at them.

One of my best experiences in relation to that happened during night tuition. Before the exams, many students whose parents were “not-educated” came to night tuition to get support in their homework and the exam preparation. First, it was a big problem that there were about 30 students in the classroom so individual support for everyone (which is usually necessary during tuition time) was unfortunately not possible. Nevertheless, I tried to support the students. At the beginning, I was just watching them and reprimanded them when they misbehaved or seemed not to study since that is what the other teacher-in-charge did. After a few days, however, I decided to ask questions to individual groups of students to check their progress and understanding. I encouraged them to ask questions when they were not sure. I did not blame them for not knowing the answers to the questions but only for not asking when they did not understand. During my stay there, the students got used to my approach and had learned that asking questions helps them and won't bring them into trouble. So, the highlight was the day before the main Math exam when so many of them were asking me for help and clarification that I was kept extremely busy the whole evening. I think this attitude towards questions is very helpful for the learning process of the students (as also the headmistress of the school agreed with me). However, it failed due to the lack of qualification of the respective teachers leading the night tuition. In my case, it was a KG teacher with no knowledge in Math. How can you expect her to answer children's question of 8<sup>th</sup> standard Math? That is why I think for changing the methodology, having well-educated and professional teachers is essential (compare below).

## Teachers' duties

If I compare the teaching hours of teachers in India, Kenya, Ghana and Germany I can say that in India teachers had the highest number of teaching hours. They were in class the whole day without any breaks or free lessons in between (except for lunch breaks etc.). In Germany, the teachers only work about half of their time in the classroom. The rest of the day they use preparing their lessons, correcting homework or exams etc. Even in Kenya and Ghana there were always some teachers in the staff room who had a free lesson. They spent a lot of time marking exercises or homework from the students. In Ghana they gave exercises, which the students did individually, for the last 15 minutes of each lesson. These exercises were collected after the lesson and marked for the students. However, at Blue Star School, the teachers were so busy teaching that there was no time for correction or office work. Also, lesson preparation was not done due to a lack of time. The students therefore never received a direct feedback from their teachers about their written work in India. I think for individual support and progress of students the correction of the students' work is essential for the teacher. Thereby, the teacher also sees the level of understanding of his/her students and can analyze the existing problems in understanding. I believe that giving teachers enough time for correction work at school can certainly improve the quality of teaching and enhance the learning progress.



## **Noise**

A very huge difference between teachers in Germany and India is also the tolerance for noise. In Germany, most teachers feel there should first be silence in the classroom and students should not talk at the same time. In this context, as a very important rule at school in Germany, students must raise their hand and wait until the teacher calls on them before they reply a question or say something. At the Blue Star School, I hardly ever saw students raising their hands. Instead the teachers just said generally without even calling on a specific student: "One girl, read that paragraph!" Then one of the girls stood up and started reading. Sometimes they specifically called on students. In other cases, all students answered the question shouting into the classroom. Shouting is generally very common and not seen as disturbance.

I can imagine these things have to do with two cultural aspects I observed: First Indians are generally very noise-resistant; they can sleep anywhere even if there is a lot of noise around them. They can also work when there is noise. The classrooms themselves are connected and doors and windows are generally open so the noise from one classroom automatically and always travels to the next one. The most amazing were the KG children. While the TV was running and playing songs with full volume and all the KG children were shouting to the songs, there were some of the children in the middle of the crowd that fell asleep while sitting. With so much noise around them, it was really impressive. Secondly, talking at the same time is nothing considered very bad in Indian culture; interrupting is generally quite common.

## **Talking in chorus**

One often-used method in teaching was the revision in chorus by the whole class. In Germany, this method is mostly abolished apart from its rare use in language classes. However, I could also see the advantages of this system. It helps that all students (especially in low classes where everyone is still eager and motivated to participate) get the possibility to be part of the activity and join the process. I had the feeling that when I did not allow students to talk before raising hands, it really slowed down the process and therefore made the lessons for the students less interactive and more boring.

At the same time, a chorus with a melody also supports the learning. Anything that contains a rhythm is generally easier to memorize for our brain. So speaking in chorus is actually an effective method for memorization for auditory learners (see below).

However, more complex questions can of course not be answered by the whole class at the same time. So certain types of expected answers (which in this school were in most cases a memorized answers) particularly work well together with this system.

### **Learning styles**

Something which I found really striking is that the teaching methods favor certain learning types. Students in this school learned new words by repeating them many times and spelling them many times aloud. Often, the word was not even written on the board so it was not visible. For students that learn through talking and hearing (auditive) this system works certainly very well. However, for students that learn through seeing (visual) this system is very hard. Since I myself am a visual learner this was really interesting to observe. The students were able to spell long words very fast while I usually write a word down and then look which version looks better when I am not sure about the spelling. That is a totally different approach. It showed me how on one hand our school education system and methods affect our learning type and at the same time how as a teacher it is really important to cater for different learning types.

### **Listening skills**

Students at the Blue Star School usually did not listen to each other. The listening skills and referring to each other are not important in the lessons. When I asked a student to repeat what the other person had said (and I did this experiment many times), hardly any student was able to repeat. They could answer the question with their own ideas and words but they had not listened to the other student's answer. This might also have to do with the teachers' habit to repeat the correct answer again (teachers' echo).

### **Independent learning**

The Indian students show a high level of independence. During revision the students all sit down and revise on their own. They sometimes even ask for clarification from the teachers or fellow students if they do not understand. That was very impressive because in this respect, Indian students are trained for independent, self-determined studying much more than in the schools I saw in Kenya and Ghana. However, this independent learning was mostly done during revision stage and the students did not learn methods for structuring and summarizing information. They only learned and practiced revision methods for memorization not for text understanding.

### **Lesson planning**

One very interesting experience happened when we had college students coming to the school for teaching practice. I discussed their teaching style (which was mainly explanations on the board and the students copying and doing exercises so a very teacher-centered teaching style) with some of the

other teachers. These senior teachers were aware that this style of teaching – even if they themselves also used it most of the time – was rather old-fashioned and traditional. Maybe this (critical) perception of their own teaching style also had to do with the headmistress, who constantly advised the teachers to use modern and more interactive ways of teaching. However, the teachers said that at the training colleges the teachers would still learn these old methods. Moreover, every teacher would in the end teach the same way he himself was taught as a student – which is in this case the traditional way. In Germany it also happens quite often, that young teachers use the same teaching methods that their own teachers used when they were still students.

I also found it interesting that the lesson plans look very similar to our German lesson plans even if in Germany there is a stronger focus on the time needed for each activity, which has to be outlined precisely. Moreover, many different student activities are expected to be initiated by a teacher during a lesson in Germany. The motivation of the students at the beginning of the lesson also plays a more important role in Germany while in India most students are motivated already because they know the content of the lessons is relevant for their exams. Even if that is not the case, they are still obedient and attentive because of the fear of corporal punishment (compare below).

### **New admission**

Students who are new at the school are put into classes according to their age and not according to their knowledge. That is a huge problem because it leads to an immense heterogeneity in the classes.

It makes it hard for the teachers who have to assure that the student is successful in the exams and it is even harder for the student who only has disappointments and experiences failure all the time. This is particularly hard for students that come from a Tamil-medium school and change to an English-medium school then.

### **Importance of teachers' qualification; Knowledge of English**

In my personal analysis I think that most important in a good education are well-educated teachers. Only well-educated and knowledgeable teachers are competent enough to teach children about understanding. The most extreme case I found was in the village school in Kanjanur. The teachers there knew hardly any English. We had problems to even communicate our names, where I am from and the number of my family members. These teachers were at the same time teaching all subjects in English. When they taught English, they let the children read the story from the book so they learned the English pronunciation. Usually children memorized the complete texts without knowing the

meaning. The exercises are also done in a way that the children only repeat and memorize. They do not understand anything of what they are learning.

The huge problem for the students at the Blue Star English High School was building their OWN English sentences. They can recite complete pages of texts or poems but even the simplest type of communication (at least in the lower classes) is almost impossible.

I identified this as one of the major differences between Kenya and India. I think I can compare the school where I worked in Kenya with the school where I worked in India. The school in Kenya was in a village called Rongo, far from the capital Nairobi. It did not have running water but at least electricity in some rooms. It was a private school of average to high performance in that area. The school in India was situated close to Pondicherry, close to an urban centre. Therefore, you should expect the standards of the Indian school to be higher. They also had running water and even drinking water from the tap as well as a better school building (in Kenya it was thatched with iron sheets). The language conditions are also comparable. There are the local languages (mother tongues), Tamil and Dholuo respectively, which are spoken at home and amongst the students. Then there is in both cases the national language Hindi or Kiswahili respectively and then the language of instruction: English. So it is interesting to compare the level of English amongst the students in each case. I can definitely conclude that in Kenya, most students were able to communicate in English (on a basic level) and form their own sentences. However, at the Indian school, the level of English spoken was much lower. I think that a big factor that leads to that is the education of the teachers. In Kenya, the teachers speak (almost) perfect English while in India most teachers struggled to speak English. While I discussed very complex issues with the Kenyan teachers in English, in India even basic communication was impaired. Since the level of English of the teacher is already very low, it is obviously hard for the students to learn from them. I could also see how the mistakes teachers frequently made while



speaking were picked up

and intensified by the students. Even the official “questions of the day” which were written on a black board in the school visible for everyone contained grammatical errors.

However, I had the impression that the teachers are generally motivated. They take their classes with a lot of energy and professionalism and take teaching very serious. In Ghana, the teachers at the primary sector often did not even show up at school. Classes even at the higher level never started on time in the morning in Ghana because teachers had not arrived, yet. There were also lessons teachers spent in the staff room while they were actually supposed to teach. In contrary to my observations in Ghana, at Blue Star English High School, there was continuous teaching going on in each classroom.

### **Constantly changing teachers**

Another big problem at Blue Star English High School is the teacher turn-over at the school. The majority of the teachers had only started teaching there 1 or 2 years ago. Only 4 of the 25 teachers of the school had already been there for 3-6 years. In Germany, the situation is the opposite. Most of the teachers will never change the school again after they come there. It is very common to find teachers that are at the same school for 20 or 30 years.

Most teachers in India keep changing schools for economic reasons. At Blue Star English High School teachers were paid only 3000-7000 Rupees a month while at government schools the salary is 35000 Rupees a month. However, it takes (according to information received by the headmistress) around 200000-300000 Rupees as a bribe to get a job at a government school. Since many teachers are unable to afford that, they work for private schools. As soon as the teachers find a more profitable job at a different school, they change their working place. Blue Star English High School was not one of the best paying schools in that area so teachers went to other schools once they were offered a position there.

Another reason for the high turn-over might be the marriage conditions in India. Most teachers at that school were really young and unmarried women. However, once they marry, some husbands do not allow the wife to work. Instead, they will be responsible for caring for the children. As I will describe below, that involves a full-time job since everything is done for the children. So there might be no time for a wife to have a job since she has to take care of her children. However, I still think this is a minor reason compared to the economic considerations.

### **Authority and respect**

In India, there is a strong stress on authority, obedience and hierarchy. For example, when the principal advises someone to do something, it happens immediately. The teachers follow what he says without asking. They also often check with the headmistress. In Germany, no teacher would take the exercise sheets for the next day and present it to the headmistress for approval. In India, that is very common.

Moreover, students and teachers are expected to jump up from their seats as soon as they see any person like the principal, headmaster, correspondent or their family members approaching. One day three students realized too late that the correspondent was coming so they took a few seconds longer to get up. The correspondent immediately started shouting at them and then told them to run three rounds around the campus as punishment.

### **Corporal punishment**

An important factor in terms of classroom control, attention, obedience and discipline of the students is the presence of corporal punishment at Indian schools. In Germany, any form of corporal punishment will lead to immediate dismissal as a teacher. However, at Blue Star English High School, corporal punishment was still used. From what I observed, the children were hit anywhere (head, shoulder, arm, back, backside, or hand) unlike in Ghana where caning is still highly institutionalized and they only beat backside and hand. They also use much larger sticks for caning in Ghana while e.g. the PE teacher at the Indian school used tape around her cane so it would hurt less and reduce the danger for serious injury. However, during exam time, I also observed that caning was used as a method for “motivating” students to work harder. There were several mornings when students from one class who had not completed their homework had to stand in line to receive the punishment. Two teachers were busy caning each one after the other before they could start classes. Nevertheless, in Ghana, this happened every day and even because of less important failures e.g. caning for coming two minutes late, caning for not standing in line properly, caning for laughing, caning for not marching properly, caning for not cutting nails, caning for not wearing the correct and clean school uniform. So generally speaking, at Blue Star English High School caning was used less compared to what I have seen in Kenya and Ghana.

### **Importance of education in the society**

Many parents were not very rich and had serious problems to afford the school fees for their children (when the time for school fees came, many of the children were sent home because the parents had not paid and were not able to pay in that moment). I saw many parents that focused their whole life on the child's welfare. They spent a lot of money on school fees and therefore subordinated their personal needs. In some cases the women even stayed home to cook lunch for their child and carry it to school every day during lunch time so the child could get a freshly cooked meal (usually, the children carried their lunch boxes in the morning). One of the teachers called Rajaeswary told me about her daughter, whom she had sent to a very good school which cost her a lot of money. Her husband even debated with her to stay home so she could cook and carry the lunch to the school for her child. She also taught her child at home every day for 2 or 3 hours (5-8pm) and arranged tuition for the subjects she did not feel competent in.

Through the importance parents give to their children's education, the cooperation with the parents at Indian schools is definitely simplified. At some German schools, the teachers are often not supported by the parents since the parents do not show any interest in their children's education. However, Indian parents also expect a lot from the schools because they pay high school fees. They mainly want their children to perform well in the exams, which puts a lot of pressure on the teachers again.

### **Pressure on children**

The example of Rajaeswary mentioned above can be seen as a very typical case. It shows on one hand the pressure put on the children if the parents invest all that effort and deprive themselves from their own needs for the child's needs. At the same time it also shows the hard life of the school children themselves. They have classes the whole day. At Blue Star English High School, there are only a few 10-minute breaks and a lunch break. During the breaks it is not allowed to run around on the compound and play. Instead, students often have to sit in rows outside in the shadow (especially after finishing lunch). They usually have school up to 4 or 5 o'clock and then go home where they do their homework and go for tuition. After that, they eat and go to sleep. So, there is very little time for relaxing or even playing. This must be particularly hard for the young children (class 1 to 4).

Generally, the children were not allowed to play at Blue Star English High School. Running and playing was not allowed anywhere. This is also very different from the concept in Germany, where regular breaks as well as movement is considered vital for the concentration of the children. I was teaching myself in a class 5 in India without any break from 1 to 4 o'clock in the afternoon and I could see how the concentration was dropping. I tried to include some active games and songs to allow the

children to move in a “structured” way. However, the Indian teachers often helped the situation of a lack of concentration with a stick (beating the children that made noise or did not pay attention).

In Germany, the children get a lot of free time for playing and interacting with other children. It is seen as an important part of their development and they should not be over-stressed at a young age.

#### **Starting changes at the lower classes; KG observations**

As I mentioned earlier, I spent a lot of time with the KG children. In Germany, KG is purely for playing and nowadays also some easy English is introduced through songs and games. However, in India, children are expected to be able to read and write English and Tamil letters, know some basic English words and sentences, and count in English as well as add small numbers BEFORE they join first standard. There is a lot of pressure on them from the early childhood.

However, I was impressed by the way how the KG teachers handled these requirements, without forgetting that these were still small kids and therefore not being too strict. They also used extremely interactive teaching methodologies.

As I explained earlier, the headmistress was very interested to introduce new teaching methodology. She decided to start with more interactive teaching methods at the KG level and then gradually continue introducing it at the higher classes as well so the children get used to it from a young age. That is why she often advised the KG teachers on teaching methods. The teachers were generally very open to new teaching methodology, also because many of them had just graduated from teachers training college and were grateful for the ideas and help. However, some teachers also felt the headmistress was demanding too much of them since she was giving them more and new advices almost every day.

Anyway, through her efforts there was a very modern way of teaching at the KG level. Amongst all teaching I have seen at that school, the KG teaching was the most similar to the German way of teaching. They used a lot of songs, movements and games to teach the children English and Hindi. The children enjoyed the activities. For learning writing, they made dots for the children in their exercise books which they had to connect for drawing letters and numbers. That is very similar to how we learned writing in Germany.

However, there was no time for the kids to play independently. The small kids were there the whole morning and often even up to the afternoon. Since their concentration span is very short at that age

you cannot do continuous activities with them. Whenever there was no activity going on, the children just sat on their places in the classroom doing nothing. Of course, they started playing with the kids next to them and created some trouble because of being bored. I think it would have been more efficient if they were allowed to go outside and play on the playground or even play inside the classroom. Instead, they were forced to sit at their places and wait. There was a lot of time each day wasted like that. During this time, the teachers took care of all the organizational issues like marking books, preparing books (making dots for the kids to write numbers and letters), working with individual students or discussing issues amongst the teachers.

I think it would be much more effective if children stayed at the school for less time but therefore the time would be used effectively through games and songs. As an alternative, one could integrate time for the children to play in the daily timetable, e.g. on the existing playground which is never used because children might get dirty or hurt. The parents would complain to the school then, why the children are playing instead of learning. The idea of breaks and playing as an important way to foster social behavior, personal development and creativity is not widely accepted.

When I was there, the teachers also started used modern technology (TV). The Indian government had supplied them with CDs with different songs and games which the teachers also incorporated into their lessons. I was impressed by the willingness of the teachers to learn new songs and games and also try them. They were really successful with it and I would often wish all German teachers were that flexible and open to new ideas.



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