

Class Divisions and School Curricula in a Small-Town Elementary School (1880s)

Abstract

As this autobiographical account of school life in the mountainous Harz region of central Germany reveals, the quality of schooling and school buildings was closely tied to students' social backgrounds: grammar school [*Gymnasium*] was reserved for the upper classes, whereas the so-called first and second burgher schools [*Bürgerschulen*] served the middle and working classes, respectively. In the case depicted here, the last four years of the curriculum were administered by a phlegmatic old teacher whose lessons focused either on reciting verses from the Bible and hymnbooks or transcribing proverbs.

Source

The school I attended was a so-called second burgher school [*Bürgerschule*]*—*the poor people's school. There were two *Bürgerschulen* in the city, as well as a grammar school [*Gymnasium*] specializing in the humanities. The grammar school was an imposing building made of solid ashlar. [...] The first *Bürgerschule* had just gotten a magnificent new building; it was on the main road and looked like a palace amidst the modest, old, middle-class houses. Our school, however, was accommodated in a few small, half-timbered houses spread out on different streets. There were three classes each for both girls and boys. It was just then that the [building's] old layout became too tight. The city was experiencing an upsurge, the population grew on account of an influx consisting mostly of poor people, and the small second *Bürgerschule* had to stretch its resources to accommodate all the growth. [...] After some time, we had to leave our small school building and were given a large room in the town hall. There we were, ninety-six boys in the third class. [\[1\]](#) [...]

Even when it came to brawls [between different gangs]*—*half-joking, half-serious*—*the composition of the groups was largely determined by the occupational classes represented by the different schools. The grammar-school pupils were the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie, and we boys from the second *Bürgerschule* were the proletariat*—*between us stood the youth of the first *Bürgerschule*, who were middle class, petty bourgeoisie. [...]

In [...] the first class we were taught by an old teacher who was the incarnation of kindness and leniency. He lived on the upper floor of the school, right above our classroom. Most of the time he only came down about a quarter of an hour before the end of the first lesson, complaining to us that he would have liked to stay up there a little longer if we had not made such a racket. Then, he chewed on his breakfast for some time and inquired about the verses from the Bible and the hymnal that we were supposed to memorize. With this, the first hour passed.

Classes with him were often terribly boring, especially the four writing classes per week, which we spent writing down some lovely saying, probably a dozen times or more, according to old rules. "The first step is always the hardest," "Self-indulgence makes you a beggar," "You have to throw a sprat to catch a mackerel," "Fresh fish are good fish," "Hearing the sermon does not hold you up"*—*we wrote down proverbs of this sort, monotonously, for hours. If you felt like it, you went up to the teacher's desk with a few completed pages, he cast a weary eye over them and then put some sort of mark in red ink at the bottom of the pages; sometimes it meant insufficient, sometimes satisfactory, but mostly good. The teacher did not care whether a pupil attended classes or not; he accepted both sorts of behavior with the same never-ending patience.

NOTES

[1] In the reverse system of grade levels, grade [*Klasse*] 3 was the lowest grade, and the pupil would attend this for two years. The same was true for grade 2. Students would then stay in grade 1, the top class, for the remaining four years. At the school described here, there was one teacher for each of the classes—trans.

Source: August Winning, *Frührot. Ein Buch von Heimat und Jugend*. Stuttgart-Berlin, 1924, pp. 22–23, 43–44, 60–61; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 281–82.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Class Divisions and School Curricula in a Small-Town Elementary School (1880s), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-580>> [July 05, 2025].