

Self-Described Status and Duties of an Elementary School Teacher (c. 1890)

Abstract

The establishment of universal education in the course of the nineteenth century constituted an important aspect of Germany's rise. Despite frictions with the church, notoriously low pay, and difficulties in establishing their own families, elementary school teachers were fully aware of their role as educators of the German people, as active leaders of civil society, and, not least, as patriotic opinion-makers.

Source

Just as incomprehensible as the clergy's resistance to electing teachers to the school committee is their resistance to releasing teachers from the lowly duties of a sexton. For more than two centuries, the teaching profession has been rebelling against the assumption of those duties that are unworthy of it, duties that teachers had usually neither sought nor desired but had to carry out because they belonged to the office of administrator, and because this, in turn, was inseparable from the office of teacher. Right now, apart from wages and school supervision, no issue is of greater importance; and even though only part of the teachers are personally affected by it, all German elementary school teachers agree that professional honor requires the abolishment of these obligations, and that teachers should not rest until this is achieved. [...]

It cannot be denied that the manner in which the *Kulturkampf* was brought to an end and the way in which schools were supposed to join in the struggle against Social Democracy have hindered the elevation of the entire profession of German elementary school teacher. But that should not keep us from acknowledging thankfully and enthusiastically all the things that have happened over the last 20 years. [...]

First of all, the progress that has been made in educating and preparing teachers is worth recognizing. There has been a thorough break with the emphasis on pure memorization. Even at preparatory institutions [*Präparandenanstalten*], care is taken to ensure that students do not "limit themselves to superficial acquisition and learning in the fields of knowledge required for acceptance [into the profession]." For that reason, there are fewer religious texts to memorize word for word, just as in the seminaries themselves; instead, one's understanding of the material is tested at every step. Another contemporary demand, unfortunately ignored for much too long, was the expansion of history instruction to include knowledge of ancient history; of mathematics to include decimal fractions and simple algebraic exercises; and of natural history to encompass chemistry. The best way to address the poor educational background of seminarians (due to pitiful classes in private institutions or even self-education) is to have state-run *Präparandenanstalten*, with several classes in ascending order. Such institutions, both as boarding schools and day schools, now exist in Prussia, Bavaria, Württemberg, Gotha, and in the imperial province of Alsace-Lorraine; in Saxony, they are connected with the teacher training seminars themselves. [...]

Unmistakable proof that, even today, teaching posts lag behind in comparison with civil servant positions at the same level is the fact that candidates still rarely come from backgrounds other than that of small farmer, artisan, petty bourgeoisie, and lower civil servant. Only seven to eight percent of the students are sons of teachers, as no father would subject his child to the same lot that he himself suffers.

In choosing a position, the question at the top of the list is whether it properly feeds the person holding it; the more well-to-do social circles would not stay away from the occupation of teacher if that question could be answered with an unequivocal “yes.”

Unfortunately, the first part of [Wilhelm Heinrich] Riehl’s harsh remark—that the ranks of teachers are recruited from the middle-class proletariat, only to form the intellectual proletariat afterwards—contains a kernel of truth. The second part of his remark would not even have been applicable to all teachers in the 1820s; referring to teachers today, it is merely a sign of ignorance or arrogance. The terms “education” and “scientific education” are so open to interpretation, so confused, that it is in the eye of the beholder whether certain professions or categories of civil servants are regarded as belonging to the educated classes or not. Today, Germany’s elementary school teachers may expect to be considered as part of the educated classes. They may do so not only because teacher training in all German states now lasts for a minimum of three years, but because the choice of subjects and the breadth of the syllabus show a clear desire to provide general knowledge to students, so that they will be recognized by scholars as of their own kind. [...]

The greater competence of teachers and the more comprehensive nature of their education can also be discerned from the greater demands society places on them. Teachers belong, as [Friedrich] Diesterweg says, to the educated professions, those from which continued education in all directions is expected. One demands that teachers participate in all municipal matters and that they embody the knowledge to which the entire *Volk* aspires.

Fulfilling such great demands requires an inclination and a certain frame of mind, and it is therefore short-sighted to make dismissive judgments about the entire professional group if not all teachers conform to the expectations. It fills us with satisfaction, indeed, when we hear that the teacher helps in some shape or form to promote the cultural progress of a town, no matter if he contributes to the improvement of agriculture and fruit-growing through lectures and advice, gives classes in handiwork, points to the untapped wealth of edible mushrooms in the forests, teaches children to recognize poisonous plants, or founds a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals. It is truly praiseworthy if a teacher puts himself in the service of the Enlightenment and fights against delusion and superstition, or in the service of art and refinement by founding reading circles [...] and on winter evenings reads the poems and dramas of our great poets with the local farmers, with each role assigned to some participant.

It goes without saying that elementary school teachers in particular are expected to cultivate patriotic sentiment and loyalty to the Kaiser and the Reich. In some parts of Germany, another benefit follows from the work of the simple teacher: the strengthening of German identity [*Deutschtum*] through the introduction and preservation of the German language. It is an established principle, substantiated by successful experience, that nothing is more effective in recovering the long lost roots of the Fatherland than the simple *Volksschule* and the loyal activity of the teachers. [...]

It is to be welcomed with delight that the enthusiasm with which teachers seek to fulfill their wishes concerning rank and title is still exceeded by the enthusiasm with which, in recent times, they have striven to make a habit of employing a refined, educated tone and social graces. More than ever, it is regarded as necessary for each one of them to possess a kind of confidence and solidity in social intercourse that need never be denied anywhere, not even at the gambling table or on the dance floor, as a refined authority on tact puts it. Openness and truthfulness are supposed to be coupled with restraint and consideration, and outward appearance should degenerate into neither old-fashionedness nor the foppiness of a dandy.

Despite the more comprehensive education of teachers, we do not fail to recognize that it will be difficult for a great many teachers, both now and later, to meet the demand that social tact should be an inherent

part of a teacher's character, something he observes unconsciously with the same assurance as a grammatical rule. How many are in a position to make up for a lack of interaction with educated company—especially with educated women—a deficit from which the development or maintenance of social tact always suffers? Even in recent times, teachers have not had sufficient opportunity for this. Their background, the training in a small town boarding school, life in a small rural community: all this is a deficit rather than a remedy. Nowadays, *Präparandenanstalten* and seminaries are more aware of their obligation to meet responsibilities in this area as well; more efforts ought to be made here and there, and headmasters as well as teachers would thus earn the warmest thanks from students. [...] Not without good reason does one detect the causes of many socially repulsive peculiarities of teachers in their propensity to assert their standing (with the pupils and also in their interactions with adults), to expect approval and agreement with all of their comments and judgments, to express disapproval in a very petty way, and to reveal the kind of knowledge that ultimately becomes a nuisance to anyone. It is this high-handed behavior that is called “schoolmasterly” in social intercourse and is despised as such. In this respect, too, increasing genuine education will also make itself felt as a liberating influence.

An essential part of a teacher's social standing is his choice of a wife. Until now, we have perhaps paid too little attention to this question in the history of the teaching profession and have overlooked how much the teacher's professional activity and his reputation in the town and in society depends on this. We have only mentioned that the authorities warned teachers about early marriage. In this context, one often ignores the fact that young teachers who end up in poor villages are often forced to set up house because they cannot find provisions for meals anywhere in the village. More effective than such warnings—which, by the way, were never received unfavorably by teachers—would certainly have been provisions for a comfortable income. Isn't it profoundly regrettable that some teachers had to choose wives from the lower and uneducated classes because of their meager income? The refined way of speaking, the agreeable domesticity that is seen not only in one's furnishings, but also in the way a family dines, can be better cultivated and maintained by no one other than an educated housewife. Therefore, one recognizes what a teacher has to forgo if his spouse ranks below him in terms of education. Not only his happiness, but quite often his entire influence in the village, depends on his wife. That is a point barely considered by those who have left the teacher in such meager circumstances that he was able neither to appreciate the value of refined women nor to make a claim to any such woman. [...] If teachers are struggling for better wages, they have certainly also set their sights on the magnificent prize of setting up house with a wife who is their equal in education and social standing. The benefit deriving from the Protestant rectory, that sanctuary of fine German morals and model of great domesticity, should radiate as much from the school, for the advantage of the entire community.

Accordingly, demands for better wages have become more pronounced than ever before in the past twenty years, despite the determined help already offered by the state and the municipalities. In many cases, these demands are still being put forth today—and certainly not without reason, whatever objections one may raise against them. Everyone wishes, for the sake of his and his family's appearance, to keep up with those whom he may consider his social equals. Just how much teachers in various German states still fall short in this respect is best shown by the fact that they justify their demands for elevation by drawing comparisons with the incomes of lower social classes, even though their own social standing is undoubtedly higher. They find it oppressive that even though they put in their best efforts for the school, for the profession, and for the community, they are still plagued by worries about their daily bread. “Of all human worries, household worries cause the most distasteful bitterness, for the very reason that they remind one of bodily needs and animalistic existence. They do not ennoble the soul, they only humiliate.”

Source: Konrad Fischer, *Geschichte des deutschen Volksschullehrerstandes*, 2 vols. Hanover, 1892,

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