



Das ist Leben

Alexander Drescher

Talya Drescher

Our family temporarily moved to Germany from Ventura County at the start of this school year. My partner and I can work remotely and in Germany, COVID-19 is being handled in such a way the children have been able to attend school in person from the start of the school year. My kids have dual citizenship so we thought that we should take advantage of the opportunity to immerse them in the language and culture for a length of time that would be unheard of typically due to our work in the United States.

After a few months of being here, we see that this is not the exciting adventure some think we are on; this is not vacation, nor is it necessarily fun. My partner and I are working U.S. hours (usually into the early morning here) while the children go to school during the day. When they come home, hours are spent doing homework and helping them navigate their new world. Of course, there are tremendous benefits to our situation. Our children are now largely bilingual and bicultural, we have made friends and celebrate cultural and religious events new and exciting to us, we are learning about an agrarian lifestyle, and...there is snow!

While we have not been in a complete lockdown due to COVID, we are spending a lot more time together due to closures of public and indoor places. My son, Alex, started keeping a journal so that he can share his experiences with his classmates and friends upon our return to the United States. We thought it would be fun to write together, and this piece is a product of that endeavor. Alex's words are written in plain text and my interpretations and explanations are italicized.

Hello. My name is Alex. I'm in the 5th grade, or at least I would be if I were in the United States. I'm in Germany right now because of COVID-19 and here in Germany the COVID situation is better than in California.

We decided that because our kids have dual citizenship, we'd take this opportunity to live overseas where the schools are open and the COVID rates are relatively low. The word "better," used by my son, is a matter of opinion. It may be better from the perspective of children being able to go to school and socialize with peers. In terms of the ability to move around the region, go to playgrounds, enjoy the four seasons and be immersed in a new culture, it's better. "Better" is relative though, and my son feels the

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need to share his thoughts about schools here in relation to the tradeoff for other “better” qualities that were named above.

I’m here to tell you about the schools and my experience where I live in Germany. First, compared to my classmates in the United States, the people, boys specifically, are not welcoming. For example, they say a ton of bad words and believe it or not they are all in English. My mom and I think that they don't know what the words mean, but they also say them in German sometimes, so I think that they do. I think that they say these inappropriate things because they want to feel like they are growing up faster.

Oddly, it is seemingly true; the language I have heard the school children use is, by my standards, pretty vulgar. By the way the words are used, I am not sure if the meaning is truly understood but I suppose kids say bad words sometimes to get a rise out of others. Alex has definitely increased his English vocabulary in the realm of profanity! In terms of “growing up faster,” kids here do have more responsibility at a younger age. For example, Alex is in the fifth grade and is in high school (it is called “Gymnasium”). He has a schedule which changes class by class and daily. He must monitor the online communication system for frequent changes in the schedule and navigate complex social situations more typically experienced by older children in the U.S.. He went from elementary school to a school comprised of grades five through 13. If you forget a form or bring the wrong book, it is your bad luck. There are no exceptions or supports for foreign or new students who are learning the language. When we asked a teacher about this and similar practices, the response was “Das ist Leben” or “That’s life.” In other words, get used to it.

The second thing about the students at my school is that they make fun of me for being different.

One example where I wish “difference” was celebrated is in the realm of religion; when the children were enrolled in school, religion must be indicated. We noted that in the computer system, our selected religion was marked as “other.” Based on this information, children either take one of two religion classes; Catholic or Evangelical; or an ethics class, starting in the first grade. I have heard kids and adults alike ask if you are in a “religion class” or the “nothing class.” I never thought of Islam, Judaism Buddhism, etc. as “nothing.”

Alex is made fun of regularly, and he proclaims that he is “bullied” for being different. I do not doubt this to be true, and it’s troubling. We have spoken with a few teachers about some of his stories and complaints. Two of the teachers simply said, “Das ist Leben” and implied that it will make him stronger and he will learn. Perhaps that’s true, but as a parent, I think it is also true that the perpetrators will learn that their behavior is acceptable and “difference” is something that can be frowned upon and shamed.

Now about the teachers at my school. They are very nice and respect every question asked, but if your class is very loud or annoying then the teacher will flip out. My teachers say things like, “Hold your beaks!” or “Shut up!” out of frustration. My class is really loud and doesn’t listen a lot of the time so there is some yelling. I have a hard time following what the teachers are saying because the class is so loud and I’m trying to understand in another language (and with masks on!); it’s hard.

From the tales I hear daily, classroom management seems to be a challenge. It might be due to the challenging times world-wide but there do not appear to be systems in place outside of the punitive. I am guessing that positive behavioral supports would go a long way...

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Because I am in Gymnasium, we have a new class about every 45 minutes. For each different class you have a different teacher or sometimes we have double hours which means that we have a class for 90 minutes. I am used to elementary school where you are in a class for the whole day with one teacher and all of my books were in a desk. The first week here, I had 30 pounds in my backpack every day but then my teacher looked in my bag in front of my classmates and said that I should carry only the books I need for the classes on that day. This was confusing and embarrassing to me, but I learned how to read the “Stundenplan” which tells you what classes you have each day of the week. In the beginning, I didn't understand the idea of the Stundenplan and that's why I put 30 pounds on my back. I was afraid of forgetting something and the teacher getting mad and shaming me in front of the class.

This was indeed a big shift for my son – elementary to high school, English to German, one class to multiple classes, and all from one day to the next. The first weeks were indeed rough and there were many tears resulting from language misunderstandings and sheer exhaustion from trying so hard to do things “right” but not quite getting it. We are not used to the public shaming which seems to be the norm. We had to tell Alex that he does not need perfect grades and we try to impress upon him how proud we are that he is learning a new language and culture on top of a rigorous academic program. This does not help much when the teachers announce everyone's grades in class and he is not near the top. As a recent immigrant, the policy is that he should not receive formal grades for a year to help with the language acquisition process. That has not happened, and his exams come home covered in red. I have come to accept that it is really a sink or swim kind of experience and he is working hard every day to stay buoyant in what feels like a pool of oil.

Some of the different subjects at school are math, English, religion or ethics, German, sport, nature, geography, art, and theater. In sport right now we have swimming and I need to memorize the way to the swim center so I can walk there to and from school. I once wore the wrong shoes and my socks got soaked in the snow because I did not think about needing to leave the Gymnasium to go to sport class. During sport I used to have something called “Circus” where we learned how to ride a unicycle and walk on a ball. My dad bought me a unicycle and we practice when it's warm enough outside.

The variety of subjects they have in the fifth grade is pretty amazing and even though he comes home with red on his papers, Alex is learning about such a wide variety of topics. We are quite impressed. Walking to and from the sport facility is a bit more independent than we were accustomed to, but over the last months we have noticed an independence and confidence that I think will serve him well in middle school upon our return.

My mom and dad say that we will stay here a while longer and I want to go home but I also want to stay. I have friends in both places and I see that there are both good and bad things no matter what. It's confusing.

My heart ached when I read Alex's final paragraph. The current time is indeed confusing and it's a confusion I cannot explain and clarify to a child. I don't know what tomorrow will bring in terms of COVID, and being a foreigner to this culture myself, I too don't understand the unspoken rules of our adopted temporary home. Alex is insightful; there are pluses and minuses to every situation. Das ist Leben, indeed.

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About the Authors

Alexander Drescher is currently in the fifth class in Gymnasium in Southern Germany. If COVID-19 had not hit he would be in the fifth grade in Ventura County, California. Alex is a storyteller, a coin collector, and a protective brother to his little sister. In his free time, Alex likes to write stories about the California Gold Rush, research old coins and have conversations about the meaning of life.

Talya Drescher is Alex's proud mom.