



## Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility



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# Projects of Internationalization in Context of the German Association *Lehrerinnen und Lehrer ohne Grenzen*: An Interview with Wiebke Enders

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## Abstract

In recent decades, unidirectional development assistance has primarily focused on emergency relief, such as the immediate alleviation of hunger, thirst, and current dangers like floods, earthquakes, or war. Ensuring and delivering this aid is a significant achievement of global players in the field of development assistance. However, sustainable development cooperation, especially in the realm of basic education, has received insufficient attention (for basic consideration of sustainability in context of teacher education and internationalization see Buddeberg et al., 2024, in this anthology). This can be attributed, as this article also suggests, to the fact that donors are more easily inclined to support the mitigation of immediate crises than long-term and perhaps less media-worthy endeavors.

## Introduction

The organization *Teachers Without Borders* counters this trend by striving to implement sustainable projects that provide children and youth with access to basic education. Since the founding of the organization in 2021, it has managed to establish a variety of long-term, diverse, and personal networks in which education-oriented projects have been realized and financially supported. In such cases, the organization can act as a network facilitator and help turn abstract ideas into successful realities.

As the initiator, Ms. Enders, makes clear in the interview, a concrete and personal connection to people motivates students to get involved in the organization. Prospective teachers also gain a deeper insight into transcultural educational processes. The international perspective simultaneously raises awareness in a vivid way about the necessity of engaging with current educational issues in one's own country as well as international challenges. Students and teachers alike discover that educational work need not be confined to the classroom; rather, anyone can take the initiative to shape the world.

## The Interview

*Ms. Enders, 2021 you founded the organization “Teachers Without Borders”. What was the impetus for you to engage in this manner?*

According to UN estimates, currently more than 260 million children and adolescents lack access to basic education. This is a shocking figure resulting from decades of misunderstood development aid that underestimated the importance of educational opportunities. The consequences for these children and young people are catastrophic, with their lives marked by poverty, hunger, exploitation, and premature death. Giving education a voice, making it heard, was the original goal of the organization. This can only be achieved through a global network and concrete, tangible collaboration. Inspired by the example of “Doctors Without Borders”, it is about more than just providing financial support to educational institutions in developing and emerging countries; it’s about direct collaboration, taking into account the specific life and learning context.

We are facing immense global challenges, such as the impact of climate change. To address these challenges, we need the knowledge, creativity, and responsibility of all people – in short, the participation of everyone. If we cannot provide access to education for all children, they will not be able to shape or collectively implement tomorrow’s solutions. These global challenges are recurrent in the curricula of various disciplines in general education schools, framed by concepts like ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) or SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). However, while global issues are discussed in the school context, the reality is often excluded from the classroom. Yet, digital media holds great potential for this opportunity: to integrate the everyday lives of Kenyan students, for example, into the classroom and thus experience the effects of climate change with regard to water scarcity firsthand. This authenticity motivates a unique engagement with the topic, as it demonstrates global interconnectedness and leads to real collaboration. Based on my own experiences in educational aid projects worldwide and the observed impacts that can originate from classroom implementation, it was important to me to establish the organization.

*How did it all start in concrete terms?*

The association was founded on September 3, 2021. When choosing the name, we deliberately sought the analogy to “Doctors Without Borders” to clearly convey the orientation and objectives of the organization right in the name. While our organization’s name has become a bit more cumbersome due to gender sensitivity, this was important to us because educational poverty is predominantly a female issue and, consequently, equal opportunities for women and men are still far from reality in the 21st century. Since the idea of founding the organization had been maturing for some time, I had already established numerous contacts with educational aid projects worldwide in which I had been personally involved or which I had become aware of through organizations like Soroptimist or press reports. We reached out to these existing projects, and they were enthusiastic about the networking concept of the organization and the aggregation of our educational concerns. This is how our global network grew and continues to grow.

At the beginning, in addition to the organizational aspects of founding an association, our focus was on public outreach through digital media, including our website, as well as through in-person fundraising events, which built trust in our work through personal contact. We also began working on our first educational projects, such as a project with a Cameroonian school that focused on addressing colonial history, enabling a shift in perspective through collaboration between students from Cameroon and students from Hamburg. We also initiated the first construction projects, such as the construction of a new school building at the Sushrusa Deaf School in Bali. Of course, our communication structures had to grow and be optimized initially to ensure that the intended close contact with our network partners was successful.

Today, our global partners regularly come together in our board meetings. Here, we reflect on past projects, plan the deployment of volunteers on-site, and discuss future engagements.

#### *What were the initial goals?*

Naturally, we wanted to grow as quickly as possible, especially in terms of membership numbers. However, our enthusiasm didn't translate exponentially into membership applications. Attracting members has proven to be challenging to this day, even though we deliberately chose a low membership fee to attract as many members as possible – aiming for quantity to make education more audible.

It became evident that people are reluctant to make binding commitments and prefer to donate sporadically. The latter poses a challenge for us in terms of planning, as all our projects are designed for the long term. It has been and continues to be a crucial goal to have a sustainable presence in the educational context and, consequently, in society. In local educational projects, we achieve this through our own involvement in each respective country or through our volunteers who become aware of us through the name of the organization and also engage on-site. We also aim to anchor our mission in the awareness of (potential) donors, members, and in the didactic-methodical discourse, thus giving education a voice worldwide. A particular focus is on connecting schools and life contexts, making global learning authentic, concrete, and tangible.

#### *What changes have occurred in recent years?*

As the organization is still relatively young, we are also learning about optimal communication structures, improved public relations, and optimized project planning. Collaboration within the network requires a great deal of flexibility from all participants. The life context of people and, consequently, the framework for our educational engagement, are subject to various country-specific, socio-cultural realities, and often significant, sometimes very negative changes (e. g. Afghanistan). In these situations, it is crucial to respond to these changes in the best possible and sensitive way in the interest of the children and young people and to work together with all stakeholders to find solutions. One thing is clear: education cannot be seen as omnipotent but is conditioned by the life context of both educators and learners. We do not impose our Western ideas of

education and our didactic-methodological approaches on our network partners. Instead, we aim to provide impulses to develop the best possible educational approach through collaborative discourse – education is situational.

*How do specific project initiatives come about?*

In most cases, network partners approach us directly and report their needs. For example, our partner school in Afghanistan needed a stable power supply to use the digital learning environments we provided. For this specific purpose, we were able to generate donations to install a solar power system. Many project initiatives also result from collaboration between schools. In the “Water Resource” project, a science-focused class at the Wilhelmshaven Gymnasium wanted to consider the global issue of water and directly engaged with students from the “Little Angels” school in Mombasa. The testing kits required for a scientific discourse on water quality were donated to the school in Kenya. The results led to the joint development of a wastewater treatment plant, which was then implemented locally at the “Little Angels” school.

*How do you find staff for the project, both in Germany and abroad?*

Thanks to our organization’s name, contributors now reach out to us. Many students, trainee teachers, and educators from all federal states contact us and express their interest in getting involved in our projects abroad. We are happy to facilitate their participation because the involvement of volunteers on-site is crucial for raising awareness of the organization and for close collaboration with our project schools. Through coverage in blogs, press articles, radio interviews, social media, and so on, the organization’s work becomes visible. For the volunteers, it’s also an experience that underscores the importance of the learning context and, by looking beyond their own horizons, leads to an expanded understanding of their own profession. These experiences will undoubtedly contribute to fruitful didactic and methodological approaches in implementing curricular content with global significance. Abroad, it’s our partner schools that are part of our network through their engagement, and they collaboratively shape and accompany planned projects with their staff.

*To what extent can students benefit from engaging with this for their own beginning professionalization, which begins with studying to be a teacher?*

Engaging in international projects, as supported by the organization “Teachers Without Borders,” broadens students’ perspectives on their own profession in many ways. For me, it’s crucial that students understand teaching and learning as situational and context-dependent. This supports reflection and evaluation processes in their own professional daily lives and the continuous individual professional development demanded by the profession. Experiencing global issues in their complexity and worldwide scope with all my senses, such as the water issue, allows me as an educator to emphasize such topics with a completely different, personal urgency. Furthermore, students benefit from the necessary, immediate engagement with different cultures, worldviews, and values. In collaborative work, there is always a sensitization to the

needs of others as well as one's own needs. Both aspects are of enormous importance when considering the daily professional life of educators. Students particularly benefit from the concrete on-site project work, which encompasses all elements of future project planning within the framework of modern school teaching. In addition to the content development and didactic-methodical considerations, which often require a high degree of flexibility from students due to the local circumstances, it particularly involves cost calculation, possible media design and support, and international discourse. International professionalization in teacher education, through the change in perspective it entails, provides new impetus for the (future) shaping of one's own professional career and imparts consolidated and intensive core competencies of modern pedagogical work. It's certainly a "win-win" situation for both sides of the international discourse.

*Do you have specific examples from your teaching experience in higher education?*

One concrete project currently in planning revolves around the significance of seagrass meadows in the context of climate change and the carbon dioxide cycle – a globally relevant topic. The local Institute for Chemistry and Biology of the Marine Environment (ICBM) at the University of Oldenburg has established a research group on this subject. From the existing results, a children's book has already been created, which, after translation into the local language, will serve as the basis for an extended project at our network school in Mombasa. The focus here will be on the field of science communication in the broadest sense, since didactic issues are inextricably linked to the fundamentals of science communication and vice versa, which is underlined in particular by new formats in digital media. In this project, teacher trainees will collaborate with students in grades 10 to 12 to develop didactic materials on this topic. This includes media formats such as science blogs, videos, and more, which will also be integrated into the curriculum. Together, teacher trainees and students will create a teaching unit for students in Mombasa, which they will then independently test and evaluate there. It's a completely new approach that encompasses various "educational bridges" and expands "peer teaching" approaches in an international context. Undoubtedly, this envisaged project with the University of Oldenburg is an example of "Science Action in Schools for Sustainable Development". Not only the learning process of the participating students and pupils is sustainable; also, the developed teaching series will be used sustainably and through teacher training offers of the students to the teachers in Mombasa also utilized in the long term in the local schools. This pilot school will certainly act as a beacon, spreading the developed content to other schools. The developed unit will also be used locally in elementary schools, and teacher training sessions on the topic are planned to contribute to the dissemination of the content and teaching materials.

*To what extent could similar projects also be initiated in cooperation with other universities (and is this desired)?*

It would be highly desirable if the potential of internationalization in teacher education, such as the approach described earlier, would also be anchored in other universities.

We are currently making intensive efforts to involve the organization in various universities in Germany and Switzerland, explicitly emphasizing the potential described earlier. Developing teaching units in an international context offers the opportunity for collaboration on a global scale at eye level and a closer interconnection of educational actors worldwide. We would be pleased if international higher education didactics could work closely with us. This way, we could consolidate and initiate potentials and initiatives, learn from each other and with each other to jointly moderate “educational bridges” (between schools and universities) on both a national and international level. This would significantly accelerate the growth of the international educational network with the common goal of making the right to education effective for every child.

*What do you wish for the future of the organization?*

The organization emulates a great role model with its name, and I would be delighted if we, too, could look back on such a success story in 50 years as “Doctors Without Borders”. Until then, it will undoubtedly be a long and not always easy journey. It would be wonderful if we could find many supporters along the way who join us in giving voice to education, which has deserved it since time immemorial: as the crucial key to self-determined life, as a prerequisite for jointly solving the critical global problems of our time, and as the engine of any change towards a free and peaceful world.

## References and Further Sources

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