



# Contemporary Educational Perspective of Indonesian and German Students

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## Abstract

Each country and even the region has its own policies in the implementation of education, starting from primary education to higher education. Each individual also has a different learning experience, even though they pursue the same education. In this article, two former students of a person-centred experiential counselling and psychotherapy course in the UK reflect on their personal experiences in education in Germany and Indonesia, as well as how their previous experiences varied from the experiential education. Common themes in both accounts of traditional education were a pressure to be the best, a loss of interest in the studies due to the pressure, a wish to be invisible as a student, and a learned low failure tolerance. The person-centred experiential learning experience is in both accounts described as liberating and encouraging independent learning. The authors argue that freedom and autonomy are important in an educational setting especially in the industrial era 4.0. Currently, the extent of freedom in education or independent learning is greatly influenced by the policies that exist in each country.

**Keywords:** personal experience; person-centered education; Indonesia; Germany

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Education at Indonesian Schools: A Personal Experience

Even if someone takes the same educational path, it does not mean they have the same learning experience. This is very relevant to the experience I got while studying in Indonesia. I remember, when I was talking to my classmates, I was always someone who had a different point of view. Therefore, the experience I describe may not be relevant to everyone who has studied in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, formal education starts with elementary school, although in its development many people began to take part in early childhood education both in playgroups and kindergartens. Most children start attending early childhood education at the age of 4-6 years and then they enter elementary school on average at the age of 7 years. I, myself, did not enter the playgroup but went straight to kindergarten at the age of 6 years (Denboba et al., 2015). I do not really remember what I did when I was in kindergarten, but I do remember that we were taught to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. One moment that I remember the most is a conversation between the mothers of my classmates who were chatting at school when dropping their children off. The topic of their conversation was centered around how great their

child is in reading, writing, and arithmetic. I was lucky enough that I went to school by myself after the first day of school, so my mother didn't join in on the conversation, which sometimes made me insecure. I also sometimes felt that I had to study hard and compete with my classmates so I would not be left behind with other friends.

At the age of 7 years, after graduating from kindergarten, I enrolled in an elementary school not far from home. The elementary school period is normally 6 years. There, the learning climate is quite competitive. This is supported by the student score ranking system which is always carried out when distributing academic reports. The brightest students are always the center of attention. In grades 1 and 2, I was ranked 2 and 3. This result should be good enough in my opinion now. However, at that time a lot of people told me that it wasn't good because it wasn't ranked 1, like my sister was. She studied in the same school as me, so people often compared my results to hers. My mindset at that time was how to get 1st rank. Therefore, I studied very hard and memorized a lot of materials, and even learned material that had not been taught by the teacher, by reading and borrowing books at the library. I was very ambitious to achieve the 1st rank. Finally, from 3rd grade to 6th grade, I was always in the 1st rank. Not only that but because of this achievement, I was always labeled as a smart child.

I started to feel annoyed and depressed because I felt that I had to always be a brilliant child. In addition to academic activities, I also enjoyed joining classes after school time such as sports, arts, and languages. I participated in short-distance running competitions, drawing competitions, and various speech competitions. This increasingly made people think that I was a smart child who should not be disabled behaviorally, academically or everything. The education system in elementary schools in my era generally tended to train children to memorize material and was competitive with the ranking system. However, interesting activities such as scouting were routinely carried out to equip students with life skills.

Entering junior high school at the age of 10, I began to realize that I was tired of the pressure of expectations from people around me. I had to be always perfect in terms of academic grades and considering my academic results in elementary school. I remember that I was no longer motivated to study hard to achieve the 1st rank. I started to participate more in extracurricular activities rather than focusing on academic learning. I took a music class, was part of a drum band group, the scouts, volleyball training, a scientific writing class, and student organizations at school. I had no interest in even seeing my friends, who took time for tutoring at the Training Institute. I only took an English class as I thought that it would be important in the future. At that time the ranking system began to be gradually removed. Only students ranked 1 were still mentioned when distributing the academic reports at the end of the semester. My mission to be an invisible student was partly successful because I never got 1st place during junior high school. However, as I won several prizes in speech competitions, I was still labeled as a smart student. Interestingly, the educational system at that time required students to pass the very strict national exam. If we did not pass it, then we had to repeat it or take an equivalence exam.

Ideally, junior high school lasts for 3 years. Then we can continue our studies to the next level for 3 years in senior high school. Senior high schools have different specialisations, such as general high schools, vocational high schools, and boarding schools with majors in science, social science, language, religion, and other specific professions. Meanwhile, for junior high schools, the types are only differentiated on the basis of religion or public schools. In senior high school,

the education system changed drastically from previous years. The national exam which was previously in junior high school was the determinant of graduation, it was formulated differently (Saukah & Cahyono, 2015). The determinant of graduation was 60% of school grades and 40% of national exam results. However, the education system still focuses on achievement in quantitative terms or grades.

Since then, I was no longer interested in grades, because it turned out that many expectations were given to achieving certain grades. The top three ranking systems were still maintained when the learning outcomes were distributed every semester. Because the number of students was also not many, I always entered the rankings. As in junior high school, I instead shifted my focus to extracurricular activities such as a student organization, an English language club extracurricular, the scouts, and a scientific writing class. I also often participated in competitions outside of school, such as debates, speech competitions, and scientific writing competitions. As I quite like chemistry, I took part in the regional-level Chemistry Olympiad with good results. However, this achievement actually made me quite insecure with people's expectations and even the predictions they gave to me. I even thought that grades and winning competitions were just temporary things that could only be enjoyed at that moment because the learning experience was more about a process.

The point where I became increasingly distrustful of academic value and achievement was when I started looking for a university. At that time, I failed the test through the academic outcome report selection and national student test. I was accepted through the independent test in the guidance and counseling department. Some failures in finding a university made me realize that I did not prepare for this situation. I was never equipped to deal with failure or disappointment since kindergarten. I was only provided with academic things and got some achievements. Therefore, I had little experience dealing with failure. Moreover, people around me constantly compared other people's achievements with my failures. The choice to study guidance and counseling majors I thought was very appropriate for me. At that time, I began to think that grades were a bonus to the learning process. Coincidentally, academically I am still a person who achieved pretty good grades, but I no longer focused on the importance of a grade. However, in general, schools and universities in Indonesia, that I know, are still quite focused on academic achievement as a parameter of whether or not the quality of students is good.

I hope that the education that I have taken will not only train cognitive capacity and show judgment on the concepts of smart and not smart students. I realized that my tolerance for failure was very low until senior high school. Even when looking for my bachelor's degree I felt so down for some days and I did not want to do anything. Meanwhile, based on research, one of the factors that can facilitate an individual success in their education includes resilience and perseverance (Silvervarg et al., 2018; Sriskandarajah et al., 2010; Sterling, 2010). Recently, I think education in Indonesia is moving in a better direction at this time where there is a growing concern for learning, not just grades as a benchmark. The concept of an independent campus is also a fresh idea for students who want to study across majors and gain field experience that is more than just theory

## **1.2. The Education at German Schools: A Personal Experience**

Some weeks ago, I had a dream. I was back in school, sixth form, or "Oberstufe" as it is called in Germany. I had to hold a presentation. I had very little interest in the subject, and after

the presentation I had no clue if I would get a good grade for my “performance”. This is what education had been like for most of my youth. I endured the process, hoping for good marks.

Education in Germany is complex. We have 16 federal states and every federal state can make its own laws around education. When I went to school, there were a primary school, which went for four years, a school form called “orientation school” (Orientierungsstufe) which lasted for two years, and where it was decided what school form, I was able to visit afterwards. After orientation school, one could either go to a Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium.

Hauptschule went for ten years and while it is meant to be a school for practical jobs, like hairdressers or bakers, it is tough getting a job afterwards. The children of many immigrants visit Hauptschulen and the school form has often been in the news for the rowdy behaviour of its students.

Realschule was for students who were not as good as to get a recommendation for the Gymnasium, but better than pupils going to a Hauptschule. Students can do apprenticeships afterwards, and good students can go to a Gymnasium afterwards. A Realschule often goes until class 10.

Gymnasium is for the students who wanted to study at a university later. It is the only school form which offers the “Abitur”, a certificate allowing students to study at a university. The orientation school does not exist anymore and now it is decided in class four, when children are nine or ten years old if they get a recommendation to go to a Gymnasium and with that will be allowed to go to a university afterwards. When I went to a Gymnasium, school went for me until class 13 (This differs from federal state to federal state. In some federal states school goes only until class 12). I was 19 by the end of my education.

This is a bit of an overview of the German school system. In case you find this confusing, do not worry, that is the case for everybody. In the following I will tell you a bit about my experiences in this system of education.

I remember that I loved going to primary school. I started primary school late, by age 6. My friends were all a year younger. I was enthusiastic about finally learning to read and write, to be able to calculate, and to do handicrafts and to play with other children. Primary school was a very good time. Grades were a part of the learning, but they were not as central as they were when I went to orientation school, four years later. Orientation school was a mixed experience. The first year was similar to primary school, and the second year seemed a lot more centred around what grades one will get and to which school form one will be allocated. It was generally a difficult time. It was the beginning of puberty and I got bullied by another kid. I changed from an outgoing boy to a shy one.

At the orientation school, I got the “recommendation” to go to a Realschule. I went to a Gymnasium anyways. Not having a recommendation for a Gymnasium meant that if I would have failed my first year at a Gymnasium, I would have had to leave the school. A recommendation would have meant that I could have repeated the year. The recommendation was decided upon by a vote of all my teachers in a secret meeting (which I eavesdropped at the time).

At the Gymnasium, I was separated from most of my friends, except one. Some friends went to other school forms and many others were at the same school as I was, but in other

classes. Classes were cohorts of students which had their lessons together. Only in classes 12 and 13 did this change and students of different cohorts would mix within a class of a certain subject.

What I remember most vividly about years 7-10 in my education was the bullying. Teachers would scream at us. Starting the Gymnasium at class 7, I was looking forward to learning French, which I had chosen as my second foreign language after English. Our teacher screamed and screamed at us, telling us how we will never achieve anything. In all honesty, I do not remember much about what she screamed. At some point one stops listening when somebody can only yell at you. The teacher forced us to have vocabulary tests once a week, as she felt we were not learning enough. Most of us failed week for week, which led to more screaming tirades from our teacher. After half a year of that kind of French lessons, I had lost all interest in the language.

Teachers would also single students out, let them stand up, and tell them, in front of the class, how inept they were. Likewise, among us students, there was a lot of bullying. I was victim as much as perpetrator. In hindsight, I greatly regret how I behaved towards other students. Yet, I also hold the adults who created such a vicious environment responsible for the suffering of many, if not all, of us students went through.

This does not mean that also there were not good teachers, who tried their best. A lot of these teachers broke under the system though, and did not last long. From comments by teachers about their colleagues, the bullying likely continued among the teachers as well. Empathy was severely lacking in my place of education.

Added to that and fuelling this toxic environment was an elitism. Being at a Gymnasium, we were told over and over again that we were the future elite of the country. We were better than others. The school was better than others. And those who did not make it, were just not cut out to be part of the elite. Being better than others became a justification to be cruel to others.

The last two years of school were a bit better. While we had to prepare for our final exams, we had more freedom to choose subjects and I also found friends again.

I did learn factual knowledge in these 13 years of school. However, the environment, at least for me, discouraged independent learning. While independent thinking was encouraged as an academic exercise, the whole structure of the system discouraged thinking which was too original.

Conformity was important. One had to fit in if one did not want to risk being bullied by the teachers or one's fellow students, or both.

Further, what I remember is the arbitrariness of the school grades. One term, I had a physics teacher who thought I was a bright student. I received a 1 (the best grade in the German system). The next term, I had a different physics teacher, who disliked me, where my mark was suddenly a 5 (the second worst grade). I must have turned into a horrible student within those few months.

The teachers were little dictators and their classes were their realm. They decided how their rule looked like, some were more benign than others. There was a geography teacher who rather talked about his band and Robbie Williams than geography, the teacher who was afraid

of speaking in front of the class, the math teacher who told us that his students had gotten more and more stupid over the 30 years that he had been teaching (meaning we were the most gormless students he had had so far), the music teacher who send the boys out as he wanted to sing alone with the girls, the alcoholic arts teacher who told us that we will never amount to anything, the teacher who told his students that he would pay a bounty to whomever killed the head of school, and the chemistry teacher who was found having sex with a minor student in the chemistry storage. None of these teachers had to fear consequences for their actions. Yet, for us it was a different set of rules. As one of our teachers liked to quote with a smirk: "Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi." (What is permissible for Jupiter, is not be permissible for a bull.)

Only the teacher who offered a bounty on the head of the headteacher faced a consequence: Early retirement with full pension. In the German education system, there is very little accountability for the actions of the teachers, or for professors at universities. A paper published by the German Society for Psychology (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie) indicates that this is not just an isolated case at an individual school, but rather a structural issue in German education (Elson et al., 2020). A poll in the study found that of 1300 scientific assistants half had experienced an abuse of power by their professor.

This form of education goes against the ideas of Wilhelm v. Humboldt whose name decorates many German educational institutions, and who wrote: "Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness." (Chomsky & Schneider, 2013).

This brings me back to my dream at the beginning. Even in the dream, I presented the essay, without any interest in the topic, just as a means to an end, to be successful.

It is further a threat to our democratic society as children do not learn to become responsible citizens, and instead learn to conform under dictatorship. As Martin Buber wrote "One cannot treat either an individual or a social organism as a means to an end absolutely, without robbing it of its life-substance [...] One cannot in the nature of things expect a little tree that has been turned into a club to put forth leaves." (Buber, 1949). Likewise, one cannot expect a healthy democracy if the individuals in the society are brought up to blindly follow the orders of their leaders throughout their upbringing. As the philosopher Krishnamurti wrote: "All of us have been trained by education and environment to seek personal gain and security and to fight for ourselves.

Though we cover it over with pleasant phrases, we have been educated for various professions within a system that is based on exploitation and acquisitive fear. Such a training must inevitably bring confusion and misery to ourselves and to the world, for it creates in each individual those psychological barriers which separate and hold him apart from others." (Krishnamurti, 1953).

## 2. Result and Discussion

### 2.1. Study Person-Centered Experiential Counseling: An Indonesian Student Perspective

After graduating from college, I decided to become an assistant counselor at a university counseling service for a year. Then, I worked as a guidance and counseling teacher for about 3

months in a vocational high school. At that time, I was in the process of wanting to continue my studies through the support of the Indonesian government scholarship. Finally, I studied person-centered experiential counseling and psychotherapy practice at the University of Nottingham, UK.

This learning experience was significantly different from my previous education. The demand for independent study was very high compared to Indonesia. At first, I felt very strange when I entered the class for the first time. Lectures were not like any lectures I had ever met in Indonesia. We sat in class in a circular position with comfortable chairs and even bean-bags. We started the lecture with a moment of silence which sometimes made me a little uncomfortable as I never had this experience before. However, as time went by, I understood this was like a process of preparing myself before class started while independently reflecting on anything related to personal issues or disturbing material and sharing it with my classmates.

There was a moment when we were asked to develop our own curriculum for lectures. This was the most unique thing I had ever come across. As common lecturers in Indonesia had prepared a curriculum and discussion before going to class. However, over time, I found that the process made us learn and have a sense of belonging to the course we were taking. We were increasingly concerned with our respective learning processes. We read and searched for references independently and discussed relevant issues in class spontaneously. Lecturers always reminded us that they were not experts in the students' learning needs. I thought they were motivating us to find out what we needed without expecting them to always guide/direct us.

The person-centered experiential counseling course was very unique. We were not only provided with an extraordinary classroom learning experience, we even had an encounter group and community meeting scheduled. The Encounter group had Rogers' concept which basically meant that people were brought together to discuss with each other living in the context of here and now (Rogers, 1970). Meanwhile, the community meeting was a routine agenda where counseling students of all batches including undergraduates, masters, and doctoral programs sat in a large room to discuss topics similar to the encounter group. For me, an encounter group was a difficult activity to understand at first. I even experienced excessive fear and anxiety as people put attention on me when I spoke. However, I learned the concept of genuineness and transparency in this group. Being vulnerable in front of other people was a difficult thing because I did not want to be perceived as a weak or vulnerable person. I made a difference in the first year of encounter group activities, I shared something and even cried and I did not feel judged as I worried before. The effect of this experience was that I became more able to respect myself. From this experience I wrote an article about my reflection on my experience in understanding congruence in person centered practice as a trainee counsellor (Sutanti, 2019).

Furthermore, the experience of learning counseling skills that could be perceived as a multicultural counseling made me and some international students agree to work together in intensive practice. We even practiced 3 times a week to be able to pass the panel exam as a test of eligibility for internship practice at a counseling agency. I sensed a more collaborative learning activity than a competitive one that I experienced in my previous study. Apart from this experience, I have tried various things, such as participating in the strike of leftists who were fighting for the eligibility of workers who were increasingly being pressured by policies. At first, I felt very disadvantaged because the lecturers did not teach during that time, but over time, I

understood that the movement to fight oppression was also a good experience. Proctor said that in counseling and psychotherapy, fighting against oppression was a significant value from a counselor's political standpoint (Proctor, 2002).

Conclusively, the education system that I went through in the UK was very different from my previous education system. The tremendous freedom allows us to be able to direct ourselves to the things that are relevant to us. For example, when writing essay assignments every semester, we were not asked to strictly write specific topics. In fact, we were asked to show our personal values in writing, for not only academic but reflective learning. Likewise, with the thesis, we were free to choose the relevant topic and I started to work independently in the direction I wanted. There were many choices that I could have taken and the supervisors not only helped provide insight, but they also listened to my concerns and personal issues that came up during the writing.

Finally, I hope that a wider range of options will also be available in the education system in Indonesia to motivate students to be creative and confident with their choices simultaneously with the development of industrial era 4.0.

## **2.2. Study Person-Centered Experiential Counseling: A German Student Perspective**

The opposite of the misery and the existing educational system in Germany has been my experience of experiential person-centred learning, which I had the luck to experience in the UK at the universities of Aberdeen and Nottingham.

In person-centred experiential teaching and learning: "A leader or a person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation is sufficiently secure within himself and in his relationship to others that he experiences an essential trust in capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves. If this precondition exists, then the following aspects become possible. The facilitative person shares with the others-students and possibly also parents or community members- the responsibility for the learning process. [...] The facilitator provides learning resources-from within himself and his own experience, from books or materials or community experiences. [...] The student develops his own program of learning, alone or in cooperation with others. [...] A facilitative learning climate is provided. [...] the focus is primarily on fostering the continuing process of learning. The content of the learning, while significant, falls into a secondary place. [...] The discipline necessary to reach the student's goals is a self-discipline [...]. The evaluation of the extent and significance of the student's learning is made primarily by the learner himself [...]" (Rogers, 1978).

How did this look like at the universities? We sat together in groups. There was an understanding that we would try our best to be authentic, show empathy, and have a valuing of others as human beings, independent of what they brought to the group, said, or did in the group. Of course, that is not always possible and sometimes one has to weigh up if one wants to be more real, emphatic, or appreciative with the other person. The facilitators, as the teachers were called, often did not say much, trusting that the group would find its own answers and responses. They intervened only when it seemed necessary to them. As these were psychotherapy courses, the content was often a mixture of theory and personal issues. However, I do not see why this kind of education cannot be used in other subjects as well. I have never felt so free and myself as I have in these learning groups. The biggest difference was, that right from the beginning, I was aware that I was responsible for my own learning. I was invested in my learning, which I only sparingly had been at school. The best example for how autonomous learning worked was



my master thesis. I wanted to develop a psychometric scale. For that I needed to learn to perform a survey and I needed to learn how to do a statistical analysis. I had no experience in any of these matters before.

My supervisor supported me, pointed pitfalls out, told me of people and books who had the necessary knowledge. Sometimes my supervisor just listened to my anxiety. In the end, I collected most of the necessary knowledge myself. I read the books, I went on YouTube and watched videos on using SPSS, and I got to present my gained knowledge to my supervisor when I was ready. It was my learning, and I was very proud of what I had achieved. It was Bildung how v. Humboldt described it. I did not just regurgitate some knowledge or ideology that had been pushed down my throat. I did not perform with mechanical exactness. I learned with my whole being, with all my energies. I believe describing experiential education to somebody who has not experienced it is like trying to describe colours to a blind person. It is so alien to many of us that it is difficult to comprehend. It is something which has to be experienced, which I encourage you to do. Finally, I wish education meant that students can generally follow their own interests, instead of being dictated to learn. That way one does not learn for the learning's sake, but only to make it through education.

### 2.3. Discussion of the Two Perspectives

Looking at the two personal accounts of traditional education, from two very different individuals, going to schools across the world from each other, one Indonesian woman, and a German man, shows some regrettable commonalities in their educational experiences. Both writers mention a pressure for good marks in their education. The Indonesian account reports a pressure to be first in a ranking system, already in primary school, while the German experience reports the pressure building in orientation school. Both writers mention that the pressure took their enthusiasm for their studies. Both individuals also tell us of a low acceptance of failure at school and how students internalised this mentality (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Savvides et al., 2021; Trang & Hansen, 2021). Teaching this failure-averse mentality seems counter-productive to people remaining open to learning in life and from their mistakes (Webber et al., 2022). Failure is inevitable in every human endeavour. A failure-averse mentality, often connected with difficult feelings such as shame, robs the individual of the possibility to learn from critical self-evaluation, which can lead to greater success and the avoidance of old mistakes in the future (Catalano et al., 2018).

Additionally, both students wished to not be seen. In the Indonesian account it was due to the academic pressure. In the German account, it was due to the bullying if one received grades which were too good or too bad.

We want to note how remarkable we found that both accounts describe how the educational system took the students interest in learning, and replaced it with a pressure to perform (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2021; Könings & Seidel, 2022). That is the opposite of what one would expect from a place of learning. As the German author noted, it seems very far removed from the actual goals of education as written down by v. Humboldt. The methods of education described in the two personal accounts seem very successful in limiting the students “perspectives and understanding, discourage free and independent thought, and train them for obedience” (Chomsky, 2014). The psychologist and political scientist Noam Chomsky came to the conclusion that the traditional education system appears more like a system of indoctrination than a system of learning (Chomsky, 2014; Chomsky & Schneider,

2013). The descriptions in the two personal accounts would support Chomsky's thesis. Obedience and conformity seemed more important in the schools than free thought or even fostering a passion for learning.

In both accounts, person-centred experiential learning is described as liberating with words like “tremendous freedom” and “I have never felt so free and myself”. This seems to be the opposite of the described traditional learning, centred around obedience and conformity (Joseph et al., 2020). Person-centred experiential education also seems to have encouraged the two former students to learn autonomously (Macfarlane, 2016), as word choices such as “without expecting them to always guide/direct us.”, “I started to work independently”, “I collected most of the necessary knowledge myself”, “It was my learning, and I was very proud of what I had achieved.” show. The former students wrote that they learned “genuineness and transparency”, and “empathy”. Furthermore, they describe how “I became more able to respect myself.” and “I was responsible for my own learning. I was invested in my learning”. Is this not the kind of learning we want in our education?

### 3. Conclusion

Education is an important part in the life of every individual. Although the implementation of education at the primary level to higher education is not the same in Germany and Indonesia, we found four similarities based on the reflections of the two authors, namely: (1) A pressure to be the best; (2) A loss of interest in the studies due to the pressure; (3) A wish to be invisible as a student; and (4) A learned low failure tolerance. The demand to be the best in school is not only happening in Germany but is also a critical issue in Indonesian education. A decrease in learning interest when facing high learning demands can lead to the students' motivation to become invisible. The most interesting finding is the low tolerance in the face of failure. The euphoria of victory and the best label that is always elevated it makes students not ready to face failure. A fixation on academic grades diminishes the students' intrinsic drive to learn, and further punishes mistakes, which can be stepping stones for future learning. Meanwhile, the experience of taking a person-centred counselling course in the UK has opened up views about the concept of liberal education and the concept of freedom of learning. This concept is quite difficult to implement, but becomes an ideal concept to give students a creative space for their own development. However, cultural views and policies are important things to consider in developing the educational paradigm for the future. In the industrial era 4.0., the education will change to fulfill the workspace demands and it will be needed the adjustment of educational system.

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