

NEWS

The billionaire is investing heavily in Vara – will raise students' knowledge levels to new heights: "Now or never"

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Mats Rosqvist

mats.rosqvist@nlt.se



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Roger Akelius grew up in Stora Mellby and attended a comprehensive school in Vara. Photo: Private

Once upon a time, entrepreneur and billionaire Roger Akelius attended secondary school in Vara.

When his Akelius Foundation, together with Chalmers, will now develop new materials and methods for effective mathematics teaching, the schools in Vara are at the center.

“We will significantly raise the level of knowledge,” he says.

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An important part of the development work will certainly benefit Vara's schools, but ultimately it is all about something else, namely international aid work. An area in which Roger Akelius has been very involved in recent years.

“I've had a lot of businesses in my lifetime and many of them have done very well. And then the question arises of what to do with all the money you've earned,” he says.

A large part of the answer was the Akelius Foundation, which was founded in 2007 and now has 100 billion kronor in assets to use for charity and relief work. Over the years, the foundation has supported SOS Children's Villages, Doctors Without Borders, UNICEF and UNHCR with large sums of money.

In connection with the refugee crisis in 2015, the Akelius Foundation began developing teaching materials for language teaching.

– I got a hotel in Haparanda by mistake, it came with a deal. It went well, we developed it into Sweden's finest spa hotel. But then there was a fire in the kitchen, as it often does, he says.

After the fire, the hotel became accommodation for 400 refugees from Syria.

– I felt sorry for them when I saw them wandering around the hotel courtyard with nothing to do, so I wanted to help them.

Concrete level

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To enter society, language skills are central and Roger Akelius saw a great need here.

– I have lived in ten countries and spoken ten languages, and I know every conceivable mistake you can make in language teaching, he says.

Sitting at a school desk and learning grammatical terms might be good for someone who wants to become a language teacher, he says. But for someone who comes from Syria and speaks Arabic as their mother tongue and has to quickly learn how to get around in a new country in a completely new language, it's not very effective. Instead, it's about working on a very concrete level.

– It is pointless to drill in terms like the past participle or superlative. They needed to learn words like vacuum cleaner bag and steering wheel to get started. And we have five senses and you should use them. If you are going to learn "to turn the steering wheel", you should ideally sit in a car and turn the steering wheel at the same time as you say it, says Roger Akelius.

Since its inception, the business has grown significantly. The material is available in a number of languages and is freely available digitally via apps and the website akelius-languages.com.

Now, work has begun on developing corresponding materials for mathematics teaching. This time, it is being done in collaboration with Chalmers University of Technology. An Akelius Math Learning Lab with digital and physical teaching materials will be created.

Taught Magnus Ugglä to derive

The ideas are similar to those for language teaching. By toning down the focus on theoretical terms and using concrete and practical exercises, the aim is to create a direct understanding of mathematics. In this way, it is hoped that teaching will be significantly more effective than conventional teaching.

– Math is not really difficult, says Roger Akelius.

He explains that it is no problem to teach a seven-year-old the principles of how to take the square root of a number using a number of wooden blocks. If you have nine blocks and line them up in a square, not only does the correct answer become obvious, it also makes it much easier for the student to understand the principle. In a similar way, other mathematical concepts can become tangible.

– Last fall, Magnus Uggla and his daughter were down with us in Landvetter in connection with a TV recording. I taught him how to solve derivatives, it took three minutes, he says.

The project will therefore affect schools in Vara municipality. A number of language and mathematics teachers will be paid for through the project and will work on developing the methods and materials.

– We will test what works and what needs to be adjusted, explains Roger Akelius.

Sports math, where mathematics becomes part of physical exercises and sports, board games and various stations in the schoolyard where students can learn about angles, volumes, geometry and more are just a few examples of how mathematics teaching will be conducted in the future.

This will all lead to more effective learning and hopefully also encourage more students to continue on to civil engineering education.

Took the train to Vara

When it comes to the question of why Vara municipality was chosen, there are two answers.

One is that Roger Akelius himself went to school here. He grew up in Stora Mellby and started at the school in Alingsås. But living on his own at the age of twelve was not an ideal solution. His mother realized this and made sure that he started at Varas' comprehensive school instead.

– I went here between 1958 and 61. I took the rail bus and at lunch we went to the North Pole and ate there on the second floor. It was a nice time, he says.

One of those he got to know was NLT's then-future local editor Bruno Arvidsson.

– We were in the same class. Bruno was a nice guy, remembers Roger Akelius.

However, it is another Varabo who has had the greatest impact, namely the municipal councilor Gabriela Bosnjakovic.

– She has been asking for five years if I should invest in Vara and I have always said no. But this time I thought it was now or never.

➤ [The local council on the initiative: "Vara will be the best in Sweden"](#)