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The Restructurization of School Entry in Germany. Concept and Latest Developments in Research

formal überarbeitete Version der Originalveröffentlichung in:

T.E.L.M.I.E. Partners [Hrsg.]: Conference Proceedings 2000. Derby : University of Derby 2001, S. 73-88

urn:nbn:de:0111-opus-14784

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The Restructurization of School Entry in Germany

Concept and Latest Developments in Research

Restructurization of School Entry

- 1. School entry / enrolment in the Federal Republic of Germany**
- 2. Developments and central innovations**
- 3. The developmental task of schools in pilot tests**
- 4. Central problems of the developmental process**
- 5. Supportive systems and accompanying research**

Chart 1: Table of Content

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to invite you to go to school with me. We attend a first-year primary class and are introduced to Lena. Lena is six years and ten months old. She started school last August. Already on her first day at school her form teacher had doubts whether Lena would be able to keep up with the rest of the class. Now she is being observed until the end of October. If, by then, she has not proved to be capable of keeping up in class she will be judged as unfit for school. In that case, Lena will have to go back to nursery school (Kindergarten).

Ladies and gentlemen, please imagine what that would mean for Lena. She would be the only pupil in her class who is not allowed to stay at school. That is likely to be the case even if a disabled child is taught in an integration class.

Contradictions like this one emerge when parallel developments in society do not match. In this case, integration classes are being extended while at the same time the enrolment practice for school beginners encourages segregation.

If we want to understand the current debate on school enrolment issues in the Federal Republic of Germany which has to be seen in the European context, we must have knowledge of the school system and of its historical background.

Primary school is the only comprehensive school in the Federal Republic of Germany. In nearly all of the 16 federal states, pupils attend primary school for a period of four years, six years in Berlin and Brandenburg. This school type has existed since 1920. In Germany, kindergartens are part of the social system, whereas primary schools are part of the school system. They are placed under different ministeries. The task of the kindergarten is that of complementing the education of the child in the family, the task of school is the intellectual education of its pupils. Only school attendance is compulsory.

Claims for the cooperation between kindergarten and primary school go back to the seventies, not only in the Federal Republic but also throughout Europe. The educational elements of a restructurization of school entry were discussed at European level then, too.

In 1969, the sixth conference of the European education ministers prompted the first symposium on school entry in Venice in 1971. The symposium recommended six points: preparing the children, preparing the parents, flexible handling of teaching at the start of school, cooperation of kindergarten and primary school, if necessary early diagnoses, ensuring that those children who did not attend any pre-school institutions would be able to cope at the start of their school life in the same way as their counterparts. In 1974, the European recommendations were concretized: the last year of pre-school education and the first year at primary school should be flexible, teaching should be individualized so that pupils would no longer have to be put back a year at the end of their first year at school and it was to be ensured that the inseparability of pre-school and primary education was recognized. In addition, the pre-school and school curriculum were to be coordinated and curricular continuity to be made easier.

Adjusting the training of the teaching staff of both areas was also part of the programme. In 1977 there were requests that all member states should facilitate a two-year period of free pre-school education for all children. Pre-school and primary education should be placed under the same ministry (WOODHEAD 1981, 171-195).

1. School entry in the Federal Republic of Germany

From the start, the school entry age in the Federal Republic was fixed at six years. There is a cutoff date rule which means that all children who turn six on a certain date start school that year.

However, compulsory school attendance which arises at the age of six does not say anything about the actual age at which a child starts school. A child that has reached school age is only admitted to school if it is judged capable of attending. Equally, children can be admitted even if they have not reached the compulsory school-age, but are judged fit for school. Until now, groups were formed at the start of school according to their homogeneity in development in order to make it possible for all children to progress at the same speed and level.

What is the situation today? - look at chart 2 below.

School Entry in the Federal Republic of Germany
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory school age: 6 years • Cutoff date rule • Examinations for school fitness (medical and educational) • Children who are judged unfit for school are put back a year (the quota for children who are kept back is 10% on average) • Pre-school kindergartens do not exist everywhere in Germany • Children are between 5,6 and 8,2 years old when they actually enter school
<small>27.10.2000 U. Carle University of Bremen 2</small>

Chart 2: Characteristics of the German School Entry

In order to establish whether a child is fit to attend school special examinations are carried out under the participation of a school doctor, the headmaster and the future form teacher. Special informal tests are used for this purpose, the best-known of which is the "Kieler Einschulungsverfahren" (The Kiel procedure for identifying a child's ability to attend school.)

The notion of the school fitness of a child assumes that a child needs to possess specific abilities in order to be supported adequately in school. These include aspects of language and speaking, knowledge of quantities and numbers, possessing the perceptive abilities necessary for learning, the development of the ability to think, motor activity, performance and work attitude, attentiveness and concentration, memory, emotional stability, independence and social behaviour.

The 'Kiel procedure for identifying a child's ability to attend school' catches these aspects in three parts:

by means of a conversation with the child's parents: the parents are interviewed about the child's development

by means of a teaching game: in a class-like situation, the children are given different tasks and are observed while they are solving these tasks

if specific problems are identified, there is an additional individual examination of, for example, the child's perceptive learning abilities
(e.g. recognition of a figure against a background, visual or hearing discrimination etc.)

Such tests are not carried out everywhere. In most federal states children meet the same fate as Lena. To start with, all children that have reached the statutory school age are recruited at school, then they are observed for several weeks in the classroom, and if they are then found to be unfit for school they are taken out of class again. This is particularly frustrating for the children because they have to go back to kindergarten while their class mates are allowed to remain at school.

2. Developments and central innovations

Between 1970 and 1990 the percentage of children who were put back a year rose on average to 10% of a school year. However, this did not happen to the same extent in all federal states. In Bavaria, the rate of children that were kept back from school was only 4,6%, whereas in Schleswig-Holstein, it was as high as 14%.

This gave the incentive to find out the reasons for the difference in the number of children being kept back from school: statistically, it was found that the number of children being kept back from school depended on a number of things which had nothing to do with the individual child's personal ability to attend school. It was found that in some individual schools the number of children who were kept back from school surpassed 20% of children of the same school year. Then, there were other schools that did not put back any children, at all. Interestingly enough, these differences could not be explained by different social stratifications.

On average, the number of children who were put back a year rose if a high quality alternative institution such as a school kindergarten was introduced.

It was also found that the number of children who were put back a year depended on which theories teachers had of child development.

Another study found that children who were put back a year did not automatically gain advantages compared to those children with a similar level of development who were admitted to school.

Bavaria was different from other federal states in so far as it adopted a stricter policy of avoiding refusing children school entry. Over and above, Bavaria had been developing massive programmes since the early eighties for the joint training of kindergarten nurses and primary school teachers.

The numbers of children who were put back a year seemed to be particularly high if there were no school kindergartens, but instead the children simply attended ordinary kindergartens or even had to wait at home until the next school year.

Because of the wide range of school admittance age between 5,6 and 8,2 years - a difference of about three years - the cutoff date rule had lost its meaning.

In the midnineties, several federal states had initiated pilot tests with the aim of finding out how all children could start school at the age of six without holding anybody back a year. Meanwhile, nearly all the federal states participate in such schemes.

3. The developmental task of schools in pilot tests

Up to now, we do see and have seen a large number of school pilot tests. We can tell from the map in chart 3 that such activities take place in nearly all the federal states. It also names three central elements of change, the integration of disabled children, no more children being put back a year and mixed age groups.

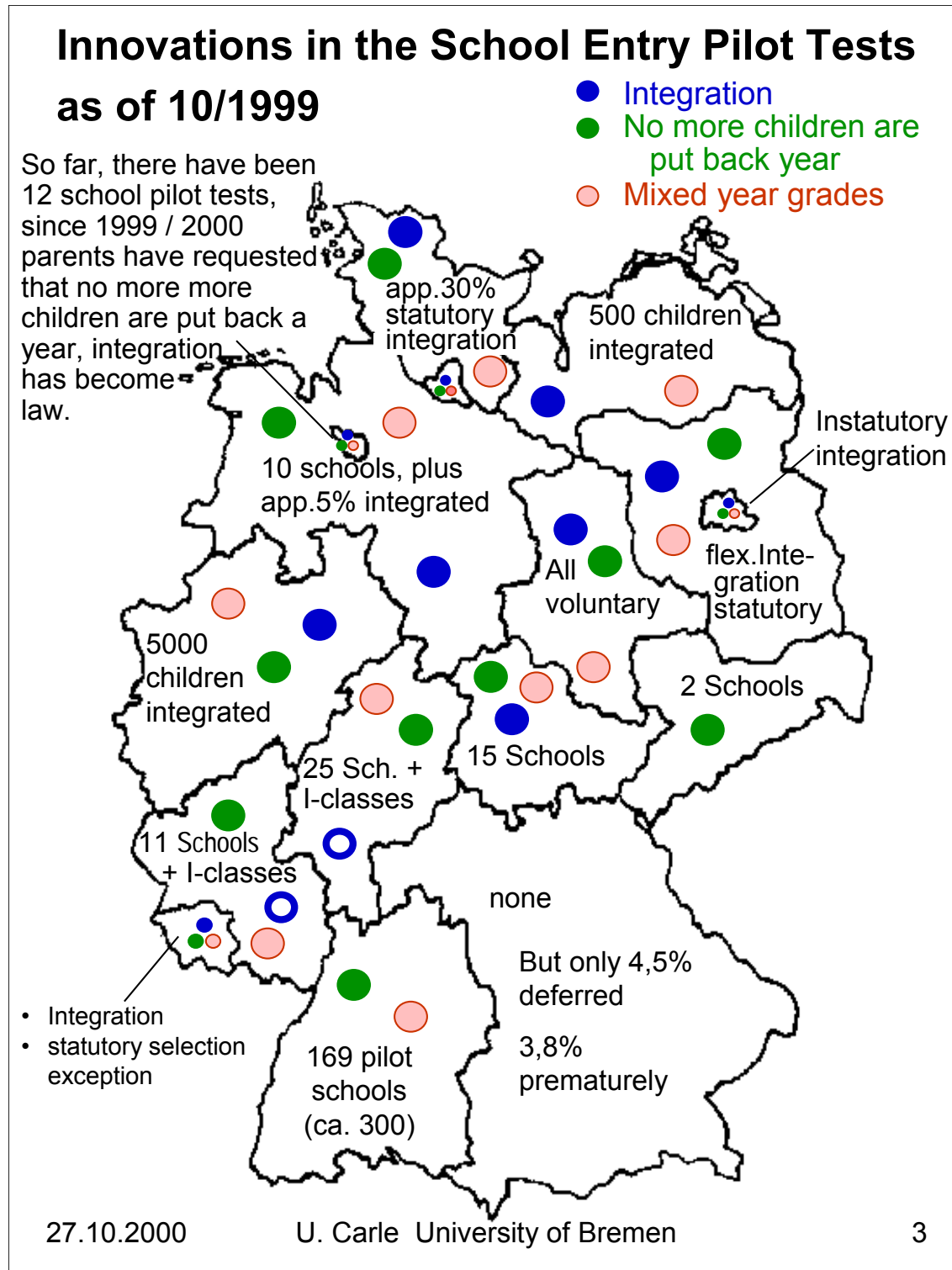


Chart 3: German map of the restructuring pilot tests in different states

Further elements of the school pilot tests are:

- Rhythmitizing the school morning
- Forming flexible school entry phases
- In some federal states: changing school entry dates

All in all, we can see the following general innovations - see chart 4.

Innovations in the School Entry Pilot Tests

- **Children are no longer put back a year. All children are admitted to school without having to undergo tests as to their school fitness**
- **The children's readiness for school is developed throughout primary school; the school changes in order to better meet the needs of the children**
- **An individual child may remain within the first two school years/ grades for a period from one up to three years**
- **Individualization and differentiation and, at the same time, integration**
- **New school entry classes are introduced which may take in children from various year grades (pre-school grade to 2nd year)**
- **School entry diagnostics is used as a diagnostics for supporting the child**
- **The school morning is rhythmized and there are reliable opening hours**
- **Parents become involved in school work**
- **Disabled children are integrated.**

27.10.2000

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4

Chart 4: The pilot test's innovation characteristics

Let me explain some points of chart 4:

What is meant by individualization and differentiation? - The opportunity of individual learning on the basis of a differentiated curricular offer.

Rhythmizing aims at the children's own learning rhythms and abandons fixed lessons.

You may ask what is meant by "reliable opening hours". The term applies to school hours between 8am and 1pm. Before, children's school hours varied from day to day, one day they would have three hours of teaching and five hours the next.

The elements must be seen as a unit both structurally and educationally. This implies extreme demands on the teachers, the staff coming from the pre-school institutions that have been dissolved and the special school staff of the special institutions at primary level that have also been dissolved.

The bundle of measures increases heterogeneity in first-year classes not only amongst pupils, but also amongst teachers. In future, primary school teachers will work together in a team with social workers and special school teachers (e.g. Burk u.a. 1998,16).

4. Central problems in the development process

The competence and skill of the teaching staff is the basis of any school development. This is one of the main problems of the innovation of the school entry phase, because the competence for starting school in an integrated setting does not develop by itself nor does it develop from one day to the next.

We know from the research of KORNMANN carried out during the Hessian school pilot test that the basic educational attitudes of teachers take a long time to change. They are reflected in the teachers routine actions without being touched by the discursive conscience. Indeed, they can also be found in the materialised structures, in work sheets, in supportive teaching plans, in time, room and cooperative structures. Since they represent tradition and do not fit the educational premise of the school pilot tests they manage to produce contradictions which challenge the teachers to reflect on routinised actions. In my experience, however, something I might perceive as a contradiction is seen by the teachers as something quite normal, just existing side-by-side. Thus, the rationalisations of actions of the school pilot test may well represent the schemes concept as well as justify it educationally. Whereas motives and classroom practice are kept as a fixed part of what teachers are used to.

This may show as follows: the teachers talk eloquently about all the aspects of the school pilot test. In other words: they can easily justify and find reasons for the pilot test.

But if one observes the way they teach in class, it is hard to find anything resembling it. That is not intended, but it is the problem of any development. The things one strives for, gives the reasons for, one talks about take much longer to become part of one's routine or even a basic attitude by which one is led even outside discussions.

May I give you an example:

In all school pilot test concepts, a social-constructivistic notion of learning is central: primary school children do not learn only from their teachers, but they learn casually or in a targeted manner from each other while doing things together. For that purpose, the teachers introduce different tutorial and sponsorship systems. Individual teachers are able to talk about how children work together to understand certain phenomena. On the other hand, observing their teaching in the classroom, the picture is often quite a different one which has nearly nothing in common with what was said. The situations described by the teachers cannot be identified, nor is it possible to judge from the material available that their prescriptions are present in uncontrolled situations. Often, an underlying "short circuit of teaching-learning" predominates. At least, the offered structure of learning matter is seen paralleled or even identical to the structure of the childrens processes of learning .

Another example:

Integrative education is based on a manifold and dynamic concept of a child's potential. Which means we assume that there is a range of gifts and talents which have been developed to a different degree and which change in the course of a person's life depending on a person's possibilities for action in different surroundings. If one was to ask teachers quite abstractly about their notion of educational potential, they would not hesitate to prefer precisely this dynamic notion of educational potential. However, everyday acting is mostly oriented towards a static notion of educational potential which is fed by a number of other stereotypes partly connected to gender.

The central problem of the pilot tests is that such a static notion of educational potential is opposed to the optimum support in integrational teaching. For if one recognizes that children have manifold developmental possibilities, it follows that selection does no longer make sense. On the basis of a static concept of educational potential, however, it seems second nature to put children into groups that are supposedly homogeneous with respect to educational potential. They make the homogenous groups smaller but don't integrate individual diversity.

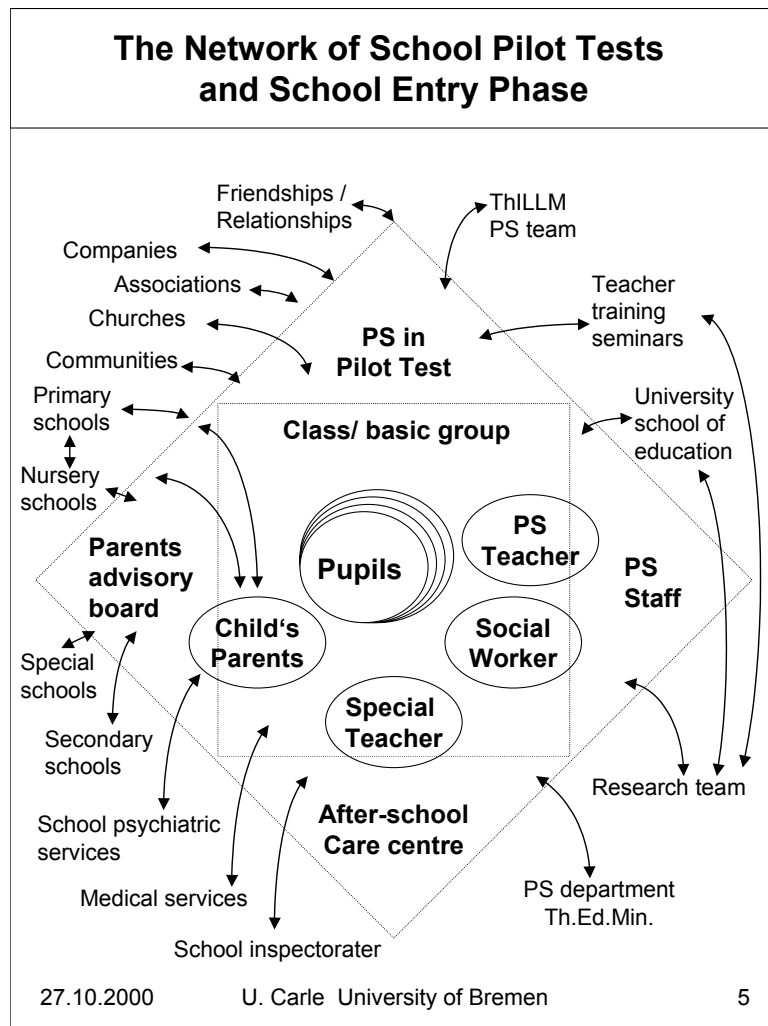


Chart 5: Central elements of the school network in the pilot tests

We do find this problem not only in teachers, but also in children, parent, service institutions and in the pilot tests' supportive systems. We come across it in the processes of reorganisation in companies, in the introduction of new curricula etc. On the basis of the 'theory of action' it can be explained as follows: the development of individual and organisational acting competences cannot be achieved simply at the discursive level, but always implies the forming of new routines of action and a change in the motivational structure.

Besides, to adopt an individualistic view of the development of new structures for action is not sufficient - see chart 5.

We can assume that teachers have a great deal of influence on children's learning, and that is what school is about. We also know that both teachers' and children's way of acting must be looked at within the socio-ecological context. We would agree immediately in the case of our telmie.doc

children. However, we often want teachers to single-handedly shoulder the entire responsibility for the system we call school.

Systemic school development research must take into consideration that a school pilot test does not happen in isolation between the teachers and their pupils. In the following, I will describe the way in which research accompanies a Thuringian pilot test that is being carried out in 15 schools. The Thuringa ministry of education has asked me to accompany the scheme at research level. There are three other research colleagues working with me: Sabine Klose, Martina Henschel and Barbara Berthold.

5. Supportive systems and accompanying research

The above chart 5 illustrates the network of interrelated effects on the pilot test. De facto, they all have to develop at the same time, children, teachers, parents, school governing body etc. They have to do this on the basis of their old competences and basic attitudes, the very things they want to move away from. This also applies to the research accompanying the scheme. We, too, have to develop further together with the schools whose development we study. We have to take an interest in the cause of the school pilot test, otherwise we cannot support such a complex process.

From that derives the necessity for an approach to evaluation which is both cooperative to and supportive for the schools development.

Methodological Needs for Research that supports Teachers Professionalization		
•	The first prerequisite for a science that supports the development of school participants is that research must serve the purpose of increasing the level of professional reflection (participative approach)	
•	The second prerequisite requires research to integrate qualitative and quantitative procedures as well as procedures referring to meaning, practice, reflection and structure (complex methodical approach)	
•	The third prerequisite requires research to embark on the process of observing and describing the way in which school participants' behaviour and actions develop. Research has to identify the linked streams of action in their dimensions of time and space instead of merely taking snapshots (eco-systemic approach)	
27.10.2000	U. Carle University of Bremen	6

Chart 6: Three methodological essentials of professionalizing scientific support

All instruments of research must be designed in such a way that they do fit to the participative approach, to the complex methodological and to the eco-systemic approach. They serve at the same time the purpose of collecting data and of increasing reflection. SWOT-analyses of strengths and weaknesses are used, equally constraint analyses and guidelines for the documentation of research's procedures in the schools.

Pilot tests of this type have been in existence since 1994. Many of them have been documented so that we can rely on a large amount of knowledge. The Thuringian school pilot test does not repeat research that has already been done, instead its aim is to document and edit developmental processes in the schools so that other schools which also want to embark in this process can learn from them. That means we need manifold documentations, pictures, videos which are meaningful. However, such a way of recording in all areas of the pilot test (show Chart 4) would be too much to handle for all the participants.

We assume that it is impossible to maintain a high level of reflection in every area of a complex development process such as the school entry phase, but that if one aspect is reflected in a very intensive way other areas would follow suit. It is important, however, that we do not lose sight of the entire concept. Therefore, we have suggested to the schools to select a particular area of the entire pilot test and to work on it (by dividing tasks) in such a way that other schools can learn from it. The schools say that apart from their base, they develop one point of the project-star they share - see chart 7.

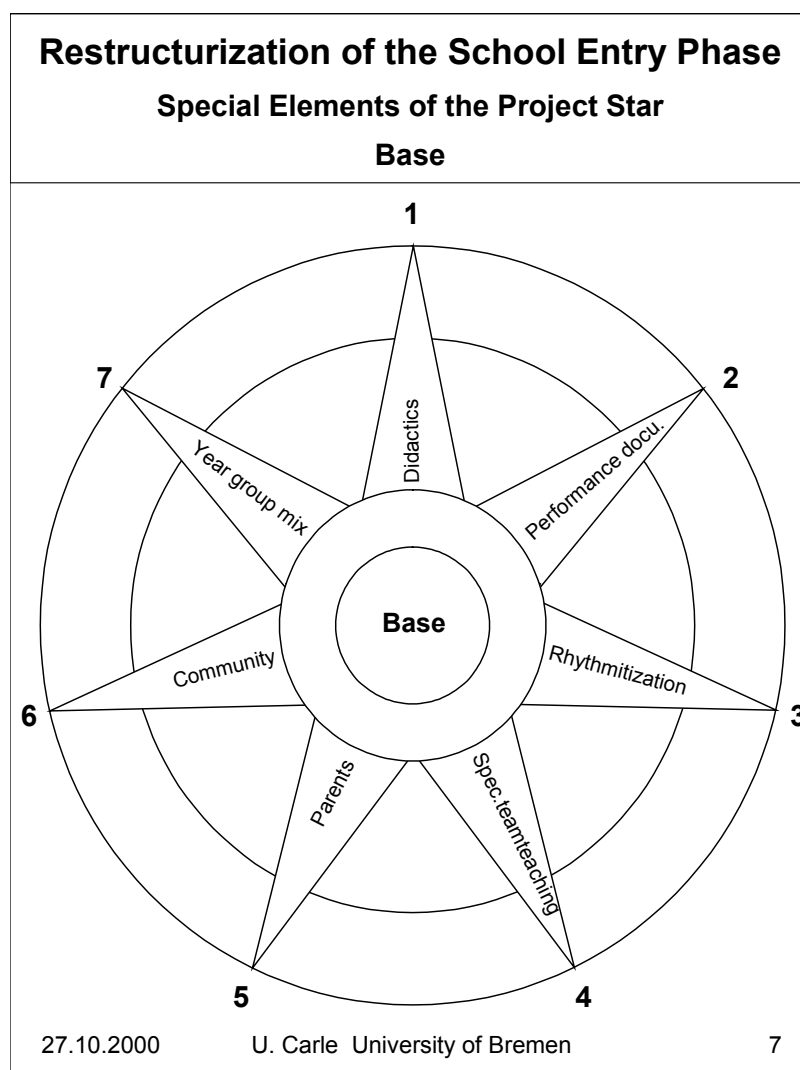


Chart 7: The seven parts of the project-star

I'll give You an example: If a school sets out within the framework of the entire concept to lay special emphasis on the performance documentation we assume that in order to do so, it will have to change its other areas , too, although it documents only one area for the other schools.

Each school has different conditions from which it starts out. Besides, every school has its own specific developmental aim, in other words to concentrate on the particular area of the star it has chosen.

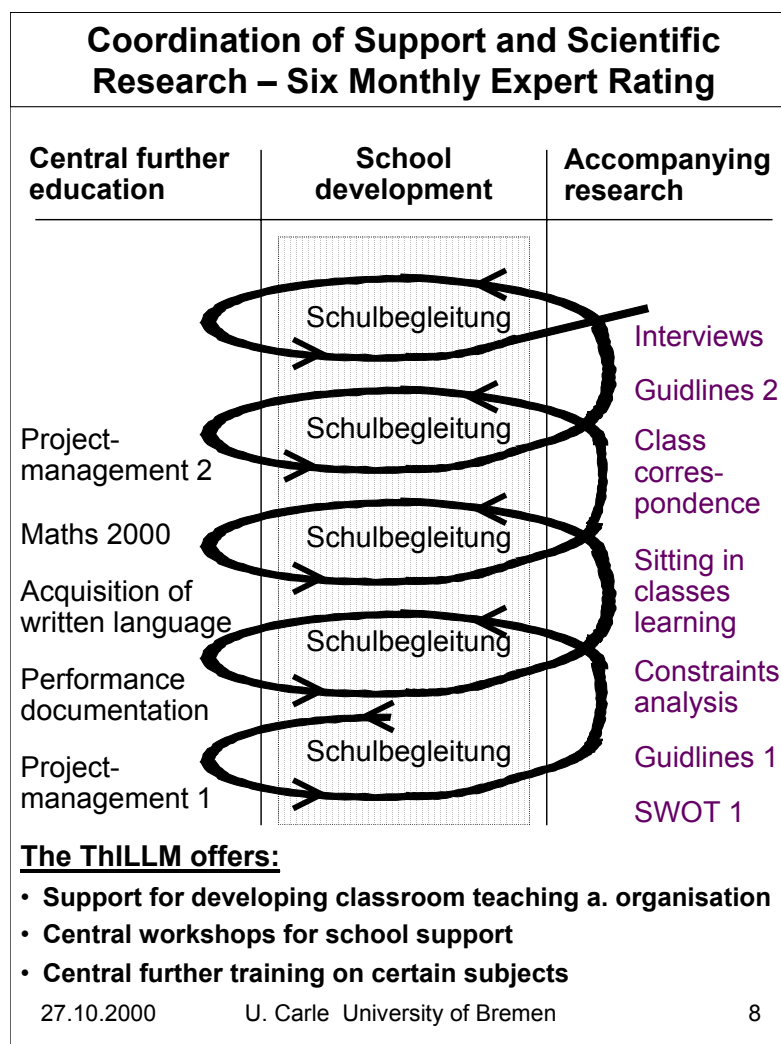


Chart 8: The developmental loop of qualification, support, research and feedback

For the researchers this means that once a year, apart from all the other recordings and documentation, each school receives its own guidelines for the prjoject documentation, which is particularly designed for the development at that individual school.

The accompanying research has to be coordinated with other areas of the supportive system, in this case it is the ThILLM (Thuringian Institute for Teacher Training, Curricula and Teaching Media), and it has to document these supportive measures, too, as there are - see chart 8 above.

The central further training opportunities are at the same time a platform for the individual schools to exchange their experiences.

In the sense of the Grounded Theory we see the data analysis as a continuous spiral-like process. Our aim is to put forward an object-oriented theory of school development that makes it possible to improve future school development projects in the sense of the system design and by doing so to facilitate a much quicker and wider reaching effect at general school level.

6. Summary

At present, the primary school system in the Federal Republic develops mostly in the area of school entry.

Central lines of the corresponding school development are:

An ecological concept of development that does not hold the individual child responsible in terms of personal attributes if he or she is found not to be ready for schooling, but that sees the interplay of the child's opportunities for action and the environment.

The value of heterogeneous learning situations is being recognized, because children learn from each other particularly when the differences between them are greater.

There is hope that because various university professors of education, social workers, special education teachers and primary school teachers work together, the entire work will reach and benefit from a higher level.

From this derive the following innovations at school entry level:

The introduction of a flexible school entry phase of two school years which a child can pass through in one to three years.

For that purpose, the introduction of mixed year groups on the basis of the basic group principle of Peter Petersen "little Jenaplan".

Abandonment of any kind of selection, be it putting a child back a year or sending him to special school.

The development of a didactics of integration which, on the one hand, leans on the ideas of Reform Pedagogy (prepared learning environment, project teaching etc.), and which, on the other hand, also adapts certain elements of support diagnostics.

Intensivating the exchange of ideas between the school and the environment within the network of the school pilot tests.

These innovations are at the same time developmental tasks for the schools of the pilot test. School pilot test are first and foremost intended to develop new methods and materials which will make it easier for other schools to change their ways.

Central problems of development stem from the fact that,

the schools must develop and document simultaneously, that they work within a complex net of relationships

that old routines and, above all, basic educational attitudes cannot be changed by issuing a decree, but that this process of change deeply affects the individual's professional development.

Therefore, it is essential to have a finely tuned system of support which - so to speak as a countermovement - develops offers of support for the newly arising needs of the schools. It must be closely connected to the accompanying research of the pilot test whose main function is to encourage reflection and to record in terms of a continuous evaluation of the process. In the case of Thuringia, it is also responsible for processing the development results so that they can be made accessible to other schools.

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