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The German Educational System – Structures, Challenges, Developments

Abstracts

EN

In this article, the German educational system is presented with its central structures, challenges, and current development perspectives. Due to the federal system in Germany, a total of 16 different school systems exist side by side. Each individual federal state has sovereignty in cultural and educational matters and has therefore developed its own structure for the organisation of schools. For reasons of space, it is not possible to do justice to this diversity here. I will therefore restrict myself to the general school system (vocational and university education are left out) and will only outline the broad lines and the striking similarities – this is necessary at the expense of state-specific characteristics and desirable accuracy.

DE

In diesem Artikel wird das deutsche Bildungssystem mit seinen zentralen Strukturen, Herausforderungen und aktuellen Entwicklungsperspektiven vorgestellt. Aufgrund des föderalen Systems in Deutschland existieren insgesamt 16 verschiedene Schulsysteme nebeneinander. Jedes einzelne Bundesland hat die Kultur- und Bildungshoheit und hat daher seine eigene Struktur für die Organisation der Schulen entwickelt. Aus Platzgründen ist es nicht möglich, dieser Vielfalt hier gerecht zu werden. Ich werde mich daher auf das allgemeine Schulsystem beschränken (berufliche und universitäre Bildung bleiben außen vor) und nur die Grundzüge und die auffälligen Gemeinsamkeiten skizzieren – dies geht notwendigerweise auf Kosten der länderspezifischen Besonderheiten und der wünschenswerten Genauigkeit.

PT

Neste artigo, o sistema educativo alemão é apresentado com as suas estruturas centrais, desafios e perspectivas de desenvolvimento atuais. Devido ao sistema federal na Alemanha, coexistem 16 sistemas escolares diferentes.

Cada estado federal é soberano em matéria cultural e educativa e, por isso, desenvolveu a sua própria estrutura para a organização das escolas. Por razões de espaço, não é possível fazer aqui justiça a esta diversidade. Por conseguinte, limitar-me-ei ao sistema escolar geral (o ensino profissional e o ensino universitário ficam de fora) e apenas esboçarei as linhas gerais e as semelhanças marcantes – o que é necessário em detrimento das características específicas de cada Estado e de uma desejável exatidão.

JA

本稿では、ドイツの教育システムについて、中心的な構造、課題、現在進んでいる展開の展望から紹介する。ドイツでは連邦制を採っているため、全部で16の教育制度が並立している。各州は文化・教育に関して主権を有しており、学校を組織するにあたって独自の構造をつくっている。紙幅に限りがあるため、ここでこの多様性を精確に述べることはできない。そのため、普通教育をおこなう学校制度（職業教育と高等教育は除く）に焦点を合わせ、基本的な方針と重要な類似性を叙述する。その際、州特有の特徴や望まれる厳密性にあえて立ち入らないこととする。

1 Educational system: Historical and Current Perspectives

In Germany, at about 43,000 schools 11 million pupils are currently taught by 800,000 teachers. From the age of six, pupils are subject to compulsory schooling at general schools for ten years; on average, pupils spend about 10,000 hours of their lives at school (van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 194). These high expenses of time, personnel, organisational and financial effort are justified with large expectations of society: In Germany, schools take on the function of general and domain-specific education and qualification, social integration, and enculturation, but also the function of selection according to the achievements and the allocation of social positions and life opportunities for pupils (Fend 2008).

Structural characteristics of school systems in all federal states – the distinction between vocational and general education, and the distribution of pupils to different secondary school types – date back to the 19th century – a reason why the school system is still burdened with all kinds of mortgages from the historical estate-based society: The 19th century distinguished between higher and lower education. The higher school system was represented by the grammar school (*Gymnasium*) – a school that was reserved for the sons of the bourgeoisie until the beginning of the 20th century. The grammar school ensured a comprehensive humanistic education and preparation for university.

It served bourgeois emancipation and the formation of bourgeois elites in a monarchical state. The lower school system was represented by the elementary school (*Volksschule*), which was primarily committed to the teaching of cultural techniques (reading, arithmetic, writing) at a basic level as well as to popular education and education to become a subordinate of the monarch (van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 15-17; Herlitz, Hopf & Titze 2005). The lower education system was upgraded during industrialisation and commercial developments in the last quarter of the 19th century. These developments led to the establishment of a middle school (*Realschule*) to ensure the demand for qualified school leavers in industry and trade.

Until 1919, there were four separate educational systems in Germany, largely without transition opportunities: auxiliary or special schools, elementary schools, middle schools, and grammar schools. Each of these school forms had its own preliminary classes and represented the corporative social order as completed systems. It was not until 1920, with the introduction of the general primary school for all children, that a uniform school system was created with an institutionalised transition from primary to secondary schools. The traditional principle of the estates, according to which allocation to school had been carried out until then, was replaced by a meritocratic principle according to which it was no longer birth rights but achievements at school that were to decide on a school career (van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 33; see also Herlitz, Hopf & Titze 2005; National Institute 1999). The meritocratic principle and the associated selection of achievements still essentially determine the school careers of children and adolescents in Germany today. The meritocratic principle suggests justice of achievement, but at the same time ignores the influence of social origins on the possibilities of achievement at school.

Even though numerous reforms have shaped the school system since 1945, the basic principle of a three-tiered (four-tiered, if special schools are considered) school system is still recognisable and effective today. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) (1949-1990) had established a comprehensive school system, which was largely replaced by the tiered school system of the Federal Republic of Germany after reunification in 1990. Hence, the German school structure still follows the essentialist assumption that pupils have different capabilities and individual abilities that justify different schooling (National Institute 1999). The general education school forms (*Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, *Gymnasium*) therefore differ considerably in terms of academic standards, curricula, and teaching and learning culture. The transition from primary school to secondary school today generally takes place after four school years (in two federal states after six school years) – in a global comparison, the German school system thus allows only a short period of common learning for all pupils. Teachers at primary schools make a transition recommendation based

on the performance shown, which also includes assumptions about the anticipated success at the respective secondary school. In most states, however, the decision on a school form lies with the parents (van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 52; see also Baumert, Cortina & Leschinsky 2008). The regular school completion certificate is the secondary school qualification certificate obtained after 10 years of compulsory schooling. In addition, after 12 or 13 school years, the *Abitur* and thus the entrance qualification for university can be acquired. Due to the cultural sovereignty of the federal states, they basically decide independently on the content of lessons and curricular requirements. In some fields of education there have been developments towards nationally uniform curricular frameworks over the past 20 years. As a result of the TIMSS and PISA studies, and with the aim of developing the quality of teaching and improving student performance, national educational standards have been introduced in some school subjects (German, Mathematics, First Foreign Language and Sciences), which define the expected level of competence and the learning outcomes in certain grades. The introduction of educational standards has led to a situation in which competence-oriented instruction is expected also in the other subjects.

2 Ongoing Reforms: Opportunities and Challenges

The structure of the school system and the way educational decisions are organised in Germany leads to considerable social inequalities. After educational participation and educational disadvantage had been crucial topics in the 1960s and 1970s educational and political discourse (see e.g., Deutscher Bildungsrat 1970), it was only the results of the international performance studies (TIMSS and PISA) in the early 2000s that revived this debate, which continues until today. Two central findings have been the subject of intense debate in the wake of the PISA Study 2000 (PISA-Konsortium 2003): the unexpectedly poor performance of German students in subject-related competences and the strong link between educational success and social background that led to certain inequalities among pupils. All in all, a comparatively high percentage of high-risk pupils in the German school system (approx. 25%) was found. In particular, children from families with experience of migration and children of single parents are frequently represented in this risk group (see Baumert, Cortina & Leschinsky 2008: 85; Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2018). While the past 20 years have seen overall positive developments in academic achievement, the influence of social background on educational success and thus the reproduction of social inequalities through school remains strong. This means above all, that children from households with a high level of education attend general schools that lead to university entrance qualifications

significantly more often, and that people with a migration background attend university less frequently (see Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2018). The transition from primary school to secondary school is seen as a neuralgic point for the reproduction of social inequalities. Contrary to its own claim, this transition has proven to be inappropriate to performance: Empirical studies have shown, for example, that pupils with the same reading skills were referred to lower secondary schools (*Hauptschule*), intermediate secondary schools (*Realschule*) and upper secondary schools (*Gymnasium*) (Bos et al. 2012). The investigation of the mathematics performance of 15-year-olds also shows clear overlaps between the performance areas – pupils from *Realschule* certainly show performance at the *Gymnasium* level here (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium 2003).

These results, among others, led to reform activities from the beginning of the 2000s onwards, which continue to this day. Among the many and varied reforms, the reform of school structure, the expansion of all-day schooling and the development of an inclusive educational system, are examples of the reforms that have been selected and will be briefly outlined here.

Reform of school structure: The reform of school structure aims to contribute to an improvement in educational opportunities after the transition to secondary education, and to ensure a demand-oriented, area-covering supply of education. The introduction of the lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*) and the modernisation of the intermediate secondary school (*Realschule*) in the 1960s attempted to overcome the dualism of popular-practical and academic education and established the principle of science-oriented education for all school types (see Baumert, Cortina & Leschinsky 2008: 53). The greatly changed composition of the student body because of migration movements since the 1960s, and a generally changing demand for education that goes hand in hand with an aspiration towards higher educational qualifications, led to a restructuring of the school system that particularly affected the lower secondary school (Baumert, Cortina & Leschinsky 2008: 85). While the importance of the *Gymnasium* as a 'bourgeois' school is not questioned in any of Germany's 16 states, the lower and intermediate secondary school system has undergone considerable transformation in all states. The school structure reform is being implemented differently in the individual federal states: While some states have adopted a two-tier system (one other school form in addition to the *Gymnasium*), most states have chosen the path of pluralisation of very different school forms (in some cases five school forms in addition to the *Gymnasium*), which allow pupils to obtain different school-leaving certificates. Overall, therefore, an increasing decoupling of educational pathways and

school leaving certificates has been observed since the 2000s (van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 50).

Expansion of all-day schooling: Traditionally, German schools are organised as part-time schools (lessons only in the morning, finishing school around 1 pm). Over the past 20 years, substantial investments have been made in the expansion of all-day schooling. Providing additional afternoon educational opportunities intends to mitigate educational inequalities related to social background and to strengthen the personal and social learning in schools, as well as to reflect the changing conditions under which children and adolescents grow up. In the meantime, the rate of all-day schooling has reached approx. 60%, but there are considerable differences between the federal states (e.g., 15% pupil participation in Bavaria, 88% in Hamburg), depending on the family policy of the states. The organisation of all-day schooling varies greatly according to the school form: While most primary schools and grammar schools follow the open all-day model in which the morning is reserved for subject-related instruction and the afternoon for other educational offerings, comprehensive schools and schools with several educational tracks focus mostly on integrating subject instruction and other educational offerings that are distributed evenly throughout the school day (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2016: 82f). This makes it clear that the interlinking of subject-related teaching and extra-curricular learning opportunities has only partially become established in schools. Since in most cases it is the parents who decide whether their children participate in all-day schooling, which is in principle voluntary, the effects of all-day schooling on reducing social inequalities remain rather small.

Inclusion: Germany has a highly developed and differentiated special school system (see van Ackeren, Klemm & Kühn 2015: 55). By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, the Federal Government and the states committed themselves legally to establishing an inclusive education system at all levels. The aim is to realise the human right to education, i.e., the equal participation of all people in education as a crucial aspect of participation in society. For the German school system, this resulted in the right for children and young people with special educational needs to attend a regular school. In this understanding, individual support in regular school lessons has priority over referral to special needs schools. Central challenges and reform measures are the transformation of special needs schools into advice and support centres the cooperation between regular and special needs teachers, and the further development of

teaching at regular schools to do justice to the new heterogeneity. Overall, the integration of special education and general education is creating some tension. The parents' and their children's right to attend the general education schools does not automatically mean that traditional patterns of attribution to children with special needs are also abandoned: The danger of labelling, i.e., the attribution and consolidation of characteristics of the group of 'special education pupils' in general schooling remains strong and is also reflected in numerous empirical studies.

3 Empirical Educational Research: Discourses and Objectives

Empirical educational research in Germany is highly differentiated in terms of disciplines, content, and research methods. Research relating to schools, classroom-interaction, teaching and learning, or the teaching profession is carried out primarily in educational science, educational psychology, and subject didactics – but with different emphases in sociology and political science as well. Concentrated at universities and non-university research institutes, research in the respective disciplines is highly professionalised and shows the influence of different scientific cultures. As a result, the disciplines are strongly differentiated in their approach and research objectives. The spectrum ranges from student and peer culture research to teacher education and professional research, from school system research to classroom research, etc. Traditionally, a clear distinction is made between empirical research and practical school or teaching development. However, newer approaches, such as Lesson Studies or Design-Based-Research, link both perspectives (e.g., Bakker 2018; Kim et al. 2021).

Although mixed-method designs have now been successfully applied in empirical educational research and the synergies between qualitative (theory generating) and quantitative (theory testing) research are often emphasised, there is still a clear distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches in German educational research. The methodological approaches are clearly contoured against each other, are highly differentiated in themselves, and have an identity-forming significance for most educational researchers. While quantitative empirical research asks about the effects of certain measures and about factors influencing certain performance parameters and the outcome among teachers or students, qualitative research focuses on the analysis of processes and asks about implicit rules and structures according to which agents at different levels of the educational system perceive their reality and jointly produce it. As a result of participation in international comparative

achievement studies (TIMSS, PISA, etc.), the discussion in Germany has focused on the quality of the education system and on the quality of teaching and teacher training. In this context, quantitative empirical research has promised an evidence-based management and development of the education system.

The reforms in the education system outlined above have led to an increased need for empirically proven knowledge of the processes and outcomes. In addition to a variety of other topics, reform of school structure, all-day schooling and inclusion have become important objectives in empirical educational research. In the context of the reform of school, for example, questions are asked about how teachers and schools deal with the closure of school locations, with school mergers and the founding of new schools, how cooperation with colleagues from other school forms is realised, or how teachers deal with an unfamiliar or more heterogeneous student clientele. During the expansion of all-day schooling, the effects on student performance or on social inequalities are investigated, as well as the dimensions in which school life is organised or how teachers cooperate with professionals from other educational fields. Inclusion brings individualised, adaptive and differentiated teaching and learning into focus, the counselling of students and parents and individual support are just as much an objective of research as the cooperation of general and special education teachers. An important field of qualitative educational research is the dealing with difference.

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