Development of Education in Germany
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German educational development has been marked in this century by political upheaval and challenged time and again to reorient itself. After the collapse of the Wilhelm monarchy, the Weimar Republic entered into a broad-based debate on education, especially with the Reich School Conference ("Reichsschulkonferenz") in 1920. The hottest topics were the controversial issues of school organisation and teacher training. Although ideas of reform pedagogy dominated the basic attitude toward education and instruction, the trend toward uniformity dictated a co-educative common school for all children and young people -- without regard to social status or creed. On the other hand, tradition and the offer of the humanities Gymnasium (university preparatory school), together with the more recent forms of Gymnasium in modern languages and the natural sciences, were already entrenched.

The debates resulted in a compromise. For the reformers, it was a first step toward the general institution of a uniform, 4-year primary school [Grundschule] by means of the Reich School Law ("Reichsschulgesetz") -- the only law of its kind to be passed. Moreover, the Reich School Conference had a lasting influence on the development of teacher colleges.

Discussions and educational developments during the Weimar Era anticipated many pedagogic and political discussion paradigms of later decades. However, the reformist pedagogic approach which called for 'putting the child first' were interrupted by National Socialism and distorted into its opposite: education as the means for implementing absolute subservience to the 'Führer' and 'Reich' -- and not least, as the foundation for ambitious expansion politics. The States ("Länder") and their educational systems were “synchronised” -- ideologically and organisationally.

The rise and fall of National Socialism drew the educational system into the wholesale collapse of 1945, and provoked a new start: reconstruction of schools that had been destroyed, the redevelopment of curricula and textbooks, mobilisation of the required, non-politicised, teaching force. All of the basic conditions for an educational system had to be completely re-established.

The basic pedagogic orientation saw a return to the models and educational structures of the Weimar Republic, and a return of governmental organisation to the federalist tradition. By reason of experiences with centralisation in the Third Reich, the "cultural sovereignty' of the newly-formed Länder was restored even more securely than it had been in the Weimar Republic.

Since 1948, the "Standing Conference of Länder Cultural Ministers" ("Konferenz der Kultusminister, KMK") had been the sole forum for governmental co-ordination. The Länder in the Russian-occupied zone still participated in the first meeting, but then were quickly subsumed into a monolithic state, similar to the system in the "socialist uniform school".

The KMK consistently succeeded in bringing together independent developments in the Länder subdivisions and those from the federalist structure, especially in regulating the initial basic conditions for mutual recognition of degrees and certificates -- as per the Hamburg Accord of 1964, which established the commencement date for the school year, the minimum school attendance requirement of 9 years, uniform designations and organisational forms for schools, and foreign language instruction. At the same time, an experimental clause was included which bound experimental organisational models to recommendations of the KMK. This clause was a security measure and simultaneously a signal for the growing dynamic that dominated discussion about school structure and reform in the 60’s and 70's.
The empirical studies of the newly-created education research were an important trigger for this reform phase. These documented wide regional differences among the Länder, e.g. in school attendance, and also graduation figures well below international standards, which could have jeopardised economic recovery. Public discussion of these findings, followed in the media, came to a head in a slogan of an impending "education disaster", which could be averted only by significantly increasing the number of Abiturienten (Picht 1964). Other studies showed low graduation rates among girls, the children of working class and Catholic families or rural regions.

The KMK injected its own findings of deficiencies into the situation, which projected an increased demand for teachers by reason of high birth rates in certain school grades and longer school terms. The 100th plenary assembly of the KMK (1964) confirmed that to improve the educational level and the number of higher degrees awarded required "greater intermobility ("Durchlässigkeit") in all existing schools" (e.g. a horizontally, rather than vertically organised school system). In the meantime, differing structural approaches began to emerge precisely on this issue: on the one hand, the reform approach, thus, the multitrack educational system, i.e. the relaxation of the insular school types -- until then deemed necessary for differentiated learning -- to a more intermobile system, which would in principle permit access to every degree from every type of school; on the other hand, the development of an integrated educational system which would afford equal educational opportunity, common social learning and differentiated degree programs in the system as a whole. These positions developed into a process which the new advisory boards ("Gremien") served to advance; growing criticism of the cumbersome federalism of education compelled the Länder into a co-operative initiative with the federal government (the "Bund").

Already in 1959, the "German Committee for Schooling and Education" ("Deutscher Ausschuss für Erziehungs- und Bildungswesen") had presented a "model plan" ("Rahmenplan") as the centrepiece of its efforts, which left the multi-track educational system essentially undisturbed, but deferred track selection by proposing a 2-year remedial phase for those pupils who were not ready to attend an "academic school" ("Studienzule") immediately after primary school ("Grundschule"). The "German Education Council" ("Deutscher Bildungsrat") which followed in 1965 and immediately involved the Länder in the discussion in order to foster the actual implementation of its recommendations, went a step further in its "Structure Plan" ("Strukturplan") in that it developed a coherent, graded education and degree system for all areas of organised learning, from pre-school to higher education, that was to conclude with a first Abitur after the 10th year of schooling within the Secondary Level and with a second Abitur after the 13th year. This gradated system could accommodate the school types of the multi-track educational system -- albeit packed into a general 10th year of schooling -- and the integrated school ("Gesamtschule").

The Structure Plan became the foundation for general state educational planning: the Federation ("Bund") was granted political and administrative authority by means of Constitutional amendment in 1969, followed by the creation of a "Bund-Länder Commission for Educational Planning", ("BLK"): The goal of creating a "joint, long-term overall model plan of co-ordinated development of the entire educational system" was achieved in 1973 already by presentation of the "Education Master Plan" ("Bildungsgesamtplan"). It retained the multi-track organisation of the Structure Plan and attached deadlines to the implementation of changes and set quantitative goals, e.g. as to pupil-teacher ratio, graduate quotas and teacher demand.

On the structure issue, formal compromise was not sought at any price: the social-liberal majority in the Bund and Länder found that the goals of the Structure Plan, i.e. basic science education for all, avoidance of premature assignment to a particular educational track and considerations of individual inclination and aptitude limited the organisational form of the integrated school ("Gesamtschule"). Those Länder where the Christian Democratic/Christian Socialist parties were in power opposed in special voting the introduction of integrated forms only in the orientation grades, the Secondary Level I and teacher training.
They wanted to await the results of experimental programs implemented in all Länder before addressing the Gesamtschule issue.

The continued drafting of the Bildungsgesamtplan eased the rigidity of positions; the two sides met in a more realistic appraisal of the education landscape, in which -- at least for the foreseeable future -- differing organisational types of schools were to be tolerated. Nonetheless, drafting was halted in 1982 after the Minister of Finance rejected an education budget which it considered too costly and too long-term in its appropriations. Essentially, the outer reaches of a planning document had been reached -- and in a touchy political area for a federation -- and exceeded, moving into non-school educational areas, where things become more complex and consensus more difficult to achieve.

The BLK was assigned to tackle selected educational planning issues with supra-regional significance, e.g. the issue of better co-ordination between education and the employment system or vocational training, which had to be continually adapted to the interplay between company and school and to changing demands and expectations for degrees or certificates. Innovation planning and Bund-Länder support of model experiments -- which had become a major impetus for school reform -- were retained.

However, the freeze on general state educational planning did not solve the problem of harmonising differing structural developments in the Länder. This work was continued by the KMK, no longer as future-oriented planning, but rather, more as an after-the-fact effort at achieving uniformity. A current example is the "Agreement regarding School Forms and Education Options in the Secondary Level I" from 1993, which established the chief prerequisites for the mutual recognition of diplomas, and moreover seeks to make certain courses compulsory in focal disciplines.

As dominant and divisive as the structure issue had always been in German educational development, it was merely the "exterior" of internal school reform which set the scene and was the subject of as much forethought and treatment by the advisory councils as the Bildungsgesamtplan. This was due to the growing insight -- the result of many years of debate on structure and numerous structuring attempts -- that organisational form is less important than quality of instruction for the promotional effect of a school.

This "turn inward" led to effective reforms in all the Länder, the most important then as now being:

- a new curriculum design which seeks to streamline and organise the constantly growing course material to meet educationally relevant goals. Recently, interdisciplinary educational aspects are being worked out better, which should encourage coherent learning. Various recommendations made by the KMK (e.g. course instruction on the environment) or by the BLK (basic computer training) anticipated this development.

- expansion of pedagogic development, counselling and advanced training facilities, which should enable and encourage the schools to initiate their own reforms.

- broader involvement of pupils and parents, a notion which is constantly reiterated in education legislation.

The emphasis is less on "general system education" ("Gesamtsystem Bildung") than on the actual learning site, the individual school, which tends to reduce problems, and especially to gear the practise to the pupil. It will be the task of new educational planning to ensure the proper balance between course content and structural reform.

In 1990, the East German Länder again became partners in educational development and school reform. Reunification offered an opportunity for a new pedagogic and organisational beginning, especially for the opening of an ideologically implemented school system geared to democratic educational goals and
differentiated structures. From the first, the new Länder contributed their own ideas on structure, for instance, for a greater concentration of school types in the Secondary Level I: apart from Gymnasium, which has been viewed as especially anathema to the socialist uniform school, the Hauptschule and Realschule, are being integrated into new school types -- though to differing degrees in the individual Länder. The 12-year course of study to earn the secondary school diploma was also retained -- all are decisions which impact the overall German education discussion. The same applies to the involvement of the new Länder in innovation planning and the model experimental programs of the BLK.

Domestic German educational federalism takes on additional dimensions on the European stage. For the first time, the Maastricht Agreement of 1992, which created the European Union, included as treaty subject matter the entire educational area. On the other hand, the Community is committed to "reserving course content and design of the educational system to the Member States". Cited as the province of the European Union are: development of the European dimension in instruction especially in foreign languages, improvements in the exchange of experience, co-operation and mobility, notions which are already solidly ensconced as policy in various projects.

German educational development is expanding into a much larger playing field in which "co-operative federalism" will confront new challenges.

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Students who pass the Abitur, the state-administered high school graduation exam