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**“School Reform meets Early Education –
Historical perspectives, current issues”**

Abstract

This paper deals with a self-evident truth, though one still not accepted in the Federal Republic of Germany: viz., that the two fundamental stages in the education system do not stand in any structural, pedagogical or research-directed relation to one another. First of all historical causes of this situation are described, and the directions shown which current discussions are taking. The second part deals in detail with the present problematic situation, which cries out for far-reaching reforms in the field of elementary education. Accordingly, the political rhetoric of reform calls for qualitative developments. But what is this supposed to mean, and what do qualitative developments actually consist of? On what conditions must the reform process of kindergarten and elementary school be based? The third section of my paper goes into these questions. The ‘motor’ of reform is to be found not in the operational qualities of education, nor in curriculum planning, but rather in changes of mind and attitude in the relevant power sectors of society.

“School Reform meets Early Education – Historical perspectives, current issues”

When I phrased the title I wasn't aware how many thoughts, lines of argument and ideological fossils this metaphor was encrusted with. What you will hear in the following resembles an attempt to perform mental acrobatics on the high-wire without a safety-net. The title of my paper refers to the encounter between two highly mobile fields of force: nursery school education (i.e. kindergarten) and school reform (whereby my attention here will focus on the primary school). I wish to exploit this metaphorical dynamic for my considerations here, and employ three lines of argument:

1. Why is an encounter between the two forces at all significant? Were there earlier encounters and convergences?

In Germany a long and eventful history is associated with this question, which harks back to the year 1920, during the period after the First World war when, in the Weimar Republic, the German education system was being organized. After some violent political controversies on educational policy between the democratic social-liberal and the national religious-conservative groupings, a 4-year period of elementary schooling was introduced. Pre-school institutions were to be further developed and to provide an obligatory period of what was called "People's Kindergarten". Early education, that is - quite in keeping with the views of the great educationalist Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) - was to be accorded an educational standing and character by right. The National School Conference of the Reich, however, did not agree to this. And this rejection marked the beginning of a development which led to completely divergent professional and learning cultures in kindergarten and elementary school.

"History is simply a repetition of its own mistakes." This pessimistic dictum certainly applies to the relationship between kindergarten and regular school. Even in the great education reform of the 1970s - which was actually the only really momentous one in the Federal Republic after the Second World War - nursery schooling was unable to establish itself politically in its own right as the first basic stage of a general education system. As an "Elementary Field", according to the wishes of the National Education Committee in 1975, kindergarten education as practised by all the divergent pre-school institutions of the day was to be raised in its standards so that it could contribute to the general overriding goals of educational reform, e.g.:

- exploitation of educational potential
- pre-school education as a means of compensating institutionally for individual deficits in socialization
- systematic use of the opportunities provided by early learning

At the same time the kindergarten sector was extended and developed and provision of nursery school places improved. A hundred per cent increase in the availability of places was achieved within five years, bringing the rate of provision up to 65 per cent, (which was an enormous step forward!) The reform of that time aimed to abandon the image of kindergarten as a child's world characterized by play and infant care. Instead, school-preparatory learning was to determine the general pedagogical conception. Once more we had the old controversy. And it was decided in favour of social learning. In this way, kindergarten remained a social

institution, and up to the present-day it has accordingly been assigned, in most federal German states, to the social and welfare sector. Here the ruling principle is that of small individual subsidization and management, whereas schools are funded from the education budget. Even in 1970, - in analogy to the case in 1920 - nursery schools did not attain the status of an educational institution. History, it appears, is a repetition of its mistakes after all!

In the early nineties the unification of the East and West German education systems had varying effects on kindergarten and elementary school: the West German elementary school quite successfully established its conceptions in the new federal states in the east. The kindergarten concept of the old West German states, however, with its emphasis on situational orientation and social learning, met with skepticism in the east. This too has had anything but a positive effect on the "encounter climate".

Since the year 2000 the education debate in the "post-PISA-era" has taken on a new quality and declared kindergarten and elementary school to be comrades in arms and to have a common destiny. The discussions broke the tightly-knit circles of experts wide open and in the media achieved a tremendous and permanent echo. The findings on the basic skills of the 15-year-old age-group quickly provoked a whole series of questions on the educational qualities of elementary school and kindergarten. Since then there has been emphasis on their mutual dependence, and vehement demands for discussion and co-operation between them have been much in evidence.

2. Entities that for long periods have had no real contact tend to go their own separate ways and develop in their own directions. Co-operation and communication become difficult. Common ground and ties between them are then frequently lost sight of.

Even as long as almost a century ago, the educational work of the kindergarten was regarded as the basis of successful teaching and learning at the elementary school. Nursery schools were expected to compensate particularly for the weaknesses of domestic upbringing and parental socialization.

"The elementary school is in many different ways dependent on the efficiency and performance of the kindergarten. Nursery school should compensate for the deficiencies in children's upbringing which as a rule are caused by domestic influences. These influences are almost always amateurish and unpedagogical, even though the majority of parents are convinced otherwise" (Kunert 1920 in Nave 1980, p.78).

Example 1:

In the debate on school entrance maturity and schooling skills, kindergarten repeatedly demonstrates an attitude of inferiority and resigned withdrawal. This example allows us to observe how the repeatedly altered mental construction has negatively influenced the relations between kindergarten and school, because it decisively determines parents' and public's expectations of kindergarten. Margaret Carr, an early-learning educationalist and researcher in New Zealand has appropriately characterized the scale of values and the chief paradigm of this relationship between kindergarten and school (cf. particularly the centre column):

Assumptions about	My folk model about assessment	<i>An alternative model</i>
Purpose	To check against a short list	<i>To enhance learning</i>

	of skills that describe 'competence' at school entry	
Outcomes of interest	Fragmented and context-free school-oriented skills	<i>Learning dispositions</i>
Focus of intervention	Deficit, gap-filling, is foregrounded	<i>Credit, disposition-enhancing, is foregrounded</i>
Validity	Objective observation	<i>Interpreted observations, discussions and agreement</i>
Progress	Hierarchies of skills	<i>Increasingly complex participation</i>
Procedures	Checklists	<i>Learning stories</i>
Value to practitioners	Surveillance by external agencies	<i>For communicating with four audiences: children, families, other staff and self</i>

(The illustration is taken from Carr 2001, p.3.)

To the case of children who have reached school age but not yet achieved schooling maturity, school authorities reacted for a long period with the instrument of selection. Up to the year 1997 the number of children reaching the school beginners' age-group who were deferred from starting attendance increased in all 16 federal German states. The deferment rate fluctuated between 5 and 14 per cent. In the same year a kind of "politically prescribed" encounter took place. On the basis of a decision by the Federal Conference of Education Ministers, every federal state in Germany has since been working to optimize the commencement of school attendance¹. This includes

increased co-operation between kindergarten and elementary school, reform of school commencement phase, new forms of teaching and learning, introduction of the principle of flexible school entrance age and time spent at school, and school entrance maturity as a developmental task in the context of parents, kindergarten and elementary school.

The process shows that reform of school entrance is making good progress and that the relationship between kindergarten and school is slowly improving. In the third and fourth school years, however, selectivity becomes increasingly noticeable. Educational standards and performance tests in what are known as main subjects encourage the technique of "teaching to the test", which leads to a pedagogical shrinkage in real educational opportunities, increasing the general pressure to achieve and in particular the expectations of parents.

Example 2:

Education politics also initiated another development. Since 1996 every child in Germany has had the right to a place in kindergarten. The Act for Youth and Child Support (KHJG) provides in Paragraph 22 that in child day-care institutions, "the development of the child into a responsible and community-oriented personality (must) be supported". Upbringing, childcare, and - for the first time in so many words - education are named as task fields. This

¹ Since 1996/7, within the framework of its project 'New paths to school commencement', the state of Baden-Württemberg has presented various models of school commencement within the framework of its project 'New paths for school beginners', thus initiating comprehensive measures for reform..

enhances the function of the kindergarten as a fundamental educational institution vis-à-vis school and sharpens awareness of the need for kindergarten quality.

"How good are our nursery schools?" was the question asked by Wolfgang Tietze and his research group in a 1998 survey, which in the meantime has been expanded into a longitudinal study, in order to establish the long-term educational effects of kindergarten on children of elementary school age and to enable comparison of the findings with those of foreign surveys. The evaluation of over 100 nursery schools with more than 400 children in five German states arrived, for instance, at the following conclusions:

Basic conditions affected by political educational policies, such as the training standards among personnel, ratio of staff to children, length of preparatory period for teachers, etc., determine 50% of the quality of pedagogical activities (at nursery schools). "The other half depends on the pedagogical staff. Under the same basic conditions "nursery school teachers display a very varied range of process quality. The success of the kindergarten as an institution depends on both sides: politicians and practitioners" (Tietze 2000, p.7).

The differences in the pedagogical quality of the work done in kindergarten are enormous; in extreme cases this can make for a year's difference in the language development of the children (loc.cit.).

It may have been these findings, which are anything but encouraging, that led German educational politicians *not to participate* in a *kind of PISA study for the pre-school stage (2001)*. Ten European countries were involved in the OECD survey. Had it been carried out internationally, Germany is very likely to have ended up in one of the lowest positions in the ranking. For W. E. Fthenakis (2002) the reasons lie in the following factors: the professionalization of pedagogical staff is carried out in Germany and Austria on the very lowest level. "They would not be employable in Europe" (Fthenakis 2002), because all other European countries organize training at least at polytechnic level and in most cases even at university level. What is lacking in addition are an educational conception as an orientation point for innovations, a research tradition comparable to that of the USA in the field of early childhood studies at universities, and also a systematic distribution of research findings². Further found to be lacking are measures for self-evaluation, participation-oriented approaches to pedagogical quality development, and a democratically organized system of feedback on quality in which parents are also involved.

At the same time great efforts were made at the national and regional level to achieve some quality improvement in the work of nursery schools and a new relationship between education and youth support. In the 'Polemic on Future Opportunities' produced by the National Youth Committee³ there is a further warning not to "make kindergarten into a pre-school whose main task is to provide for the development of better "schooling abilities" among children. The chance for nursery schools to develop elementary life skills and indispensable capabilities in the field of social and language behaviour, as well as in cognitive and social-moral education, can only be taken advantage of, if the specific

² According to Hans-Joachim Laewen, also a member of the specialist group Equal Chances like myself, there are at present fewer than 10 university professorships which are at least partially designated for the field of early learning, and not a single university with more than one professorship for the field (2001).

³ The National Youth Committee, according to Paragraph 83 of the Act for Child and Youth Support, has the task of advising the national government on basic issues of youth support. Contact: Offices of the National Youth Committee, Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V., Bonn office (Geschäftsstelle Bonn), (e-mail: borsche.bik@t-online.de)

structures and conditions already described are not subjected to administrative strictures, but strengthened and extended. This requires clear improvements in the quality of nursery school work and as the most urgently required pre-condition for this, considerably improved career and professional development opportunities for nursery school staff" (p.31).

Conclusions to be drawn: It is beyond doubt that kindergarten and elementary school alike have become more modern. These changes have taken account of the individuality-principle and have brought about a transformed, friendly and 'child-oriented' image. However, **quality development** must be approached in both institutions much more comprehensively and 'with more pedagogical radicalism' ⁴(H. v. Hentig). But there is one noticeable difference: the elementary school reform is being developed by a scientific discipline which in the last thirty years has been able to establish itself in research, teacher training and academic dialogue. Early education, by contrast, has a lot of ground to make up. It can learn, however, from the mistakes of elementary school pedagogy.

3. School reform meets early education' - This refers to an urgently needed encounter on a common path of reform. The latter necessitates a common mental foundation beyond purely operational education and curriculum concerns.

In this respect the new century got off to an exciting start. There is more awareness than ever before that our topic is not only of national importance - and even that would be noteworthy in the climate of cultural federalism we have in Germany! - but also of international importance. In the encounter between kindergarten and elementary school, educationalists and teachers will be able to leave their own 'institutional enclaves', whatever these may be like, and gain reflective detachment from their own thoughts and deeds. From a social-constructivist perspective the chief concern here is in confronting the 'dominating discourses' (Michel Foucault) "which in the form of conventions and convictions steer our imagination, thoughts and actions in a specific direction and draw boundaries around their inclusion and exclusion criteria" (cf. Dahlberg 2004, p.16).

"We educationalists too are participants in such discourses, in that we orient ourselves to them. If we intend to bring development and change to bear on our pedagogical practices, then in my view we should begin to reflect on the question of what régime dominates in our field of early learning. This method of approach is of particular importance in two ways: firstly, in order to create space for the development of a new horizon of expectation, and secondly, in order to be receptive to alternative ideas on the child and our relations with him or her" (Dahlberg 2004, p.17)

Let me point out a few central areas in which a 'deconstruction' or 're-construction' as the basis of new hopes and ideas has already begun. Topics are concerned here which link both professional sectors and which must be incorporated into a scientifically based 'reflection competence'. Lack of space and time allow me to characterize these only briefly:

- **Increasing institutionalization of child care as social practice**

⁴ This was the judgement of H v. Hentig (1979) on the educational reform of the seventies. His main criticism was that in the last analysis it had "bowed to the economy" and had not carried forward the important pedagogical issues (such as learning quality, equality of opportunity, democratic principles) energetically enough.

From a traditional perspective the establishment of child crèches and all-day schooling follows from pedagogical and social-political motives: viz., developmental support and poverty prevention, by allowing mothers to pursue paid employment. The central position which educational quality has gained in public debate, however, must be attributed decisively to structural changes in childhood and growing up: extra-familial, public child care should be seen as a constituting element in a 'dual socialisation' (cf. Honig 2004, p.28). Michael Honig points to the analyses of feminist research into social policy, as these thematize "issues of education and upbringing in the context of the interrelation between paid employment and caring activities in the relations between the generations" (loc.cit., p.29). The central issue "can be characterized as the *loss in prestige of the male-breadwinner model*:

"The stability of male-breadwinner-families is based on permanent male full employment, on the provision for women through the income of their husbands and the care of children - and possibly old people - by the women. The male-breadwinner-model is losing ground factually and normatively and is being replaced by an adult-worker model. This, however, unlike the breadwinner model, has not found a structural answer to the question of who can and should look after the children - or, put differently: ***The adult-worker model has a structural deficiency in matters of childcare.*** Since the seventies of the 20th century the increasing employment among women and mothers, rising divorce rates, uncoupling of the two spheres of parenthood and marriage, and the increase in single-person-households and single parents has raised the question of how economic, demographic, and providing functions can be combined together in one form of existence that accords all its members equal rights and opportunities and the children a happy and successful development into adulthood". (ibid.)

The relation of paid work to care work should also be thematized in this connection, as well as unemployment among many parents. Such insights are the pre-condition for achieving a contextual understanding that relates to the life situations of the children who have to be cared for, as well as to the macro-structural conditions.

- **The right of the child to education**

The term 'duty' appears to be among those words that are typically German. It contains a high concentration of normative power. Thus the German word *Schulpflicht* (literally 'school duty' and meaning the legal obligation to attend school) stands for the demand placed on child and parents to respect the rules and regulations of school as an institution. This institutional-bureaucratic side has an indelible effect on the awareness of children and parents. What is not seen quite so clearly is the other side of the coin, i.e. the entitlement of a child to receive school education that is anchored in Article 29 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child (UN 1989). I mention this in order to further awareness of the fact that goals and developments in the education sector do not exist or occur outside the framework of the law. Education is existentially important and must therefore be protected by the law.

Article 29

The signatories agree that the education of the child must pursue the following goals:

- a) to fully develop the personality, gifts and mental and bodily abilities of the child;*
- b) to convey to the child a respect for human rights and basic liberties and for those principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- c) to convey to the child respect for his/her parents, cultural identity, language and cultural values, for the national values of the country in which he/she lives and if distinct, of his/her country of origin, as well as for cultures different from his or her own;*

d) to prepare the child for a responsible life in a free society in a spirit of communication, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship between all peoples and ethnic, national and religious groups and also in relation to native inhabitants;

e) to convey to the child a respect for the natural environment

These five statements from the Convention encompass considerable responsibilities on the part of educators, politicians and the powerful sections of society. At the same time they constitute an enormous challenge to those who develop curricula, organize interaction with children and take responsibility for processes of education.

• **Images of children and childhood**

It is precisely the institutions of early education which lay claim rather self-evidently to child-focus, as if this were a concrete and uncontroversial concept. On closer inspection, however, widely differing images of children and childhood are involved. These are expressed concretely in various conceptions of the 'nursery school child' and the 'school-child', of classrooms and other education venues, and of adult-child interaction. Along with Wassilios Fthenakis and Pamela Oberhuemer (2004) I will distinguish three basic child roles:

- The *child as a reproducer of knowledge and culture*: This role is dominated by the question-answer pattern, and is stubbornly rooted in the daily pedagogy of both institutions.
- The *biological child* is defined in his or her identity by educational psychology. "Child-focus here means the answer to the question of what we can expect of children at various stages of development. In this perspective children are observed outside the context of their individual development and standardized by a measurement- and classification-system. This tendency to standardization is vividly illustrated by the normative way that school entrance maturity is dealt with.
- The role of the child and his educators as co-constructors of knowledge and culture brings upbringing and education back again into the relationship between the generations. In this situation, children and adults are active, equal partners. Childhood research of the last two decades - and thus also the rather more recent research on school performance - has created the image of the child as an active 'self-educator', operating on its own initiative and with its own means and methods. The image of the 'rich' child has arisen, whose "learning is understood as a co-operative and communicative activity in which children together with others (i.e. other children and also adults, E.R.) acquire knowledge and lend meaning to the events of the world" (Dahlberg 2004, p.27).

Respectful understanding towards children is expressed in the observation of three central basic human needs: the need for autonomy, the need to experience one's own competence and ability, and the need for social attachment. Education institutions must thus provide a stimulating educational environment, cultivated, humanizing behaviour forms and educational opportunities for learning with a thorough sense of understanding.

According to Hans-Joachim Laewen this implies:

"1. *The formation of the child's environment* and thus the (reflected) choice of subject matters which are to be the object of the children's performance in construction. Questions, say, of classroom layout and arrangement are then not simply peripheral issues; on the contrary, they stand in the focus of the education task. The emphasis on space as a "third-party educator" in the world-renowned crèche system in the Italian Reggio Emilia can only be understood in its full meaning from this perspective.

2. The adult role of *answering questions and enlarging on children's topics* takes on a position of central importance when it is taken for granted that in every waking moment children are occupied with tasks of construction. If children's questions and issues are to be properly responded to and enlarged upon, they must be fully perceived and interpreted by adults...

3. *The imposition of 'difficult topics'* is part of the pedagogical dialogue between child and adult, as long as the rules of discourse are not contravened. Responses of children to such topics will always have their own idiosyncracies and demand a further (possibly modified) response from the teacher. In this connection structures of early attachment play a major role insofar as they secure, among other factors, the access of the child to the teacher and vice versa. In this way the 'imposed topic' becomes an object of construction by the child. How children actually deal with this and what conclusions they come to cannot be determined in advance. It is precisely from this that the necessity follows for a continual and competently run 'dialogue' by the teacher with the children, in the course of which the necessarily subjective constructions of the child can become more objective" (Laewen 2002, p. 59).

These three selected aspects already show that in the training of kindergarten staff and regular schoolteachers structurally varied types of knowledge are important (cf. Radtke 1996):

- On the one hand there is *implicit routine knowledge* which teachers have at their disposal and which structures their pedagogical actions in a pre-reflective way.
- On the other hand they require *explicit scientific knowledge* to base their processes of reflection on and which functions as an interpretative matrix for their practical experience. It is quite obvious that in this process the potentials of pedagogical and ethnographic child research are of great importance, for their methodological apparatus allows micro-analyses of actual interaction to be carried out and provides the opportunity of perceiving and reflecting on the 'institution of kindergarten or school' from the child's viewpoint" (Ariane Garlichs).

An exciting question in this regard is: How can basic scientific knowledge be transformed into practical knowledge and skills and thus make itself felt in the routine procedural experience repertoire?

I will come to a conclusion:

"School reform meets early education" - since the topic was first formulated a lot has been achieved. We at teacher training institutions have taken on two tasks in the reform process of elementary education:

Scientific underpinning of the orientation plan

Baden-Württemberg is one among several German federal states which have made it a central point to develop their programme via an 'orientation plan'. This constitutes a series of

guidelines for the relations between state and sponsoring organs. Our three-year study on the 'Implementation of the Orientation Plan' will be divided into various parts:

- The *quantitative part* will deal with the factors initiating reform. It seems to us that for the first time here we have a historical opportunity to carry out a state-wide survey of expectations, opinions and patterns of interpretation in connection with the instrument of reform. A large part will be devoted to the respondees' own evaluation of 'operational practices' (Honig inter alia 2004). As the orientation plan stimulates teachers to examine their own practices via concrete questions in the methodological-didactic field, it is only natural to allow them to evaluate themselves the social realities they have already produced. These collective judgements show actual values.

- In the *qualitative part* of the survey we will record the nature of the reform process locally in a number of selected institutions, paying particular attention to movements in the quality of the pedagogical interaction process, the structures and the guiding pedagogical orientation.

Study courses for nursery school teachers

The child or children, who are the 'objects' of education theory and practice, are not, of course, born at school entry age, even if this impression occasionally arises. For this reason primary education studies and school subject departments have formed a common working group on 'Elementary Education'. The aim is to create modules on central topics of reform.

Both tasks are already work-intensive consequences issuing from this so friendly-sounding topic of mine.

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Her fields of interest in teaching and research:

Primary Education between diversity and solidarity,
Transitions in the school system,
Conceptions of schooling in the historical und international context,
School performance and achievement.

Research Projects:

- „Performance in Primary Education – How primary school children perceive their performance in school; a topic, which is situated at the point of interaction of school-, childhood- and education research (2000 – 2006)
- “Evaluation of the implementation of the ‘Orientierungsplan’ in Baden Württemberg” (2006-2009)