



Universität Potsdam

Diether Hopf

Setting out : preschool and primary school

first published in:

Max-Planck-Institute for Human Development and Education: Between elite and mass education : education in the Federal Republic of Germany. - State Univ. of New York Press, Albany, N.Y. 1983, S. 133-144

Postprint published at the Institutional Repository of Potsdam University:

In: Postprints der Universität Potsdam

Humanwissenschaftliche Reihe ; 90

<http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2009/3593/>

<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus-35939>

Postprints der Universität Potsdam

Humanwissenschaftliche Reihe ; 90

Setting Out: Preschool and Primary School

5.1. Entering school

Administratively, the school year begins on August 1 throughout the Federal Republic of Germany. All children who have turned 6 by the previous June 30 are considered to be of school age. This was one of the points established by the Hamburg Agreement, drawn up by the Länder in 1964 and again in 1971 to coordinate educational policy. Once a year, public notice is given that parents have to register their school-age children. At the time of registration, readiness tests are sometimes used to establish whether a child is in fact mature enough to enter school. Such tests are now administered less frequently, since a growing number of children attend kindergartens where their teachers can ascertain their readiness for the primary school. About half of the 6-year-olds and practically all 7-year-olds attend school. The vast majority of children go to the standard public, coeducational primary school, there being few private schools at this level. The primary school, also referred to as the primary level, consists of four grades in all the Federal Republic's Länder, save West Berlin, where it extends through the sixth grade.

The preschool level of the educational system includes nursery schools and kindergartens—in other words, all public or private institutions which provide half- or all-day care as a supplement to parental care for children from the age of 3 until they enter regular school. Parents' use of nursery schools is voluntary, and supervision of children there is carried out not by school teachers, but by

personnel especially trained for this kind of work. Participation in kindergarten programs is also voluntary.

We can distinguish between two types of kindergarten, the "preparatory class" and the "threshold program." Both facilitate a gradual transition from home or nursery school to school proper. Organizationally, the threshold program may be attached either to the nursery school or to the primary school, as a one-year program for 5-year-olds or as a two-year program for 5- and 6-year-olds. In the latter case, only the first year is voluntary. The preparatory class, on the other hand, is an integral part of the primary school; for the most part, it serves those children whose sixth birthday falls after the cut-off date. The advantage of those preschool programs that are attached to a primary school is that sharing facilities is conducive to cooperation between preschool and regular teachers. These programs are thus particularly well suited to providing children with the continuous development of the learning process that educators consider desirable. In a number of Länder efforts are being made to expand these preschool programs.

Children whose sixth birthday falls in the second half of the year may, under certain circumstances, be admitted to school early. Conversely, a 6-year-old may be held back a year if, on the basis of readiness tests or his teacher's observations during the first months of school, it appears that he is not yet ready. Such children, as a rule, attend either a special kindergarten attached to the primary school, or a preparatory class, where they are given extra help in developing the abilities considered essential for success in school. In some Länder this attendance is compulsory. The school kindergarten thus occupies a special position between the preschool level and the primary level.

5.2. Capacity of preschool facilities and developments in the primary school

In 1960, nursery schools could accept, on an average nationwide, one child in three for the age group from 3 to 5. In 1977, they could take in three out of four children in this age group (cf. Figure 5.1). Since 1966, total nursery school capacity has steadily increased. Nursery education is still expanding throughout the country, and it can be expected that within the decade of the eighties nursery school facilities will be available for all children in the age groups concerned. Although nursery schools are still insufficient to accommodate all children who might attend such schools, there are considerable dif-

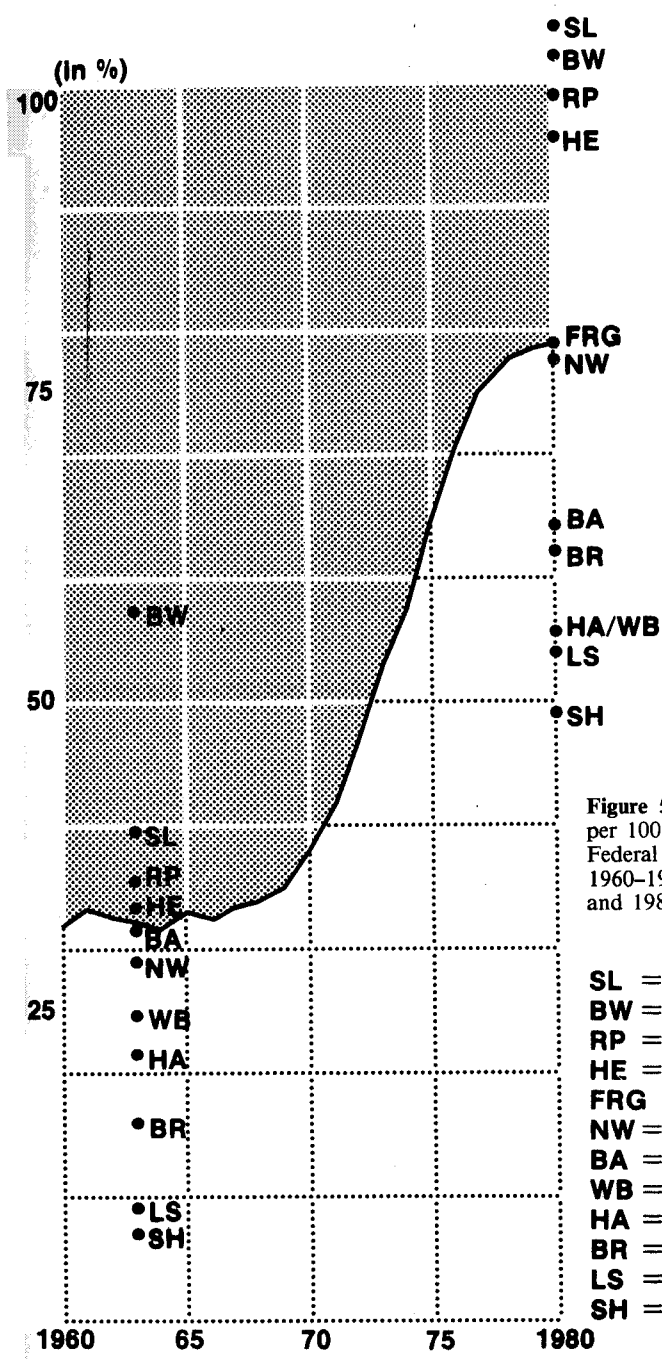


Figure 5.1. Nursery School Capacity per 100 Children Aged 3 to 5 in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1960-1980, and in Its Länder, 1963 and 1980

- SL = Saarland
- BW = Baden-Württemberg
- RP = Rhineland-Palatinate
- HE = Hessia
- FRG
- NW = North Rhine-Westphalia
- BA = Bavaria
- WB = West Berlin
- HA = Hamburg
- BR = Bremen
- LS = Lower Saxony
- SH = Schleswig-Holstein

ferences between the Länder in this respect. In 1980, for example, the nursery schools in West Berlin were able to accept only 55 percent of the children in the relevant age group, whereas the nursery school capacity of Saarland was larger than the number of children of nursery-school age. One can assume, however, that as the birthrate continues to fall the situation will rapidly improve throughout the Federal Republic.

In comparison, relatively few children are cared for in the preschool programs at the regular public schools, which are particularly well equipped to gradually prepare them from an early age for regular school. In 1980, enrollment in preschool programs connected with a regular public primary school was only some 5.5 percent of the 5- and 6-year-olds throughout the country as a whole. Underlying these nationwide averages, however, there are again considerable differences between the individual Länder; for example, whereas in Saarland 1.2 percent of the 5- and 6-year-olds are enrolled in such programs, in West Berlin the figure is 27 percent. The disparity between these two particular Länder exemplifies the fact that the differences between the Länder in this regard are also due in large measure to the differences in the number of facilities they have at the primary level.

Whereas nursery education in general is expanding, it is less likely that the threshold program will gain much additional ground. When the German Education Council proposed this two-year scheme for 5- and 6-year-olds in 1970, the idea was to create an organization and a program that would ease the transition from play to formal schooling. This program has proven quite successful at the Laboratory School in Bielefeld and at a number of other experimental schools. Its failure to catch on in most of the Länder is probably to be attributed above all to the fact that its expansion would create difficulties for the private and parochial nursery schools, which would stand to lose a good part of their clientele.

Current demographic trends are effecting an improvement both in teachers' working conditions and in learning conditions in the preschool and primary levels. They are also creating a growing number of vacancies in preschool facilities. Data on the size of age groups from 1945 to the present, along with demographic forecasts up to the year 2000, give a picture of this development (cf. Figure 5.2).

Particularly relevant to school enrollments in the 1980's is the steep decline in the birthrate from 1966 to 1973, a drop of over a third from the birthrate in 1966. Equally significant is the rapid growth in the proportion of foreign children, which is creating new

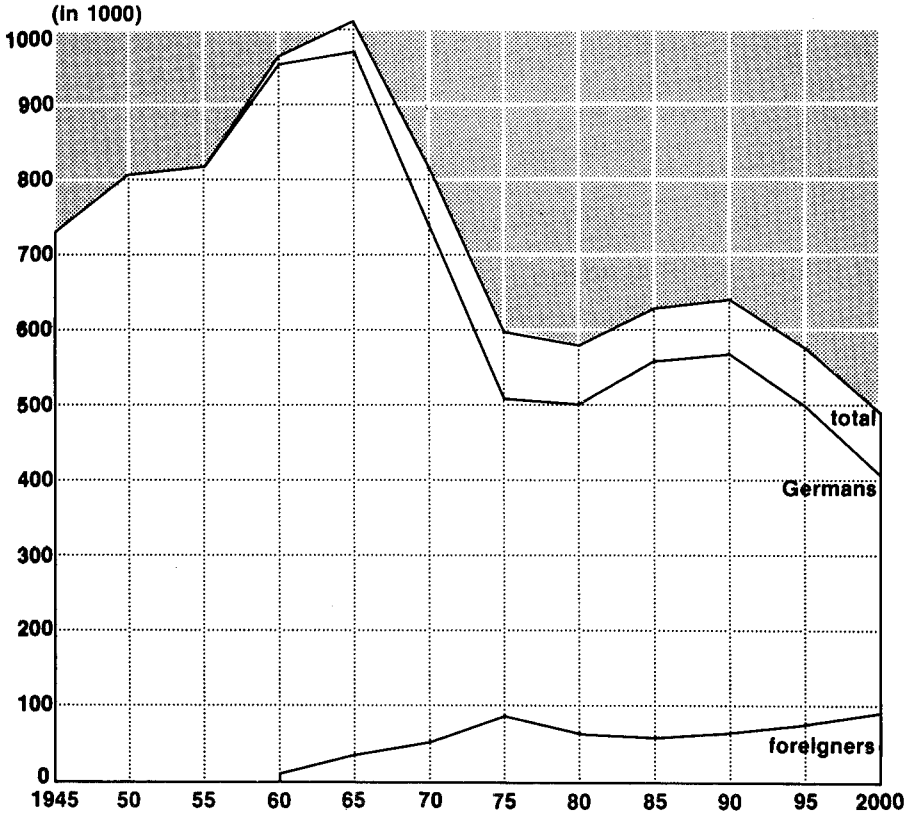


Figure 5.2. Size of Birth Cohorts, 1945–2000

problems for both preschool and regular school facilities (cf. 6.5). Yet, even taking the growing number of foreign children into account, the Federal Republic's primary schools will have a considerably smaller enrollment during the eighties than in the previous decade. Unfortunately, the improvement of the pupil-to-teacher ratio due to this decrease in enrollment will be undone in the near future. Because of financial constraints on the school system arising from the general economic situation in the Federal Republic, many teaching posts will be eliminated as teachers quit or retire.

As a result of the decline in the birthrate, the total number of children in primary school has dropped more than 30 percent, from some four million in the early seventies to roughly 2.8 million in 1980, and is expected to drop further, to less than 2.4 million in

1985. As a further consequence of this development, the size of both schools and classes can be expected to continue the decline already observed in the past few years (cf. Table 5.1). However, the statistical trend should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there still are numerous instances of classes so large that proper instruction is difficult.

5.3. *Instruction in the primary school*

The universal primary school was first given a legal foundation in the Weimar Constitution of 1919. This school was intended to replace the 'Vorschulen' which were still attached to many Prussian Gymnasien and middle schools, and was established as the common primary level of a unitary school system. This new type of school was founded on principles that can be summed up in the terms "child-centered," "learning through the senses," "closeness to life," "wholeness," and "spontaneity." These notions were embodied in the Reich Law on the Primary School of 1920 and dominated debate during the decade that followed, determining didactics, methodology, and the organization of instruction. In particular, reform-minded

Table 5.1: Basic Data on Primary Schools and Hauptschulen, 1960–1980

Year	Pupils	Full-time teachers	Pupils per teacher ¹	Pupils per class
Primary schools and Hauptschulen				
1960	5,219,235	142,098	35.7	36.6
1965	5,565,778	161,115	33.1	34.7
1970	6,347,451	187,724	31.6	33.9
1975	6,425,116	235,042	27.5	30.0
1980	5,044,183	249,848	21.6	25.2
Primary schools only				
1975	3,912,170	127,812 ¹	30.6	29.6
1980	2,767,542	116,426 ¹	23.8	24.1

¹ Including full-time equivalents of part-time teachers.

Sources: Statistisches Bundesamt: *Bildung im Zahlenspiegel* 1981;
Kultusministerkonferenz: *Statistische Veröffentlichungen*, No. 54,
September 1977, No. 75, October 1981.

educational theorists were intent on drawing a clear line between education in the new primary school and the authoritarian tradition of rote learning in the 'Lernschule' of Germany's past.

For a long time after the 1920's, the primary school was considered a school type in which all major reforms had been carried out, and for which the only remaining task was to consolidate the reform efforts in the individual schools. As late as 1962, a respected advisory body, the German Committee for Education, expressed the view that the primary school had found its proper form, more than any other level in the school system. In its "Master Plan" of 1959, a comprehensive program for the whole of the educational system, this advisory body defined the following objectives for the primary school:

- The primary school should shelter the child within and bind him to an external organizational order and an internal moral order;
- it should carefully guide the child from play into a readiness to work;
- it should introduce the child to life and the world around him in a way that is appropriate to him as a whole being, encouraging him to experience his surroundings directly and not merely exercising his verbal recall;
- it should help the child learn responsible social behavior;
- it should cultivate the child's active command of his native language, orienting him toward standard German;
- it should introduce the child to numbers and the written word, and enable him to read, write, and do simple arithmetic correctly and easily.

It was not until around 1970 that the primary school once again became the focus of pedagogical debate. This discussion took into consideration what had been learned about primary education from experiences in other countries, especially in the United States of America, and also drew from these findings incentives for changes in preschool education. Criticism centered on two issues, one being social integration in the primary level and the other equality of opportunity.

With regard to the former, it was felt that the integration of children of different creeds and backgrounds, Protestant and Catholic, rural and urban children, was insufficient. The school districts were considered too small and thus too homogeneous, and the usual four years at the primary school were held to be too short to effect satisfactory integration.

With regard to the equality of opportunity, it was thought that teachers were not sufficiently individualizing instruction to compensate for the particular deficits of children from homes which did not stimulate them to learn. Above all, however, the selection process that occurs at the pupils' transition to secondary school was criticized for taking too little into account the potential learning capacity of children disadvantaged in this way.

In 1970, the Education Council proposed a plan for the reorganization and development of education throughout the Federal Republic. This "Structural Plan for the Educational System" included a two-year transition phase for all 5- and 6-year-olds. This transition phase was based on recent findings in the field of child development showing that educability is especially great in early childhood. And since child-centeredness was no longer considered an appropriate criterion for instruction on the primary level, the Education Council made the following recommendations:

(1) Learning processes should be initiated in such a way as to render any subsequent change of their fundamental orientation unnecessary.

(2) Attention should be directed not merely to the subject matter to be learned, but just as much to the process of discovery and to developing individual initiative, ability to cooperate, and problem-solving skills.

(3) Individual factors that serve to promote or impede learning should be identified as precisely as possible.

(4) The simplified rudiments of science and social studies, as well as of modern mathematics and language theory, should be included in the instruction given in the primary school.

(5) More time and attention should be given to the acquisition of language skills, and language instruction should be revised.

(6) Instruction in art, music, and the crafts should stress the techniques typical of these subjects.

(7) Basic skills such as reading and writing should be taught in separate courses and thereby given a special place in the curriculum.

(8) New subjects—a first foreign language, for example—should be introduced.

The new principles which serve as guidelines for primary school education are individualization of instruction, its differentiation into basic and advanced courses, its orientation to basic concepts and methods of various academic disciplines, and compensatory education for the purpose of achieving greater equality of opportunity. These principles continue to be the objectives of primary education.

Although indisputable progress has been made in realizing them, much remains to be done.

These principles have not gone entirely unchallenged, however. It should be pointed out that, in particular, objections have been raised against the call for orienting instruction to the structure of academic disciplines.

Primary school instruction focusses on basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. It also provides an introduction to the natural and social sciences through courses in a subject area encompassing both fields. Relatively few hours a week are devoted to the additional subjects: music, art, crafts, and sports. As a rule, children attend school during the morning hours, in 45-minute blocks. First-graders have a total of 17 hours of school a week, a load which increases to around 25 in the higher grades.

The subject matter to be taught in the primary school is set down in curricular guidelines by the school administrations of the Länder. These are more or less binding, depending on the individual Land. Whereas some school administrations stipulate exactly what is to be taught for the full school year, others allow teachers a certain number of weeks, which they can plan as they see fit. Yet other Länder view these guidelines as mere recommendations, allowing teachers considerable individual latitude in deciding when to present what material.

In addition to the regular classes, between one and three hours a week are set aside for instruction in small groups for those children who need special attention. Beginning in the second grade, special help is provided for dyslexic children in the form of remedial classes (cf. 6.2).

So far as methods are concerned, teachers are free to teach as they choose. For the most part, however, they still seem to prefer "frontal" instruction, in which the teacher stands at the center of all activity, asking questions, making corrections, introducing new material, announcing an exercise or review—in brief, determining in detail what the children are to do. Occasionally one encounters teachers who give the type of instruction recommended by the Education Council in its Structural Plan. These teachers apply methods which allow them to take better into consideration the children's varying individual aptitudes. For example, the children might learn something new by working together in groups on a project independently of their teacher, or they might work with changing partners. Teachers feel a strong need for techniques of this sort, but up to now their training, both at teacher-training colleges and at the uni-

versity, as well as during their first year of teaching, has not taken such innovations into account. Moreover, there are too few teachers with the appropriate experience who could serve as models (cf. Chapter 12). A further obstacle to the introduction of individualized instruction is the high pupil-to-teacher ratio (cf. Table 5.1).

The growing numbers of school-age children of foreign workers poses a special problem for the primary school and increasingly also for the different types of secondary school (cf. 6.5). The number of non-German children in the primary school and the Hauptschule tripled over the period from 1970 to 1978. In the 1979/1980 school year, 9.6 percent of all primary school pupils were children of foreign workers—most of them from Turkey, Italy, Greece, Spain, and Yugoslavia. Additional problems arise for the schools in those districts where there is a mixture of nationalities. It should be noted that the overall statistics obscure the fact that there are enormous variations within the individual Länder themselves, and that there are some schools in which non-German children are in the majority. The success of attempts to integrate these children into the school and give them a good education depends on the extent to which ghettoization can be avoided and various forms of differentiated and individualized instruction can be developed. Only by means of such instruction can a teacher take into account widely varying levels of knowledge, learning habits, and language skills, and thus give each child the specific help he needs.

5.4. Report cards, being kept back, and advancement to secondary school

Like all schools in the Federal Republic of Germany, the primary school is organized into grades. As a rule, the pupil advances year by year from a lower grade to the next higher one, promotion depending on satisfactory achievement. Report cards are issued twice a year, and the child's achievement in individual subjects is rated on a scale from 1 to 6. A "1" signifies very good, a "2" good, a "3" is satisfactory, a "4" is passing, a "5" means poor to failing, and a "6" means failing. A pupil whose performance in several subjects is poor to failing has to stay back and repeat the grade.

The proportion of children kept back a grade in the primary school was as high as 4.2 percent in 1976, dropping by 1978 to 3.2 percent. In dealing with the considerable differences that exist between children from different backgrounds, schools have until recently been inclined to favor having the low achiever repeat a grade early in his

school career rather than later. Now, however, a number of Länder have introduced a policy of automatic promotion; all children advance together with their classmates, and any weaknesses are dealt with in special remedial classes. According to this policy, no child should, as a general rule, be kept back, especially in the first grade. In conjunction with automatic promotion, a limited number of schools in some Länder have replaced the traditional 6-point scale on report cards with detailed descriptive evaluations. This form of reporting, which is designed to pinpoint the child's individual strengths and weaknesses and suggest how best to help him, is not yet practiced on a scale wide enough to permit appraisal here.

There are considerable and growing differences in the way the various Länder deal with transition from the primary school to one of the four types of secondary school: Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium, and comprehensive school. There is not even agreement on the specific point in time when the decision should be made on which type of secondary school a child should enter. In most of the Länder, selection takes place at the end of the fourth grade; in Berlin, it falls at the end of the sixth grade (cf. 7.1 and 4.5).

Quite apart from the problems that can arise, should a family, for instance, be forced to move from one Land to another at this critical point in a child's educational career, the transition process in itself places a considerable burden on the individual child. The main problem is that at this point the preparation of pupils tends to be concentrated one-sidedly on those subjects and skills which either are—or are considered to be—of crucial importance for the evaluation on which the recommendation for the one or the other type of secondary school is based. For example, some parents arrange for their children to be given special after-school tutoring in spelling and arithmetic for a while just before the crucial decision is to be made. Some schools even go so far as to drop altogether for a time in the fourth grade the few hours per week devoted to art and music so that more time can be spent on reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The selection process puts the child under great pressure to achieve, especially in those Länder where examinations are employed, or where the decision rests mainly with the teacher. As a rule, it is the parents who exert this pressure, many of them being prepared to make considerable sacrifices and go to a great deal of trouble to ensure that their children get the education that will give them the most advantages. The teachers, however, generally reinforce this pressure.

It would be easier to justify these disadvantages if the process of selection for the one or the other type of school were actually as accurate as it is supposed to be. Yet this appears to be doubtful, as a number of empirical studies on the reliability of the selection process have shown. The best guide in the decision on which type of school a child ought to attend appears to be parental preference, provided that the parents do not underestimate their child, a mistake that is made more often than their overestimating their child's ability. The use of the parents' assessment of a child as the primary criterion for his assignment to a secondary school minimizes the negative effects of this classification on primary school instruction and creates a new and more favorable learning environment in which children have a better chance of showing what they are capable of. In any event, grade point averages and written examinations measure only a small fraction of the abilities which are important if a child is to do well in secondary school.