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# COMPULSORY EDUCATION FOR GERMAN IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE CASE OF RURAL WISCONSIN

Juliane Jacobi-Dittrich

The intention of this paper is to report on school attendance among German immigrant children in rural Wisconsin. It draws information from a study that has been made with a broader outlook on cultural accommodation through schooling among immigrant families. School attendance was one aspect of this study among a number of others (i.e. language policy, use of language of instruction in schools, school organization and the relationship between the public school system and the private parochial<sup>(3)</sup> school system, teachers' training and the practices regarding the hiring of teachers). The dominant concern was not so much 'compulsory education' but rather comparative aspects of school attendance in terms of ethnicity. (Jacobi-Dittrich, 1986) Some introductory remarks on the ethnic group I am dealing with as well as on the official school politics of the State school administration towards immigrating groups should be made before I turn to the results of my research on school attendance.

The social and economic background of the predominant types of German immigrants to rural Wisconsin in the second half of the 19th century can be classified as working and middle class. The immigrants were either small farmers, skilled tradesmen or

bussinessmen who left Germany between 1840 and 1890 mainly for economic reason. Among the various immigrating groups the group is characterized as fairly well to do. There was a large group among the immigrating Germans who were able to buy land immediately and start farming, another large group first worked as hired men in order to make the money for the purchase of land. There was plenty of work and there were good wages compared to back home. The lack of any restrictions by law or custom that prescribed where and as what to work was new to the immigrants. People who were skilled tradesmen ended up farming although they had never intended to do so while others who planned to go into farming failed completely and eventually became shopkeepers, inkeepers or manufacturers. Social mobility had not only become a fact of their life but also a prospect of the lives of their children. In respect to their attitude towards compulsory education it can be assumed that they would give a certain consideration to basic schooling for their children.

Furthermore the German immigrants came from countries where the establishment of compulsory education at the time was well on its way. Almost all of them had gone through some basic elementary instruction and they probably took it for granted that their children would attend some years at school in order to acquire a certain standard of education. (Among my <sup>CONSTIT</sup> sample of two rural communities in Wisconsin almost all adult immigrants could both read and write, <sup>according to the</sup> ~~in~~ 1860 and in 1880) But, nevertheless, there was a serious obstacle to the establishment of

compulsory education that resulted from their non-English-speaking cultural background and that official State school policy had to fight throughout the second half of the century. Coming from countries where state and church were closely entangled and where the establishment of compulsory schooling took place in close cooperation between the two institutions, they were completely unacquainted with the specific American idea of free public schooling as well as with localized school administration. This lack of acquaintanceship combined with the language problem caused a lot of political fighting during the decades I am dealing with. Wisconsin's official school politics and a brief outline of what types of school existed in rural Wisconsin will explain the conditions under which the establishment of compulsory education took place in the immigrant society of 19th century USA.

Official school policy considered "Americanization" of the immigrants as a major issue of the free public school system. Wisconsin's school administration continued to act along this line from 1848 (statehood) to 1890. What did "Americanization" mean in 19th century American school politics and educational ideology? "Americanization" was part of the ideology of the Common School Reform Movement that arose in the 1830s and became a widespread political movement among school administrators throughout the following decades. It meant the education of the non-Protestant, non-English-speaking immigrants (Irish Catholic, German Catholic and German Lutheran) according to the moral

standards of an undenominational but heavily puritan American Protestantism. The ideas were developed and theorized by men like Horace Mann or Henry Banard, men who worked for the establishment of a free public school system. They were convinced of the moral superiority of American Protestant middle-class values to all other "sectarian" religious beliefs, in the case of German immigrants especially those of the Catholics and Lutherans among them. Wisconsin's school administrators during the first decades of the state all came from the East, the center of the Common School Movement. It would go beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss the policy of the State's school administration, their relationship to the development of the immigrant society in the course of the century and their consequence for the establishment of the public school system.

Among the various ethnic groups who came into Wisconsin, the Germans established the largest school system outside the public school system. The two dominant denominations, Catholic and Lutheran, established parochial school systems in urban as well as in rural areas. These parochial private schools had the purpose of educating the children of German immigrants in a traditional religious way. Used to the type of religiously organized public school in Germany, they transferred the same type of school to a country where the separation of state and church was an essential included in the constitution. Legally the immigrants argued with their right of religious freedom. It was the purpose of these schools to educate the children in a



traditional religious way. That meant that instruction mainly took place in German. On the other hand there were a lot of either mixed ethnic communities or German communities, who had public schools with a strong influence of German culture, especially by means of German as language of instruction. As for the language problem there was a variety of solutions in parochial private schools as well as in public schools. School legislation from 1848 to 1890 reveals that there were three main issues to be treated: school attendance, Americanization through language requirements, i.e. English had to be the language of instructions in all schools, public or private, and the repression of the private parochial school system. These issues were highly interdependent and throughout the century, state legislation pursued the improvement of Wisconsin's public school system in that sense. Compulsory education was not explicitly an issue until 1878, when state law declared: "Every parent, guardian, or other person in the State of Wisconsin, having charge or control of any child or children between the ages of seven and fifteen years shall be required to send such a child or children to a public or private school, for at least twelve weeks in each school year." (Laws of Wisconsin 1879, Chapter 121) A wide range of exemptions was still possible:

- if child's help was needed for domestic support
- if parents could prove that the child "has already acquired a fair knowledge of the branches of learning ordinarily taught in the common school of this state."
- if the house of the parents was situated more than two miles far from the next school house.

It was only 1882 when the law required serious proof of school attendance through annual written reports to the County Superintendent of Schools what school the children aged 7-15 had attended the preceding year. The fine though was fairly low (\$ 5 to \$ 20) and there is no evidence of strict enforcement. This lack of enforcement might be explained through school attendance records I have taken of two rural communities, almost exclusively German settled, from census data provided by the Federal Manuscript Census of 1860 and 1880.

State school statistical records on school attendance have no data on the pupil's ethnic origin. They only report on school attendance per average child aged 7-15 per annum. These yearly statistics in the Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction have a lot of weakness (incomplete records) and report only on the public schools. There are no overall statistics for the parochial schools recorded. The state wide statistical report on school attendance in the public school system tells of school attendance of 3.9 months per year per average child in 1849, 5.5 months in 1859, 7.7 months in 1869 and 8.6 months in 1879. Thus it demonstrates regardless of its statistical weakness the tendency towards a fulfillment of the legally required compulsory school attendance of 1878.

Since I was interested in a specific ethnic group in rural areas, I had to find out other means of checking on school attendance. I went back to census data, which provide some

information on school attendance. I chose rural communities of different character with a predominance of German settlers and recorded the censuses from 1860 and 1880. The two censuses were chosen for comparative reasons. The 1860 census is taken in the first decade of the existence of the settlement. Most of the settlers came into the area in the early 1850s. The 1880 census makes it possible to compare my outcome with other research. Both communities had various types of schools in their boundaries: public schools, Catholic and Lutheran parochial schools. Sauk City was a rural town of about 1000 inhabitants with a strong influence of German political refugees and with all denominations represented. Cross Plains was a farming area settled in typical midwestern pattern, unincorporated village of about 500 inhabitants with a high degree Catholic immigration as well as with a Lutheran group. - (The main reason I chose the two communities lies in the broad source of material of the two places in terms of school- and parochial records, newspapers and the like, which I used for the above mentioned research on cultural accommodation) - I used the codesheet C. Kaestle and M. Vinovskis used for their study on school enrollment in Massachusetts but did only plain quantifying work with the data since the size of the sample did not allow going a detailed analysis as Kaestle and Vinovskis did. (C. Kaestle, M. Vinovskis, 1978)

Both censuses ask whether every child between 3 and 20 attended school during the previous year or not. The census did not ask



how long the child attended school or what kind of school he/she attended. Furthermore the 1860 census asked every person older than 14 what profession she/he had. The 1880 census asked the same question and in addition to it how many months of the previous year the person had been occupied.

In 1860 a very low percentage of enrollment is reported in the farming community of Cross Plains, Dane Co. Only the 8-year-old children went to school 100 %. The group of the 7-year-old children enrolled only up to 29 % and the group aged 9-13 had an enrollment average of about 50 %. In Sauk City the rural commercial town school enrollment in 1860 was much higher. A percentage of about 90 % of all children aged 7-13 went to school. In Cross Plains in 1880 the 7-13 year-old children attended school almost up to 90 %, i.e. school enrollment had greatly improved during the two decades. In Sauk City in 1880 the same age group is recorded to attend school up to 100 %. Cross Plains still did not reach the level of Sauk City. The group of the 5-6 year-olds in all four cases shows a wide range of school enrollment as well as the 14-15 year-old children. (table 1 Appendix) Cross tabulation of school attendance, working and age 15-19 differentiated according to sex tells about school leaving age and regarding the length of school attendance of the individual youth. (table 2-6) While school entrance age does not show any significant difference between boys and girls, (except Cross Plains 1860) school leaving age and transition to work does. (table 2). Girls left school earlier.

and a larger number of them aged 15-19 in both communities neither went outside the house for wage - labor nor went to school. (table 2-6). Overall school attendance in 1860 of the sample shows that the percentage of children aged 7-13 enrolled in school is slightly lower than the enrollment of the same age group Keastle, Vinovskis figured for Massachusetts (85-90 % in Massachusetts in comparison to 75 % in Cross Plains and to 90% in Sauk City). The comparative numbers for Massachusetts, New York (state) and Michigan in 1880 were achieved by both communities.

The length of time the individual youth spent in school of her/his lifetime increased significantly from 1860 to 1880 only among the 14 and the 15 year-olds, not among the 16-19 year olds. The general tendency of these statistics shows that the children of German immigrants in rural Wisconsin spent about the same amount of time at school as the children of various ethnic and social groups in the East and that rural Wisconsin ranged in the upper part of school enrollment scores of the United States at the time. Considering this outcome in terms of enforcement of compulsory education it could be said that German immigrant children whose parents came from a country where they received basic elementary instruction in 1880 were fulfilling the state law's requirement for school attendance. In 1880 Wisconsin compulsory education was well enforced to the extent that children aged 7-13 went to school universally although a large number of them did not attend public schools.

Table 1

## Schoolattendance during the preceding year children aged 3 - 19

	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	also Insg.
SC 1860	2.2	10.5	55.3	83.9	91.2	93.1	87.5	94.4	95.5	88.2	90.9	60.9	64.7	35.0	25.0	13.6	20.0	424
SC 1880	16.7	0.0	15.0	85.7	100.0	100.0	95.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	96.3	88.2	77.8	29.2	11.8	4.5	0.0	378
CP 1860	0.0	22.2	14.3	60.0	28.6	100.0	66.7	50.0	71.4	25.0	57.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	25.0	0.0	94
CP 1880	4.0	4.2	26.1	46.7	91.7	75.0	95.8	91.7	84.2	95.8	83.3	53.6	73.3	30.0	13.0	15.0	5.9	394
1860 overall	1.7	12.8	48.9	80.6	80.5	93.5	84.2	90.0	89.7	76.2	77.8	58.3	50.0	28.0	21.7	15.4	16.7	518
1880 overall	10.2	2.1	20.0	65.5	95.3	88.9	95.7	96.2	92.3	98.0	90.2	66.7	77.8	29.6	12.5	1.5	3.0	772

SC = Sauk City

CP = Cross Plains

Table 2

Working youth according to age-groupe

	15	16	17	18	19	total	working
1860	30 %	20 %	50 %	75 %	75 %	107	53
1880	11 %	22 %	38 %	51 %	70 %	202	86

Table 3

Working, aged 15 - 19

	male	%*	female	%*	total	%+
1860	25	40	13	29	38	36
1880	46	46	24	23	60	30

Table 4

Working aged 15 - 19 attending school

	male	%*	female	%*	total	%+
1860	9	14	6	13	15	14
1880	5	5	2	2	7	3

Table 5

Schoolattending, aged 15 - 19

	male	%*	female	%*	total	%+
1860	21	34	8	18	29	27
1880	23	32	28	27	51	25

Table 6

Neither working nor attending school, aged 15 - 19

	male	%*	female	%*	total	%+
1860	16	26	24	53	40	37
1880	30	30	51	49	81	40

\* related to the male or female overall sample of youth aged 15-19

+ related to the overall sample of youth aged 15-19



## SUMMARY

The enforcement of compulsory education as a means of state politics towards immigrating groups in the United States of America during the second half of the nineteenth Century is the topic of this paper. The group investigated, Germans in rural Wisconsin, had a fairly high standard of school attendance even during the first decade of their settlements. They reached the North Eastern standards of enrollment in 1880. Since official state politics were oriented along the line of the aims of the Common School Reform Movement, they tried to repress the private parochial school system established by the German immigrant churches through language restrictions as the requirement of English as language of instruction if a private school should be acknowledged as substituting public schools and through compulsory school laws. The latter though did not serve its purpose to draw children into the public schools since the German immigrants were generally strong advocates of school attendance and had adjusted their parochial school system to the law's requirements. The paper reports on school attendance in two German settled communities in rural Wisconsin.

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