

Zeitschrift:	Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie
Herausgeber:	Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich
Band:	15 (2009)
Heft:	1
Artikel:	Equality of educational opportunities : schooling and social justice in West Germany and the U.S.A. during the 1960s
Autor:	Koinzer, Thomas
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901740

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Equality of Educational Opportunities.

Schooling and Social Justice in West Germany and the U.S.A. during the 1960s¹

(Red.) Sowohl in den USA als auch in Deutschland wurden in den späten 50er- und 60er-Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts zum Teil intensive Diskussionen über die gesellschaftliche Funktion und Ausgestaltung der Schule geführt. Diese Debatten konkretisierten sich allerdings durchaus unterschiedlich, wenn die Frage der realen Ausgestaltung der Organisation Schule angesprochen wurde. Der nachfolgende Beitrag fragt in vergleichender Perspektive nach den Gründen dieser unterschiedliche Problemwahrnehmung.

• Thomas Koinzer

At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s after the United States of America were «sputnik-shocked» and had entered a tremendous educational program already, the Federal Republic of Germany discussed similar obstacles of its educational and school system. The discussions in both societies were focused on the question of economic competitiveness within the clash of the East and the West and on the question whether the educational system and the schools in its core should act as a social agent to ensure or to establish social equality (Picht 1964; Friedeburg 1992; Kenmann 2000; Rudloff 2007).

The United States, with some exceptions only, never discussed its educational jewel, the existence of the comprehensive high school, as an appreciated and common institution to reach the «American Dream». Rather billions of dollars were invested in new schools, teachers, teaching methods and techniques, technical equipment and educational research as well, to try through trial and error to achieve equality through investment and innovation, but as a reform within the framework of the comprehensive school (e.g. Richter 1975). As one result the nationwide high school enrollment of those aged between 14 and 17 jumped from 60 to 90 per cent between 1950 and 1970. Even though these figures did not reflect academic achievement, they showed that the great promise of the comprehensive high school, «of bringing students of all the various segments of society together» had been fulfilled (Rudy 2007, p. 66).

Bringing students of all the various segments of society together and having similar enrollment

rates in secondary and higher education were almost inconceivable in West Germany during the 1960s. In spite of all the differences in the construction and the aims of vocational and academic achievement of the structured secondary school system, current and future economic challenges and questions of social equality were on the agenda of that time in West Germany too. The question of equal educational opportunities turned out to be one of the central demands, to offer every child the opportunity to enter secondary and higher education regardless of her or his social background. Beside the debates on the structured school system that obstructs access to higher education, the dimensions of school climate, the pedagogical attitudes of the teachers and the teacher-students-relations, especially at German Higher schools (Gymnasium), were widely criticized as «defeatist,» which became a main point of German reform discourse within the next decades.

In the first part of the paper I will introduce a West German perception of the American school system as a model that could serve as a blue-print for reforms of the German system, to establish the school as a social agent. This perception acted as an ambivalent argument within the discourse on the reform of the West German school system. At the same time, the perception of the «foreign model» of schooling mirrored and fostered negative perceptions of the West German schooling in general. Therefore the perceived American «equality of educational opportunities» was faced with a German «pedagogical defeatism,» which saw it as «additional meaning» (Schriewer 2003), as the «foreign argument» (Zymek 1975) or as the «international argument» (Gonon 1998), the undeniable expertise of school reform and the necessity to establish a school system that generates social justice.

Therefore a few examples of the German perception of the American schooling and the ideal of educational equality will be presented here. These images were articulated in travel reports by German educators who visited the United States through a special program during the 1960s. The examples chosen are paradigmatic constructions of the «good» American educational system and the comprehensive high school as the place where the «equality of educational opportunities» were lived out every day. This perception was part of a reform discourse that used the ideal of American high schools as a supplementary argument to foster one of the main points in German educational reform

of the 1960s and 1970s: education and public schooling as instruments to defeat social inequality in Germany.

In the second part the paper describes the self perception of German schooling, how German educational experts constructed the reality of the German school system. It is focused on the example of Ralf Dahrendorf's essay *Bildung ist Bürgerrecht* of 1965. This part thus concentrates on the teacher-students-relations and the internal school communication only to portray a specific pedagogical style and a school climate that prevented the foundation of schools as places to establish social equality in Germany.

Between 1960 and 1971 about 127 educators, mainly teachers, school administrators, university professors in pedagogy, sociology, politics and history and school book publishers took part in a program called *German Educators Missions* to get acquainted with the American educational system and the comprehensive high school as a model to reform German education and schooling. Although small in number it was a group of people that were already very influential or would later gain influence within the German educational and school sector. Before and after each trip, which lasted around four to eight weeks, the participants met with other former or future travellers, members of the *American Jewish Committee* (AJC) and the Frankfurt based *Institute for Social Research*, which organized the trips, the American Embassy and German authorities to discuss the trips, to exchange ideas and to form an elite («Kader der Aufklärung» as Adorno said), an active minority within German society which would lead German educational and school reform among other things (Albrecht 1999, p. 443ff.; Koinzer 2008).

As a rule, the trips to the U.S. started in New York City and were organized on the spot by the *Institute of International Education* (IIE). After almost two weeks of introduction to the American educational system and its local, regional and national administration, which included visits with some authorities in Washington, D.C. and visits of mainly secondary schools and university departments, the participants split up in pairs to travel to several locations throughout the States. As one participant said: «From Kindergarten to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto we got to know all levels and forms of efforts on education.»² The visitors sat in on classes in schools, colleges and universities and they met with leading scientists in education, psychology, sociology and political sciences. Only a few of the participants of the program should be mentioned: The pedagogues Kurt Aurin, Jakob Muth, Hermann Röhrs, Wolfgang Mitter, Hartmut von Hentig, Otto Monsheimer, Werner Loch and Wolfgang Edelstein; the sociologists Dietrich Goldschmidt, Jürgen Habermas, and Günter C. Behrmann; the political scientists Hans-Hermann Hartwich and Kurt Sontheimer or the lat-

er Minister of Education and Culture in North Rhine-Westphalia Fritz Holthoff.

What did they observe concerning the American comprehensive high school as the place where the «equality of educational opportunities» is striven for?

The Germans perceived the structure of the American educational system and especially the school system as an expression of the «equality of educational opportunities.» As «favorable elements» of American education, Dietrich Goldschmidt, member of the first group in 1960 and Professor of Sociology at the Teachers College in West Berlin mentioned i. a. the «education-mindedness» of the American people, «the school as a social melting pot ... [and] the opportunity that the whole day spent by the pupils in school affords for discussion and for development of democratic attitudes.»³ The high enrollment rates in secondary education⁴ were emphasized as well as the perceived basic principle of high school education that every child gets the same educational opportunities within a school that offers justice through a system of differentiation and individualization.⁵ The sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who traveled to the U.S. with the program in 1965, confirmed that the American school system «superbly realised the equality of educational opportunities» despite the challenges concerning ethnic minorities.⁶

While these perceptions were more on a systemic level, many more participants emphasized the internal school communication, the school climate and the teacher-students-relations as favourable and basic elements of American schooling to realize «equality of educational opportunities», in other words the daily «applied principles». Hans Graf, a grammar school teacher, who travelled to the U.S. in 1964, reported on the American high school as a school that was «free of autocratic characteristics between teachers and students [...]. The American teacher is in general more practical than theoretical and tends to a *vita activa* than to a *vita contemplativa*.»⁷ American teachers were «warm and friendly» mentors of their students but always respected, as the political scientist Kurt Sontheimer observed. In contrast to their German colleagues American teachers were interested in the «behavioral consequences» of the educational process in school.⁸ The friendly and sympathetic manner of American teachers served as a good example for the students. The students in turn were happier in school than their German counterparts, as the school administrator Willy Cordt and the psychologist Reinhard Tausch reported in 1962. American teachers were more patient and tolerant even if students gave the wrong answer. A German teacher, however, «typically begins a class without a friendly word and concentrates on the subject matter until the bell rings» (Chicago Sun-Times, May 18, 1962). The pragmatism which determines the every day action of teachers was remarkable. New methods of teaching were in-

troduced all the time and «if educators are not completely satisfied with the results, they try to correct the deficiencies, thereby improving the method», Dieter Sauberzweig, later Minister of the Arts in West Berlin, observed in 1963.⁹ A friendly, relaxed and socially integrative atmosphere prevailed within the schools that could reach the «edge of disorder», as Wolfgang Mitter, later Professor of Pedagogy in Frankfurt/Main, wrote after his trip to the U.S. in 1967.¹⁰ And Fritz Holthoff, who traveled to America in 1962 and became Minister of Education and the Arts in Northrhine-Westfalia in the late 1960s, emphasized a «relation based on partnership» between the students but between teachers and students in particular.¹¹

Such a perceived positive image of a comprehensive school system and the model pedagogical behavior by its teachers seemed to be the basis of schools as social agents and an institution that was able to establish social equality or at least secure the «equality of educational opportunities.» Furthermore high enrollment rates in secondary education were fundamental for the access to higher education at colleges and universities and thus guaranteed a more qualified workforce for more economic competitiveness in a modern, industrialized world. Whereas the encouraging pedagogical action of American teachers led to such outcomes, the situation was different at the Gymnasium in West Germany, the type of school that qualified for access to universities. The pedagogical spirit there was perceived as different, as detrimental to social equality and higher graduation rates, as strengthening inequality and as a fundamental reason that students dropped out.

Finally Ralf Dahrendorf's perception of the German «pedagogical defeatism» should be presented to mark the difference. «Pedagogical defeatism» was a familiar phrase of the time and focused on the school and the teaching behavior as reasons for the low graduation rates from Higher Schools (Gymnasia) and the social inequality strengthened by the habitus of German teachers at these schools. Ralf Dahrendorf was Professor for Sociology at the University of Tübingen, a member of the German Bildungsrat, a research and advisory institution in the field of education founded by the German federal and state governments, and visiting professor at American universities in 1960 and 1962 (Dahrendorf 1963). He published his book *Bildung ist Bürgerrecht* and an essay in the German weekly *Die Zeit* in 1965 where he pleaded for a more encouraging teacher behavior to prevent that students leave the school early. He argued that the «backwardness of the German society» was visible in its schools as well because of these tendencies. The responsibility of the school and the teachers was obvious.

Dahrendorf emphasized that the German Gymnasium was an institution that did «not educate» and did not «support and lead young people to their best.» Instead it «accepts only», and it regards

some of its students as «alien and a bit bothersome» (Dahrendorf 1965, p. 90).¹² Dahrendorf quoted some examples from a study that evaluated why students dropped out of school. The interviewed former students reported that their teachers were «personally inhuman,» the teacher-students-relations were impersonal; the teachers taught the subject only, they were not interested in the student as a human being (*ibid.*, p. 92f.), which made the whole school system inhuman. The Gymnasium is an institution of academic education («wissenschaftliche Bildung»), not one that serves the students and it is not a social agent («Wohlfahrtsseinrichtung») at all, Dahrendorf concluded (*ibid.*, p. 96).

The German perception, in terms of social justice and modernity, was that the German school system lacked what the comprehensive school system of the U.S. offered – by neglecting racial and other forms of segregation: an emphatic teaching behavior in schools that promotes the purpose to *teach*, to *educate* and to *support* young people. The perceptions and reflections of the trips into the American «educational reality» fostered and confirmed the negative perception of the German school system, its frosty internal climate and its poor teacher-student-relations. Even without Dahrendorf's hypothesis in mind, the German educators who traveled to the American schools saw the opposite of their own structured school system. Despite of isomorphic ambivalences in the translation and understanding of *social* they saw the promise of social justice or at least its principles fulfilled in the American school structure and the pedagogical behavior they observed. In that way and in using that kind of scientific expertise for the German school reform discourse the American (high) school was primarily understood as a cultural expression and embodiment of ideals and ideas rather than as a practical instrument for accomplishing these ideals. Moreover the American example was a foreign model that entered the German reform discourse as «additional meaning» (Schriewer 2003; Steiner-Khamisi 2003) in a period when reform impulses from the outside, the so called «externalizing potential» (Phillips/Ochs 2003) had already entered the reform practice as well. The articulated negative image of German schooling as unjust and not meeting the challenges of a modern society, was superseded. A new model along the lines of a just, comprehensive school model with warm and friendly teachers and happy students became the promise of the future German school system.

Footnotes

- 1 Revised paper given at the International Standing Conference on the History of Education at the Rutgers University/Newark, U.S.A., July 26, 2008.
- 2 Protocol, January 1, 1961, p. 2, Horkheimer's bequest, IX 235, 1-50, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 3 Letter by Beatrice Braudes (IIE) to Max Birnbaum (AJC), November 28, 1960, p. 3, Record Group 347.7.1, FAD-1, Box 40, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Archive.

- 4 Wolfgang Hilligen, Final Report on the Ford Foundation (Spring 1961), p. 3, Horkheimer's bequest, IX 235, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.; Hans-Georg Rommel in Birmingham News, December 12, 1964.
- 5 Rang, Martin/Rang, Adalbert (1965): Bericht über die Amerika-Reise, p. 1, Horkheimer's bequest, V 188, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.; Kauther, Rudolf (1969): Bericht über die Amerika-Reise, p. 18 f., Ruth Horn's bequest, Abt. 1203, Nr. 324, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden.
- 6 Protocol, June 26, 1965, p. 6, Horkheimer's bequest, V 188, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 7 Protocol, October 8, 1964, p. 3, Horkheimer's bequest, V 190, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 8 Report on the summary session, May 23, 1963, p. 1 and 5, Horkheimer's bequest, V 190, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 9 Report on the summary session, May 23, 1963, p. 1, Horkheimer's bequest, V 190, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 10 Protocol, January 23, 1967, p. 2, Abt. 504, Nr. 6596, Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden.
- 11 Protocol, January 26, 1963, Bl. 65, p. 6, IX 235, 51-71, Horkheimer's bequest, Archivzentrum Frankfurt a. M.
- 12 In 1961 the sociologist Helmut Schelsky argued that the German teachers at the Gymnasium are primarily scientists e.g. historians, mathematicians or philologists; pedagogy is «something added» only. In contrast, the teachers in German elementary schools (Volksschullehrer) are «pedagogues» (Schelsky 1961, p. 114).

References

Albrecht, Clemens et al.: Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik. Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule. Frankfurt am Main/New York 1999

Dahrendorf, Ralf: Die angewandte Aufklärung. Gesellschaft und Soziologie in Amerika. München 1963

Dahrendorf, Ralf: Bildung ist Bürgerrecht. Plädoyer für eine aktive Bildungspolitik. Bramsche 1965

Friedeburg, Ludwig von: Bildungsreform in Deutschland. Geschichte und gesellschaftlicher Widerspruch. Frankfurt am Main 1992

Gonon, Philipp: Das internationale Argument in der Bildungsreform. Die Rolle internationaler Bezüge in den bildungspolitischen Debatten zur schweizerischen Berufsbildung und zur englischen Reform der Sekundarstufe II. Bern 1998

Kenkmann, Alfons: Von der bundesdeutschen «Bildungsmisere» zur Bildungsreform in den 60er Jahren. In: Axel Schildt/Detlef Siegfried/Karl Christian Lammers (Hrsg.): Dynamische Zeiten. Die 60er Jahre in den beiden deutschen Gesellschaften. Hamburg 2000, S. 402–423

Koinzer, Thomas: «Lehrfahrten für die Gesamtschule». Educational Borrowing, Transfer und Externalisierung auf die amerikanische Comprehensive School. In: Erziehung und Bildung 60(2008), S. 11–29

Phillips, David/Ochs, Kimberley: Processes of Policy Borrowing in Education. Some explanatory and analytical devices. In: Comparative Education 39(2003), pp. 451–461

Picht, Georg: Die deutsche Bildungskatastrophe. Olten 1964

Richter, Ingo: Die unorganisierte Bildungsreform. Innovations-, Legitimations- und Relevanzprobleme im amerikanischen Bildungswesen. München 1975

Rudloff, Wilfried: Bildungspolitik als Sozial- und Gesellschaftspolitik. Die Bundesrepublik in den 1960er- und 1970er Jahren im internationalen Vergleich. In: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 47(2007), S. 237–268

Rudy, John L.: The Comprehensive High School, Enrollment Expansion, and Inequality: The United States in the Post War Era. In: Barry M. Franklin/Gary McCulloch (Eds.): The Death of the Comprehensive High School? Historical, Contemporary, and Comparative Perspectives. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, p. 53–70

Schelsky, Hellmut: Anpassung oder Widerstand? Soziologische Bedenken zur Schulreform. Heidelberg 1961

Schriewer, Jürgen: Problemdimensionen sozialwissenschaftlicher Komparatistik. In: Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Schriewer (Hrsg.): Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften. Frankfurt am Main 2003, S. 9–52

Steiner-Khamsi, Gita: Vergleich und Subtraktion. Das Residuum im Spannungsfeld zwischen Globalem und Lokalem. In: Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Schriewer (Hrsg.): Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften. Frankfurt am Main 2003, S. 377–379

Zymek, Bernd: Das Ausland als Argument in der pädagogischen Reformdiskussion. Schulpolitische Selbstrechtfertigung, Auslandspropaganda, internationale Verständigung und Ansätze zu einer vergleichenden Erziehungswissenschaft in der internationalen Berichterstattung deutscher pädagogischer Zeitschriften, 1871–1952. Ratingen 1975