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Transatlantic Encounters: Placing Education Research Interests in an International Context

Sieglinde Jornitz¹ and Annika Wilmers²

1. Introduction

In recent decades, education science has increasingly become networked internationally. In Germany for example, prior to the year 2000, the discipline was rather focused on national discourse whereas an interest in educational policy or pedagogical matters across other countries was only shown in individual cases. A new impetus came from international student assessments run by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and the OECD. This trend was supported by manifold funding research programs which did not only target European and international conference activities but specifically attempted to foster research co-operations among scientists from the discipline (Berg et al. 2004; Jornitz/Wilmers 2018).

From a German perspective, the term “international” often implies collaborations with scientists based in the USA. At least two reasons can be assigned with respect to this particular interest. On the one hand, the English language has made it fairly easy to follow up on the discourse in the US while on the other hand, the US have been and still are leading in the development of all types of student achievement tests and assessment procedures (Jornitz 2018; Aljets 2014). The (recurrent) growth of assessment studies in Germany made it necessary to co-operate and pressure from the science community in the USA complementarily also evoked a desire to learn more about education science in Europe, including Germany, and many other countries throughout the world. The increased participation of German scientists in the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) reflects this development, to which we have given shape by conceptualizing and launching a series of international sessions in this context. The format has not only proven successful but it has also led to diverse research co-operations on both sides of the Atlantic. The annual event has moreover facilitated stability in the initiation of contacts, which many of the participants were pleased to

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take on. The thematic diversity and depth of the international discourse over the years are reflected in this volume, which illustrates that the focus has never been on a mere comparison of developments in Germany and the USA. Rather, such developments are comprehended as being located in a diverse international context to which colleagues from other countries and other discourses have contributed.

In this introductory chapter, we will outline some of the central characteristics of the school systems in the US and Germany. This will be followed by an exploration of some of the discourses on school reforms that both countries participated in over the past 150 years. A third section of this chapter examines the development and concepts of comparative and international education research in Germany and the US before the last section introduces this volume and gives an overview on the international activities it is based upon.

2. Historical pathways of the German and American school systems

The school systems of Germany and the US have often provided a starting point for many thematically diverse networks in education research. In both countries the school systems are federal, but they show some significant differences in structures and organization due to their different historical and political developments. In Germany and the USA the national government and the Ministry of Education have no legally binding access to the education system as a whole. In both countries, the states or *Länder* are politically and thus also legally in charge of the school education system. Whilst the US are constituted of 50 partially federal (autonomous) states, the Federal Republic of Germany consists of 16 federal states. Differences can be found with regard to the stronger local influence on schools in the US states on the one hand and some efforts of national coordination through the implementation of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK, founded in 1948) in Germany on the other hand. Two structural aspects are important for Germany. First, as one of the German particularities, students leave a comprehensive primary school after four years, generally at the age of ten. Depending on their achievement profile, they are then allocated to a secondary school in a three-track (*Hauptschule* (5 years), *Realschule* (6 years) or *Gymnasium* (8-9 years)) or, more recently, a two-track (*Realschule* or *Gymnasium*) system. Hans Döbert, a German expert on school systems, points out: “During the course of the nineteenth century, a three-track school system came into existence, whose role was essentially to

cater to and stabilize the social interests of the three-class society of Germany.” (Döbert 2015: 306). The leading education minister of the state of Prussia in the 19th century, Wilhelm von Humboldt, developed a three-tier school system intended to reflect a segregation of society into three parts. Humboldt believed that the respective school should equip students with a type of general education that qualified them for working in skilled labor, administrative and academic professions.

This secondary school system persisted after World War II and was forcefully defended in the 1970s in the former Federal Republic, when proponents of a comprehensive school system were accused of wanting to introduce a uniform, socialist or communist school system, similar to the one existing in the former GDR or the Soviet Union. “Thus, from 1949, the education system of West Germany and its federal structure were diametrically opposed to the centralized structure of East Germany.” (Döbert 2015: 308). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the West German school system was implemented in the newly founded East German federal states. In this regard, the *Gymnasium* does not only stand for the opportunity to obtain an academic qualification but it also symbolizes an opposition to a comprehensive school system. The achievement-based allocation of students to three (or two) school types is thus meant to create homogenous learner groups.

Secondly, the German school system is centered around a commitment to science disciplines that are represented by school subjects and adapted according to student age. Topics and school subjects defined by the curriculum largely correspond to science disciplines. In the case of Germany, “a remarkable consistency in subjects” (Döbert 2015: 323) over the centuries can be observed. Arguing from the school perspective and the demands society links to school, Dietmar Waterkamp, a German scholar and expert in comparative education, characterized the German school as a “hasty school” (“*eilige Schule*”) (Waterkamp 2012: 97-109). Hence, a large number of subjects are taught at schools in Germany. Exercises and revision units are usually assigned as homework and thus relocated to extracurricular afternoon sessions. At the same time, students are held responsible for ensuring that they have understood the subject. Waterkamp asserts that “public classroom discourse” (Waterkamp 2012: 98) is characteristic for the way in which teachers design their lessons. Based on an interrogative dialogue between teacher and class, an individual student’s contribution to a topic is assumed to be relevant for all the others.

Following Germany’s participation in international large-scale assessment studies like TIMSS and PISA, a paradigm shift has taken place. Whereas state control formerly focused on the curriculum and followed a so-called input-oriented model of state control and monitoring from 2000 onwards, the model has shifted towards an output-oriented one (see Döbert

2015: 315). To measure learning outcomes, national achievement tests were implemented. This instrument, including its specific items and scaling practices, was as new for German students and their parents as for teachers. This shift in education policy also brought Germany's education research into closer alignment with the international discourse and development of evaluation instruments. "Today, comprehensive educational monitoring which now embraces standardized tests and comparative work, national and international studies of school achievement, and educational reports, is part of the fixed repertoire of control functions in education." (Döbert 2015: 315).

Schools in the United States are rooted in a different tradition. They are characterized by the idea of one school for all. All students are taught in the same type of school, which differentiates by age and courses. There is no early tracking via school types and students are grouped in courses regarding interest and learning level. Testing is a typical instrument in American schools. These data are used for steering educational practice and policy (see section 4 of this book). Both characteristics – course tracking within one school type and students' testing – are rooted in the history of the American school system, which Paul Fossum divides into four educational historical periods or "movements" (Fossum 2021, forthcoming; see also Rury 2014). The first period took place in the mid-1800s and was centered on the question of a common school. Its leading figure was Horace Mann (1796-1859) who fought for the establishment of a public school system and broadened the availability of education in the US.

This was followed by the progressive education movement that lasted from the late 19th century until the mid-1900s. John Dewey was its well-known supporter and protagonist. Progressive education puts the learner and his or her needs at the forefront of pedagogical thinking and practice. For the US, in contrast to Europe, it was also the time "intensive testing of students [began] as a means of gauging their intelligence and of enabling their sorting and channeling into instructional emphases" (Fossum 2021, forthcoming). Concerning the progressive schools in the 1920s, Ellen Lagemann states that these schools "were increasingly giving up traditional subject-focused curricula in favor of problem- or project-focused activities." (Lagemann 2000: 100). With an ongoing school enrollment, students' testing and the establishment of a course system in school became widespread. The idea of a "uniform academic core" (Lagemann 200: 101) for the school curriculum was more or less turned down until nearly 100 years later, when it emerged again vehemently with the controversy on the Common Core Standard in 2010.

A school day in the United States largely follows a course structure. Subjects are thus less aligned to a science discipline structure and students have more freedom to choose their courses according to their aptitudes and interests. In his comparative study, Waterkamp describes the US school as a "school of alteration or variety" ("*Schule der Abwechslung*") (Waterkamp

2012: 139-153). Courses, instead of subjects, are taught and these courses span a broad range of topics. This can be explained by large immigration movements in the 19th century which brought people from many different countries to the US. Hence, the US school system had to serve people from diverse cultures, languages and biographies. Joel Spring writes in his classic work on the American school: “The idea of using education to solve social problems and build a political community became an essential concept in the common school movement.” (Spring 2018: 91). Therefore, establishing a nation-wide school system is closely linked to the concept of becoming an American citizen and forming a new nation (Rury 2014).

According to Fossum, the third educational period spanning the 1960s and 1970s concentrated on fighting against the ongoing segregation in schools, and expanded its focus on anti-discrimination activities from race to gender, ethnicity and religious belief (Fossum 2021, forthcoming). It was a time when the education system was challenged with integrating every child into its system and offering him or her the best education available.

When in 1983 the controversially discussed report “A Nation at Risk” was published (see: Fossum 2021, forthcoming; Spring 2018: 478ff.), with the main result that schools were not able to reach their goals, it led to an *Accountability Movement* that is still in place today. This fourth period (Fossum 2021, forthcoming) started two important reform activities, one on standardization of curriculum and one on school choice. Both are topics of an ongoing debate (Ravitch 2010; Schneider 2016). Assessment and the expansion of different test structures are central elements of American schools, while in Germany and Europe, this instrument of measuring student achievement is rarely used, or implemented only on special occasions. Nevertheless, criticism of achievement studies has been growing in the US. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act was introduced (passed in 2001; signed in 2002) sparking a development that Urban, Wagoner and Gaither describe as a process of “reinforcing a steady diet of high-stakes standardized testing” (Urban/Wagoner/Gaither 2019: 344).

A comparison of the two school systems points to both similar and different traditions and thematic priorities. However, the set-up of the two public education systems was accompanied by an ongoing transatlantic exchange on education reforms and policies.

3. School reform in a transatlantic exchange

Over time, similar topics were addressed in both the United States and Germany, as can be seen from the discourse on particular educational reforms, the set-up and expansion of education systems or the debates on

quality in education. Still, this does not imply that discourses have taken place at the same time nor that debates are grounded in the same conceptions across countries. But the similar foci of interest are striking in both the US and Germany, and so are returning references to the respective other country in attempts at education system reform over the past centuries. For example, in many cases Germany served as a role model for the American education system in the early stages of its development. A lively intellectual exchange on educationally relevant topics can be found throughout the 19th century, and following the Second World War, American re-educating activities took place in West Germany. From a historical perspective, two episodes stand out in the continuing transatlantic educational discourse: First, the interest in education systems in German states, particularly universities, during the establishment of a higher education system in the US in the 18th and 19th centuries and, second, activities linked to the goal of (re)democratization of the German education system and the so-called re-education measures after 1945 (for information on the history and development of transatlantic exchange in education, cf. Overhoff/Overbeck 2017; Uljens/Ylimaki 2017).

“Re-education” was not merely an isolated objective after 1945, as Thomas Koinzer demonstrates in his work on experiences and appraisals of German pedagogues who travelled to America as part of a German “Educators’ Mission” between 1960 and 1971 (Koinzer 2011). Following the re-occurrence of anti-Semitic incidents in Germany, the American Jewish Committee and the study office for political education at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) had organized the program to enable German pedagogues to experience the American education and school system, which was perceived as taking a leading role on the path to a democratic school model. The participants’ experiences and observations focused on concepts of teaching and realizing democracy at school as well as concepts of implementing and running empirically-oriented research in the social sciences (Koinzer 2011). The group of *Amerikafahrer* (America-goers) was heterogeneous and came from all over West-Germany. It was comprised of German pedagogues from the areas of practice, policy-making and research who were particularly interested in practice-related, applied pedagogy. In the assessment of the American system, the German educators painted a diverse and ambivalent picture, fed by claims for a democratic school on the one hand, and perceived political and social problems on the other, e.g. race segregation and violence in American society or foreign political developments, such as the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, it affected the education reform measures in West Germany in different ways (Koinzer 2011: 12-13).

Ewald Terhart has identified an Anglo-American influence on German educational reform discourse in particular for the period spanning 1965 to 1975, concerning educational science concepts and methods (Terhart 2017).

According to Terhart, at this time the educational discourse in Germany became more susceptible to influences of empirical educational science, psychological research on learning and teaching, programmed instruction and curriculum research. These were meant to help overcome a standstill in the reform process in Germany as well as to foster a new orientation within education science. These reform efforts came to an end in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, when new economic crises (see e.g. the high unemployment rate among teachers) and (inner-)political crises (e.g. the Red Army Faction activities) arose and other developments, such as the rise of new social movements, evoked a shift of educational political interests (Terhart 2017: 166-170).

In this context, Terhart refers to the relationship between taking up and adapting American concepts in German studies and relevant translations of important American educational works by German scientists, and the dissemination of American theories in Germany. At the time, the translation efforts were essential to studying Anglo-American methods to this extent in Germany (Terhart 2017: 164).³ The need to translate English language publications into German has rapidly declined since the 1990s, because since then knowledge of English has increasingly become a standard in German and international education science. However, this transfer is by no means a completed task, which becomes clear when looking conversely at ways to discuss German research internationally and at continuing challenges in the field of translating non-English studies from humanities research, as will be discussed later in this volume (see section 6 of this book).

For endeavors at familiarizing an American readership with German research, it is interesting to take a look at the German pedagogue Erich Hylla (1887-1976), who had been able to do research in the US in 1926/27 and who had been a visiting professor at Columbia University and Cornell University in the second half of the 1930s. After World War II, he served as advisor in education questions to the US High Commissioner in Germany and was involved in the German-American plans for a new research institute for international pedagogical research in Germany, which eventually led to the founding of the DIPF – today the “Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education” – in 1951. In his book, “Education in Germany. An Introduction for Foreigners”, published in 1954, Hylla explains the German education system to an English-speaking readership.⁴ An earlier volume had already been published in 1928, called “Die Schule der Demokratie. Ein

3 A list of exemplary translations from the reform age in the 1960s and 1970s can be found in Terhart 2017.

4 In 1929 Hylla translated Dewey’s “Democracy and Education” and this work was reedited in 1949 and in 1964 followed by a new edition from Oelkers in 1993 (Hylla 1949; Oelkers 1993). Regarding the reception of Dewey in Germany after the turn of the millennium see Bellmann 2017.

Aufriss des Bildungswesens der Vereinigten Staaten” (“School of Democracy. An outline of the education system of the United States”, Hylla 1928), wherein Hylla exhaustively described the American education system to German readers. Both books aim to inform the respective counterpart with the underlying assumption that new foreign phenomena can only be understood within the context of the system one is familiar with, as Hylla points out in his preface of “Education in Germany”: „Since any given educational system can be really understood only as a part of the cultural and socioeconomic texture in which it has developed, an attempt was made to indicate this frame of reference in the extended explanatory passages [...] accompanying the discussion of various aspects of German education. Thus the foreign reader should be enabled to find the common denominator for corresponding phenomena of education in his own country and in Germany.” (Hylla 1954: 3)

The globalization of educationally relevant topics and a growing interest in international comparisons, which is evident from large-scale international assessments, prominently placed international exchange on educational topics on the agenda in the past three decades (see section 3 of this book). The idea that, in a globalized society, education is a determinant factor, also given global competition, is not new, as the “Sputnik Shock” after 1957 and the American debate following the “A Nation at Risk” Report in 1983 showed. The Sputnik shockwaves did extend to West Germany, yet it was the later “PISA shock” in 2000 that alerted the German population profoundly and persistently with regard to education, whilst comparatively little attention was paid to the results of the first PISA study in the US (Martens 2010). Attention only rose when China ranked higher than the US in the PISA cycle of 2009 (see Parcerisa, Fontdevila and Verger in this volume). The examples illustrate the wide scope when positioning educational topics on a country’s agenda, ranging from national education aspirations to international (education) competition. Educational topics are simultaneously placed on a transnational agenda as well as developing highly national and even regional trajectories and dynamics. In this regard, the issue of international transferability and its relation to country-specific education concepts are debated under the slogan of “educational borrowing and lending” on both sides of the Atlantic. These refer to a complex construct of international settings and national adaptations (cf. Steiner-Khamsi/Waldow 2012; Phillips/Ochs 2010).