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Secondary schools in eastern Germany:

A study of teachers' perceptions
in Brandenburg Gesamtschulen



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situation. From the perspective of ten years after unification, there is the temptation to look back upon the GDR, its institutions and education system, as pre-destined to last only 40 years. McAdams warns against this temptation, arguing that:

With the certainty of retrospective knowledge to guide them, future scholars may also be trapped into thinking deterministically about the past and reading German history as though it were somehow fated to lead to the outcomes of 1989 and 1990 (McAdams, 1994, p. 193).

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF THE GDR AND THE IMPACT OF THE 'WENDE'

Education systems and schools do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded in their political, social and economic contexts. Writing on German education and society in 1949, Samuel and Hinton Thomas comment:

Education is everywhere and at all times the expression of society, even though at the same time it helps to mould it (Samuel and Hinton Thomas, 1949, p. 16).

In eastern German schools after the 'Wende' it was unclear what kind of society eastern German education should express or help to mould. The state of flux in the wider society was reflected in the schools.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the purpose and status of education changed fundamentally. The SED had placed great emphasis on the role of education within the GDR state. This was indicated by the fact that Margot Honecker, the wife of Erich Honecker, led the GDR's ministry of education from 1963 until the collapse of the GDR in 1989. The SED attempted to harness the education system as an ideological tool. This was achieved in a number of different ways: the centralised control of the curriculum; the use of subject monitors (*Fachberater*) to ensure that teachers adhered to this curriculum, and the introduction of the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend* - FDJ), the youth organisation of the SED, in order to encourage the development of socialist thought amongst young people.

In addition, the GDR's notorious Ministry of State Security (the so-called *Stasi*) monitored citizens throughout the GDR, including pupils and teachers (see Behnke, 1998 on the activities of the *Stasi* in schools; Miller, 1999 on the impact of informers on GDR society). This aspect of the GDR's legacy remains one of the most bitter and controversial because citizens find out that friends, neighbours or even relatives had informed on them. This controversy affected all members of GDR society and many people wanted to know what was in 'their file' (see also Garton Ash, 1997).

Teachers and pupils worked within this context of the all-pervasiveness of the SED and the prevailing ideology. The GDR regime went to extreme lengths to monitor its schools and its citizens. However, all governments operate a political agenda within their education system, but teachers still have room for manoeuvre:

Even in the most centralised one-party states such as the Soviet Union, the teacher retains some vestige of autonomy, at least in the classroom (Broadfoot, Brock and Tulasiewicz, 1981, p. 2).

In the GDR, as in other states, teachers could exercise control over what happened in their classrooms, notwithstanding the rigidity of the system they worked within.

The education system served a dual purpose during GDR times: to provide the labour force required by the planned economy, and to raise young people as 'fully developed socialist personalities'. As soon as the Berlin Wall was breached, these two purposes became obsolete. In addition, the status of education was called into question because the citizens of the GDR criticised schools, teachers, universities and researchers for following the party line. The schools had been embedded within the political environment of the GDR, and the shift towards becoming part of the capitalist, free market Federal Republic, with its emphasis on individual choice, necessitated a 'Wende' at the micro level, within the school organisations.

These micro-level changes were of a less dramatic and more protracted nature than the macro-level changes. Phillips and McLeish's model (1998, p. 11) identifies the implementation at school level as the final phase in the process of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system of education. (The model is included as Appendix I.)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AREAS OF FOCUS

This study aimed to explore and examine the developments in secondary schools in eastern Germany after the 'Wende'. This aim was, however, very broad, and it was therefore necessary to narrow the study's focus considerably. Certain decisions had to be taken at the outset of the research.

The first was the deliberate and explicit decision to concentrate on teachers' perceptions. This was based on the fact that teachers were important actors within the process of transformation of schooling in eastern Germany. In addition, many of the teachers in eastern Germany at the end of the twentieth century had experienced two different educational systems, and it seemed timely to explore their perceptions of them.

The second decision was to focus on one German eastern state, that of Brandenburg. The reconstitution of the five eastern German states after unification increased the number of federal states to 16. The states all have autonomy regarding their educational policies. Therefore it seemed advisable to focus on one state. It would not have been feasible in a study of this nature to examine secondary schools in all five states of eastern Germany.

The third decision was whether to examine the different secondary school types on offer in eastern Germany since unification, or whether to focus on one particular school type.

The second and third decisions are interlinked. I was interested to investigate the development from the ten-year unitary secondary school of the GDR, the POS, to the Gesamtschule or 'comprehensive school' of unified Germany. Brandenburg was the only eastern state to introduce the Gesamtschule as the main school on offer. An investigation of the transformation of the GDR unitary school into the comprehensive school seemed particularly interesting, as it would be possible to gauge the teachers' assessments of the problems and potential of each of these school types.

Therefore, the broad aims of the study were narrowed down, and the focus was on the perceptions of one group, teachers, in one school type, the Gesamtschule, in one state, Brandenburg.

The research questions evolved during the analysis of the literature and the initial period of library and exploratory research in eastern Germany. They fell into three main sections - questions regarding the GDR school, questions regarding the Brandenburg Gesamtschule and questions regarding the process of transformation of secondary schooling in the GDR. There are, of course, constant explicit and implicit comparisons between the GDR school and the Gesamtschule.

The initial research questions that guided the research were deliberately broad. They guided the development of the more specific questions during the research period, and also informed the design of the interview schedule. There will be an attempt to provide answers to the questions that follow in Chapter Five and in the conclusions. The initial research questions are outlined below.

The GDR school

- Which aspects of the school system of the GDR did the teachers feel might have been worth preserving?
- Which aspects of the school system of the GDR did the teachers feel no regret to see disappear?

The Brandenburg Gesamtschule

- What are the current successes and the current problems of the Gesamtschule school type in the Brandenburg context, according to the teachers?

The transformation process

- How did the teachers experience the period immediately after the 'Wende'?

In addition to these broad questions, which were the basis for my interview questions, there was a set of more specific questions relating to the school systems of the two German states and to the transformation process. These guided the interpretation of the interview data. They are outlined below.

General questions regarding the GDR and FRG societies and schooling systems

- Did the teachers reject the GDR and embrace unified Germany? Did they express a belief in the superiority of the GDR?
- Did the teachers reject the GDR school and welcome the new school types?

Structures of secondary schooling

- In the context of the structures of secondary schooling, I hoped to hear the teachers' perceptions of the shift from the unitary, ten-year POS of the GDR to the selective secondary schooling system introduced after the 'Wende'. These teachers were in the position of teaching at a so-called comprehensive school, but within a selective system. What would be the teachers' views regarding this situation?
- The POS had heterogeneous classes. There was no internal differentiation, and the teachers gained experience in teaching pupils of widely differing ability. Were the teachers able to draw on this experience in their current work at the Gesamtschule?

Curriculum issues

- The guidelines in the GDR were strict and rigid. I anticipated that the teachers might express appreciation of the increased freedoms in teaching content and teaching methods. The curriculum of most subjects changed significantly. How did the teachers perceive the changes in curriculum and teaching methods since the 'Wende'?

Changes in relations with pupils

- How did the teachers assess their relations with pupils after the 'Wende'? What kind of changes had taken place in the communication between teachers and pupils, according to the