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Segregated Education — The German Solution

Rosalind M. O. Pritchard

Most of us think of the Federal Republic of Germany as a rich, prosperous country with an enviably small degree of political and religious strife. Visitors from Northern Ireland who go to Germany soon become used to people's eager curiosity about the civil unrest here; indeed many Germans are rather supercilious and incredulous about what they are pleased to call our "medieval wars of religion". Yet it is not so long ago that a religious issue constituted the major controversy in the German educational system. It is a little-known fact that, until comparatively recently, most German primary and non-academic secondary schools (Volksschulen) were denominational and that integrated education was introduced only in the face of considerable difficulty.

Hitler, of course, had had no difficulty in introducing both integrated and comprehensive schooling but in a post-war democracy, where innovations had to be introduced by consensus rather than imposed by a dictator, things looked rather different. Hitler's predilection for integrated, comprehensive schools had made them seem suspect and tainted to such an extent that it was necessary later on to invent new labels for both concepts. When the Federal Republic was set up, each of the eleven districts (Länder) had autonomy in the educational field and so each made its own decision about denominational schools. The historical tradition of the northern city states such as Hamburg and Bremen made them opt for integrated schooling but most of the other Länder decided to reverse the trend of the Hitlerzeit by setting up denominational schools and teacher training colleges. The principle of denominational education was formally and legally enshrined in the constitution of each Land, a fact which naturally led to difficulties when the spirit of the age changed in favour of integrated schools.

It is interesting to study the alignment of forces for and against denominational schooling. The parents, the educationalists, the teachers' unions and usually the Protestants were in favour of mixed schools. It is worth mentioning that not alone Protestant parents, but also Catholic parents were against segregated schooling. Often the two co-operated to form a pressure group for the abolition of denominational schools.

Support for integrated schools was more often based on educational than on religious arguments. The situation of the minority schools in the rural parts of Germany had always been difficult, and was now becoming impossible. In many Länder, the religious minority was so small and widely dispersed as to make its denominational schools unviable. This unviability became an intolerable problem when new specifications were introduced stipulating the minimum numbers and yearly intakes necessary for efficiency. These specifications were legally binding. Many schools were however prevented from conforming to this legal requirement by the existence of another legal requirement, namely that all schools had to be denominational. This curious anomaly lent point and urgency to the debate.

Often, the children of minority religions had to go to considerable trouble and inconvenience to attend their denominational schools because sometimes there was

only one such school to serve a large area and it was necessary to travel a long distance every day to attend it. The alternative was that these children should go to a local school which was avowedly Catholic. No matter which alternative they chose, they were in effect being penalised for their religious affiliation. This was contrary to the German constitution which lays down that no citizen should suffer because of his beliefs.

It was not alone in the actual choice of schools that children of minority denominations were disadvantaged. They were not receiving a fair deal inside the schools themselves. Particularly in rural areas, children of all ages often had to work together in one classroom and the teacher-pupil ratio was sometimes very poor. This was felt to be unacceptable, especially in view of the drive to achieve equality of opportunity for all pupils. Teachers too were disadvantaged by the rule that they could only seek employment in schools of their own denomination. In one Land, there was an incident which caused a scandal at the time (1967) and highlighted the need to take action about segregated education. In this particular Land, the Catholic schools were badly understaffed and yet 27 newly qualified Protestant teachers were unable to find posts because the Protestant schools already had sufficient teachers. The situation was manifestly absurd and unjust.

Of course, it was not solely the desire to achieve a more rational deployment of resources which provided the impetus for integrated education. It was felt that non-denominational schools would be in keeping with a modern, pluralistic society, and since people of different religious affiliations were already mixed in their housing and at work, it seemed artificial to separate the children at school. It was naturally hoped that integrated schools would promote tolerance and mutual understanding between people of all religious convictions.

There were, however, serious obstacles to integrated schools. It was hardly to be expected that the Catholics would be anxious to give up their denominational schools merely for the convenience of the Protestants. The Catholic Church was able to bolster its claim for denominational schools by pointing to an agreement which Hitler had concluded in 1934 with the Holy See in which the Church was conceded a special influence in the education of Catholic children. Apart from the opposition of the Church, which was reluctant to relinquish existing privileges, there was opposition from various Länder governments who were reluctant to change their constitutions. There was also opposition from some parents who complained that, if all schools became non-denominational, they no longer had any freedom of choice in deciding to which schools they would send their children. It was feared by some people that the whole educational system would be fragmented by the controversy and that a proliferation of private schools would result. Finally, there was a very real concern lest non-denominational schools might become godless, immoral institutions and a decline in moral values ensue.

And so the two sides confronted each other — those for and those against denominational education. The debate raged for some years, but eventually each Land

evolved its own formula for desegregated education. In Bavaria, one of the most conservative of the Länder, the government sought the same way out of the dilemma as Harold Wilson did over British membership of the common market. A referendum was held. For a Land in which seventy per cent. of the population is Catholic, the poll was perhaps surprisingly low (41.8%), but the Bavarian minister of education, Dr. Huber, declared his satisfaction with the turnout. Of the voters, 74.8% declared themselves in favour of non-denominational education. Not all Länder held referenda, but each managed to reach some consensus about the problem which opened the way to reform.

It would be a tedious exercise to go through the reforms introduced by each individual Land, and indeed it would be unnecessary because it is possible to abstract the features which are common to most of them.

In order to create the conditions for integrated schools, it was necessary to take certain legal steps. Although in Germany, the state takes precedence over the Church, it was nevertheless decided to seek the approval of the Holy See for the proposed innovation. This was given, and it was agreed that if in future any differences of opinion should occur over the contract which had been drawn up, then both the Land and the Holy See would co-operate to achieve an amicable solution. The right of the Catholic Church to a reasonable influence in the education of its young was guaranteed. Each Land then proceeded to alter its constitution so that there was no longer any legal obstacle to the introduction of non-denominational schools. A legal verdict in Baden-Württemberg clarified the position of parents with regard to their freedom of choice. It was ruled that although they had the right to care for and educate their children, they did not have the power to demand a system which would hurt and infringe the civil rights of other children (that is, they did not have the right to demand denominational education). Despite this verdict, the dreaded proliferation of private schools did not occur. With regard to the danger of the new schools becoming godless institutions, several legal safeguards were adopted. The schools were to be explicitly Christian. Christian symbols such as the Cross were not to be outlawed but rather to be welcomed and made a part of school life. Prayers too were to be part of school life. Religion was to be a full academic subject with several hours of instruction a week. This religious education was to be carried out for each denomination in a separate class. Any child who did not wish to take part in either prayers or religious education could be withdrawn from them by his parents, and young people of eighteen or more could make this decision in their own right. No teacher could be forced to give religious education against his will.

What then was the effect of all this on the schools and on the children? Some months ago in a little mining town in the Saarland, I visited a school where the Headmaster, Herr Gehl, had presided successfully over the integration of one Protestant and two Catholic schools. Prior to this amalgamation, the parents of children at all three schools had on 4th February, 1970, sent a joint letter to the Minister of Education requesting the setting up of an

integrated school. In the school year of 1970-71, it became ministerial policy to integrate all schools throughout the Saarland. In my presence the Headmaster asked some of the children about the religious affiliation of their friends and many of the children simply did not know. Herr Gehl told me that, in six years, no-one had exercised the right to withdraw from religious instruction. The atmosphere among both pupils and staff was happy and harmonious and after I had gone, some of them sent me essays on their experiences of integrated schooling. These essays are guaranteed to be their own work and to have been done without adult influence.

Karen, a Protestant girl, writes:

"Denominational schools are silly. Here Catholics are in the majority. When I was in the second form and there were no integrated schools, there were exactly six pupils in our class. That sounds funny perhaps but it is true. What is one supposed to do with six pupils? In our class nobody is so pious that he would start up trouble because of someone's religion and anyway people who raise trouble because of religion are not Christians because it says in the Bible: 'He that loveth not his brother abideth in death'."*

Hans-Jörg, a fifteen-year old Catholic, writes:

"Thank goodness there is no segregated schooling here. I would fight against it. One should not separate the pupils just because they have different beliefs. Isn't each one valuable in its own right? I can't understand why schools in Ireland are not integrated too."*

A thirteen-year-old, Stefanie (Catholic) believes that:

"Denominational schools drive a wedge between the two religions. In later life people cannot get on without quarrelling."*

Martina, a Catholic girl, writes:

"I think that integrated schools are very good. When we used not to have them, we did not know the Protestants and the Protestants did not know us. I am Catholic and I sit beside a Protestant girl and we are great friends. When there were no integrated schools, we had no contact with the Protestants."*

Claudia, a Catholic girl, is not satisfied with the arrangements for religious education:

"I think it would be better if Protestants and Catholics had religious education together, because we are together all day in school and why

should we be separated in R.E.? I have often gone to Protestant or ecumenical services and have liked them very much. There is very little difference between them and a Catholic service."*

All these children have an acute awareness that their educational system has undergone an important and, to them, very positive transformation. They are conscious of latent tensions but yet proud of what has been achieved in the way of tolerance and friendship. The new system has helped them to perceive similarities rather than differences. This solidarity is attractively expressed by a Catholic German boy called Martin and it is to him that I will give the last word:

"There are red and yellow flowers. They all drink the same water and have their roots in the same earth and the same sun shines on them. Which colour does the sun prefer? Does it not shine the same for all? Does God love a Protestant more than a Catholic? To all of this there is only one answer: 'We all have the same God'."*

Acknowledgement

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Bibliographical Note

There is a scarcity of English sources on this subject but the German periodical "Die bayerische Schule" (the Bavarian School) contains much writing about integrated schools. A key article is "Staat-Kirche-Schule" by Klaus Obermayer (25th May, 1967; no. 15; pp. 236-240). Also interesting is: "Zur Frage einer christlich bestimmten Schule" by Marian Heitger (20th December, 1967; no. 35-36; p. 600-602). In the Saarland the "Evangelisches Bildungswerk", a Protestant body, produced a file of material on the topic called "Materialien zur öffentlichen Diskussion", (1969). The teachers' association "Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft" whose head office is in Frankfurt also has in its archives material on the subject.

*Translation