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Paper presented at the Conference „Religiously Affiliated Schools in a Multicultural Society: Challenges and Objections“ Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, January 28-30, 1999

Self-Development of Protestant Schools: Supportive Structures

1. Introduction

The current debate on public school development in Germany is concerned with the autonomy of each school, with the quality of schooling, and the implementtation of appropriate structures for school improvement. In some States (Bundesländer: Northrhine-Westfalia, Hamburg, Hesse) schools are obliged to develop a programme for the school within a certain time. De-centralisation and de-nationalisation are some of the underlying policies (Fischer/ Rolff 1997). The new paradigm of state control over the school system can be seen as a new approach to democratisation giving more responsibility to the school.

In search for models how to prepare schools for their new task, one teacher organisation pointed out, that private schools could serve as models for public schools. These schools should have the greatest experience in the different aspects of de-centralisation, – curricular, financial, personal, and organisational, in self-guidance, self-management, and self-responsibility. As most of the private schools in Germany are denominational (catholic or protestant), these schools begin to experience a new interest from the public.

In earlier texts of protestant synodes, reflecting on the status of private schools run by lutheran churches or church affiliated organisations, these schools are stated to be „blueprints of the normal“. K. E. Nipkow (1999), one of the main scholars and advisors of the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), claims that protestant schools „could lead the way“ for public schools, and C.T Scheilke (1999) reassures that they „should lead the way“.

Recently, commenting on the foundation of new protestant schools in the new Bundesländer, F. Schweitzer (1998, 201) refers to the freedom of privately maintained

schools which provides the opportunity to test opportunities for and obstacles to school development „even deputizing for public state schools“ (p.201).
Between all these „shoulds“ and „coulds“ and „oughts“ of important authorities one can notice a kind of disappointment about protestant schools not being ahead of whatever. The real situation of these schools could be different from idealistic postulates, causing dilemmas in the educational programmes.
In my contribution I will try to determine how and why protestant schools can be regarded as models of decentralised school development.

2. Background

My experiences are the result of a five-year research and development project „School-based in-service education for protestant schools“ (Schulinterne Lehrerfortbildung für Evangelische Schulen SCHILFESCH). During this period selected teachers from protestant schools (Grammar schools and some other types of school) were trained to become „facilitators“ of school-based in-service course work as a part of school development. I, myself have been involved in short term and long term processes at about a dozen schools, most of them Grammar Schools (Gymnasium). The close relationship with the colleagues of a school during the long process of counseling, planning, guidance of training phases, accompanying the steering group within the school, cooperatively evaluating the ongoing development process, all this yields an extraordinary rich but nevertheless restricted insight into a school: The attention being on the manner of reflection, negotiation, decision making and self monitoring in teams.
Collecting data about school development processes in general was not the major purpose of that project, but a very important side effect, which means that my conclusions depend on a rather weak, more or less informal data base. What I present here is therefore a tentative approach to point out some of the strength and weaknesses of protestant schools and the way they develop themselves.

3. The Subject: Protestant schools in Germany– some general remarks

There are about 800 protestant schools in the different Länder of Germany; most of them are schools for children with special needs or for professional education. Some – about 200 – are schools for primary and secondary education. The school maintenance is almost as different as these schools are: in some cases schools are maintained by the Landeskirche, in others by a church foundation, a parish, a group of parishes, a society or other organisations. Even in the same State (Bundesland) there is no single approach to school maintenance. The Protestant Foundation in Bavaria (Evangelische Schul-stiftung in Bayern) has started to keep the school administration as well as the staff development under one roof.
In addition to these church maintained schools there are several primary and very few secondary schools in Northrhine-Westfalia and in Lower Saxony maintained by the

municipality or the local authority. Although they are public state schools, the parents of the attending children can vote for the Christian character of the school, whether it should be Lutheran or catholic or both. If I reflect on protestant schools in this article, I don't have these primary schools in mind.

The status of protestant (and catholic) schools is in general guaranteed by the constitution (Grundgesetz Art. 7.4), additionally by state school laws, depending on contracts between state and church. Private schools have to be approved as substitutes to state schools if their goals, institutions, and the scientific education of their teachers is not minor to the state schools, if they do not choose pupils selectively according to material possesions of their parents, and if they are able to pay their teachers.
State laws include passages regulating the financial support, the curriculum, and the general supervision by the state. The curriculum has to be similar, but not of the same kind as public state schools. Thus, the private schools possess a certain degree of freedom with respect to the curriculum within the frame of state acknowledgement, especially examinations. But schools make use of their self-determination in different ways; very often they tend to be adhering to the regulations. Not a single protestant school has been among those 300 „Innovative schools" to take part in the 1996 worldwide competition of the Karl-Bertelsmann-Foundation.

As M. Schreiner (1996) recently worked out in a historical and systematic study, protestant schools have been established for different pedagogical and theological reasons. Notable motives were on a missionary, diaconic, and educational-policy dimension. During decades of their existence schools often lost their primary aim, they forgot about the ideas of the founder or – in most cases – the educational needs of the pupils changed. After reviewing the documents of 26 protestant schools, M. Schreiner (1996, 393) comes to the conclusion that neither in theological theory nor in school practices it is possible to identify the authentic essential of a protestant school. But, as M. Schreiner concludes, schools have continously been in search of the outline in which the christian freedom („libertas christiana") may be brought into educational existence.
Keeping Schreiner's thesis in mind, the following chapter focusses on the issue of what makes a school move in search for a new educational programme in present times.

4. Challenges of protestant schools' development

School development is a term which includes all the different efforts within an individual school to establish and to shape the curricular, organisational, and personal characteristics of the educational programme. School development processes are opportunities to individual schools

- to adapt the educational programme to changes in the conditions of schooling, such as the geographical, social, or psychological situation of the pupils generation,

- to emphasize certain aspects of instruction and education, such as the integration of pupils with different abilities, the orientation on certain norms and values,
- to find educational solutions for problems which have not been dealt with before, like the use of new media for example,
- to steadily improve the educational programme when necessary.

But what are actually the „pulls“ and „pushes“ which initiate a development process?
The Gymnasium (Grammar School) in Germany is the school with the least change since decades. Some people think that this type of school being totally resistent to any reform. Teachers of the Gymnasiums are the outstandingly smallest group to take part in inservice programmes. On the other hand, the Gymnasium is obviously the winner of the educational expansion of the last thirty years (Liebau/ Mack/ Scheilke 1997). More than thirty percent of the pupils in one year attend the Gymnasium, in some university cities this figure is higher than sixty percent. More and more parents choose this type of school because they take their option on the highest school-leaving qualification for their children. This attractiveness of the Gymnasium is one of its dilemmas. The educational culture does no longer fit to the learning needs of the mass of pupils, because it is centrally oriented at the education of a selected elite as it used to be before (Liebau/ Mack/ Scheilke 1997, 9).
Protestant Gymnasiums operate unter the same dilemma, but very often in an intensified way: They can select their pupils according to achievement levels at the age of ten when pupils apply for access to the school. Parents sometimes chose a private protestant school not for religious reasons but because they know that there are no turkish (islamic) pupils, no pupils from a foreign background. Being able to control the access by selecting pupils with regard to their denomination and achievement and being able to offer the highest school-leaving qualification: whatever could be an objective reason to change the programme?

The most frequent reason to start reflection on change is the pressure that comes from lack of pupils. Schools loose their attractiveness when there is a concurrent school in the neighbourhood to be preferred by parents. Sometimes a tiny event like a new headmaster in the neighbour-school gives reason to unbalance parents´choose. The teachers personally gain interest in raising the attractiveness of their school and they start to work on the programme.

Sometimes the church maintenance of a protestant school is running out of money to restore the buildings and/or to keep the boarding branch of the school. In this case, teachers find themselves under a double pressure: lack of attractiveness and lack of money. Will fund raising be a suitable solution or is a change of the educational programme called for?

From our school development project we know that pressure or push from outside on the school does not lead to a serious and successful mode of action. There must be an additional „pull“ from inside to bring about a sustainable development of change.

By the following three examples I give a short description of how schools, i.g. the teachers and headmasters, recognised their school situation as a starting point for change, making use of the SCHILFESCH project supply.

5. Asking for support in a development process

Case A

The A-school situated in a summer tourist area– a secondary school combining Gymnasium and Realschule – is rather small, no more than about 240 pupils in grade five to thirteen, and a staff of 25 teachers. The recruitment of pupils from the region used to be balanced by the attraction of pupils from far away, because the school was able to supply dormitories. Two years ago this branch of education had to be given up for economical reasons. The boarding house was sold. The school existence became critical.

The close and strong relationship between the teachers – half of the colleagues were married to each other, almost every teacher had a colleague`s child in his class – made them feel to have a lot in common, only some of them doubted whether the educational quality was good enough. They said that they lacked „objective“ measures to assess their educational quality, that they felt to work isolated. Their doubts possibly were not a result from reflection in the role of teachers but in the role of parents. They asked for support from „outside“.

Analyzing the initial situation by means of interviewing each other the school turned out to be a rather informal business from the teachers‘ point of view with a liberal and pragmatic school management and almost no leadership from the headmaster. The high degree of informality seemed to paralyse any professional discourse. One could not figure out whether the informality was a result of the headmaster’s interpretation of „freedom“ or an outcome of too much privacy. Most of them had lost their vision. The daily five-minutes-assembly was still called „morning blessing“, reminding the school community at the original Christian character of the school, but it was used as an opportunity for current informations to the pupils.

Individual teachers felt a strong responsibility to regain a mission statement and to reconstruct schoolwork by explicating quality criteria. „I don’t know by definition but something urgently has to happen,“ one of the teachers summed up the initial situation.

Case B

The school is a traditional protestant Gymnasium, situated in the middle of a town. It attracts sufficient pupils every year. There is a written mission statement to be handed out to the parents, and three years ago a booklet was produced to celebrate the 125th

anniversary of the school. Some regular project work in the classes indicate the efforts towards educational innovation of the curriculum. Once a year – since more than 20 years – the staff is on a two-days inservice retreat; most of the innovative parts of the programme have been initiated during these days. Teachers complained about time consuming conferences and meetings while severe conflicts resulting from different attitudes were constantly disturbing them. The internal dissatisfaction reached a point to ask for support from outside the school. They thought most of them could not continue in the same way.

Although the classrooms of the younger children were pleasantly painted and decorated, the rooms in general looked somehow neglected to the visitor. If you enter the building in the afternoon you firstly have to cross the row of dustbins in the backyard before you reach the side entrance. There are almost no products of pupils work in the corridor or hall, dusty showcases are illuminated but empty. The impression of neglected rooms is reinforced when you enter the staff room: it looks like the stock room of an ancient stationary store; no requisite at all to indicate that somebody likes to stay or communicate or work or rest in this room, no plant on the window sill, no curtains at the windows.

After the steering group had been elected the first step was to collect data on the social climate in order to gain a better consciousness on teachers‘ complaints. In the end of the feedback conference someone announced a „staffroom-clear up-session“ asking for voluntary helpers. This initiative was the beginning of actively taking on the responsibility for the esthetic as well as functional design and shape of rooms. To care for the teachers‘ own nurture and welfare was the task ahead. Becoming aware of the distance and creating room by opening the social space was realised by having practically to do with each other. Flowers, selfmade curtains and new bookshelves turned out to be the vehicles of practical cooperation. „We were very good in talking about and extensively analyzing our situation; but we lacked experience in co-operative work,“ someone made a conclusion.

Case C

The C-School was founded twelve years ago as an alternative to the school policy of the political majority in the state. Parents asked for a qualified Grammar School being able to care for gifted children; they assumed that a comprehensive school will not be able to deliver a highly qualified education. The founders themselves had a Christian orientation in mind which meant

- to care for the intellectual, social, emotional and moral growth of the individual child,
- to teach gifted and physically handicapped children together,
- to care for ecumenical development by teaching both, lutheran and catholic religion.

A leaflet provides detailed information about the mission statement of the school to the parents. An annual yearbook evaluates the highlights, events, and success of the year. The core curriculum is accompanied by a rich programme of working groups, interest

circles, courses to help pupils with dyslexia, sports, music groups, drama, exchange programme, study excursions, festivals, bazars, social and welfare events, and participation in national and international youth research competitions. „Regular“ instruction takes place only during half of the school year. The extra-curricular activities seem to dominate the programme. „We do not lack ideas of what else we can do“, the headmistress said, „but we need ideas of how to integrate and co-ordinate the different projects and events.“ The teachers had requested feedback from some parents in order to look into a kind of mirror. Parents were satisfied in general, but they critisized the educational qualitiy of the regular lessons with terms like „scholastic“ or „old-fashioned“ or not in correspondence with the ambitious goals in the leaflet. This was the point to ask for support from outside of the school.

6. Setting up structure in a development process: the SCHILFESCH project

We could go on describing different sitations of schools at the very beginning of a cooperation process with the SCHILFESCH project. To us as external advisors it is a beginning, but to the schools and the staff it is as well an end of a history of success and failure in work at school. We have to keep in mind that the personal, historical and social context is still involved in the actual questioning.

All protestant schools we have worked with started with educational, organisational or social-interaction issues, none of them had a theological dimension of schooling in question. Does this mean a hidden hierachy in thinking about a protestant school: first to care for a „good“ school and well educated pupils, second to think about the reasoning behind? Or does this mean to be annoyed with theological reasoning on human being without being able to reconstruct and transfer it into everyday teaching and learning?

We pursue a policy by which we set up a social structure to organise a collective reflection on what the participants want to have changed. A high degree of transparency, an experimental access to what could be done, and continuous procedures of feedback and evaluation are helpful motivators. The one-year-process is structured in phases:

(1) Agreement
(2) Diagnosis and data feedback
(3) Clarification of goals and action planning
(4) Realizing action plans and evaluation.

In the **agreement-phase** there are some conversations and interviews with the headmaster, a group of teachers, sometimes with parents or with the school maintainer to find out whether the needs of the staff fit into what we can offer to them. In the end the teachers‘ conference has to decide with a qualified majority wether to take part in the project. The agreement will not be signed if less than 75% of the staff is willing to co-operate. Afterwards a steering-group has to be elected by the staff, representing the different groups in the staff, such as male and female, science teachers and language

teachers, „traditionals“ and „innovators“, younger and older. The headmaster or his deputies has to be member in the steering-group, a teacher organisation deputy can be a member. A workable group size of six to ten persons is recommended. The group elects a „speaker“. The steering-group works in partnership with the external advisor. The school maintenance and administration has to be involved to back up the process.

In the **diagnosis-phase** data are collected to describe and to analyse the situation in a more objective way. This phase is slightly slowing down the process in order to improve the participation of all in a democratic way. Everyone has to receive the opportunity to take part in a collective problem definition. Appropriate instruments are recommended. In this phase the steering-group decides the way and the time when the pupils and parents are actively included. Sometimes they do not feel able to handle the complexity of too many opinions at the same time and decide to work with parents later or leave parents' interests to the headmaster.
Up to now we have almost no experience with the systematic integration of the school maintenance board; but we have some indicators that it might be a mistake not to involve the board.

When the **goal-clarification and action planning** begins some teachers complain about wasted time before. They often do not recognise that the careful analysis of the situation bears in itself perspectives of change. In this phase teachers can negotiate their visions and perspectives, bringing aims and tasks in a hierarchy. They start to work in groups on selected questions after a collective decision. Most teachers feel comfortable in taking over responsibility for a certain task not for their own sake or individual interest but as a mandate of the teaching staff. During this phase they need structuring advice to groupwork, project management, decision making processes in a team.

The phase of **implementation and evaluation** very often cannot take place within the same school year. It underpins the notion of experimental innovation to secure success. In most schools there is almost no encouraging feedback culture; teachers are not used to report on their own work by presenting in front of their colleagues. They are not used to criticise in a constructive manner. This needs to be trained and established.

SCHILFESCH is trying to instrument the four phases by means of monitoring, counselling, supervision, training, coaching and giving feedback. The teaching staff remains the „owner“ of the process.

7. SCHILFESCH in practice

The above description of the development process in four phases is „idealistic“ of course. As a matter of fact: it helps to check and balance an ongoing process especially when the „red thread“ has been lost. But it bears many yet unsolved problems. I am going to discuss a few of them.

Steering group

The function of this group is not really clear in general and to the members themselves (Fischer 1998). The group has to take over parts of school leadership for a limited amount of time. Most teachers hesitate to do so because they lack confidence in their abilities or they are afraid to be mistrusted by colleagues. The group is necessary in schools sized up to more than twenty teachers in the staff. The task of steering a development process has different aspects: the group organises opinion-forming and decision-making processes, raises crucial questions to be answered in diagnosis and evaluation, serves as a clearing board, regulates conflicts, coordinates development projects, organises feedback procedures, training camps and inservice training facilities. In the long run the steering group takes over what can be learnt from the external advisor/ facilitator. The successful management of groupwork within an appropriate amount of time is one of the most difficult tasks.

Sometimes it happens that the external moderators merged into the steering group and lost their distance, no longer being able to prevent the group from becoming a „closed shop“ or informal „chatbox“.

We have to think about equivalents to the steering group, such as the leadership committee, the „headmaster-team“ or any else.

School leadership

The part of the headmistress/headmaster in school development processes is not sufficiently reflected upon. She/he has to be member of the steering group to be involved into the ongoing processes. But what about her/his role in conflicts? A strong headmaster might be able to handle his role, a weak or anxious one is a problem anyway. Some steering groups leave the „foreign affairs“ to the headmaster and care for the inner-educational affairs. The liaison between headmaster, school administration, and maintenance board sometimes can turn out as a mighty opposition to the educational policy of the staff.

School leadership in a protestant school has to be looked at from a systematic point of view.

Participation of parents

Up to now we do not have experienced the ongoing participation of parents in a school development process. Parents' opinion is questioned, deputies take part in conferences or teamwork, some schools continuously run parents projects like catering or library services, parents organise social events, fund-raising, public relations, but teachers cooperation with parents is obviously of minor relevance to them. The part of parents as „shareholders“ is not sufficiently worked out.

Participation of pupils

Although protestant schools claim the mutual cooperation of teachers, parents, and pupils to be an essential core of the christianity (Leben 1979; Potthast 1981), the

participation of pupils still seems to be neglected. In some schools pupils' opinions were asked for as a source for diagnosis procedures and additionally for evaluation. The steering group was always enthusiastic about the competent enrichment that came from the pupils as a result of a questionaire, letters to the staff, foto exhibition or in form of a rap composition (!). It was felt that the pupils contributions to diagnosis, evaluation, action planning were of crucial importance to the development in whole. These experiences need to be broadened.
Teachers complaints about pupils passivity, lack of interest, or mental absence sometimes has to do with overprotection and lack of tasks which give them the feeling of being needed.

Continuity

The coordination and negotiation work of the steering group makes obvious that the character of teacher's work has to be redefincd: teaching, counseling, assessment, education and innovation have already been defined (Dt. Bildungsrat 1970). The cooperation, convincing, negotiation work with colleagues and others turn out to be an additional part of teacher's work.
Sometimes the moderators/ facilitators worked very hard not to become overwhelmed by multiplied problems. The tendency to quickly jump from one affair to the next – which is demanded in a teacher's everyday business – very often reduced the efficiency of the steering group. Once again the moderators became merged to the informal culture of interactions and forgot their competence to set structure and rhythm.

Protestant uniqueness

Is there any crucial difference to school development processes in public state schools?
At the first glance: no difference, and appearantly an attitude of reserve on the side of the teachers to claim for difference. They used to have a personal and collective history with discussions about the christian „uniqueness" of the school, overburdened with idealistic claims and very little results as to the teaching and educating. The history usually is not highly evaluated, they often remember unsatisfying outcomes. Some of them felt the discourse on Christianity to be not really fair because they are employed by the church and loose their job in case they fundamentally critisize the maintainer of the school. To continue the discussion is necessary under different conditions and in a different setting. When there is a rather safe atmosphere of mutual trust within the teacher staff they begin to open the discussion and continue to think about the religious dimension of education and schooling, referring to:

- subject „religion" and fundamental religious knowledge in the different classes,
- prayers and worship,
- religion within project work and between subjects,
- religion in school life, in extracurricular activities, in the celebration of holy days,
- religion in the relationship between pupils, teachers, parents and the school community,
- religious reasoning in recruiting physically handicapped children,

- diaconic experiences for the pupils during practical periods in diaconic institutions.

The discussion of whether and how many children from different denominational backgrounds or non-christian religions should or could be recruited has begun in some schools, but not yet led to a result within the school programme. One new protestant comprehensive school in Westfalia recently began to work claiming to adopt the challenge of multiculturalism in the social environment of the school.

I could not find a special discussion about assessing achievement from a protestant point of view, although there are some experiments with written comments instead of figure marks.

Schools are different, protestant schools appearantly are more different. But they work on similar issues:

- reconstruction and negotiation of a mission statement,
- improvement of the curriculum work, the extracurricular activities, the relationship between pupils, teachers, and parents,
- professionalizing staff development, i.g. communication and decision making processes,
- improvement of teaching and learning processes,
- promotion and support structures in favor of gifted and handicapped children.

8. Conclusions and perspectives

The SCHILFESCH project has in some cases served as an incentive to the teacher staff. One could observe outcomes of an empowerment by means of reflection, action, and evaluation in a team of colleagues. The „pull“ from inside of the school to stimulate a development is different in any case. The case A refers to a kind of isolation with lack of challenge which made the teachers doubt about the quality of the school; the started to review the curriculum in whole. The case B refers to an encrustet tradition causing problems in the social interaction of teachers and lack of nuturing themselves; school B began with a thorough evaluation of the social climate. School C seems to be a school for an élite, but the teachers feel incomfortable about it: searching for new methods of teaching they try to better coordinate different dimensions of the programme.

Are they „models“ „forerunners“ or „blueprints“ for other schools? If one wants to conclude this from empirical evidence then much more evaluative research has to be done. They could be named as „leading the way“ in terms of process development; most important aspects of which are

- to take over the responsibility for the quality of education and for any change,
- to reflect continuously on pupils needs and teachers work,
- to organise an ongoing process of checks and balances in the schools programme.

What protestant schools need to become „good“ schools is something like this:

- Empowerment of the staff by incentives like inservice education, action research projects, cooperative models of curriculum development and school leadership between university and school, theory and practice.
- Feedback by an- empirical assessment of what schools and teachers achieve (To work in neglected, narrow, unsufficient rooms but to spread out an optimistic fire every day is a really „high“ performance. To bear the burden of a hindering management and compensate it by educational creativity takes a lot of teachers time)
- Promotion of intern evaluation by teacher-research studies following the model of the „reflective practitioner“ (Schön 1983).
- Support to the definition of criteria of quality, criteria of educational success.
- External evaluation in addition to the internal, concerning for example the selectivity of recruitment, parents chose motives, effectiveness of compulsory religious education for all and of homogenius religious grouping.

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