Fragmented Reforms: The spatial conditions and implications of school reform in a polarized rural-urban setting.

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The paper explores to what extent spatial conditions define and determine location and success of implementing school reforms. It serves as a previous insight into the presentation at the 2015 RC21-conference in Urbino and as an abstract for an article to be published.

The chair for Urban Planning has been involved in different projects on the relation of spatial development and schools in teaching and research and on this topic also is cooperating with the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in the Thuringia. We conducted several teaching projects on children's participation and the question of school development and we accompany scientifically the Weimar School Development Project of the Thuringian IBA.

In this paper we will present our findings based on a study of the implementation of school reform in the federal state (Land) of Thuringia in Germany that was performed in the context of a study project. Eight newly installed Community Schools, in German Gemeinschaftsschulen (i.e. schools including common learning from primary school to highschool diploma) in different spatial conditions (rural areas, shrinking cities and flourishing urban areas) have been studied with regard to the conditions and strategies of their establishment, their relation to the spatial environment and the prospects to enhance socio-spatial development and educational chances in the respective area.

General framework

Placed into an international comparison the German school system is notoriously famous for its exclusionary power. In spite of the introduction on so called "mass universities" in the 1970ies and the ongoing increase of students leaving school with a high school diploma that allows to enter university, it still remains largely unlikely to get that far if you have non-German parents, parents who receive welfare or are

unemployed or have a non-academic background themselves (Krüger-Hemmer 2013; Prenzel et. al. 2014, Baur 2012). One strategy to counter this is the introduction of a Community School that in contrary to the traditional West-German tripartitioned secondary school system allows all students to stay in one Community School and graduate with different kinds of diploma. Lately, several federal states (Länder) have introduced Community Schools to counter the problem of a social segregation through school education.

Looked from a perspective of spatial development and infrastructural planning, the school reform in this, radically shrinking Land of Thuringia however serves another function: In question is whether the combination of school types especially in shrinking areas also can help to improve and stabilize school services and capacities, solve and lower transportation costs. Therefore, reasons for the school reform in Thuringia are to be found not only in educational politics but also in infrastructure planning. Since 2011, 32 schools have decided to transform into a Community School, more are planning to do so.

In question however is, what impacts – in either aspect – this reform will have in different spatial contexts of the polycentric and spatially polarized Thuringia with its large rural and demographically and economically shrinking areas and few urban hubs in the middle of the country that have experienced growth during the last years (for more information on the spatial context, see: Barz-Malfatti/Welch-Guerra 2007, Welch-Guerra 2010).

On the one hand, the correlation of school careers and spatial conditions has much less been an issue of research than the impact of parental background on school success. Of course, in Germany, just as in the U.S. in example, schools in segregated and marginalized parts of cities are oftentimes unable to help the large amount of disadvantaged and oftentimes non-German students to succeed in school well enough to graduate with a high-school diploma (Mack 2009; Ditton/Krüsken 2007; for best practice cf. Werkstatt-Stadt 2004; Quadratkilometer Bildung 2015 etc.). But much less is spoken about the relevance of specific spatial contexts in rural or shrinking areas –

even though statistics show clearly that a lower share of children growing up in rural areas graduates from school with a high-school diploma. One consequence of the little attention given to spatial conditions as such is that it remains fairly unclear what impacts a school reform might have in that respect in different spatial contexts (cf. to one of the few publications: Krüger/Orth-Heinz 2010, also Budde 2007 for the Land of Brandenburg, Friedrich-Schilller-Universität 2013 for rural cases).

On the other hand, in Germany school planning in reaction to shrinkage in rural as well as in urban areas largely results in the closure of schools in villages and towns, and a centralization of schools, with university-enabling degrees being offered almost exclusively in the regional towns. This not only leads to an increase of transportation for students and teachers and a centralization of transportation networks, but might also lead to a deepening of the polarization between high school graduates and those with a secondary graduation between children coming from cities and the surrounding rural areas, as raising distances and transportation costs might further deter rural students from gaining a graduation that opens up academic careers.

School reforms in Thuringia however, seems to follow a different model. So far however it has not been studied in what way the school reform actually has been implemented. Looking at the distribution of the 32 Community Schools no significant pattern can be identified with respect to the school type or spatial conditions that lead to the transformation of a specific school into a Community School. Also, so far, one hardly can judge upon the impact of the transformation due to the short amount of time since the process started. With regard to the questions raised above one can see that this, however, should be done in the course of the transformations being completed. However, already it is possible to research the spatial and administrative resp. political conditions in which the transformations took place and to compare in what way the different local conditions impacted, catalysed or framed the reform – and might either enhance or hinder its success. Facing demographic shrinkage of rural areas and small rural towns to be expected in Germany in general the adaption of school systems and sustaining of quality education will be a decisive factor to keep young families and people from moving away. Against this background, the paper

explores to what extent spatial conditions define and determine location and success of implementing the school reform in Thuringia, Germany.

Methodology and Research Design

In the course of a study project that was performed with 20 students in Winter 2014/15 eight newly installed Community Schools in different spatial conditions have been studied. Schools to be studied were chosen according to their spatial contexts and the progress of reform-implementation that was to be at least officially implemented. To enable a comparison between different spatial contexts schools were to be located in most different spatial contexts (rural shrinking areas, shrinking cities and flourishing urban areas inner cities, flourishing urban areas inner cities, segregated neighbourhood). Following these criteria, Community Schools in Jena, Weimar and Erfurt (demographically stable), Eisenach, Sonneberg and Suhl (shrinking towns) and Oldisleben, Aschara and Rodeberg (shrinking rural areas) were chosen to execute case studies. Jena and Eisenach are additionally relevant as cases in segregated neighbourhoods.

These schools were studied with regard to the conditions and strategies of their establishment, their relation to the spatial environment and architectural conditions and the prospects to enhance socio-spatial development and educational chances in the respective area. Each school has been surveyed and analysed according to a similar matrix developed through research literature on the different aspects of school development and spatial contexts.

To perform the empirical study, techniques of qualitative empirical research have been used such as manual based expert interviews, on site observation, spatial analyses of morphology, transportation network and socioeconomic factors with cartographic methods.

The case studies

The case studies reveal that the progressive pedagogic concept of the Community School can have very different spatial effects and that it is to be assumed that these

are closely linked to demographic trends and spatial conditions surrounding the Community School. While one might assume that in places that show demographic decline, the Community School seems to provide a good alternative to the differentiation of school types it is however in the growing towns of Jena and Weimar that the Community School seems to work as a school that attracts all classes and milieus and manages to enhance educational chances for all.

In the rural context instead, as well as in urban contexts of shrinking cities, the school reform tends to be performed in a competitive manner. In the village of Oldisleben it seems, that their Community School may compete out the elementary school of Heldrungen, the neighbouring village. As both villages are situated in the shrinking Kyffhäuser County they might face a common problem in future. The central place of this county is Artern, the most attractive small-town is Bad Frankenhausen on the Kyffhäuser Mountain and the number of children might hardly be enough for one or two General or Community schools altogether (classes 5-10 beside the Grammar School classes). Instead of competition between villages a concept of a regionalized approach on school infrastructure within the frame of a Community School as a school for every child might have been more sustainable.

There are also towns shrinking like Eisenach, famous for the Wartburg Castle and car industry. Here the transformation of the Eastend General/Secondary School into a Community schools seems to have the potential to revitalize this neighbourhood "behind the tracks" of the Leipzig-Frankfurt railway. Here the connection between the pedagogic and the spatial approach might be found in the readjustment of the Eisenach school net by avoiding a redlining between "good" and "bad" schools. The same hopes they had in Köppelsdorf, part of the small-town of Sonneberg, just adjacent to the Bavarian border in the South of Thuringia. Transforming the General/Secondary School into a Community School meant to improve the image of the school within the municipal school net. Indeed the number of registrations rose in comparison to another General/Secondary School. But on the other hand the municipal and county policy wants to focus the schools in the historic inner city of Sonneberg and the main station nearby. All three cases show different ways, how the

transformation into a Community School becomes a tool to gain competitive advantage towards other schools in town or rural area.

However, there are also schools that creatively use the window of opportunity for reforming their profile and teaching (Suhl, Rodeberg and Aschara). Here we have the case of Suhl, a heavily shrinking former industrial town in the South of Thuringia. Here the pedagogic Jenaplan concept (Petersen 1937) has already been established in 1993 in one school as a model project. Due to the adjustment of the municipal school net to cope the shrinking this school had to change place several times. Maybe there were also political efforts to decrease the attractiveness of such an "alternative" public school. But the parents stayed faithful and although within a shrinking environment, the numbers of pupil's registrations was stable. Now the school is near the inner city in a renovated school building from the 1980s.

Also the villages of Aschara and Rodeberg combined pedagogic successes and pretensions with a spatial matter. Both villages are in the Unstrut-Hainich-County, a rural area dominated by the landscape of the Hainich forest and the Unstrut river. The local capital Mühlhausen, a heritage, has once been a major node in medieval times. Rodeberg is a village some kilometres away from this town; Aschara administratively belongs to Bad Langensalza, a small-town between Erfurt and Mühlhausen. In the latter Community School it is astonishing, that parents register the children in the Aschara school in the south of the municipality although they live in another village north of the urban node. Also parents from the town send their kids into the village. The extra logistic efforts the municipality has to take (with funding from the Land) seem to be worth to have a village school as a Community School on a rural campus. Also Rodeberg is an established village school. They try to connect themselves with the "rest of the world" as member of the Cultural Agent Programme, funded by the Land (TMBWK 2014). This program widens the horizon of the children with the help of art and culture to counteract the possible narrowness of a rural milieu.

Nevertheless we experienced in our cases that there a much smaller numbers of pupils that head for a high school grade than in urban Community Schools. The empirical data

is too small yet, but the trend is visible and explainable. As rural Community Schools usually have too little number of pupils for the establishment of own high-school classes it is necessary to change school when you turn the age 14/15 (after class 8). This is actually not a big deal – unless your whole social network is localized around the Community School that gets you the Secondary level after class 10. High-school diploma might mean the change of your social environment in a difficult age. In towns this is not a big problem as often Community Schools without own high-school-grade-classes cooperate with another Community School, a Grammar School or a Vocational Center nearby.

Research Results

Our analysis has been a qualitative one and done is too early to already evaluate either the implementation of the Community School in Thuringia or the spatial consequences of it. However, with regard to the questions raised in the beginning on the differences of reform implementation and its potential impacts one can draw certain assumptions that need to be validated through further research.

We have acknowledged three types of development approaches: There are "demographic competitors", who utilize the pedagogic reform to establish a single school for every pupil and thus achieve a stabilization of local registrations to the local school within a shrinkage environment. The number of registrations seems to be the crucial value to compete within the administrative structures. Often but not necessarily the alternative pedagogic approach achieves also a better level of education in a decentralized spatial manner.

Another type is the "alternative pedagogue", a Community School that is primarily successful because of the different way of teaching. Jenaplan (as in Weimar and Suhl), Dalton (in Erfurt) and other possible alternative educational methods are put under the umbrella of the Thuringian Community School and eventually model projects can become a stable part of the public school net. An exceptional example is Jena, where the whole school net shifted into a progressive system of only Community Schools and Grammar Schools (because all General/Secondary Schools have been transformed),

which makes the Jena school net systematically better as they ceased the logic of children left behind: on every school the highest grade is possible, but not necessarily a must.

The third type we revealed is the "clusterer of sociocultural infrastructure", where the school gets involved into the place-making (in Healey's sense) of a neighbourhood as in our cases of Jena and Weimar. But also rural neighbourhoods, a bunch of villages can be of that type as Rodeberg and its Cultural Agents Program shows. This type is linked to the concept that is in German named Bildungslandschaften (for the scientific discourse see: Montag-Stiftungen Urbane Räume 2013; Klein/Kühnlein 2011; Oelkers 2012; Solzbacher/Minderop 2007; Bleckmann/Schmidt 2012 etc.). They do it for the sake of their pupils, because within that network of sociocultural infrastructure they can offer their children a broader meaning of education – to serve that village from the saying, which is needed to raise a child. This interlinks the pedagogic approach of the school to a planner's approach of developing a neighbourhood or a village.

Accordingly, the study revealed different types of strategies depending on interests of actors involved, spatial and demographic conditions ranging from neoliberal competition on the one hand and the search for the realization of a school reform concepted on the other. While Thuringia has been pursuing the implementation of an integrated Community School (including common learning from primary school to highschool diploma) for pedagogical reasons and in order to deal with demographic decline in rural areas, local decisions to take part in the program follow very different reasons.

Mostly, these reasons follow the logic of neoliberal paradigms of spatial development and are related to locational competition either between rural municipalities or schools themselves. This, along with the very specific spatial local conditions, profiles and personal of the schools results in a broad variety of schools resulting out of the reform concept of Community Schools and, in consequence, to an ambivalent picture of potential impact on quality of education and educational opportunities resulting out of the reform. Also, it seems that the governmentally led strategy to reform schools in

the end does not comply with governmental plans for spatial development but instead gives rise to spatial dynamics solely induced by local decisions on school development.

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