

Ingo Richter

Regionalisation Process in German Education

**Presentation at the Conference on “The Atlas of Regional Educational Systems” in Moscow
December 19th, 2014**

1. What are Regions? – Past, Present, Future.

The Holy Roman Empire which existed from the Mediaval Ages until 1806 in Central Europe consisted of several hundred member states. It was a confederation with an emperor, the Kaiser, and a kind of parliament, at the top. The member states were independent states also with a head of state at the top, a king, a prince, a duke, a count, a bishop or archbishop, but there were also free cities with a city council at the top. Some states were big and mighty with thousands of inhabitants, while others were small and powerless with just some hundred people. We could call these states regions, but, that’s pretty useless, because there was no central administrative power, just the Kaiser as the head of a loose confederation.

Thesis 1: Regions are mainly administrative units of a bigger entity.

The Holy Roman Empire was followed in 1815 by the “German Confederation” which existed until 1871. There was a couple of member states which were *completely independent, no Kaiser and no central authority, with two dominant powers Austria and Prussia and some more member states, like Bavaria or Saxonia e.g. To call these member states regions of the “German Confederation” would also be useless, because regions must be somehow equal or at least comparable.*

Thesis 2: Regions are of comparable size.

After these two confederations Germany became a federal state. At first there was the “German Reich” with the Kaiser from 1871 to 1919 and then the “Weimar Republic” from 1919 to 1933. These two federations – as

uncomparable as they were – had one thing in common. There was a dominant state within the federation which was Prussia, and Prussia as well as the other member states was a centralised state. These member states had administrative units, provinces, districts and counties, but these units were more or less powerless. They had no life of their own.

Thesis 3: Although regions are administrative units they do have some power of their own.

Interesting enough, the so called “Third Reich”, Nazi Germany, from 1933 to 1945 which was a highly centralised state, had a very effective administrative structure. There was the central authority of the “Reich” and just one second administrative level which were the regions, called “Gau”. They were approximately of equal size, but they did not really have administrative or political power.

The same was true for the German Democratic Republic (GDR) which existed in Eastern Germany from 1949 to 1990 which also had two administrative levels, the state as such and the districts.

Thesis 4: In the past in Germany only totalitarian regimes had an administrative structure on the basis of regions.

If we look at Germany today we find a disturbing picture. Unified Germany is a federal state with 16 member states. And so was the former west German state with 12 member states, and there is no overall administrative structure on the basis of regions, because the administrative organisation of the states is a state matter. The federation has no say in these organisational matters. So, we can ask the question whether the member states could be called regions, and I will come back to this question in a moment.

Thesis 5: In federal states the member states – under certain conditions - can be called regions.

If we take a look at the member states of the European Union we will find all sorts of regionalisation: 1. Most of the member states are centralised states with some kind of decentralisation but without a regional structure, like the UK, Spain, Portugal, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland and the new members in Easter Europe. 2. Some member states which were traditionally highly centralised like France or Italy introduces regions not so long ago. 3. In federal states like Belgium, Austria or Germany one can ask the question whether the member states of the federation are regions.

Thesis 6: In the EU there is no general regional structure, but in some member states there are trends towards regionalisation.

The European Union itself tries to develop a regional structure, but the Union itself cannot structure the administration of its members. Art 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the Union provides for a regional policy, and in Art. 176 a Fund for Regional Development is created, administered by the Commission after the advice of a Council of the Regions (Art. 306). The regions can be transnational transgressing the borders of the member states.

Thesis 7: The EU has developed a policy of regionalisation, even beyond the borders of the member states.

This overview shows that it is not so easy to say what regions really are. There is no country in the world which has nothing but a regional administrative organisation. All states – if they have regions at all – have administrative units above and below the regional level. Furthermore, it is very hard to say if regions – if they exist at all – constitute educational systems. In order to examine this, I will analyse the German case, and I will begin with the question whether the member states of the German federal state are as such educational systems and whether they are regions to our understanding.

2 . Are there sixteen educational systems in Germany and could they be called regions?

If we take a look at the competence distribution in German constitutional law regarding education, it is quite clear that education is a state matter, and that means that the states are responsible for law making and administration in education as well as for running schools and universities. There are three important exceptions. Here the federation has the legislative power, - but only the legislative power, not the responsibility for administration and maintenance. The three exceptions are:

- Preschool education,
- Vocational education and
- University access and graduation.

If schools and universities are state matters and if they therefore are independent in educational policy, what are then the most important structural differences between the states?

- Preschool education can be public (run by the local communities) or private (mostly run by the churches or other religious organisations).
- School entrance age can be at five, six or seven.
- Some states have six years of primary education, but, most states have only four years.

- Secondary education can be comprehensive or differentiated in two or three types of secondary schooling.
- The Gymnasium, the most prestigious type of secondary schooling, which gives access to university studies, can be eight years or nine years long, - some states giving students a choice to take the eight or the nine year track.
- Some states try to integrate disabled children into the general schools, others are proud of their special schools for handicapped children.
- In foreign language education there is a complete chaos. Most schools nowadays start with English as the first foreign language.
- In nearly all states religious education is part of the curriculum of public schools.
- In vocational education you will still find the traditional apprenticeship, but more and more vocational schools.
- Every state has its own regime for private schools and also for private school finance.
- In Higher Education the so called Bologna Process, e.g. the creation of one European Higher Education Area, gave considerable discretion to the signatory states.
- The biggest differences between the states in Higher Education were to be found in the financing of the universities. Just until recently half of the German universities asked for tuition, whereas the others were free. This year the last of the “Tuition States” gave up, so that again Higher Education in Germany is free for everybody. An – astonishing enough – tuition does not seem to make any difference.

Looking at this long list one could think that Germany indeed has 16 different educational systems, but these structural differences between the states are grounded in constitutional provisions which should establish a decentralised educational system, but not necessarily 16 different educational systems. Before we can make a decision on the character of education in Germany we have to look also at the centralising forces in German education. They strongly work against the decentralising forces mentioned before. These centralising forces can be constitutional instruments as well as informal trends in education.

- The federal constitution guarantees fundamental individual rights, as e.g. freedom of expression, religious freedom, parents rights, the rights of private schools, economic freedom etc. These rights supersede the state law, even the state constitutional law.
- International law, particularly EU-Law has a centralising effect in education.

- Some constitutions of federal states – like in the US – permit that the federal state funds projects in the member states and in the local communities, without having the competence for law making. This has a strong centralising effect, because who has the money, dictates the conditions for spending. The German constitution does not permit this kind of federal funding.
- The states can – of course – harmonise their educational systems through contracts. And, that is what they do! But, basically contracts suppose unanimity of the contracting parties. Contracts between some of the member states do not bind the others. There is no majority rule in federal law.
- Structures are not rigid, they permit exceptions and therefore flexibility.
- And then there are informal forces which contribute a lot to the harmonisation of education.
 - a. The curriculum – and that is of course the most important element – nowadays is based on scientific knowledge, and science – after a while – means unity of knowledge.
 - b. School books are published by private publishers and they have to be admitted by the school administration.
 - c. Student assessment by standardised tests becomes more and more popular. This has an enormous centralising effect.
 - d. The Teacher training is organised by the states, but, the states try to harmonise the teacher training in order to facilitate teacher mobility.
 - e. Finally, the media – particularly the social media – play an important role. Probably they have the greatest influence on the harmonising and centralising process in federal states.

I would say that because of the just mentioned centralising forces in Germany there is one educational system and there are 16 educational subsystems because of the structural differences.

So, if the German member states of the federation can be called educational systems or at least sub systems, are they regions? We'll just check the list:

- They are indeed administrative units, they are even more than administrative units because they are states. But, they are parts of a larger unit, the federal state.
- They are not of comparable size, because their population varies between 1 Mill. and 10 Mill.
- They do have power, because they are competent in educational policy.

I think we can call them regions even if they are not of comparable size.

All member states of the German federation have some kind of sub-units. The big states have two administrative levels, the districts (Bezirke) and the counties

(Kreise), e.g. Bavaria, one of the big states, has 7 districts, 71 counties and 25 cities outside the counties. The small states don't have districts but just counties, as e.g. Schleswig-Holstein which has 11 counties and 4 cities. One could call the districts regions, but in education this does not make much sense, because the districts are just administrative sub-units of the states. They do not have power in education. The counties and the cities, on the other hand, do have some say in educational policy, particularly regarding school buildings and maintenance, but they lack any competence in structural and curriculum questions. That's why we cannot call them regions. Therefore in the end Germany has a regional policy in education, but the regions are the member states of the federation. And this becomes quite clear if we look at the development of educational politics in the last decade. Everything began with the so called PISA shock.

3. The PISA – Shock and the New Educational Policy 2001- 2014

The “Program for International Student Assessment”(PISA) is a standardised testing program for 15 years old students developed by the “Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development” (OECD) for the administration in 32 states, 28 OECD – member states and 4 non-member states, one of them being the “Russian Federation”. The idea was to repeat the test every third year and to choose each time a slightly different approach, stressing either students competencies in reading, mathematics or natural science. So, until now, we have had five testing waves in 15 years. You will all know the tables ranking the participating states after the average results, and everybody spotting the place of his or her country on the list. PISA always compares the results of the participating states and the changes over time. So, politicians and educators can find out, where their country stands and whether the results have improved or not. So, in 2000 in Germany the average reading competence was far below the OECD average, and for Russia the results were even worse. There was an outcry in the German public, and for years educational policy in Germany was dominated by these bad results. Since, Germany's position in this international ranking has much improved. In 2012, with now 34 OECD – member states and 31 participating non-member states, the reading competencies of German students are significantly above average, whereas Russia's position has not that much improved.

Why do I mention all this? The PISA results have been used to compare states, and the results were powerful instruments for the educational debates in most of the participating states, particularly in Germany, because the Germans thought that they had the best educational system of the world and suddenly they realised that they were not even average but more or less at the bottom. But, then with some kind of effort the Germans managed to improve the results and to make it not to the top but clearly above the average. And, everybody was

happy! But, this is not the reason why I mention PISA. I mention it because the PISA results were used to compare regions within Germany.

The results of the first PISA tests were broken down on the basis of the 16 German states, the so called “Länder”, and so were the results of the three following tests from 2003 to 2009. This study was called PISA-E, and the E stands for enlargement. In order to do this enlarged study, the sample had to be bigger. Instead of 5.000 students participating in the international assessment 50.000 students had to participate in the national PISA-E study, which means 10 times as many. This large sample of students was necessary to get reliable and valid results for all states, some states being big with 10-15 million inhabitants others being small with only 1 or 2 million inhabitants. The results showed of course big differences between the states, only two states being above the OECD level and all the others being below the OECD level. This again led to a heated debate on educational politics, this time on the national level, some states claiming to do better in education than others, and some states pointing out that the PISA studies are not fair and that they compare regions one cannot compare because of the existing differences between them. PISA – so they said – does not mean anything for the quality of education, but only reflects the socio-economic differences between the states.

Of course the researchers also knew that, and they tried to neutralise the socio-economic conditions like religion, poverty, migration, urbanisation, industrialisation, and several other factors which might be important for educational success. But, finally the discussion ended in a deadlock, one side saying that the influence of educational policies on educational achievement can be isolated and measured, and the other side still saying that it is useless and meaningless to compare apples and pears. But, in the end the discussion and this deadlock had some positive effects on the educational policies of the German states. The Conference of Ministers of Education convened on a bunch of measures in order to make the regions more comparable than they were before:

1. The ministers developed “Standards of Educational Achievement” (Bildungsstandards) as output measures, for several subject matters, school types and levels, and these standards are now applied by all states on the federal level. Before, the input had been measured and compared, particularly expenditures, school facilities, teacher force, teacher/student ration, curriculum, teaching hours etc, but not the outcome (See Tab.5).
2. The ministers founded the “Institute for Quality Development in Education” (Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen –IQB) in Berlin at Humboldt University for the further development of the standards and for the development of the tests which are necessary for the assessment of the educational achievement. So, the states got informed in how far the standards were achieved, and on this basis the states could be compared. But, not only the states could be compared. The establishment

of the “Standards of Educational Achievement” and the regular testing made it possible also to compare regions, districts and even schools within the states (See Tab.6 and 7).

3. The ministers founded the „Center for International Comparative Student Assessment“ “Zentrum für Internationale Vergleichsstudien”(ZIB) in Munich at the Technical University for the further development and realisation of the coming International Student Assessment Studies like PISA 2015, TIMMS, IGLU and all the others, now under the new constitutional provision of Art. 91 b al. 2 which provides for the cooperation of the federation and the states in matters of Comparative International Student Assessment Studies (See Tab.8).
4. The southern German states like Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg always had centralised examinations at least for the Gymnasium graduation which is the Higher Education entrance examination. Now all states organise central exams (See Tab. 9). This permits local and regional comparisons within the state. Some states agreed to have central exams on a multi-state level, and this means that comparisons between these states become possible.
5. In 2006 – even before the last PISA-E – study the federal minister of education and the state ministers of education started the “ Educational Reporting System” which is an indicator based regular national educational monitoring procedure every second year, run by four research institutes and the statistical offices of the federation and the states. “Indicator based” means that the institutes first had to convene on a list of educational indicators which would be used again and again to make the outcomes comparable between the states. Each report is based on the same set of indicators in order to measure change over time. Apart from the regular investigation each report has a special theme which allows some kind of deeper research. Up to now we have 5 of these reports (For the indicators see Tab. 10)
6. Finally, in 2009, the Federal Minister of Education started the “National Educational Panel Study”(NEPS) at the University of Bamberg which is a longitudinal study of six cohorts in five dimensions in order to measure the competence development of 60.000 persons. I will come back to this “multi-cohort-sequential design” later (See Tab.11). As the dimensions cover a broad range of research problems 15 research corporations and 15 universities work together. As the idea is to follow the competence development of these persons over lifetime, it is a permanent project of many many years which will cost the federal government millions of Euros and which will nurture the research projects of generations of researchers. After the initial phase of four years the Federal Government transferred the responsibility for the National Educational Panel Study to

a national research community funded by the federation and the state together.

7. Last not least, the Federal Ministry of Education and a bunch of independent foundations initiated and financed many school projects in order to find out about best practices in education. Meanwhile, in the archives of the ministry and the foundations you will find information about hundreds of these projects. They cover reforms of the school structure, the curriculum, teacher training, school books and the media, teaching methods and so on. Just to name a few of these foundations: Bertelsmann, Bosch, Freudenberg, Deutsche Kinder- und Jugend-Stiftung, Stiftung Brandenburger Tor, Mercator, Vodafone, and several others. They all operate on the national level, but, some of them run regional centers and collect the data on a regional level. The most ambitious of these projects is the program “Regional Learning Management” (“Lernen vor Ort”), initiated by the Federal Minister of Education and financed by the Federal Government and the European Union. Eighteen cities and eighteen districts were singled out to set up a regional educational management unit in order to develop the regional educational system. The regions were free to choose their own program, but they were obliged to share their knowledge and their experiences with the other regions. Ten so called Transfer-Agencies were set up which are responsible for the knowledge transfer and the dissemination of experiences. (See Tab. 12).

This is the data basis for educational planning in Germany. The socio-economic data are provided by the general census which has been conducted twice in Germany since 1949, by the annual micro-census in 1% of the households and by the so called Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) which is conducted also every year in 11.000 households with 30.000 interviews and which covers a broad range of socio-economic questions. These data can be regionalised below the state level.

Conclusion

To regionalise educational systems is a political decision. The west German constitution as of 1949 which was confirmed after unification in 1990 has made this political decision in favour of the member states of the federation and not in favour of a regional level below the state level. There are administrative units below the state level as the districts of the bigger states, but they are just administrative units without an educational policy of their own, and there are the counties and the cities, which decide on buildings and maintenance of schools, but that is not enough to call them regions. So, we can answer the question

whether there is a regional policy in education in Germany: Yes, but the states are the regions. There is no trend to make the districts or counties so powerful that they can be called regions. There has always been and there is a trend to reform the state structure, that means to reorganise the federal landscape in order to make the states more equal, but that is another question.

If you permit a look into the future, I think that the EU regions could become the basis of a regional educational policy, but as long as the EU has no real power in education, this is “Zukunftsmusik” as we say in German: The Music of the Future.