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### **(3) National Education Policy in Focus: Organisation of Schooling in Germany: one-sided view of a complex discussion by Thorsten Bohl, Tuebingen, Germany**

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International discussions about educational structures/the organisation of schooling have a long tradition in Europe; in spite of this, there is no operationally defined and cross-nationally valid terminology available to describe the organisation/structure of education systems. Comprehensive schools mean different things in different countries; and indeed all education systems are to a lesser or greater degree selective. Nevertheless, these two terms – comprehensive and selective – are useful and widely used concepts in policy discussions about the structure of education systems. *Comprehensive systems* are either understood (for instance, in the UK) as a school system offering all kinds of secondary education programmes to the children of a particular district in one and the same school building. Also, comprehensive systems may denote a basic non-differentiated eight or nine-year long education program – as for instance in Finland – catering to all children. Conversely, *selective systems* may be understood in terms of admission requirements, tracking to different programmes, ability grouping, or screening procedures along the different phases (typically, non-promotion, retention/repetition of grades, and drop outs/transference to special education, etc.), as for example in the German education system.

In the GOETE countries the timing of the *transition from primary to secondary education* varies substantially, which can be viewed as one element of the degree of selectivity and stratification: Slovenia and Finland have no transition at all; in Poland and the United Kingdom transition takes place after 6 and 7 years of schooling respectively; the Dutch system only switches from primary to secondary programs after 8 years; in Italy and France after 5 years, and finally, in Germany transition takes place after 4 years (depending on the region, after 6 years) of schooling.

The educational research and policy debates of the past years – in particular in the aftermath of the PISA studies – have, among other things, recurrently pointed to the relationship among organization of schooling and student performance. For instance, there is evidence that in systems that track pupils very early (e.g., Germany) the level of performance depends heavily on ethnic, socio-economic status of the family of origin (OECD 2001; 2008). This issue lies at the heart of the discussion on how to tackle educational inequalities and ensure all pupils have equal opportunities.

In the aftermath of World War II, American and British allies attempted to introduce comprehensive school systems in Germany and were faced with insurmountable resistance from the part of German establishment. The reconstructed (West) German education system adopted the structures of the pre-war period of the Weimar Republic. The system in the German Democratic Republic was moulded according to socialist ideology and was structured as a comprehensive, polytechnic system.

All education reforms in West Germany since the 1960s and 1970s included a heated debate and controversy over the advantages and disadvantages of comprehensive or selective structures. During that period, the German Education Council (Deutscher Bildungsrat) acted as a mediating agent among the Ministries of the German Länder (the units of the federal state), which have the actual competency in education policy. It was established as a joint commission for educational planning and operating between 1966 and 1975 by federal and state governments to design needs and development plans for the German education system, to make recommendations on structural issues, to calculate the financial framework and to make recommendations for long-term planning. In 1969, the council recommended the introduction of comprehensive schools (Gesamtschule) as pilot projects; these experiments would make possible to assess upcoming policy-making decisions on structural changes based on scientifically controlled experiments. In western Germany, there were Gesamtschulen in most states since the 1970s. The issue proved, however, to be a party political issue of high brisance, especially after the Social-Democratic Party (SPD) campaigned with comprehensive school systems as the core of their reformist policy platform.

If the first decision of the Council on Education also supported by the CDU-politicians, in the following years it came to a virtual "school fight" between the CDU and SPD. This had to do with the simultaneous shift of power in favour of the federal government and the SPD. Comprehensive schools were made core of their reformist policies, however, when the SPD suggested introducing comprehensive schools nationwide, the Christian Democratic Union, teachers' and parents' associations and the churches organized opposition and the new legislation has been blocked. Controversies were rekindled in the wake of Reunification in 1990, and waxed and waned time and again since then. Debates over the 'right' organisation of schooling remain high in the agenda of education policy makers and stake-holders. Below we document an interview Professor Dr. Thorsten Bohl (University of Tuebingen, Germany), member of the GOETE consortium gave to the magazine 'bildung & wissenschaft'. The interview refers to a document launched by the Federation of Philologists (Philologenverband, PhV) in the region of Baden-Württemberg representing teachers from

grammar schools, i.e. the ( elite track within the three-tiered German school system. In its newsletter from April 2010 the Federation claimed that: “educational research does not lead to any convincing evidence for advantages of longer joint learning. Instead, there is much evidence that longer shared schooling leads to considerable disadvantages both for high-performing and under-performing pupils.” The PhV names numerous scientific studies in order to support this thesis.