

A new reform in teacher education? A historical perspective on recent developments in teacher education in Germany – the case of North Rhine-Westphalia

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Abstract

The relationship between universities, teacher educators and schools, as well as between theory and practical elements, has always been a central concern in teacher training worldwide. In German teacher education the lack of practical classroom experience for students during their studies has been continually criticised. A new reform in North Rhine-Westphalia implemented in 2009 has tried to create a closer link between universities and schools by introducing longer practical elements at university level. These elements are labelled as 'innovative' and 'new', even though similar reforms were trialled in Lower Saxony 40 years ago. This article discusses the main ideas behind the reforms by taking a historical perspective on teacher education and examining the challenges and opportunities accompanying this development. With the new structure the role of universities, centres for teacher education and schools is profoundly changed, meaning a stronger collaboration and a new range of responsibilities for each of them.

Keywords: Teacher education; Practical elements; Collaboration; Reform; Germany.

The history of teacher training in Germany – some key facts

Two central criticisms have repeatedly been levelled at teacher education in Germany since the beginning of the 19th Century: the weak relationship between theoretical and practical elements, and the inadequate structure of teacher training. Since 1810, teacher education has distinguished between the training of grammar school teachers (*GymnasialschullehrerInnen*) and elementary school

teachers (*VolksschullehrerInnen*). The former training was perceived as more academic, requiring subject knowledge because based at university, whereas the latter focused on practical elements requiring less subject knowledge, with a shorter duration and participation in further education seminars.

In the early 19th Century, F. A. W. Diesterweg (1790–1866) criticised the inadequate training conditions for elementary teachers, some of whom could hardly write and needed to do other jobs to earn a living. However, Diesterweg, himself a trained grammar school teacher, did not consider questioning the teacher education of grammar school teachers for being too academic and lacking practical elements (Freitag 2002). Attempts to establish a training system across the *Länder* (states of Germany) failed and standards varied. Teachers in the Weimar Republic (1918–33) were guaranteed the rights of the state, since they served as actors under the authority of the *Land* (Füssel 2011: 79). Teachers nowadays usually obtain civil servant status (Döbert 2010: 180). The debate about the appropriate location for teacher training gave rise during the Weimar Republic to the instalment of teacher training colleges of higher education serving all forms of teacher training.

A division was again made between the different forms of teacher training. Eduard Spranger argued that elementary school teachers did not need to have as much subject knowledge, so teacher training for grammar school teachers should remain at universities (Freitag 2002: 53); the separation of training between the types of school continued. The teacher training colleges of higher education (with the exception of one in Baden-Württemberg) were later integrated into universities, which are still responsible for the first phase of teacher education in Germany, with no interference from private institutions. The subsequent induction period (second phase of teacher education) is, however, undertaken by the local education authorities of the *Länder*.¹ Programmes such as Teach First, which was introduced in Germany two years

ago, are not as popular as they are in other countries (Ball & Junemann 2012). Students who want to train as teachers generally decide at which type of school they want to teach and choose two ^{iv} subjects, with Educational Science being the obligatory third subject. The average length of time for studying used to be four to five years (depending on the type of school), with a subsequent 24-month induction period (*Referendariat*). Since the implementation of the bachelor's and master's system the average time for studying at university is five years for all types of school, with a subsequent 18-month induction period (see Table 1). Qualified teachers in Germany are, on average, older than their European counterparts, as students need a master's degree to enter the second phase of teacher education. Entering the profession from a different career remains challenging.

Recent developments: increasing time spent at school – linking universities, centres for teacher education and schools

As the German education system is divided into the different *Länder* (federal education system), the Standing Conference of Education Ministers (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) functions as an organising body negotiating central ideas of reforms in Germany. Because of this particularity, the focus of this paper is on North Rhine-Westphalia, which is the most populous state in the country.

In the past, students normally started their induction period (second phase of teacher education) without having experienced much classroom teaching. The 1999 Bologna Reform brought changes to the education sector in Germany. The length of study, its variations between the different types of school and the lack of practical elements were especially criticised. Recommendations for teacher education were approved in 1998 (*Empfehlungen zur Lehrerbildung*), and four fields of competence were implemented in 2004 (KMK 2004). Many *Länder* decided to change their teacher training systems and introduced reforms including bringing in practical elements at an early stage of study. In response to these developments, an expert commission introduced recommendations for teacher education in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2007. These recommendations were implemented in the 'Reform of Teacher Training in North Rhine-Westphalia' (*Reform der Lehrerausbildung in Nordrhein-Westfalen*), which was passed by the state government in 2009. The reform shortened the second phase of teacher education and reallocated the time to the first phase. This means that the length

of time for studying has scarcely changed; in fact, it has increased for some students (eg primary school teachers). These developments were hailed as a 'new project' strengthening the quality of teacher training (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2012).

The reform implies the following core elements:

- increase the length of practical elements within the first phase of teacher education
- focus on didactics and teaching methods
- implement Primary School Education as an individual course of study, accompanied by adjustment to length of study across all types of school
- increase the significance of teacher training at university. (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2012).

The reforms were introduced along with the implementation of bachelor's and master's degrees. Table 1 gives a basic outline of teacher training in North Rhine-Westphalia under the current reform, with a focus on practical elements (school placements).

Table 1: Overview of teacher training in North Rhine-Westphalia with a focus on placements

The bachelor's programme, with its obligatory placements outside and inside school, functions as an orientation for the students to reflect on their choice of career. Students document their experiences in a mandatory portfolio across all phases of teacher education. In the first year of their master's degree, students spend five months at an assigned school and prepare short units of teaching.^v Teachers act as mentors, and students also attend seminars at universities and at centres for teacher education. According to the Ministry of Education, students gain an insight into the practical aspects of teaching at an early stage. Theoretical knowledge is combined with practical knowledge at schools. Students spend longer at school during their studies and receive feedback on their practice at universities, schools and centres for teacher education. This supports the students' professionalism. The adjustment to the length of study leads to the equivalence of degrees (Landesregierung Nordrhein-Westfalen 2013). On a practical level, this means changes for the institutions. Each school has to nominate teachers to function as mentors who supervise students at schools. Centres for teacher education provide counselling and support for students, a group they did not teach and supervise previously.

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Table 1: Overview of teacher training in North Rhine-Westphalia with a focus on placements

	Structure of teacher education	Practical elements/ placements	Length of placement
	Before study begins	Placement at school (without teaching)	20 days
First phase of teacher education	Bachelor of Education (six semesters/three years, studying two subjects + Educational Science)	Placement at school (without teaching)	Four weeks spent at school Four weeks at institution outside school
	Master of Education (four semesters/two years studying two subjects + Educational Science)	Placement outside school Placement at school (including small teaching units by student)	
	Master's degree (first state examination)		
Second phase of teacher education	Induction period	Placement at school (mainly teaching)	18 months
	Qualified Teacher Status (second state examination)		

Universities provide information on action research and didactics, meaning a stronger focus on practical elements and support. As students spend time at all three institutions, these institutions need to collaborate. For instance, the schools need to know what is taught at university in preparation for the internship. During the internship the schools have to inform the centres for teacher education about the progress of the students, so that the centres for teacher education can offer consultations for the students in accordance with their needs.

Recent developments from a historical perspective

As the lack of practical elements has always been a concern for teacher educators, previous reforms sought to enhance the collaboration between the different institutions by implementing more placements within the early phases of study. Two reforms are presented here and are compared with the reform in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Pilot scheme: single-phase teacher training in Lower Saxony (Osnabrück and Oldenburg)

Osnabrück and Oldenburg in Lower Saxony introduced a single-phase teacher training programme in the 1970s in order to overcome the imbalance of theory and practice (Wagner 1978). Financially supported by the *Bund*, the reform was withdrawn after just two years in Osnabrück and ten years in Oldenburg. This was the outcome of a political decision by the conservative government of Lower Saxony, in spite of the universities having wished the reform to continue (Spindler 1982: 296). The structure of the single-phase teacher training focused on practical elements, with two four-week periods spent inside and outside school, another two six-week blocks at school, as well as five months spent at a school. With regard to structure, the similarities between the current reform in North Rhine-Westphalia and the pilot scheme are striking.

The first section of study (first four to six semesters) in both reforms focuses on a period of orientation to the teaching profession and on preparation for the following five months spent at school. The second section focuses on practical experience, whereas the third section comes after the placement and concentrates on theoretical knowledge and preparation for the induction period. The 'old' and 'new' reforms are similar in structure, except that the current structure offers more freedom to change the field of study after the bachelor's degree (Regenbogen 2005: 71). Experiences made within the pilot scheme are well documented. The collaboration between universities, teacher educators and schools proved to be a major concern, posing challenges for all three groups. How to embed university and school structures, as well as finding a productive way to interact, were identified as central topics (Fichten et al. 1981).

Reform of teacher education in Bremen (Lehrerprüfungsordnung) – Halbjahrespraktikum (five-month placement)

A new reform of teacher education was introduced in Bremen in 1998, comprising more practical elements with two four-week periods outside and inside school, as well as a five-month placement at school, meaning that this reform contained the same elements as the current reform and the pilot scheme in Lower Saxony. The reform was introduced in order to use the time spent at school 'more effectively' (Hoeltje et al. 2003: 5). It expired with the introduction of the bachelor's and master's programme in 2003. An evaluation of the reform in Bremen revealed interesting facts about conflicting perceptions between the different groups. After initial criticism, students and their mentors at

school considered the focus on practical elements as beneficial. Some challenges regarding collaboration between the institutions were mentioned: Academic staff criticised the mentors for not being open to the 'innovative' teaching ideas of students, who were not allowed to try out their ideas in the classroom. They also criticised the lack of communication: only a minority of academic staff interacted with mentors. At the same stage, mentors complained about the lack of interest of academic staff, arguing that the latter left the students alone and made cooperation between university and schools impossible. Students mainly criticised the university structures as, in their eyes, the seminars lacked practical relevance. As a result, the university intended to revise the curriculum and introduced meetings between the university and schools. The impact of the measures taken is unknown as the reform was cancelled shortly afterwards (Hoeltje et al. 2003: 5).

Outlook: a new reform in teacher education?

As the history of teacher education underlines, the reform in teacher education in North Rhine-Westphalia is only partly 'new', as similar reforms have been implemented in the past. Experience gained within the previous reforms indicates that exaggerated expectations of an enhancement of practical elements alone are not useful. Time is needed before the different actors involved in teacher education (eg teachers, students, mentors and university staff) perceive the reform as useful. Regarding university structures, the interdisciplinary discourse and an exchange of ideas within each discipline needs to be intensified.

It is likely that the different groups (universities, centres for teacher education and schools) will criticise each other for a lack of communication or blame each other for delivering the 'wrong' contents as each focuses on different aspects. Supporting the students, especially during the practical elements, thereby finding the right balance between theory and practice, is going to be the major challenge, as each group tends to have a different perspective on the priorities within teacher education. Teacher educators based at university have to interact with schools and centres for teacher education more than before as the university is no longer solely responsible for the first phase of teacher education. All three institutions need to reflect and adjust their current role and find (new) ways of communicating with and not against each other. Understanding that the different points of view can actually provide important stimuli for students and the development of teacher education proves to be the biggest challenge.

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Whether this reform succeeds or not also depends on the politicians. Within the federalist structure, a change of government in one *Land* usually implies changes for the education system. History shows that the previous reforms were only implemented for a short period of time. Stability is needed instead of short-term activism. The previous reforms can function as a lesson as to how not to introduce reform.^{vi} We can ignore what has happened in the past or we can take the opportunity to analyse the reasons for what happened and discuss the possible benefit for the current reform. The labelling of the reform in North Rhine-Westphalia as ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ reveals one particularity of German teacher education: because of the federal system, each *Land* is in charge of its own education system. The Standing Conference of Education Ministers tends to negotiate central ideas, but each *Land* adapts to these reforms in its own individual way. A documentation undertaken by the Standing Conference about the current situation of teacher education in 2014 reflects this heterogeneity. This 169-page report lists the structure of the first and second phases in the different *Länder*, and reveals the variation in the structure and types of school (KMK 2014). The *Länder* compete with each other for the best students and graduates, thereby emphasising the ‘innovative’ approach to education, instead of exchanging ideas. It is more than likely that this tendency will continue, costing money and resources that could be invested in teacher education.

A stronger collaboration between the *Länder* is evidently needed, as this would not only make it easier for students and teachers to change universities and schools, but also produce greater stability as not every *Land* would have its own distinctive education and teacher training system. The most relevant aspect should be to create a consensus throughout Germany between universities, centres for teacher education and schools regarding how to organise the relationship between theoretical and practical elements, otherwise the reform of teacher education will not last long, as the two examples mentioned showed. Only in this way can we arrive at a structure that is not constantly called into question.

Notes

ⁱ Teacher training and teacher education are used synonymously in this article.

ⁱⁱ This motivated line of argument distinguishing between the types of school can still be found being put forward by teachers today (von Bargen 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ A *Land* might have several local education authorities (*Bezirksregierung*) depending of its size. For example North Rhine-Westphalia has five education authorities: Arnsberg, Cologne, Detmold, Düsseldorf and Münster; centres for teacher education

are located within those districts.

^{iv} Teachers have to choose three subjects for some types of school.

^v Strictly speaking, the internship does not involve only short units of teaching, as the students also have to conduct a research project which is graded by the university once the five months come to an end. A one-to-one advisory discussion with a colleague from the centre for teacher education is obligatory for each student.

^v This does not mean that the idea itself, implementing more practical elements at university level, was bad. There were several reasons that the reform was not successful, such as its hasty introduction and the short time for implementation.

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