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#### **Starting School in Germany. The Relationship between Education and Social Inequality**

**Abstract:**

There is an ongoing and increasing debate worldwide over the best time to start formal education and on how to deal with the transition from a play-based learning to the initial stage of a formal curriculum. Crucial aspects being discussed are: readiness for school, curriculum concepts, institutional differences between early childhood education and school, and the cultural understanding of what it means to be a child. Modern societies vary in their answers to these questions. International studies (OECD and others) comparing students' performance, conceptualize this theme mainly from the perspective of later success or failure in school. In the case of Germany, they indicate a strong nexus between social origin, understood as cultural capital (Bourdieu), and school performance. The German system is considered the most unjust of all countries compared. The paper is based on a beginning empirical research project titled "Cultural meaning of starting school in Germany in comparison with Australia, and Canada". It will discuss the crucial role of this nexus in respect to starting school from a comparative cultural perspective and will focus primarily on rituals.

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## **Starting School in Germany. The Relationship between Education and Social Inequality**

### **Introduction**

Ever since schools have existed, the beginning of school has been of considerable consequence. Its significance is ritually anchored in the respective cultures and reaches far beyond the actual event itself. Herein are reflected historically grown cultural overall concepts of school, generational relationships as well as current educational-political tendencies. Particularly in perceived times of crisis in the educational system, attention is often turned to the introduction into the process of schooled learning.

Germany considers itself at the moment to be in such a time. In connection with this, a term that arose in the 1960s is often used: Bildungsnotstand translates to mean an educational state of emergency. In the 1960s an educational crisis was considered to be present in all western countries. It originated within the context of the Cold War and was triggered by the so-called Sputnik-Shock of the late 1950s. The “crisis” today appears in some ways to be limited only to Germany. However this “state of emergency”, similarly to the 1960s, can only be understood within the context of current political, economic and social crises.

### **„PISA-Shock“ as the hypocentre of the educational discourse in Germany**

Over the past several years the societal discourse about education in Germany has been dominated to a large extent by the so-called PISA-Shock. The reason for this is the mediocre ranking achieved by German pupils in international comparative studies, in particular the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). Standardised comparative testing of scholastic achievement on national, regional or local levels was, until fairly recently, not usual in Germany. In regard to this, the recent international comparative studies had an unusual impact on German society that hardly stands in proportionate relation to the actual results of the testing.

In no other participating country have the results left such deep traces behind. Either the other countries attained better rankings (i.e. Finland, Canada, Australia, Korea) or they paid little or no great attention to their own low ranking (i.e. Luxemburg). PISA-Shock has become a topos. The entire German school and university educational system, the country’s educational traditions, its concepts of raising and educating children – all are being scrutinised, all are being placed within the context of pre- and post-PISA. The explanation of this reaction is the idea that Germany has long taken for granted that it was one of the most educated countries. This belief had been supported by its historical experience, mostly based in the 19<sup>th</sup> C., as the country of “poets and thinkers”. The fact that this was never really examined empirically in the 20<sup>th</sup> C. relegates the assumption to a myth.

The implication here is that the international studies have left deep wounds in the German national identity. Not necessarily in terms of its national symbols as a state but rather, in terms of its overall cultural concept of self. The highly controversial German term: “deutsche Leitkultur” (the German defining culture with its preconceived notion of a homogenous ethnic and cultural community) as the middle point of a collective defining process of identity implies questions of societal differences and power in correlation to education in the sense of

*Bildung*. This German term is also not easily translatable. It is normatively charged, programmatic and has the central function of defining social differences both through certification as well as habitus (Vogel 2004, S. 37f.).

In no other OECD country is educational success so closely interrelated to social background as it is in Germany (compare for example Baumert/Schümer 2002, 159ff.; Schümer 2004, 74). Social milieus reproduce themselves. Along with income and social status, the cultural capital (Bourdieu) of the family, meaning mainly education as habitus, is determinant in terms of the educational biography of future generations. A child coming from the educated white collar has on the average, 4 times as much a chance of attaining a higher academic qualification than a child with the same intelligence and knowledge coming from the blue collar. In the state of Bavaria, that boasts the best scholastic achievement in Germany, the chances are as much as 6.65 times higher (dpa/taz 31.10.05, 7).

Since this lack of equal opportunity became apparent in 2000 through the publication of the PISA results, the situation, if not worse, has not gotten better either.<sup>1</sup> All the reforms since instituted in order to improve schools and scholastic achievement have not managed to reduce the differences between social groupings. Families with high cultural capital, awakened by the PISA results, recognised that further investment in the education of their children was both necessary and would be profitable. Families with low cultural capital were more trusting of, or had to be more trusting of the public schools because they had fewer resources to do otherwise. Therefore it can be assumed that the reforms actually increased the significance of the role of the family and their investment in education in the form of time, commitment and money, in particular outside of the school.

Examples of this investment are manifested in expensive afternoon and holiday activities such as tutoring<sup>2</sup>, music lessons and sports, language and computer courses. In explanation for the private organisation of the students' afternoons is that generally speaking, German schools only hold instruction in the morning. This brings us to the most expensive and publicly visible, planned national reform: The governmentally initiated all day school program.<sup>3</sup> Since it is voluntary though, and less than 10% of all students actually participate, the effectiveness of this program is a matter of critical concern, both in itself as well as within the context of all the instituted educational reforms.

### **Educational reforms after Pisa**

The PISA-shock triggered various political educational measures. Examples of this were the institution of educational standards and comparative testing, a national move to expand the all day school program and reforms of the Early Childhood Education and Care (henceforth: ECEC)<sup>4</sup> system. A further measure was to facilitate the shortening of the amount of time normally needed to complete schooling (flexible duration of the first two grades from one to three years in multi-aged groups and one year less at the highest level of secondary education) through which, the student's learning potential could be more effectively utilised. The

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<sup>1</sup> The ongoing public debate shows diverse interpretations of the data in terms of a lack of equal opportunity. See f.ex. Füller in TAZ, 1.11.2005, 7.

<sup>2</sup> The money spent on tutoring by families in Germany is estimated at about 2 Billion Euros per year. (See Focus Schule 1/2004, 131)

<sup>3</sup> See information by Federal Government in English: [www.bmbf.de/en/1125.php](http://www.bmbf.de/en/1125.php)

<sup>4</sup> Term used by OECD for international comparison. ECEC includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age. ([www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/24/34411165.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/41/24/34411165.pdf))

reasoning behind this is that PISA not only exposed a large risk-group of unusually weak students but also a deficit in terms of the promotion of gifted children. The reform initiatives seem both diffuse as well as paradoxical. On the one hand they suggest a comparatively dynamic and active response in a country that generally tends to react slowly to change and on the other, the reforms appear to distract from the real problems. These paradoxes can be demonstrated with the following example:

In none other of the comparable OECD countries are children sorted out and steered with such lasting effect into one or the other scholastic tracks at such an early age as in Germany. According to Schümer (2004) during the course of required schooling, surprisingly many pupils are left back, placed in special schools or otherwise singled out in a negative manner. Furthermore, after only four years of comprehensive primary schooling,<sup>5</sup> between the ages of 9 and 10, the children are separated into different types of schools<sup>6</sup> that vary in terms of the number of years of further schooling as well as in academic niveau. These aspects then play a decisive role in setting the future paths of their occupational biographies. Contrary to the initial intentions of this plan, which were formulated at a time of reformation away from a feudal oriented system and toward an achievement oriented system in 1919/1920, the result has, in all practicality, been the opposite. Those entitled to go to university (approximately only 1/3 of each birth year) attain that qualification (Hochschulreife) normally by way of completion of a course of study at a Gymnasium. The result, until recently, intentionally maintained a low quota of academics.<sup>7</sup>

Though, according to Schleicher, this structural attribute has played a considerable role in the poor ranking of German students<sup>8</sup>, there have been no serious attempts on the part of those politically responsible for education to change the situation. The institution of integrative systems in Germany is considered a political taboo.<sup>9</sup> In its place all day school reform projects were begun. As mentioned above, the effectiveness of this reform is questionable due to the fact that it is essentially only an addendum to the regular classroom instruction and only reaches a small percent of the students. Therefore it has little real influence on the meaning of classroom instruction in Germany (no changes in classroom instruction time, curricula, teachers' work time, measurement of achievement or learning culture). It is therefore not to be expected that the poor PISA ranking of German 15 year olds can be thus counteracted.

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1919/20 all children between the ages of 6 and 10 attend the elementary school together. In contrast to many other modern countries though, a relatively high number of pupils with special needs are instructed at special schools even today. Therefore, one can really speak only in relative terms about one school for all children.

<sup>6</sup> Hauptschule (secondary school) until grade 9 (compulsory schooling); Realschule (secondary school) until grade 10; Gymnasium (secondary high school) until grade 13. Some states also offer the opportunity to attend a comprehensive school. Formally speaking, the entire system has become somewhat 'porous' over the last several decades. That is, access through transfer to an academically qualifying education is possible, though, for a variety of reasons, it is difficult to realize and is relatively seldom done.

<sup>7</sup> According to a press release by the Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Office of Statistics) the high school graduate quota rose in 2003 (including a group of 18 to 21-year-olds) to 39.9%. The number of college and university graduates approximately 18.4%. Hence, less than a fifth of an age group in Germany actually complete their college and university studies. This is comparatively speaking, a very low academic quota. (Statistisches Bundesamt: Mehr Abiturienten und Absolventen eines Erststudiums im Jahr 2003. Pressemitteilung vom 25. Februar 2005. [www.destatis.de](http://www.destatis.de); 18.8.2005)

<sup>8</sup> Cf. about this controversy, for instance the dispute between Schleicher and Prenzel in: *Die Zeit* Nr. 8/2005, 17.5.2005

<sup>9</sup> The analyses of numerous elections since the 1960s call attention to this problem. In particular the Laender that have introduced the comprehensive schools during this time, such as Hessen and Nordrhein-Westfalen, have considered this issue politically explosive during elections.

Oelkers (2004) even consider this reform to distract from the actual problems in the German schools. A similar situation can be observed at the ECEC level as well.

### **The discussion about the time before formal schooling begins in Germany and its relevance for school entry.**

Since PISA significant reforms of the ECEC level have also been called for. In particular, questions about the education and status of ECEC teachers, investments in pre-school pedagogy, various models of care for children ages 0-10, as well as the long debated questions about goals and content of the phase prior to formal schooling dominate the discussion. In the 1990s Germany began to introduce wide-scale measures such as legally guarantying every 3-year-old access to ECEC. Only after the OECD comparative study though, were fundamental, educational measures taken that focus on questions of education, thus bringing real change to the transition between ECEC and primary school.

The OECD-Study “Early Childhood Policy Review 2002 – 2004” points to many areas of strength in the German system. It assessed the social-pedagogical approach, with its holistic, non-scholastic view of the child, to be internationally on par and went as far as to suggest that it is worth emulating. Nevertheless the low PISA ranking of the 15 year olds set a dramatic impulse. The current discourse suggests a considerable deficit on the ECEC level in terms of the children’s preparation for school. Supposedly what is being offered on the ECEC level is limited only to ‘play’ which in turn, does not optimally exploit the educational possibilities. The lasting influence of neuroscience on pedagogy with its view of the “competent baby” and “time windows” that, after the pre-school phase, close forever, is strongly felt here. The alleged deficit on the ECEC level is being staged as a crisis that must take considerable responsibility for the crisis felt in the entire German educational system.

The current measures taken such as language tests and appropriate support programs, binding agreements to cooperate between ECEC and schools as well as curricula or similar scholastic programs do not change only the last year of ECEC but influence the entire phase before formal schooling too. The new and planned curricula are conceived to focus more on the *Bildung* aspect of the legal societal contract-triad of care, education as *Bildung* and upbringing. Despite the flexible, non-standardised nature of these curricula, they nevertheless intervene in the conceptual freedom of the institutions as well as in the parents’ rights in a manner unheard of up to now (OECD-Study “Early Childhood Policy Review 2002 – 2004“, 46). Emphasis is placed on scholastic learning earlier than was usual up to now. A central point of focus of all these curricula is the transition to the primary level with particular attention to the successful adjustment of the individual child. To facilitate this, cooperation between both institutions is strived for. Structural differences make this difficult.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The background behind this development is the historically based institutional separation between the ECEC and formal schooling at the primary level in Germany. They can be characterised by the following points:

- Legally and organisationally under different authorities: ECEC (social service, welfare); Primary School (school system, ministry of education)
- ECEC attendance: costs money and is voluntary; Primary school: no costs, rigid compulsory (no home schooling allowed)
- Significant difference in education and training for the job, in status and income: ECEC: no academic degree required, low income, Primary: academic degree required, much higher income
- Difference in goals and functions: ECEC: triad of care, education, raising children, no curricula, no scholastic learning; Primary schools: Curricula, formal learning, education as main goal.

Many of these points have only recently begun a process of change.

## **The Transition from ECEC to school entry – Changes in schools**

In almost all German federal states the changes in ECEC are accompanied by a reorganisation of school entry: in part, fundamentally and on a wide scale. Due to the fact that cultural and educational matters are decentralised and lie within the realm of state autonomy, intended reforms on the primary level are multifaceted and often contradictory.

On the one hand: Early school entry, acceptance of all children irrespective of their preparedness, multi-aged grouping within the first two grades and flexible duration of the first two grades from one to three years. In contrast: a renaissance of diagnostic practices in the form of (school) medical examinations, language aptitude testing, screening tests to ascertain scholastic weaknesses and pressure placed on the ECEC levels to improve school readiness.

The complex and contrary nature of the reforms can be exemplified. The adoption of Multi-aged grouping and a differentiated flexible duration of the first two grades appears to favour the focus on the learning capabilities of the individual child. These structures are derived from the reform pedagogic tradition. In actuality though, initial practical experience shows that middle class parents are using the instrument of acceleration to gain a competitive edge for their children. Rather than loosening its hold, the German three-pronged selective school system begins to assert and further perpetuate itself already in first grade. Future Hauptschüler attend the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade over three years, the Realschüler over two years and the Gymnasialschüler for just one year.

The reform of the beginning of school correlates with the (until now dominant) German practice of a comparatively late school entry. The school entry age is 6 years, similar to the worldwide average (Oberhuemer 2004). Because of the early decision and selection process of the three pronged system though, parents and the relevant institutions until recently, tended to forestall school entry in border line cases early school entries were seldom and often regarded as taboo.<sup>11</sup>

The context of this phenomenon is a mentally anchored notion of “school maturity” which allegedly is governed by endogenous development. This particular idea of school maturity was widely accepted in Germany after WWII but has been scientifically refuted since several decades. Nevertheless the term continues to be used often in everyday language. The Minister President of Baden-Württemberg for example, continues to speak repeatedly of the “school-mature” child in public while the responsible education ministry there continues to fight for more differentiation in the terminology and practise. In everyday life of families, pre-school and school this concept remains dominant and continues to be acted upon. One awaits the time when the child is mature enough to enter school, preferring to wait a year longer when in doubt, to assure an optimal beginning (Fertig/Kluve 2005). This view is not limited to Germany, Meisels calls it the “maturationist view on school readiness” (Meisels cited in Docket and Perry 2002, 74f.), point to Australien and American studies that document similar parental tendencies in the middle class. One hopes that a “delayed school entry” will help the child to be more competitive in school and life.

Because the first four school years play such a decisive roll in the educational career of the children, this maturationist view is particularly pronounced in Germany. Fears of a future loss of status of both the parents and the children are tied in with this behaviour. These fears are

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<sup>11</sup> From the 1960s until recently the cut-off date has been June 30<sup>th</sup>, meaning school attendance becomes mandatory for all children reaching the age of six by this date. If a child was born only a day later, it meant either waiting an entire year in an ECEC or applying for an exception. For decades parents tended to favour the first option. (See for ex. Fertig/Kluve 2005)

fed by the current economic crisis with its long-lasting mass unemployment and the accompanying deconstruction of the welfare state. The economic and social crises affect all families in terms of uncertainty about the future. Children are often subject to the projections of these adult fears. Furthermore, the continuing drop in the birth rate (Germany has one of the lowest birth rates in the world) increases the pressure placed on an ever-shrinking number of children to achieve social success and attain recognition for themselves and their families.

Economists have shown that the expected advantages of delayed school entry in terms of more scholastic success never played out. Data analyses over a period of several decades prove that in fact, the opposite seems to occur. There appears to be a correlation between later school entry and a lower scholastic success rate (Fertig/Kluve 2005). Other, international studies on the other hand, have shown that children entering school later enjoy a slight advantage in the beginning but that the differences diminish as they get older (Stipek 2003). Docket und Perry (2002) found no clear proof of the relevance of the age question and the accompanying concept of maturity on a successful educational biography.

The state reform ambitions on ECEC and primary level reflect a connection between two conceptual points of departure. Though initially these appear to have similar goals, in truth they contradict one another:

1. The more effective use of human capital through earliest possible formal education: The central focus here is on Germany's comparative international economic achievement potential.
2. The advancement of equal opportunity for children through early formal education: the central focus here is compensating social disadvantages.

The worldwide empirically validated relevance of school entry to educational biography sets the stage for this discussion. The transition from ECEC to formal schooling became a central subject of research (Griebel/Niesel 2004) and educational politics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. The discourse and practice in Germany has been significantly influenced by the international debate ensuing from such comparative studies as those of the OECD. The relevant questions here are about school readiness<sup>12</sup> about the criteria for successful transition and achievement capability support concepts. In terms of the relevance of the role of school entry on equal opportunity, research in the past 4 decades paints a contradictory picture: Despite the to some degree successful compensatory programs, Head Start being the oldest and most well-known, societal differences are not minimized during the time spent in school but rather in part reinforced. Schools are apparently unable to fulfil their legal and political function as "the great equalizer" and are evidently in part to blame for the continuity of these differences. (Lee/Burkam 2002; Gomolla/Radtke 2002; Berger/Kahlert 2005) As such, formal education can be said to support discrimination based on class, race and gender in German society.

The selection processes that often reinforce the influence of social origins on scholastic success, begin almost immediately from school entry onwards to take hold. The decision about the scholastic route to be taken, with its accompanying consequences in terms of future occupational and social status, is actually made at the time of transition between ECEC and primary level. That is, years before the formal selection and placement in the different school types takes place. At this time the relationship between social differences and equal opportunity are defined and adjusted on a more or less subliminal level to the individual pupil.

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<sup>12</sup> Must the child be ready for school or the school be ready for the child? (See Lewitt/Schuurmann Baker 1995, 128)

Since school entry is a process of community formation that begins long before the first day of school, it is also a question of which social groups will be integrated and which excluded. At the moment Islamic boys from migrant families are the most in danger of being excluded. At the centre of the German perception of this phenomenon is a picture of the “child at risk”. This picture is considered to be of international relevance. The focus is on the compensation of real or imagined/ conceived deficits of the child and the social background of its family. Thereby the social inequalities that often actually cause the deficits are often ignored. Even if these inequities are not entirely ignored though, the concept of the “child at risk” is sustained by diverse models of functionalistic explanation. The explanations generally present the “child at risk” as a social victim, a stereotype that reinforces discrimination and counteracts the compensational dimension of the programs (See Siraj-Blatchford 2004). An examination from the perspective of the subject, the child, though, requires a different approach.

### **School entry from the perspective of ritual theory**

Families are preoccupied with the subject of school entry long before the actual beginning of school in manifold ways. The importance placed on it can be exemplified by the considerable stretching out of the transition from ECEC to school over an extended time period. This is manifested in many micro-rituals, in the emphasis placed on the macro-ritual that celebrates school entry, in financial outlay, in investments of attention and effort including medical and therapeutic and much more.

In a post modern world of industrial states there are global, common tendencies in terms of the relationship between school and society/culture that cannot be reduced to factors of international comparative studies (Robin 2000). This relationship is governed by correlations between work, family and school. It reflects the generational ordering and thus the specific definition of childhood. It is expressed, communicated and renegotiated in the form of rituals. The performance and dissemination of such rituals on local, national and global planes is strongly influenced by the consumer and media culture.

Growing up in the Postmodern is an exercise in social complexity, insecurity and cultural diversity. Many rituals appear to lose their meaning or are transformed in such a manner that they are no longer recognizable as such<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, some rituals gain in importance. For instance the birthday ritual, that constitutes global ritual communities (Deckert-Peaceman 2004-2005). Similarly school entry, as an initiation ritual to the status of school child appears to be gaining in meaning.

This represented perspective views school entry under ritual-theoretical considerations as presented by Wulf et al (2001a, 2001b; 2004) and others. Accordingly, rituals define a central framework for upbringing and educational efforts. Seen thus, education is not exclusively an individual act but is, rather, embedded in social structures and ritual arrangements that constitute the communities. Of considerable importance is the repetitive, symbolic and performance character of rituals and their inscription in the bodies of those involved. This definition of the term ritual is disengaged from a functionalistic perspective and thus enables one to see the potential for change. Its point of departure is that ritual acts are social situations that can be influenced in a direct or indirect manner by the involved parties. Wulf observes the school entry ceremony in this way:

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<sup>13</sup>James and Prout note that typical for modern societies, societal rites of passage do not actually mark a specific transitional step but that each marks only one small transitional point in a series of many. (James/Prout 1997: 246)

„Mit Hilfe des rituellen Arrangements ‚Einschulungsfeier‘ inszeniert die Schule nicht nur ein Übergangsritual; sie inszeniert sich auch als ‚schulische Familie‘ und überschreitet damit Anlass und Funktion des Einschulungsrituals. In dieser Veranstaltung entsteht eine durch Vielschichtigkeit und Multidimensionalität gekennzeichnete Aufführung, für deren Verständnis nicht nur kognitive Subjekt-Objekt-Beziehungen, sondern auch ästhetische und ludische Dimensionen eine wichtige Rolle spielen. Damit verbunden ist eine Selbstdeutung der Schule und eine Darstellung ihrer Beziehungen zum sozialen und politischen Umfeld.“ (Wulf et.al. 2004, 10)

“With the help of ritualistic arrangements the ‘ceremony of school entry’ is staged by schools not only as a ritual of transition; it stages itself as a ‘school-family’ as well and thereby oversteps the bounds of the occasion and of the function of the ceremony. At these events performances characterised by complexity and multidimensionality evolve. They can only be understood if, along with subject-object relationships, also aesthetic and playful dimensions play important roles in the analysis. In relation to this is the self-interpretation of the school and its relationships to its social and political environment”. (Translation of the above German quote)

School entry ceremonies in Germany have often been described and analysed (Wulf et al.2004). However no systematic examination has been made of the relationship between micro-rituals and macro-rituals from the perspective of cultural theory. That is the point of departure of this author’s current research project on “The Meaning of School Entry in Germany Under Consideration of Global Tendencies”. Following is a discussion of a specific phenomenon in Germany towards school entry.

### ***Schultüte*: Artefact and ritual and the meaning for individual and collective processes for school entry.**

Every child in Germany is given a *Schultüte* upon school entry, today by its family. The *Schultüte* is a large cone of cardboard filled with little presents, originally sweets, given to children in Germany on the first day at school. For generations this custom has been a part of school entry including the obligatory photograph of the child with school bag and *Schultüte*. A large assortment of congratulatory greeting cards have the *Schultüte* motif on them. Sentimental memories of the *Schultüte* are communicated through stories and literature. The custom goes back approximately 200 years in history. It exists only in Germany and, to a considerably lesser degree in Austria and other German-speaking border countries. The *Schultüte* custom is an emblematic symbol of the initiation of the child as a school child as well as to ‘sweeten’ the entry into the ‘real world’ the institution of school.

Interestingly, the developmental and dissemination history of the *Schultüte* is very similar to that of the Birthday ritual. (Deckert-Peaceman 2004-2005) It began in specific German regions in the Protestant milieu and then spread via the cities during the 20<sup>th</sup> C. to all of Germany. The *Schultüte* reflects political and societal trends and today, the influences of the consumer and media world. During the Nazi era, the *Schultüte* was given a standard size to imply the equality of the people (What Nazis defined as only German: ‘Aryan’ people). The cardboard cone is painted and pasted with motifs that express the current trends. Today figures and symbols of popular children’s culture are the fashion. ‘Do it yourself’ pamphlets

give instructions how to make them. Nevertheless the *Schultüte* is also embedded in a political dimension: During the Kaiserzeit, before WW I, the German emperor's face often ornamented the *Schultüte*. During the Nazi period some were decorated with swastikas. The *Schultüte* has become a symbol in itself of school entry in the consumer and media world. The *Schultüte* as motif can be seen in many diverse contexts. For instance in Apothecaries, a pharmaceutical company advertises a vitamin product packed to resemble a *Schultüte*, suggesting that giving a child these vitamins will guarantee a successful scholastic career.

Artefacts and rituals have also always functioned as expressions as well as producers of social difference. Poor families were either unable to afford the *Schultüte* or only very modest ones. As early as 1900 the *Schultüte* practice was criticised for this reason. Above all else, through the *Schultüte* and its contents, on their first day of school, children were confronted with the social differences between rich and poor. (Coburger newspaper from April 29, 1900, quoted in Handschuh 1991, 147). Nowadays the financial differences do not play a direct role anymore. In 1992 the courts ruled (Should Welfare pay for a *Schultüte*?) that a *Schultüte* is part of the necessary subsistence of a child entering school (Alten, von 1995, 17)

However the *Schultüte* continues to play a role in defining social difference. A schoolyard scene shortly before the school entry ceremony in an urban school with an ethnically diverse economically disadvantaged population transports without words, the understanding that through the *Schultüte*, membership in the school community is established (Videotaped Data material from 2003, Deckert-Peaceman). For the majority of these families, this artefact and its accompanying ritual is a foreign object. The body language of the children and the parents projects a lack of understanding of the meaning of the *Schultüte*. They were playing a game without knowing the rules or at least not understanding them. Yet the fact that they had a *Schultüte* in their hands meant they belonged. The child, like all other children in Germany, is accepted into the school community. Yet, this child does not really become a member of the community because the performing character and its correlative cultural meaning is not really shared. The following biographical text presents an illustration:

“All the children... had... homemade *Schultüten*. There were many Russian children who had only recently arrived in Germany and could speak no German. They had ‘only’ store bought *Schultüten* and hence, on the very first day, were (already) outsiders.”

The condition of having only limited membership on the part of the migrant children and their families is also an expression of their status in the society. Even many of those living in Germany for four generations still do not have German citizenship.<sup>14</sup> Since collective Identity primarily develops through the *Leitkultur*: the German defining culture with its preconceived notion of a homogenous ethnic and cultural community, migrant families, though they live permanently in Germany, don't really belong.

One must consider the fact that precisely these specified groups are the ones that hardly have a chance at success in the German school system. Regardless of their scholastic potential, children from these groups are selected out into schools of special needs and into the lowest academic track. They consequentially become members of the third of German society that has been disempowered. Seen this way, the question of inclusion and exclusion at the time of school entry, via the accompanying ceremony and the *Schultüte*, in its relevance for the antinomy of social difference and equal opportunity, that is school, self-evident.

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<sup>14</sup> Germany does not consider itself an immigration country. Citizenship is mainly ruled by ethnic origin, not by place of birth. Therefore children of migrants are not automatically given citizenship though born in Germany. It is more difficult to obtain dual citizenship than in other countries.

## **The Meaning of School Entry from the Comparative Cultural Perspective**

The *Schulstufe* is a singular German phenomenon. However, questions about the formation of community at the beginning of formal schooling, about inclusion and exclusion, about the value of school in terms of national identity, about the relationship between ethnic difference in society and in the school, about the antinomy of social difference and equal opportunity and their relevance for school entry, are of considerable significance for all OECD countries. National identity is consummated in comparison with other national identities (Robin 2000). National educational policy is consummated increasingly in comparison to other national educational systems. However, the parameters upon which comparisons are made, and which are used to justify national decisions, are neither transparent nor are they capable of doing justice to the complexity of educational processes. They are limited to global economic and political interests and systematically relegate the democratic contract of the public school systems to a back seat role (Robin 2000, 15).

Needed are comparative studies that do not separate single factors such as scholastic achievement from their cultural, social, political and economic context but rather, attempt to underline the interdependencies of all factors. Only thus is it possible to avoid allowing education to be used by specific interest groups for the purpose of reducing "...all school learning to batteries of workplace-oriented 'skills'..." (Robin 2000, 18). Since the consumer world and the media world serve to create global cultural communal bonds, and since growing up in the Postmodern no longer offers unambiguous and clear national/cultural borders, a culture-theoretical approach with emphasis on rituals appears to give us the appropriate methodological tools. Tools that help to combine the micro-levels and the macro-levels, to elucidate the correlation between global, national and local practices and to examine critically, the reductionist picture of school in this age of comparative studies.

This is the point of departure of the incipient study on the meaning of school entry from a perspective of cultural theory. A central aspect is a comparison between Germany, Canada and Australia (upcoming Deckert-Peaceman/Scholz). However it is not intended to be a classical comparative study. Rather, the examination of two other cultures should serve to widen the understanding of, and differentiate more specifically the meaning of school entry in Germany. In focus are the questions of the construction of the "child at risk" and of the exclusion of certain groups from the scholastic community from the very first day school (and perhaps even before). The assumption is that these questions are related with the construction of national identity in each of the societies. Of relevance is the manner in which immigration and multi-culturalism are dealt with as a societal task. In each of the three countries these issues are viewed and handled differently. The role and function thereby that school plays within the framework of equal opportunity and the fabrication of social difference will be examined with regard to community formation in school and society. This role will then be analysed in terms of global and national trends that aim to use human capital better to capacity.

For example, Germany society has developed to a so-called 2/3 society. That is, through poverty, unemployment, minimal cultural capital (through structural illiteracy, inadequate capability with new technology), and a lack of flexibility in school, 1/3 of German society suffers a perennial exclusion from the participatory possibilities. While 2/3 of the pupils continue to expand their competences through determination to exploit their human capital, the distance to the remaining 1/3 continues to grow. This 1/3 is practically illiterate and lives

increasingly further out on the edge of the society. By way of the early selection process, children are informed at primary school age, that they have forever lost the societal game.

In relation to Australia, there are of course many clear differences. Interestingly though, despite the geographical and cultural differences, there are also some similarities. The study will consider both the structural factors (on the one hand, selection into a three pronged system with a very low of attendance at private schools [in Germany] and on the other, an integrative system with a very high attendance of private schools on the secondary level [in Australia]), as well as the micro-rituals (*Schultüte* in comparison to school uniform) and macro-rituals. It will also examine the difference between individual and collective rituals concerned with school entry. (Example of individual initiation in New Zealand and in areas of Australia.) Through the presented dimensions of meaning of these rituals in terms of the relationship between school and society in cultural comparison, a clearer understanding of the intermeshing of local, national and global developments that so strongly influence growing up in the Postmodern worldwide can be attained and critically scrutinised.

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