This contribution begins with an analytical differentiation of three different forms of autonomy that appear in the German educational research discourse. Based upon the Enlightenment's proposal of an autonomous subject as the ideal objective, the pedagogical interpretation of this concept postulates the idea of the autonomous nature of the child, which is discussed in contexts of reformed pedagogy. In the pedagogical process, which is considered to be a dialectic process within the medium of autonomy and heteronomy, the inevitable result of the autonomous nature of the child is the autonomy of the teacher. Teacher autonomy appears necessary in order to handle the dialectical nature of this process. This freedom of the teacher is itself tied to the manoeuvring room institutionally provided within a given educational system. As a consequence, the autonomy of the school as an institution becomes necessary. After presenting these three different forms of autonomy, the article will discuss their continuities, discontinuities and synchronicities against the background of Germany's various stages of educational reform in the last 40 years. This will be achieved through the means of brief insights into empirical studies on school planning development, school inspection and school profiling. Finally, the consequences of these different forms of relating to the question of autonomy for the discourse on school reform and school development are discussed.

Keywords: autonomy; school development; school inspection; school profiling; school development planning

For reassurance regarding the meaning of the term autonomy in pedagogy (Froese 1952, Bohnsack 1967), it is worth re-considering its original etymological meaning. Literally translated, the term expresses the idea of a self-legislating entity (Greek: αὐτοκράτειρα and οὐκομοτέρον). Embedded in this concept of autonomy is the modern idea of the self-reflective subject able to rationally justify its actions in this reflection (cf. for the following Heinrich, 2006, pp. 31–50). Crucial in its influence on the Enlightenment, within the field of pedagogy this idea needed to be transferred from phylogenesis to ontogenesis: the development of society as a whole as desired by the Enlightenment should also be initiated and fostered in every individual person (Beutler, 1969; Bohnsack & Rückriem, 1969). Taken to its full consequence, ‘pedagogy’s aim is to make itself redundant’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 21).

Pedagogical autonomy and its derivatives

By this reasoning ‘education ends where man becomes independent’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 21). However, drawing on Pestalozzi, Geißler (1929, p. 19) emphasises the priority of the individual: ‘In a way, the individual constitutes the criterion of pedagogical autonomy’. This leitmotiv of the enlightened and independent man resulted in concepts of reformed pedagogy distancing themselves from traditional pedagogy by rejecting the idea of a naturally

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The author would like to thank Michael Cope and Monika Palowski for translation into English and Maike Lambrecht for helpful comments and discussions.
flawed will of the child needing to be broken in order to socialise him/her as was the case with August Hermann Francke’s pietistic pedagogy (Blankertz, 1982). In opposition to this pietistic pedagogy, reformed pedagogy claimed a positive anthropology, viewing the child as an untainted subject not yet damaged by society (cf. Rousseau, 1993) whose autonomy ought to be transformed but always respected during this transformation: ‘In the conflict between child and culture, both Rousseau and Pestalozzi entirely took the side of the child’ (Geißler, 1929, p. 29).

Besides reformed approaches tending to idealise the child (cf. Gläser, 1920, p. 15; Hartlaub, 1922; Key, 1902/2000, p. 120; Montessori, 1967, p. 23) due to their pedagogy ‘From the Child’s Perspective’ (Gläser, 1920, see references in section 4), historically explicable as a reflex to a perceived negligence of the child’s autonomous nature, the German discourse at the turn of the last century was mainly influenced by humanistic pedagogy (Bast, 2000; Schiess, 1973). Its many approaches (Flitner, 1928; Geißler, 1930; Weniger, 1928/1929) perceived the pedagogical process as characterised by the need to foster the child’s autonomy specifically by confronting it with an adult world while always allowing for ‘Protest against [the] Intentionality’ thus ‘imposed’ (Blankertz & Gruschka, 1990, see references in section 4).

Thus humanistic pedagogy reacted to a phenomenon all too familiar from classical German pedagogy: the paradox of independence as already put forward by Kant:

How do I cultivate freedom within compulsion? I should accustom my pupil to endure the compulsion of his freedom and yet teach him to use his freedom well. Without this, all is but mechanism, and the graduate does not know how to make use of his freedom. (Kant, 1803/1922, p. 206)

The paradox of independence therefore immediately clarifies that pedagogical professionals moderating such a sensitive process cannot act upon narrow and schematic guidelines, for these forms of generalisation – inevitably abstracting from the individual – would render all attempts at focusing on the individual subject impossible. The concept labelled ‘pedagogical relation’ by humanistic pedagogy, i.e. the ‘enthusiastic connection between a mature person and a developing person for the latter’s sake, so that he may come to realise his life and identity’ (Nohl, 1933b, p. 22), directly results in a necessary pedagogical freedom of pedagogical professionals in order to carry out their difficult duty (Delekat, 1928; Nohl, 1933a).

Within school, this is referred to as ‘pedagogical freedom’ (Buer, 1990, see references in section 4), the ‘freedom of the teacher’ (Mayer, 1980, see references in section 4) or, in short, teacher autonomy (Fauser 1986). In modern terminology the idea of the autonomy of the child re-emerges, featuring prominently in contemporary curricula and lesson-planning emphasising the need for student-centred teaching and categorically excluding a teacher-centred style of instruction (Tillmann, 2001). Evidently, the ideas of the autonomy of the child and the autonomy of the teacher are still relevant in the modern resp. modernised school (Brüsemeister & Eubel, 2003), mediated by the outlined methodical and didactical principles.

This also explains why concepts of reformed pedagogy often opposed overly strict regulation of instruction and didactics (Schaller, 1962). Reformed pedagogy’s mostly ambivalent relationship with school as an institution (Oelkers 1989) – in some more subversive parts of the discourse explicitly rejecting (Bernfeld, 1967) resp. decidedly criticising (Fromm, 1965) – originates from this very ambivalence: the modern version of school as an institution (compulsory education) on the one hand, allowing for all children to participate in ‘pedagogical relationships’ resp. pedagogically designed interactions; school as a ‘compulsory institution’ on the other hand, including universalistic rules aimed at turning children into pupils (Dreeben, 1980). Both assumptions opposed the ideas of teacher autonomy and the autonomy of the child.

Taking an offensive turn on this phenomenon, the autonomy of the school (Klafki, 1987; Richter, 1994) and its independence from other social institutions were – if only to a certain extent – resolutely called for (Bastian, 1998; Beetz, 1997; Daschner, Rolff, & Strycz, 1995; Frister, 1994; Munin, 2001; Richter, 1999) in order to assure that within this ‘realm of pedagogy’, pedagogical reasoning was decidedly observed. Thus, the school ought to be independent of society’s other demands (e.g. economic convertibility of degrees and sufficient aptitude for vocational training, cf. Leschinsky & Cortina, 2003, p. 34). Autonomy of the school, therefore, was also used as a polemic term against various forms of usurpation by the state (e.g. Knitter & Wiedemann, 1996, p. 64, drawing on the Enlightenment philosopher Johann Heinrich Campe) or against attacks from the sphere of economics (Blankertz, 1982, pp. 81f., drawing on Rousseau), both subjecting pedagogical autonomy to the rules of the market.

Following this school autonomy concept’s – typically German – history of thought (Hörner 1991; Helmer 1994; Döbert/Geißler 1997; Munin 2001), an area of conflict between a pedagogical ethos and pedagogy institutionalised in schools emerges, based on origins in reformed pedagogy and derivation contexts in educational research; a pattern which does not seem to be observable in the Anglo-American discourse (Anderson, 1991; Busching & Rowls, 1986; Cox & Wood, 1980; Shulman, 1983). In the face of ‘Social Efficiency’, a concept of broad relevance early on in America gaining increasing influence subsequent to the late 19th century’s Taylorism (Waldow, 2012), schools were imagined as autonomous economic entities and, in the educational research discourse as well as in the pedagogical – psychological (Herzog, 2012) and the political-administrative discourse (cf. Bellmann, 2012, p. 144),
appeared compatible with the ideas of enhancing efficiency and effectiveness.

So, while the (dominant) Anglo-American perspective - apart from traditions of reformed pedagogy and those following Pragmatism (Dewey), which are marginalised in American educational policy (cf. Biesta, 2007, p. 20) - is characterised by a seamless continuity between the educational mandate and the institution carrying it out, the German tradition appears characterised by typically projecting the area of conflict between autonomy and heteronomy onto all dimensions of interaction in school, mediated by an ambivalent understanding of autonomy:

- the idea of student-centred instruction in terms of the autonomy of the child which needs to be guided towards independence,
- the idea of the pedagogical freedom of the teacher resp. teacher autonomy essential for encouraging such processes, and
- the idea of school autonomy which, in its moderate version of schools' independence from other state and economic institutions, constitutes the sole source of teacher autonomy.

Using this specifically German trifold and, therefore, potentially conflictual understanding of autonomy as a background for establishing a perspective on the German schooling system's developments over the last 40 years, the history of school reforms in these years does not appear to be a continuous development of quality but rather a history of contradictions (Terhart, 1998, 2000; Wollenweber, 1997). A policy analysis drawing on governance categories (cf. Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007) reveals the numerous interdependencies between norms of the pedagogical discourse, demands from educational policy connected with them, and the resulting administrative directives (cf. Heinrich, 2007). The complex management of interdependence by the different agents from pedagogy, politics and administration eventually makes it impossible to unequivocally identify one subject of action promoting reforms. Instead, a *topos* from governance analysis seems to apply: it is not individual agents who direct actions anymore but a constellation of agents as a whole (cf. Kussau & Brüsemeister, 2007, p. 26).

**Stages of German school reforms and metamorphoses of the autonomy concept**

Drawing on governance analyses, we have developed and elsewhere published the following model of stages of the Austrian school reform (cf. Altrichter, Brüsemeister, & Heinrich, 2005, pp. 9–14; Altrichter & Heinrich, 2007, pp. 78–93):

- Preliminary stage: stagnation and grey area autonomy
- Stage 1: autonomisation of schools
- Stage 2: school management and the search for new governance instruments
- Stage 3: the ‘PISA shock’ and across-school elements of governance.

Due to comparable structures (Federalism and continuous debates on school structures) and, as a consequence, astonishingly similar discursive formations, this model is basically transferrable to the German school reforms (Altrichter, Heinrich, & Soukoup-Altrichter, 2014, pp. 1–3):

**Preliminary stage: stagnation and grey area autonomy**: Spanning from the 1970s to the late 1980s, this rather long-lasting period in German educational policy was characterised by stagnating reform efforts. In spite of on-going debates about the hierarchical structure of the German schooling system, especially regarding the establishment of comprehensive schools in opposition to the segregated schooling system (cf. Heinrich, 1996), conditions in many of the German federal states – which hold the legislative authority on education – were stable and largely unquestioned. Positions in the debate on the structure of the schooling system were polarised: rather conservative voices called for a strictly segregated system, while more liberal and politically left-wing factions demanded the implementation of a ‘one school for all children’-model. Tensions were high between the two sides, but no fundamental reforms were implemented in this period. Individual teachers with an orientation towards reformed pedagogy who appreciated the need for innovations were forced to move in grey areas of the law resp. to identify and secure niches for reform-oriented teaching in their daily work (grey area autonomy).

**Stage 1: autonomisation of schools**: The beginning of the 1990s saw some changes. Based on the international discourse, de-centralisation and de-regulation grew more relevant in German educational policy. This discourse mainly originated in criticism of the dominant centralised governance for its inefficiency. In this sense, the ‘Individual School’ was found to be a ‘Unit of Pedagogical Action’ (Fend, 1986, see references in Section 4) resulting in an understanding of school as an organisation in need of development (Rolf, 1994). This period also saw adaptations of Anglo-American concepts regarding the development of schools as organisations in the German discourse (Lange, 1995a, 1995b).

**Stage 2: school management and the search for new governance instruments**: In the second half of the 1990s, the idea of individual school development as a necessity was still relevant but increasingly connected with the (legally) binding fixation of reform instruments like required self-evaluations or the liability to submit school development plans. Recognising the need for an increase in efficiency, very diverse instruments of school development were combined and the need for an ‘orchestration’, i.e. a reconciliation of single instruments’ effects emerged.
Stage 3: the ‘PISA shock’ and across-school elements of governance: in Germany, the publication of results from the first PISA survey resulted in a profound shock across all levels of educational practice and policy. As an effect of the so-called ‘PISA shock’, this ‘orchestration’ or coordination of action abruptly manifested. Referring to the ‘PISA shock’ in an international context does, however, require some explanation, since in many other OECD countries PISAs results were acknowledged but did not cause as intense political debates as they did in Germany (Tillmann, Dedering, Kneuper, Kuhlmann, & Nessel, 2008). The firm belief that the German schooling system was extremely efficient and, therefore, fit for international competition, was heavily shaken by the PISA inquiry’s results which were, if not entirely poor, still far below expectations. Accordingly, the ‘PISA shock’ triggered a widespread and heated discussion about the coordination of governance elements across schools which itself resulted in the ‘Comprehensive Strategy’ issued by the Central Commission of Education Secretaries (KMK, 2006) representing a consensus between the individual Secretaries and proposing the idea of educational monitoring. In this stage, numerous reforms that had not even been dreamed of during the decades of stagnation in educational policy were consensually implemented at incredible speed: national standards, centralised assessment tests, school inspections and educational reporting at a national level. In the meantime educational reporting has also been partially introduced at a regional level (Ackeren et al., 2013).

Changing relations between teacher autonomy and school autonomy – the example of school development planning as supersession of grey area autonomy during the transition from school autonomy to state-regulated school management

The implementation of compulsory school development planning in Germany was reconstructed in an empirical study in which 25 teachers were interviewed.2 The phenomenon in question is suitable for an inquiry into changing pedagogical concepts of autonomy because school development planning radically transforms innovative reform ideas emerging from the midst of the teaching staff by means of their fixation and publication in a school development plan.

Whereas during the stage of grey area autonomy individual teachers or teacher networks conscious of their autonomy used to take the pedagogical liberty of implementing low-level reform ideas in their lessons without informing head teachers or administration, the concept of development via school development planning is now being transferred from the individual autonomous teacher’s readiness to accept reforms to the whole school as an organisation. Since development objectives now require legitimisation before colleagues, head teachers, and the school community instead of the teacher’s own pedagogical conscience only, the room for autonomy shifts: the individual teacher’s autonomy may have to submit to decisions on school development planning democratically made by a majority (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2007, p. 299). Objectives of school development planning are still meant to represent the whole teaching staff’s objectives and can, therefore, still count as an expression of teacher autonomy, but it is the autonomy of the collective that now functions as a corporate agent.

It is, however, totally unclear in many cases whether this collective autonomy actually constitutes a corporate agent with a coherent position or whether differing individual opinions merging into compromises or majority decisions are being treated as agents (‘The school conference has decided . . .’, Heinrich, 2011, p. 111f.). Analysing dilemma interviews (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2006), focused on fictional scenarios which illustrated possible conflicts between autonomy and control in school development planning, yielded numerous reactions from teachers fearing for their pedagogical freedom in the face of compulsory collective agreement. After the formerly voluntarily school development planning which educational policy had offered as a possibility had become compulsory (fixated in decrees or laws, varying between the different federal states), not only teachers’ individual freedom but also the autonomy of the teacher collective, which within its particular school had agreed on specific objectives, was curtailed. School development plans were required to be submitted, a rule which in some cases even included formal instructions on the components that the plans should cover.

It could be argued that such forms of curtailing autonomy are harmless as the failure to achieve objectives outlined in school development plans never resulted in sanctions. In involved agents’ subjective interpretations, however, fears and feelings of losing autonomy, often implicitly articulated, become visible:

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2The aim was to find interviewees from all different types of school in order to avoid overlooking certain patterns of argumentation specific to individual types. Because of their exceptional position, special needs schools were not included in the sample. Instead, we interviewed teachers from primary schools, secondary schools (‘Hauptschule’), middle schools (‘Realschule’), vocational schools (‘Berufsfachschule’), grammar schools (‘Gymnasium’) and comprehensive schools (‘Gesamtschule’). Whenever possible, interviewees were selected from contrasting age groups (for instance, trainee teachers and teachers on the brink of retirement). Questions regarding the distribution of certain characteristics among the population and the sample were, however, not prioritised. Because of the small sample, socio-metric categories could not be expected to be significant in the sense of a statistically sound group comparison. The hardly structured sampling process was supposed merely to increase the likelihood of assessing all patterns of argumentation essential to the autonomy debate, which would not have been likely with a sample strictly homogenous regarding gender, age, and type of school. In order to further increase the variety of responses, interviews were carried out in the Federal States of both North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse. At the time of the interviews (summer/autumn 2002), they had either just completed the first stage of school planning development as recently demanded by law or were just going through its critical phase (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2007, p. 223).
Interviewer: Do you feel controlled by the school council and school supervision?
Teacher: — Not yet.
Interviewer: What do you mean by ‘yet’?
Teacher: — Because maybe, when the school development plan is finished, this could happen. But I don’t think that . . . well, ehm, I think I’ll be able to justify my pedagogical work.
Interviewer: But that means it is an examination nevertheless . . .
Teacher: . . . no, it’s not a direct, concrete examination, it’s more like a kind of dictation inside the head. (As cited in Heinrich, 2007, p. 237)

This teacher at first rejects the notion of their autonomy being curtailed, only to then concede that this curtailment affects them at the level of subconscious internalisation, even if legal resp. manifest circumstances do ‘not yet’ constrain it.

Meanwhile, larger empirical inquiries suggest that remarkably, German teachers react to statutory provisions from educational politics as if they were embedded in high-stake systems, even though negative sanctions never took place. While in the USA the non-fulfilment of fixed objectives often results in direct and drastic sanctions, German teachers seem to react with pre-emptive obedience and conformism, even though no comparable negative sanctions by the government have — as yet — to be expected (Bellmann, 2015).

On the fading autonomy of schools in the context of quality management – the example of school supervision

The relatively non-binding nature of school development planning in Germany was transformed into a binding nature not only by compulsory submission of development plans to school supervision boards, but also through implementation of school inspection as a compulsory procedure in the German federal states. Similar to England, where in the years following their implementation new standards of school inspection were used as guidelines in many individual school development plans, instruments of school inspection presumably have a normative influence on school development planning in Germany as well.

This is valid not only in terms of compulsory submission of development plans to school inspection boards with their non-submission being an indicator of failure on the schools’ part, but also in terms of school inspection assessments following a national framework of school quality, which is a signal to teachers as to which norms have to be considered binding norms of their profession.3 Kotthoff and Böttcher emphasise that the norms of reference relevant in school inspection [are] normally published in the form of an orientation framework for school quality, representing a quasi-theory of ‘good schools’. By publication of evaluation criteria, expectations concerning the quality of schools and instructions are formulated, lending an additional normative effect on individual schools to the governance instrument that is school inspection. (Kotthoff & Böttcher, 2010, p. 296)

In an empirical inquiry funded by the Federal German Ministry of Education and Research (see Heinrich, Lambrecht, Böhm-Kasper, Brüsemeister, & Wissinger, 20144) and involving different school agents, one school inspector articulates this normative claim very clearly:

And whether we can define norms to a certain extent. That’s an example of one of the discussions that took place […] ‘Does [school inspection] define the norms that must be fulfilled?’ Like: ‘Who really does define the quality standards?’ This, at the moment, is the compelling idea behind it. (School inspector)

It should be noted that, especially in Germany, schools have always been confronted with guidelines issued by the government, i.e. in the form of curricula (Avenarius, 1995; Flügge, 1964; Hennecke, 1986; Stock, 1971).

This normative entity, however, traditionally manifested in Germany (and in Austria) as a school supervision board composed mainly of members of the actual teaching staff and was, therefore, predominantly oriented towards the norms of the teaching profession and open to pedagogical arguments in favour of teacher autonomy (Schratz, 1993). These very forms of teacher autonomy became, however, subject to criticism due to an increasing interest in meeting quality standards through school management (Lange, 1999; Richter 1999), so that, as a consequence, the traditional school supervision oriented towards teacher autonomy also began to attract critical attention and a ‘crisis of school supervision’ (Maritzen, 2008, p. 88) seemed imminent.

In contrast, the school inspections implemented after the ‘PISA shock’ clearly follow the lines of efficiency-centred organisational development, conducting their evaluations in accordance with externally defined objectives

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3These frameworks contain the pedagogical idea of the autonomy of the child in respective norms, such as student-centred, individualised or differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, the autonomy of the child is only present as a formal claim which, still, has to be met within the frame of teacher autonomy in actual lessons.

4The data presented in the following originate in two sources: a school administration survey, carried out on a region-wide basis in four federal states (Böhm-Kasper & Selders, 2013) and more than 120 interviews conducted for the joint project ‘School Inspection as a Governance Impulse for School Development and Conditions for its Realisation in Individual Schools’ (funding code 01JG1001A-D) and for the follow-up survey ‘Functions of School Inspections: the Generating of Knowledge, Knowledge-based School Development and Legitimation’ (funding codes 01JG1304A-B), both funded by the Ministry of Education and Research. For reasons of anonymity, all denominations of processes in the respective organisations have been changed to ‘school inspection’. Similarly, all names given are pseudonyms, indications of gender have been partially interchanged and official functions are not distinguished, with only the affiliation with school supervision or school inspection marked down.
that must be achieved in the best possible way. Therefore, the normative entity has not only abandoned the traditional form of school supervision oriented towards teacher autonomy but also, at the content level, changed a fixation of objectives which now only allows for an ‘autonomy of channels’, as another school inspector clearly describes:

[...] so, this increasing independence of the school clearly leads to people saying: ‘school supervision has strict administrative supervisions but, in principle, takes a step back and leaves large parts to the school’. But, in exchange, the state – so to speak – looks at that school in the shape of [school inspection] using a secure system and giving a feedback- a feedback system, for an independent school. [...] Especially from that perspective I can understand the rather large part of normalisation that somehow, for reasons of fairness, has to be involved. (School inspector)

This illustrates a further shift of the room for autonomy away from individual teacher autonomy to the merely collectively claimable autonomy of the whole teaching staff within an organisation development framework and, from there, to school autonomy which, eventually, does not even count as autonomy of the individual school as an organisation any longer but only as autonomy of the school as an institution of the state. This new type of standard-setting appears to gradually replace the 1980s’ original concept of the individual school as a ‘Unit of Pedagogical Action’ (cf. Fend, 1986) with a universalised idea of a ‘good school’. Thus, the potential for increasing the quality of schools by means of site-specific elaboration, which had been the focus of the beginning school development movement in Germany in the 1980s and 90s, is gradually weakened.

School as an institution of the state is still operating within its own framework of norms distinguishing it from other social spheres, such as the economy, but these norms’ fixation (autonomy), mediated by the government’s quality frameworks, does not reside with schools as individual organisations, with the teaching staff or with individual teacher autonomy anymore.

On the fading autonomy of schools in competition – the example of school profiling

Apart from the continuities and discontinuities described so far, even the autonomy of school as an institution has become endangered in recent years by, in terms of a parallelism of competing concepts, an increasing relevance of the economic principle of competition alongside efforts of school profiling. Here, the question is whether the individual school might be conceptualised as a pedagogical business, in need of unique selling propositions making certain student clienteles prefer it over competing businesses.

On the one hand, the phenomenon of school profiling can be understood as an extension to school planning development in which the individual school learns to view itself as an organisation with shared pedagogical standards and, therefore, to distinguish itself from other schools as well. On the other hand, catalysed by the demographic context of decreasing student numbers, this process of differentiation also triggers competitive thinking which has abandoned the pedagogical logic of providing the best education possible for each individual child but instead follows the economic paradigm of self-preservation.

The phenomenon of school profiling illustrates how the idea of ‘Social Efficiency’ (cf. Waldow, 2012) can be connected to the highly compatible concept of the economical-liberal autonomy of the school as a business. In an inquiry funded by the Austrian National Bank we could identify highly differing effects of competition on school profiling (cf. in detail Altrichter et al., 2014). For instance, in the case of an Austrian ‘Gymnasium’ (grammar school) we observed the gradual disappearance of the perspective of pedagogical encouragement and its substitution by a concept of selection modelled along the lines of economic self-preservation:

That means, the mere fact: one goes with the child to an upper secondary school with a cultural focus, the child has to take a kind of entrance exam – many people won’t apply, and those who do are mostly far above the average, and that’s a very positive selection effect of the orientation workshop; we’ve already discussed getting rid of it, if we don’t get as many applications as before, but we won’t do so, as the mere fact of its existence gives us access to a clientele with very high potential. (Austrian grammar school teacher)

It seems remarkable how well this teacher is able to utilise market mechanisms and their symbolic biases and, at the same time, refer to a ‘positive selection effect’. This conceptual pair would have been considered an oxymoron, a contradiction in itself, within reformed pedagogy or traditional conceptualisations of pedagogical autonomy.

As part of a larger project network, eight Austrian secondary schools of different types were included in the sample following three preliminary studies. The case studies were based on document analyses (documents relevant to profiling, such as draft papers, public image documents, minutes, representation in the media), field studies, and interviews. In each of the eight schools between 10 and 15 thematically structured interviews were conducted in two waves. The first wave included five ‘officials’ from each school (school administration, representatives of staff, parents’ representatives, students’ representatives, teachers with coordinative functions) who were assumed to put forward essential ‘formal’ perspectives on the development process. Interviewees for the second wave were selected by means of theoretical sampling supported by preliminary analyses of the first wave data. The aim here was to assess expertise, perspectives or attitudes which had been referred to in the interviews from the first wave but had not been systematically observed (cf. in detail Altrichter, Heinrich, & Soukup-Altrichter, 2011, p. 53).
Mediated by ‘second order competition’ (which means not only competing for a high number of students as in ‘first-order competition’, but also for a high-performing clientele; cf. Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995), the prevalent interpretation of pedagogical processes results in a loss of sensitivity for aspects that might constitute the modern equivalent of the pedagogical orientation towards the autonomous nature of the child: student-centred instruction, individualisation and differentiation.

Students are, in contrast, mainly seen as de-individualised performers:

And I want qualified students to come. That doesn’t mean that I would refuse foreign students, for example, not at all. We have very good foreign students, but we have also very weak foreign students. I mean, I want the qualified ones to come. And I want the good ones. What teacher wouldn’t like that? (Austrian grammar school teacher)

Autonomy – or trans-intentionality of divergent processes of self-legislation in the constellation of agents

To conclude, the metamorphoses of the autonomy concept – beginning with a concept in humanistic pedagogy and developing into an instrument of modern educational governance – illustrate how pedagogical reasoning becomes increasingly irrelevant in the term’s semantic substance and is being reshaped by bureaucratic institutionalisations resp. by the logic of control by the state or by economic principles.

It could be argued at this point that the German discourse, in whose context these pedagogical elements of the rhetoric of autonomy seem to have secretly disappeared, has become indifferent to these traditional pedagogical norms’ necessity (cf. Heinrich, 2010). And it is in fact – except in explicitly reform-oriented and alternative circles – considered old-fashioned and anti-modernistic to refer to such old pedagogical norms.

Meanwhile, however, such autonomy’s necessity is again referred to more often and ex negativo, as the ‘monitoring paradigm’ (cf. Böttcher, 2013) is increasingly criticised in the German school-related discourse. Suddenly, even proponents of an efficiency-centred school development agenda warn against the horrible image of a controlling state, drawing on the United States as a frightening example:

In the Federal Republic [of Germany], the paradigm of monitoring has not yet changed into a paradigm of control that links assessment to negative sanctions. The USA serves as an example of this. It might therefore be too early to give out a ‘warning against the false idol’ [...]. But, if politicians should decide to focus on the further development of monitoring instead of the further development of pedagogical practice, we will quickly arrive at a system that produces a number of negative side effects. (Böttcher, 2013, p. 18)

At the same time, the United States is seeing an increase in criticism of technological and control-oriented school development resp. of the failed ‘great American experiment’, as the two American experts in school development Mintrop and Sundermann (2012, p. 24) put it:

The hypothesis of simplification was put forward by experts in management and psychometrics. It claims that we can humanise a very complex system of human interaction, i.e. teaching, by employing a limited number of effective quantitative indicators. The great American experiment has taught us how difficult it is to connect exact numbers to the more subtle professional values of human charity, enthusiastic teaching and good instruction.

Even if this criticism does not explicitly refer to traditional German concepts of autonomy, it does contain the aforementioned elements of a pedagogical idea, beginning with the autonomy of the child which needs protection and for whose careful development the autonomy of the teacher is essential, and arriving at the school as an autonomous institution which ought to provide the framework for free pedagogical interaction. This possibly means that we no longer find ourselves in the third stage of coordination of across-school governance elements (see c. 2) but already in a fourth stage of school reform, the ‘monitoring paradigm’, in which – as the interview studies illustrated – the three earlier forms of autonomy come under pressure and the pedagogical potential threatens to dwindle away.

At the same time, the ever-increasing criticism seems inevitable, making a return to traditional forms of pedagogical autonomy appear promising. A progressive option could be the concept of a negotiation-centred and evidence-based school development (cf. in detail Heinrich, 2015), because within this concept, through the demands for evidence, the old idea of the enlightened subject could be revitalised: a self-governing subject, establishing its own law (autonomy) and justifying it in the court of its ‘own’, in this case ‘pedagogical’, reason.

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