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Protestant Schools in Germany. The School's Religious Profile as a Subject of Pedagogical Discourse

Szkoły ewangelickie w Niemczech.

Profil wyznaniowy szkoły jako przedmiot dyskursu pedagogicznego

Abstract: Protestant schools in Germany. The school's religious profile as a subject of pedagogical discourse.

Public schools maintain denominational neutrality. They are meant for all students regardless of their worldview. In democratic countries, however, there exist also schools declaring a connection with a specific religious tradition, where a high level of education is usually provided. Nonetheless, they differ among themselves in their understanding of the relationship between the declared religious profile and their social and cultural pluralism. In this article, I will analyse the identity of evangelical schools in Germany on the example of selected pedagogical discourses in this field.

Keywords: school pedagogy, theory of upbringing, school culture, educational responsibility, Protestant education

Introduction

School systems include both public, state-run institutions, as well as schools run by private, social and religious institutions. I disregard here the historical aspect and the processes of secularisation of education. From contemporary perspective, it is worth emphasising that not only strictly denominational schools, but also private and community ones may have a religious profile. The latter may be expressed in the declarative layer, the symbolic layer and cumulatively in the applied school culture. Protestant

schools form a specific group. They function in different countries, naturally in proportion to the cultural position of Protestantism in the given country (Simojoki, Scheunpflug and Schreiner, 2018).

Protestant schools in Poland constitute a statistically marginal part of the education system. At the same time, they are like a lens into the challenges faced by denominational education in general. For this reason, I have chosen the discourse conducted in Germany on the combination of Protestant ethos with general and dialogical education as an example in the present analysis.

The Federal Republic of Germany is a pluralistic, secularised country with a high proportion of pupils with a so-called immigrant background. Nevertheless, within the framework of education 'for all', there are also Protestant schools. They remain open to a variety of pupils and at the same time maintain their specific denominational profile. The term: 'denominational profile' indicates that the topic of my inquiry is not only denominational schools run by an organisational Church unit, but – in general – schools declaring identification with certain worldview values. I am primarily interested in defining the denominational profile of Protestant schools and how it relates to general education within the public domain. General education is aimed at all students, delivered inside a melting pot, i.e. the entirety of cultural, social and existential challenges. It refers to the identity of the individual, the ability to live and build community and solidarity (Klafki, 1985, pp. 52-69).

Public and denominational education: Germany – Poland

In this section, I will quote data commonly available in publications by the statistical offices of Poland and Germany. I include them solely to serve as a background showing the extent of denominational education, its diversity and problems with providing a clear definition.

Germany. In Germany, educational aspects are regulated independently by the federal states. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany only stipulates, in Article 7, that education is under state supervision. Incidentally – being the only such constitution in Europe – in the same article it also guarantees the compulsory nature of religious instruction at school. In addition, it allows for the establishment of private schools, including denominational schools or those based on a particular worldview. The provision on state supervision corresponds with the delegation of detailed legal and organisational competences to individual federal states. Thus, in Germany we have a total of 16 education acts, corresponding to the number of federal states. The consequence thereof is a particular diversity of the

educational system. Germany has a population of 82.8 million, including 9.7 million foreigners. The school system, taking into account its federal diversity, consists of primary schools (15,409 institutions and 2,796,000 pupils), Hauptschulen – general, low-level schools (3,399 institutions and 494,000 pupils), Schularten mit mehreren Bildungsgängen – schools with various educational routes (1,862 institutions and 528,000 pupils), Förderschulen /Sonderschulen – special schools (1,940 institutions and 317,000 pupils), Realschulen – real schools (1,940 institutions and 816,000 pupils), Gymnasien – gymnasiums (1,940 institutions and 2,226,000 pupils), integrierte Gesamtschulen – integrated collective schools (2,325 institutions and 1,085,000 pupils), freie Schulen – free schools (821 institutions and 56,000 pupils). A total of 8.35 million pupils in Germany receive primary, vocational, special and secondary education (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019, pp. 95-96).

There are 1,135 Protestant schools in Germany with 214,400 pupils. These institutions are run by 364 legal entities. Protestant schools account for 2.6% of schools in Germany. A total of approximately 24,900 teachers work in these schools (EKD, 2020a, pp. 5-7).

In addition to Protestant schools, there are also Catholic schools. There are around 900 institutions with approximately 359,500 pupils (schulen.katholisch.de; accessed on 15.04.2024).

Among Protestant schools, the largest number are organisationally linked to Diaconia (a Protestant social welfare organisation with over 125,000 full-time employees). Further managing entities are Protestant associations, educational foundations and limited liability companies (GmbH). These schools are partly financed by the state funds (by federal states), foundations and donations. Nearly half of them charge additional fees.

Out of these 1,135 Protestant schools, 632 institutions offer general education, out of which 178 institutions are special schools, and just over 500 are vocational schools – most in the field of social assistance and nursing. 72 schools operate at the gymnasium level. The largest number of Protestant schools is located in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. There are 419 institutions there – 36.9% of all Protestant schools (EKD, 2020a, 5nn).

In Protestant schools in Germany, 73% of students declare their religious affiliation. The largest group consists of Protestant students of just over 50%. The report on Protestant school statistics does not provide total figures. This is due, firstly, to the different types of institutions (general education, special education, vocational education) and, secondly, to the fact that in the territory of former East Germany including the entire city of Berlin, as well as Bremen, it is not allowed to ask students about their religious affiliation. The

overall data that could be obtained shows that, apart from Protestants, the largest group of pupils are those who declare themselves as Catholic (23.1%), followed by Muslims (5.7%), Jewish (0.1%), and other religions (4.9%). A significant group (21.1%) are those declaring their non-denominational status (EKD, 2020a, 17). 7.4% of students have an immigrant background and 4.8% are foreigners (EKD, 2020a, 20).

A large share of Protestant schools offer full-day classes in the spirit of Ganztagschulen (53.2% of general schools of various levels), in which 57.4% of the pupils participate. An educational novelty is the implemented concept of teaching which integrates different grades of pupils. It has been implemented in 31.7% of general schools. Protestant schools are characterised by good educational and sports infrastructure, therapeutic and pastoral support and intensive cooperation with parents (EKD, 2020a, pp. 22-26).

Poland. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland, in Article 70, guarantees the right to education and delegates the determination of the rules for the implementation of compulsory education to an act of Parliament. Pursuant to Article 8 of the Education Law, schools may be public or non-public institutions and may be established and run by local government units, another legal entity or a natural person (Act of 16 December 2016 Education Law, i.e. Journal of Laws of 2023, item 900).

Poland has a population of 38.088 million (according to the 2021 census 38.036 million). The age group 7-12 comprises 2,226.6 thousand, 13-18 – 2,221.8 thousand. To this should also be added a portion of 19-year-olds, whose total population is 535.5 thousand (SP, 2022, 207). The school system in Poland is diverse. At this point, I will cite statistical data on the main types of schools, which include: primary schools, first- and second-level vocational schools, general secondary schools and technical schools. In the school year of 2021/22, there were a total of 14,144 primary schools in Poland with 3,121.7 thousand pupils, 2,231 1st degree vocational schools with 219.9 thousand pupils, 136 2nd degree vocational schools with 3.7 thousand pupils, and 2,331 general secondary schools with 652.7 thousand pupils and 1,854 technical schools with 656.5 thousand pupils.

In Poland, denominational organisations managed 169 primary education institutions for 33,800 students, 25 vocational schools for 1,000 students and 95 general secondary schools for 16,600 students. In the context of the entire school system, institutions run by religious organisations are a definite minority, namely represent ca. 1% of institutions. In the case of the largest group of educational entities, namely primary schools, they account

for only 1.2% of schools with less than 1.1% of pupils, and ca. 0.5% of pupils in higher-level schools (PS, 2022, 345).

In Poland, the concept of a school drawing on a religious tradition is not unambiguous. In a fundamental approach, denominational schools would be institutions run by a church legal entity – either directly by a church or by its organisational units, such as orders or organisations whose status is defined in the law regulating the relationship between the state and a church or a religious organisation. The term ‘other legal entities’ used in the Education Law also includes educational associations which, from the formal and legal point of view, have nothing in common with church organisational units, nevertheless they may declare a commitment to the ethos and culture of a particular religious tradition. Thus, in addition to strictly denominational schools run directly by church entities, there are also schools run by educational associations or individuals who declare, directly or indirectly, a connection to a particular denominational tradition. It applies not only to Catholicism as a tradition with a statistical majority, but also to denominational minorities (Michalski, 2020).

In the case of Protestant schools in Poland, it is important to note that they are purely social institutions and not – in the legal sense – denominational. None of these schools is founded by a church entity. These are institutions run by educational associations that integrate elements of Protestant identity into the curricula and the fostered school culture in a dialogical, even unobtrusive and discreet manner. These schools operate on the grounds of the principals expressed in the school’s policy documents and on the basis of an identity associated with promoting a particular school culture.

In recent years, this issue has become the subject of individual monographic analysis. Among Protestant schools, institutions in Bielsko-Biała, Cieszyn, Gliwice, Kraków, Wrocław and Warsaw should be listed. In addition to schools associated with the Protestant (Reformation) tradition, there are schools referring to the so-called Second Reformation and Evangelical Protestantism (Chyła, 2020; Goch-Murzyniec, 2023).

Educational responsibility of the Protestant Church

After the Second World War, the process of denazification began in Germany. It applied to church communities as well. For it must be remembered that a significant part of both of Germany’s largest churches had collaborated with or silently condoned the activities of the Nazis. In the history of the Protestant Church, a pivotal milestone was reached with the ‘Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt’ (1945), in which the council of the EKD

(Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland = Protestant Church in Germany) expressed its repentance for having betrayed the principals of the Christian faith. From this point onwards, a slow renewal of the Church began which lasted for many years. In the initial period, its essential feature was the introduction of an ideological distance between the Church institutions and the state. Naturally, cooperation has continued to exist, e.g. in matters of joint financing of various projects or the collection of church tax by the tax offices. Nevertheless, the Protestant Church has sought to re-establish itself as a critical authority. It was at this time that Protestant universities were established. Some of them originally functioned as vocational colleges. They were intended as a complement to, and sometimes an alternative for, state university education. It should be noted that only a few of them provided specifically theological education. Most of them –including the Protestant perspective – provided courses in educational and social studies. Protestant academies were then established as places for critical social discourse and lifelong learning.

During this period, the foundations were laid for the development of the idea of the educational responsibility of the Church. From a historical perspective, the founding text was Karl Ernst Nipkow's 3-volume work 'Grundfragen der Religionspädagogik', published in 1975 (first two volumes) and 1982 (third volume). Volume two with the subtitle 'The Educational Activity of the Church' was specifically focused on this idea. Nipkow started from a pragmatic premise: 'The state makes its own claims on Christian education, and at the same time the Church intends to pursue its own aims with the help of the state.' (Nipkow, 1975b, p. 41). However, this is not an instrumental dependence. Both the state and the Church must maintain their own autonomy. What is crucial, however, is the further argument. The Church's educational responsibility is crucial for maintaining its social credibility. This indicates that the Church cannot limit itself to theological principles alone, but must equally take theological and educational criteria into consideration in its educational and social activities. Moreover, the educational criteria do not contradict the Reformation tradition (criticism of authority, individualism, the demand for erudition and a linguistic grasp of reality). The idea of the educational responsibility of the Church implies the concept of recognising a double normativity, a convergence of theology and education in the social and school domain (Nipkow, 1975a, pp. 173-178).

While in the 'Grundfragen der Religionspädagogik' the Protestant schools only appear in passing, in his subsequent magnum opus Nipkow dedicates them a separate chapter. It begins with an argument entitled: 'Schools

Run by Protestant Units – the Forgotten Chapter’ (Nipkow, 1990, pp. 496-554). In Germany, there is an appreciation of the educational reform and the constitutionally guaranteed activity of so-called free schools. Protestant schools, similarly to free schools, should maintain their own profile and at the same time participate in the tasks of the school curriculum and general education. Protestant schools, referring to the principles of Protestantism, are open to the challenges of pluralism and modernity. While they consider the existential and social issues of the students, they also focus on the acquisition of specific knowledge and competences.

Nipkow’s thesis is to the effect of: a Protestant school is a ‘good school’ (Nipkow, 1990, p. 509). Nipkow, as the later chairman of the EKD education committee, was a crucial influence on the Church’s official documents in this regard. ‘The educational responsibility of the Church is now seen multifaceted and in various areas. It encompasses the educational tasks of religious communities as well as state schools, religious instruction, educational institutions run by Church organisations, ranging from pre-school facilities to youth work to adult and lifelong learning’ (EKD, 2008, p. 79).

Protestant profile of school in EKD documents

‘Education is and will remain a constitutive feature of the Protestant Church’ (EKD, 2009, p. 76). The Protestant Church in Germany issues periodical memoranda on fundamental issues of religious and social life.

From a systematic perspective, it can be said that the arguments presented in the memoranda fall within the scope of a single substantive matrix. This matrix is defined by beliefs, the extremes of which can be designated in a quadrilateral form – four interrelated issues: denominational profile – holistic individual development – openness to social pluralism – social inclusion and community building. EKD’s memoranda are published as the official stance of the Church or the position of a specific task body. Each time, however, it is nothing more than a signpost, a paper that presents a particular viewpoint for the readers’ reflection, rather than a doctrinal text. It is also worth emphasising that the memoranda are not limited to a list of theses, but constitute comprehensive studies. They are edited by competent persons, largely representatives of the academic world. By their very nature, they are intertwined with educational issues (Ernst-Milerska, 2020, 2022).

In an educational context, we can divide these documents into five groups: 1) memoranda on religious education (EKD, 1995, 2014b), 2) memoranda on the challenges of social pluralism and secularisation (EKD, 2015, 2020b), 3) memoranda on the formation of an inclusive community and

social consensus (EKD, 2014a, 2017, 2021), 4) memoranda on general education from a Protestant perspective (EKD, 2003, 2009, 2022), and 5) memoranda on Protestant schools (EKD, 2008, 2020a, 2020c).

Let us now focus on issues directly related to the Protestant school profile. EKD's stance in this regard was already expressed in the memorandum on religious education entitled 'Identität und Verständigung' ('Identity and Understanding'). The members of the EKD Chamber of Education and Upbringing, chaired by Nipkow, formulated the core educational task for school and society as follows: 'Amidst what is varied, strengthen what is common' (EKD, 1995, 65; cf. EKD, 2014).

Another memorandum drafted by the same body addressed the essence of general education at school and the support of students in their holistic development. It was written from the perspective of the fundamental criterion of any educational activity, which is a 'measure of humanity'. It was a response to the admiration evoked at the beginning of the new millennium by empirical studies of measuring educational effectiveness (e.g. PISA). Again, EKD's stance is not only about understanding the essence of general education, but also about demonstrating the specificity of the Protestant educational profile. The human being (student) cannot be reduced to a set of measurable competences. The memorandum advocates a holistic vision of a human being and education. 'A person gains his or her own dignity by the way in which he or she works through his or her experiences, feelings, hopes and fears, reflects on them and acts on them in a particular life situation' (EKD, 2003, 27).

The idea of the Church's educational responsibility does not reduce its theological identity. It also applies to Protestant schools. 'The deepest communion of all schools run by Protestant organisations grows out of a common reference to the Gospel as the basis of faith and life' (EKD, 2008, p. 38). In other words, Protestant schools are part of the German public education system. At the same time, however, they are distinct from schools run by the state (federal states). For they not only make the Christian tradition accessible from a cultural perspective and general knowledge, but express this tradition in everyday life, the ethos and culture of the school (EKD, 2008, pp. 69-71). 'Protestant schools aim to provide an experience of faith that reflects an evangelical understanding of faith. In this case, we are not thinking only of religious instruction, but holistically of the community life of the school, the celebrations and festivities, the worship services, biblical reflections and other elements related to spiritual life. In conclusion, what

emerges is a thoughtful school ethos that is an expression of the Christian faith' (EKD, 2008, p. 69).

From a statistical perspective, 86.9% of Protestant schools have obligatory Protestant religious instruction. 100% of general education schools conduct school services and reflective Bible studies. 50% of the schools have pastoral counselling and the link between education and the diaconal, social activities of the Church is nurtured. Formal affiliation to the Protestant Church is required of teachers in principle, but their religious commitment is not verified. In the case of 63.8% of the general schools, additional forms of further training for teachers in the field of the Protestant profile are provided (EKD, 2020a, pp. 14-15).

The religious foundation of the relation between the ethos and culture of the school and the Gospel has concomitant educational implications. The following educational implications can be indicated when paraphrasing the text of the memorandum: 1) recognition of the uniqueness and indelible dignity of every human being, 2) a comprehensive view of education in relation to teaching, knowledge, values, attitudes and actions made in the context of meanings that constitute the purpose of life, 3) experience of the Gospel that supports individual freedom, 4) primacy of freedom resulting in the recognition of learning and openness to the world, 5) a commitment to others and social justice. Consequently, 6) Protestant schools should be 'good schools' and combine the holistic development of individuals with support for the acquisition of diverse competences. For this reason, Protestant schools are part of the fulfilment of the tasks of public schools in the 'horizon of pluralism and liberal democracy' (EKD, 2008, p. 42). Protestant schools are not based on a homogeneous student community. They do not assume religious or cultural homogeneity. And this is precisely why they strive to preserve their own identity. 'The ethos of Protestant schools takes pluralistic relationships within the school community with due seriousness' (EKD, 2020a, p. 16).

Protestant schools in Germany: a study

The Protestant profile of a school is not only the subject of theoretical considerations, but also that of research. I shall now refer to two research papers on Protestant schools in Germany. The first focuses on the definition of the Protestant profile by school leaders, while the second examines the relationship between the denominational profile and general education and the fulfilment of the tasks of public education which is, by design, accessible to all students.

Simone Beck conducted focus group interviews with Protestant school leaders. She performed that task over the course of 19 sessions with a group of 66 people between 2015 and 2019. (Beck, 2022, pp. 88-92). Beck assumed three types of leadership orientation focus: on the needs of the learner, on the fulfilment of the mission as derived from the Christian message, as well as on alternative education. In addition, she emphasised the role of shaping the Protestant profile through action in extracurricular institutions, e.g. diaconal and social institutions. The analysis of previous research indicated that the staff of Protestant schools is guided by the principle of freedom, which results in the selection of different forms of work and – in practice – different forms of school culture. Therefore, there is no single common understanding of what is meant by a Protestant religious profile (Beck, 2022, pp. 22-33).

The interpretation analyses of the interviews confirmed that there is not a single approved model for the Protestant school profile. The results show that this is one of the most significant challenges that school managements become aware of. The profile is constantly developed and discussed. The author of the study distinguished 4 types of argumentation, means of addressing such a challenge: 1) awareness of the ambiguity of activities carried out in an exclusively church perspective, 2) compensation of uncertainty by the reduction of ambiguity within the school community, 3) overcoming of contingency in the modus of a Christian ethos oriented towards the well-being of the individual, 4) overcoming of contingency in the modus of a reflective religious dialogue with regard to pluralism. For all of the aforementioned types of reasoning, characteristic is the connection with the appreciation of individual religiosity. It is viewed in terms of a determinant of managerial professionalism. Religious identification correlates with recognition of the heterogeneity of the school community, recognition of the diversity among individuals. When acting in a pluralistic environment, the management is aware of the correlation between education with a Protestant profile and the essence and tasks of general education in a pluralistic state. Therefore, the leadership expresses its individual religiosity through the acceptance of the pluralistic context and consideration of such context in educational activity (Beck, 2020, pp. 211-218)

Hanna Rose conducted a study on the relationship between a school's denominational orientation and the requirements of the general education system. The research question of the study was: how do schools run by Protestant organisations develop at the interface between denominational orientation and the general education system? The research examined the legal and declarative dimensions in terms of curriculum and the practice of

everyday life (Roose, 2022, pp. 9-28). The author studied the content on the websites of Protestant schools.

The first stage of the research consisted of an analysis of the actual level of the legal determinants of the relationship between denominational orientation and openness to all. Firstly, this level involved the teaching of the Protestant religion, which, as a matter of principle, is obligatory in Protestant schools. The pluralism and heterogeneity of the pupils is reflected in the dialogical character of school religious education.

The second stage of the research took the form of an analysis of the imaginative level, perceptions of the Protestant school. In the self-presentation of the schools, the following stood out: the appreciation of the pluralistic character of the school community and the mediation between the denominational profile and openness to all. This mediation is implemented across 5 dimensions: 1) the denominational positioning dimension – defining the Protestant profile from the perspective of the school staff, 2) the performative dimension – discourse that is transformed into action, creation (school rituals, school culture, school image creation), 3) the ethical dimension – presentation of the Christian image of the human in terms of an ethical challenge, 4) the inclusive dimension – valuing individuality within the community, personalisation of educational strategies in the context of pluralism, 5) the dialogical dimension – fostering tolerance and reaching consensus in communication processes.

The third stage of the research addressed the symbolic level, namely biblical teaching as an important aspect of the Protestant educational profile. Religious denomination is important, however, the specificity of Protestantism is its focus on the Bible. The Bible precedes the denomination, which enables a greater appreciation of pluralism and heterogeneity (Roose, 2022, pp. 217-231).

To conclude the results of the research, the author identifies the fact of the commodification of religious elements within general education. As a result, there appears a distanced form of communication, which is limited to the provision of religious beliefs to pupils, without a pressured, authoritative link between them and the requirement to adopt a certain religious orientation. The idea of distancing refers to an area enclosed within a set of extremes: on the one hand, the exclusion, the disregard of the student's beliefs, while on the other hand, the prominence of the specific beliefs of particular individuals. What remains in the middle is the area of safe withdrawal within the public school space. 'The penumbra.' In this area of penumbra,

the Protestant profile of general education finds its implementation (Roose, 2022, pp. 233-238).

Summary

The discourse on denominational elements in school education tends to focus on religious instruction, the presence of religious symbols, religious elements introduced in school ceremonies and the principle of worldview impartiality of public institutions. Research is also performed on the hidden forms of symbolic violence – the mechanisms of imposing the norms and patterns of social life represented by the dominant cultural group.

Dietrich Benner recalled a maxim attributed to Schleiermacher, a theologian, philosopher and one of the founders of German education: ‘Nothing because of religion. Everything with the accompaniment of religion’. In other words, religion can accompany general education and, at the same time, the sole concept of general education should not grow out of religious convictions. With reference to Benner, it can be argued that Protestant schools implement the tasks of secular public education to the full extent (‘nothing because of religion’), while at the same time embedding religion in their own identity (‘with the accompaniment of religion’). This approach emphasises on the one hand the autonomy of public education vis-à-vis the mission of the churches, while on the other hand the possibility of coherence between the two traditions (Benner, 2008, pp. 127-149).

In this article I have addressed the problem of a specific type of school, namely Protestant schools in Germany. In my view, these institutions represent an expression of the pluralism of general education, reflecting the diversity of the society in terms of culture and worldview. While the ambiguities concerning the definition of the Protestant profile provide an impulse for further debate in this area, they also reveal the stable ‘penumbra’, the area of coexistence of religious convictions with the acceptance of the pluralistic character of the school and the challenges of general education implemented in public schools.

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