

Germany's participation in the International Reading Literacy Study of 1990/91 at a turning point of history

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When IEA decided to conduct an International Reading Literacy Study in 1990/1991, it seemed very unlikely that the Federal Republic of (West) Germany would participate. Although the country had been a member of previous IEA surveys such as the Pilot Twelve-Country Study of 1960, the First International Mathematics Study of 1964 and the Six Subject Study of 1970/71, the public release of results from the last of these caused a stalemate. This was due to controversies between the eleven states constituting the Federal Republic, triggered by the fact that state-level means were interpreted by party politicians as intra-German 'league tables' without any consideration of sampling limitations. Highly misleading naming and blaming ensued.

Apart from the methodological fallacy of the respective comparisons, the specific constitutional context has to be considered. The jurisdiction over education was and is largely reserved to the federal states which, in combination with the statistical ignorance of the stakeholders, led to the abovementioned polemic abuse. At any rate, once the damage was done, it was to some extent understandable that key political actors subsequently advocated refraining from any further participation in IEA studies. This was accepted as a general political consensus and it defined the state of affairs until the mid-1980s. It was Neville Postlethwaite, Professor of the University of Hamburg since 1976, who labored to renew German activities in the IEA. At first, his efforts resulted in only two regionally restricted studies: the Munich component of the IEA Classroom Environment Study, published under its own acronym SCHOLASTIK (Weinert & Helmke 1997), and the Hamburg component of the IEA Written Composition Study (Lehmann & Hartmann 1987; Lehmann & Törmäkangas 1992). Obviously, in both cases inter-state comparisons and resulting political controversies were simply impossible.

Towards the end of the 1980s, when IEA actually planned the International Reading Literacy Study with Neville Postlethwaite as International Coordinator, it appeared highly desirable to reconsider the feasibility of such an undertaking in West Germany, despite the difficulties of the early 1970s described above. Thus, the Ministries of Education of all eleven states were contacted in order to seek their permission to conduct the respective test sessions in intact 3rd and 8th grade classrooms, randomly selected as two independent probability samples. After considerable persuasive efforts, including the assurance that inter-state comparisons were ruled out, the requested permissions were, indeed, granted by all federal states, although the question of funding was still open. It so happened, however, that the very fact of achieving the seemingly impossible, namely winning the cooperation of all states, convinced Professor Klaus Hasemann, the responsible civil servant in the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, to approve the funds needed by the University of Hamburg to conduct the study for the whole of West Germany.

In the midst of the preparations for the survey, political events in Europe during the fall of 1989 changed the situation entirely. On 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall and the guarded border fence between the two Germanys came down, inaugurating the end of communist East Germany and

eventually the reunification of the country. This was determined after the first free election of an East German Parliament in March 1990 and a series of negotiations with the four Allied Powers, leading to the incorporation of five states of the former East Germany into the Federal Republic by October 3, 1990. An almost immediate consequence of the fall of border controls was the revitalization of professional contacts between West and East German colleagues, which gave rise to the idea of implementing an East German component of the IEA Reading Literacy Study.

Heiner Willenberg, at that time professor at the West German College of Education at Ludwigsburg and a consultant for the earlier IEA Written Composition Study, already had a working partnership with Professor Wilfried Bütow of the Academy of Educational Sciences, East Berlin, and a group of researchers of the East German Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Institute for Primary Education in Köthen: Professor Manfred Baumann and his colleagues Käte Nestler, Ute Geiling, and Steffen Knoll. So, visits to Berlin and Köthen were organized in order to draft the design of a parallel sample for the very last school year of an independent East German school system. These colleagues had access to the required complete East German sampling frames for Grades 3 and 8 and proposed a random-start, equal-intervals design. Thus, parallel data collections could take place in both parts of the country in the spring of 1991, during the last year of two separate German school systems.

It should be noted that the respective systems of education were quite dissimilar. West Germany had opposed post-World War II moves of the Military occupation authorities, above all of the US, to introduce a comprehensive system according to the American model and retained the traditional three-tiered system of four years of common primary education plus four (later five or six) years of prevocational schooling for blue-collar jobs, six years of prevocational schooling for clerical jobs or nine years of pre-university studies. In 1945, East Germany had followed the Soviet model of eight (later ten) years of common education plus four (later two) years of pre-university studies. In the context of the ideological rivalries of the Cold War, debates over possible reforms of the West German system had continuous overtones of this antagonism. Thus, both the proponents and the opponents of reforming the traditional West German system were anxiously awaiting the results of this very first intra-national comparison. Unlike Hungary, East Germany had always carefully avoided international comparisons. The International Coordinator of the Reading Literacy Study was at first unwilling to accept two separate German data sets into the international data base. Perhaps because of the analogy of other countries with multiple samples such as Belgium or Canada, or perhaps in view of the technical independence of the two German samples, IEA at last conceded their separate inclusion.

The empirical results were, indeed, surprising. Despite all the differences in terms of educational theory and architecture of the two systems, student mean performance, the variance of achievement, and the covariance with social background were virtually identical between the two samples (cf. Elley 1992, 1994; Lehmann *et al.* 1995). The last of these three findings was particularly unexpected. Contrary to West German claims of the tiered system providing superior options for education specifically tailored to individual abilities and thus maximizing overall achievement, this position was not substantiated by the data, at least not in the domain of reading literacy. And contrary to the proclaimed socialist goals since 1945, the Soviet Occupation Zone and subsequently the German Democratic Republic had failed to be superior to the competing 'capitalist' system of

education in the country, at least in the domain of reading literacy, and to be more equitable by abolishing privileges in terms of the transfer of human and cultural capital by the upper and middle classes. Consequently, the public discussion of results of the IEA International Reading Literacy study was very much constrained by these issues of the long-standing ideological competition between the two parts of the country.

One implication of this constraint should not be overlooked: The fact that *both* German systems had failed to demonstrate excellent outcomes in terms of reading literacy did not really find much public attention. Only half a decade later, the publication of the TIMSS results (Baumert *et al.*, 1997) helped to bring about the required public awareness of urgently needed changes in the country's educational policies and practices.

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*The Reading Literacy Study was conducted at the third or fourth grades (the grade with most nine-year-olds) https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2001i/pdf/P1_TrR_ExecSum.pdf