

# The Gendered Classroom: Girls' and Boys' Experiences in Postwar Germany

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At the end of World War II, German educational administrators in the Soviet occupied zone of their nation decided to implement coeducation; that is, the schooling of girls and boys in the same classroom. This policy represented a radical break with German educational traditions, as well as with the western German zones' continued practice of gender-segregated schools.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this move was as simple as it was ambitious: educational reformers of the Soviet zone were committed to a new kind of school, one that would offer all children the same education in order to permit active and equal participation of all citizens, male and female, in the "new Germany." Educators estimated that over 90 percent of school-aged children attended school in the postwar years, approximately 15 percent of the entire population.<sup>2</sup> Major change in young people's education could thus potentially bring about major social reform. Yet coeducation did not resolve the so-called "woman's question" of structural inequality, a theory elaborated by the nineteenth-century socialist August Bebel and of grave concern to the "antifascist democratic" educators of the postwar years.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>Certainly, rural communities in the nineteenth century had taught both sexes together out of convenience. But demographic shifts and the attendant increase of school buildings throughout Germany fostered the steady establishment of single-sex schools, often even in the countryside. Although educational thinkers and parents often favored coeducational classrooms for the early primary grades, single-sex classrooms, particularly by the secondary school level, dominated the educational landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. Marianne Horstkemper, "Die Koedukationsdebatte," in *Geschichte der Mädchen- und Frauenbildung*, eds. Elke Kleinau and Claudia Opitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1996), vol. 2, 204-205.

<sup>2</sup>Schulabteilung der Deutschen Verwaltung für Volksbildung in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone (ed.), "Die deutsche demokratische Schule im Aufbau," (Berlin: n.p., circa 1947), statistical appendix, 77.

The percentage of school-aged young people remained around 15 percent of the population throughout the GDR. The category fourteen to twenty-six years of age made up about 18 percent of the population. Edeltraud Schulze et al., *DDR-Jugend: ein statistisches Handbuch*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 17-24.

<sup>3</sup>August Bebel, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* [1895] (Hannover: Fakelträger, 1975).

implementation of the coeducational classroom, although an important move towards erasing gross disparities in educational opportunities for girls, still allowed for and even perpetuated gender-specific educational lessons and experiences.

One major impediment to creating the same educational program for girls and boys resulted from their differing wartime experiences. Typical age divisions had changed. Many young people had lived through events that did not normally correspond to their life years: for instance, young children had been responsible for typically adult tasks like minding a store. Classrooms had a significant number of female and male pupils older than the normal age range. Boys in the higher grades, though, constituted the largest percentage of older-than-average pupils. School boards usually placed young men who had returned from the war back in their last grade, an attempt to reconstruct normal educational structures.<sup>4</sup> By reassigning ex-soldiers the role of pupil, however, educational administrators negated young men's military service as a passage into adulthood and created classrooms that singled out an overwhelmingly male experience by highlighting age differences. The percentage of pupils older than the normal age for their school grade hovered around 20 percent for boys and 18 percent for girls throughout elementary and lower secondary school, but in the older grades the differences proved even starker. In those classes, 21 percent of boys were older than the normal age range, compared to 16 percent of girls for the grades nine through twelve.<sup>5</sup> The difficulty that those young men must have faced—of having fought in the war, only to return to a classroom where the majority of pupils were considerably younger and without combat experience—is almost unimaginable. The composition of young people in the “new school” thus reflected the demographic shifts inflicted by the war and pointed to the unequal socialization experiences that young men and women brought with them into a classroom theoretically committed to gender-neutral education.

Once in the classroom, such structural differences between girls' and boys' experiences increased at the pedagogical level. In practice, not all educational reformers agreed on the extent to which coeducation should be introduced into classrooms. Certainly, the official policy from the *Deutsche Verwaltung für Volksbildung* (DVV, German Educational Administration) left little room for arguments: As the DVV director Paul Wandel insisted in 1947, “We are still of the opinion that women and men must receive exactly the same opportunities based upon school education. That is, there should be nothing in the school that from the beginning says that the woman

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<sup>4</sup>From Magistrat der Stadt Berlin, Abteilung Volksbildung, Hauptschulamt, Wildangel, 11 March 1946, Landesarchiv Berlin/Stadtarchiv [hereafter LAB/STÄ] 120/3292.

<sup>5</sup>DVV, ed., *Die Deutsche Demokratische Schule im Aufbau*, statistical appendix, 42.

should actually be in the home. Instead the entire education in the elementary school and in the secondary school must proceed in a manner that assures the same education for women and men."<sup>6</sup> Although he spoke in the name of all Soviet zone educators, he did not represent a unified front. Biological postulations about girls' and women's natural roles as *future mothers*, articulated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, continued to be a part of Soviet zone decisions about coeducation. Women in particular worried about the consequences of eliminating typical girls' courses from the curriculum.

Thus, advocating equal education for girls and boys existed alongside the question of whether to offer certain courses to girls that were considered necessary for their futures as wives and mothers. Educators at a 1945 conference in Saxony voiced resistance to having the same education for boys and girls if it was at the expense of ignoring girls' domestic and maternal instincts: "Instruction in home economics has the duty to transmit some basic home economic knowledge and a modest amount of practical skills to the adolescent girl, thereby attending to the housewife disposition of girls."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, a women's committee for the DVV that met in 1947 to discuss girls' education complained that the school curriculum lacked mandatory domestic skills courses for girls.<sup>8</sup> One member noted that she could not imagine that women would find the scenario of a girl without household skills acceptable.<sup>9</sup> The educators present finally suggested that domestic skills should be offered to girls, parallel to boys' courses in handicrafts. In a related nod to addressing actual sexual issues, biology would be taught separately to boys and girls, at least in the seventh and eighth grades. The only dissenting voice was Käte Agerth, who later went on to become a respected teacher in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—indicative, perhaps, of her early commitment to antifascist democratic objectives, such as eliminating unequal access to education, including at the gender level.<sup>10</sup> As late as December 1948, an educational administrator in Berlin suggested

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<sup>6</sup>Paul Wandel, "Ministerbesprechung," 18-19. March 1947, Berlin, Bundesarchiv [hereafter BArch], DR-2/53, no. 75.

<sup>7</sup>"Bericht über die Tagung der Schulaufsichtsbeamten des Bundeslandes Sachsen," 19-20 October 1945, BArch DR2/488, no. 30.

<sup>8</sup>"Protokoll über die Sitzung des erweiterten Ausschusses für Frauenfragen," 10 June 1947, Berlin, BArch DR-2/576, no. 29-32.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 32.

<sup>10</sup>Eva Landler, "Käte Agerth—1888 bis 1974: Im Herzen immer jung geblieben," in *Wegbereiter der neuen Schule*, eds. Gerd Hohendorf, Helmut König, and Eberhard Meumann (Berlin [East]: Volk und Wissen, 1989), 13-19. Gert Geißler noted however that Agerth and others of similar political background, in contrast to their early roles in the communist resistance during the war, did not achieve any real positions of political influence in the GDR. Gert Geißler, "Schulämter und Schulreformer in Berlin nach Kriegsende 1945," in *Reformpädagogik in Berlin—Tradition und Wiederentdeckung*, ed. Wolfgang Keim (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1998), 137-168.

that the absence of infant care courses in the secondary school would create real problems for girls later in life. He proposed the establishment of four- to six-week courses that would cover the “necessities.”<sup>11</sup> Many antifascist educators, although they accepted the premise of coeducating pupils for most courses, were not willing to abandon traditional female courses involving housework and childcare and, in some instances, biology. Suggestions that men should learn simple housework skills were almost nonexistent, although one educator did complain that, with the elimination of military service for boys, they would never learn to sew on buttons or darn socks.<sup>12</sup> Still, he offered no suggestion for where else boys might acquire that skill—schools did not seem to even come into consideration as an option. Even in educators’ most radical attempts to change education and thus social culture through a version of coeducation, they were unable to break away from long-standing gender roles that had survived the war and even postwar optimism about an antifascist world.

Educational administrators at the top level even expected teachers to punish girls and boys differently. When children misbehaved, boys experienced harsher consequences. Social reformers launched a campaign right after the end of the war to end corporal punishment, which they identified with Prussian and Nazi methods of disciplining children that resulted in militaristic and fascist attitudes.<sup>13</sup> By 1947, legal means of discipline included warnings or even involving the administration for youth affairs (*Jugendamt*), but spanking, slapping, and hitting were no longer to be part of the classroom. Antifascist educators deemed its continued practice unacceptable, as many of these reform pedagogical educators had even before the war. Yet they were particularly upset when girls became the targets of corporal punishment. In one essay read by members of the Berlin central school administration, a thirteen-year old girl wrote her thoughts about her school. She complained that the director hit the pupils. This section, marked in red by an administrator, included the surprised question, “Corporal punishment—does he hit the girls as well?”<sup>14</sup> The director’s inappropriate disciplinary method was not called into question; his use of it on girls was. Regardless of laws and social

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<sup>11</sup>“Sitzungen der Abteilungsleiter des Hauptschulamtes,” 20 December 1948, LAB/STA 120/201, no. 213.

<sup>12</sup>BArch.

<sup>13</sup>Director of the Abteilung für Volksbildung der Sowjetischen Militärverwaltung in Deutschland, P. Zolotuchin, to Paul Wandel, DVV, Berlin, 8 January 1946, no. 129; and “Protokoll über die Gesamtkonferenz der Hauptschulräte,” Berlin, 29 June 1947, no. 80-81. See also the School Law of 23 April 1947, “Richtlinien der Deutschen Verwaltung für Volksbildung in der SBZ Deutschlands für das Schulwesen,” *Monumenta Pädagogica* Bd. VI, Teil 1, 237-241.

<sup>14</sup>Hildegard Borris, thirteen years old, 14. Volksschule, Klasse 8 b - Mädchen, “Unsere Gedanken zur Schule,” Deutsches Institut für Pädagogische Forschung [hereafter DIPF/BBF/Archiv], NL Löffler, fo. 10, no. 2.

expectation, boys could actually expect even harsher punitive measures in practice. The city councilor of Meißen, for instance, explained that his city had introduced youth arrest as a disciplinary measure. Offending boys had their heads shaved and then received work duty, a humiliation all the more remarkable for its associations with typical punishment of women who had fraternized with enemy troops, or the delousing of war prisoners.<sup>15</sup> The coeducational classroom might see boys and girls breaking the same rules, but teachers and directors understood an unwritten rule about discipline: girls never suffered extreme physical punishment. Again, the persistence of gender roles extended in the school even to the treatment of girls' bodies.

Arguments in favor of coeducation constantly alluded to a moral reference to girls' right to the same (*gleiche*) education as boys, but more traditional concerns about girls' natures were ultimately more convincing to a majority of Soviet zone reformers.<sup>16</sup> Educators believed that psychological differences in women and men needed to be overcome, or perhaps harnessed in the service of the emerging antifascist nation. Many educators agreed that girls did have a certain kind of nature that differed from boys', one that might need to be addressed as such even within the structure of coeducation. This approach took various forms, ranging from uncommented observations of girls as less unruly, to more explicit suggestions for how to meet girls' special needs. *Kreisschulrat* (county schoolboard administrator) Lehmann of Leipzig noted that the *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, (FDJ or Free German Youth) the state-sponsored socialist youth group, had a difficult time attracting female members, suggesting a general lack of interest in politics among girls and young women. He described the "female sector" as having "fallen into the sleep of Sleeping Beauty." He did not propose a Prince Charming, though, but rather suggested that more women were needed in the upper secondary schools to change education's traditional male-dominated structure.<sup>17</sup>

Such discussions about girls and women having been unable to resist Nazi propaganda because of a lack of appropriate reasoning skills worried educational reformers significantly. A working conference on girls' education in 1947 concluded that girls needed the same education as boys in order to acquire the same logical reasoning skills and political-historical orientation. Only such an education could equip girls and young women to resist propaganda as during National Socialism. Such rhetoric harkened back to centuries' old beliefs of women's weaker brains that were too vulnerable to

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<sup>15</sup>"Tagung der Bezirksschulräte," Meißen, 24-25 April 1946, BArch DR2/488, no. 265.

<sup>16</sup>"Konferenz der Minister für Volksbildung der Länder," Berlin, January 1948, BArch DR-2/73, no. 43.

<sup>17</sup>Report by Herr Naumann of FDJ Dresden, "FDJ und Schule, Kreisschulratskonferenz," Dresden-Wachwitz, 3-5 November 1948, BArch DR 2/489, no. 351.

irrational ideas. "Today's school must educate a new generation of women who are immune to fascism and who will later raise their own sons and daughters anti-militaristically, for peace and the reconciliation of peoples, and who will confidently take their places in public life, in the economy, and in politics," as a 1947 report on the DVV's position on girls' education insisted.<sup>18</sup> A 1945 meeting of six male elementary school teachers in Dresden described the perception of women being more psychologically labile in even more concrete terms. This self-appointed "Provisional Committee of Antifascist Teachers" raised the concern that of those teachers who had not belonged to the Nazi Party, some were politically reliable, while others had nevertheless participated in some of their activities. The group suspected that these individuals "were likely to be primarily young female faculty," although they presented no evidence to support this statement.<sup>19</sup> One point of these self-professed "scientific" arguments was clear. If Germany was to become truly reeducated, it was not enough to reeducate only half the population. Its other message was equally clear. Women were being indirectly accused of having been guiltier of participation in Nazi activities and belief systems. This indirect charge could be solved only through the redemption of motherhood, ironically a role the Nazis insisted that women assume as well. Women after the war had a unique ability and responsibility to raise antifascist, democratic children, regardless of women's supposed otherwise equal place in society. That reeducation programs especially targeted mothers and girls as future mothers indicates the extent to which postwar life circled around a very uneven gender distribution of labor, in which girls and women carried the larger responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

Soviet zone educational law did not stop at calling for the "same education" (*gleiche*), demanding instead the identical (*selbe*) education for girls and boys. Here, too, separate education could not be considered equal. Yet educators' and society's resistance to a truly coeducational classroom proved stubborn. Neither educational reformers nor the public ever made explicit arguments to reserve an elite education for boys, and even proponents of coeducation did not conceptualize gender-segregated classrooms in terms of boys' advantages. Moreover, the needs of the labor market were also nearly absent from these discussions, even though the work force would be dominated for a generation by women. Instead, girls' education continued

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<sup>18</sup>"Zur Ministerkonferenz in Januar 1947, DVV, Berlin, Betr: Arbeitstagung. Stellungnahme zu den Aufgaben der Mädchenerziehung in der Gegenwart," BArch, DR 2/53, no. 248.

<sup>19</sup>Prov. Ausschuss antifaschistischer Lehrer [PAAL], "Niederschrift über die Sitzung am 1.6.45, nach. 15 Uhr bei Kollegen Fritz, Dresden-Leuben, Dürrst. 18," DIFP/BBF/Archiv, Sammlungsgut, Döbelner Konferenz, no. 6.

<sup>20</sup>See Monika Gibas, "Vater Staat und seine Töchter: Offizielle propagierte Frauenleitbilder der DDR und ihre Sozialisationswirkungen," in *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland: Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR*, ed. Dieter Vorsteher (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1996), 311-312.

to be addressed in the same terms as it had been since the beginning of the century. Politically, changing girls' education was seen as necessary for the well-being of the nation. Scientifically and morally, arguments had generally disappeared about girls being less capable, making their separate and inferior education unjustifiable. But eliminating the gender-bias from schooling proved a daunting task. Despite Soviet zone educational administrators' optimistic remarks to their colleagues in the West, the coeducational classroom did not solve the "woman's question."<sup>21</sup> At least part of the failure to eliminate gender differences in postwar eastern Germany arose from educators' own uncertainties about how equal girls' education should be. Although the slow dismantling of single-sex education improved girls' access to educational opportunities, it did not create the truly unified society envisioned by Soviet zone educational reformers. The "new Germany" continued, at least in the area of gender education and socialization, to practice the habits of the old nation.

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<sup>21</sup>Correspondence from Deiters to Bund demokratischer Lehrer und Erzieher Österreichs, Vienna, 6 August 6 1948, DIPF/BBF/Archiv, NL Heinrich Deiters, no. 2.