

ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL: TRACKING DECISIONS DEPENDING ON GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN THE SWISS EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: Swiss secondary school consists of classes with different achievement requirements leading to non-equivalent academic titles. Depending on gender and ethnicity, pupils profit differently from this institutionalised dispersion of academic success. Referring to cantonal data (N=25 cantons) as well as to a set of individual data (N= 1425 pupils), empirical indices are found that educational opportunities are the consequence of institutional discrimination, school organisation making use of their pupils' cultural and symbolic capital to legitimate its tracking activities. Theoretical and empirical arguments indicate that schools are prompted to construct their clientele closer to reality in order to diminish unjustified institutionalised expectations.

Keywords: school organisation, tracking, institutional discrimination, cultural and symbolic capital, gender and ethnicity

Introduction

In Switzerland, pupils are allocated to tracks with different achievement demands after six years of primary school. On a national lower secondary level, one can distinguish between schools with basic and advanced achievement requirements. Justified by these different requirements, the tracked Swiss secondary school is structurally dependent on preceding performance-based Selection as well as aligned to the production of achievement differences. However, analysing data of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office shows that, depending on gender and ethnicity, pupils profit differently and to an increasing degree from the institutionalised dispersion of school success. In 2000, 35% of the boys compared to 28% of the girls and 27% of the Swiss compared to 55% of the non-Swiss pupils attended classes with basic demands in the ninth grade, the latter primarily being from families having immigrated from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Turkey and former Yugoslavia (cf. Imdorf 2001, 258-260). Yet, those statistical effects reflect different levels of formal qualifications, which are crucial with regard to a successful transition into vocational schools, apprenticeships and matura schools on the upper secondary level, promoting favorable professional and social positions in future.

If gender and ethnicity are mentioned as variables structuring school success in the following, they represent dominant classification systems fixing social orders on a symbolic level. As socially constructed categories being often naturalised in daily usage, they refer to unequal possession of capital between groups. In turning to account the concept of *cultural capital* proposed by Bourdieu (1987), groups of pupils perceived by gender or ethnicity can be

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conceptualised as groups doing gender and as groups doing ethnicity. They do so enabled by a habitus which structures the perception, thinking and acting of the individuals and which one acquires through socialisation at home, among peers and at school.

School success and school organisation

Decision-making processes at the transitional stage between primary and secondary school can be analysed out of two theoretical perspectives: Advocates of the methodological individualism would argue that unequal allocation results from parents' educational decisions, whereas an organisational approach explains tracking decisions as the consequence of purposive and goal oriented *organisational* behaviour. With their concept of institutional discrimination, Gomolla and Radtke (2002) provide a fruitful theoretical approach to understand pupils' school success as a function of organisational decision-making. Following their arguments, school tries to fulfil its organisational needs maintaining its functioning and its stability in time. As a powerful means to pursue these goals, school prefers homogeneity to heterogeneity with regard to pupils' expected ability and their schooling within classes. It is assumed that in the process of decision-making, institutional discrimination transcending an achievement-based selection of pupils can result out of organisational necessity to establish and maintain such homogeneity. Thus, institutional discrimination can be understood as a set of social processes through which organisational decision-making results in identifiable groups receiving fewer material reward per quantitative unit of performance than an identifiable comparison group within the same organisational constraints (Gomolla & Radtke 2002, 51). Institutional discrimination is only applied as an organisational resource, when it appears to be convenient to delegate problems and to reduce complexity in problematic situations.

Institutional discrimination occurs if school apparently takes decisions which have unequal impacts on pupils, *and* if these produced differences get provided with sense by making use of ascribed characteristics of disadvantaged groups to legitimate those decisions. Thus, ascribed characteristics are as functional as achievement-based criteria to structure school's processes of decision-making. They are constituents of dominant classification systems and they serve to reduce complexity in the sense of traditional ethno-cultural and gendered stereotypes. Characteristics ascribed to groups of pupils provide them with *symbolic capital* in terms of assumptions about their personality and their families. Symbolic capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1993, 218), acts in turn as a credit, which gets allowed to a group possessing symbolic guarantees as a result of shared beliefs. Therefore, symbolic capital is an integral part of knowledge school has at its disposal in terms of professional common sense, structuring and legitimising the process of decision-making if the logic of schooling does require it.

Hypothesis

It is assumed that, aiming at establishing homogeneous ability groups, school organisations make use of pupils' cultural and symbolic capital to structure their tracking activities. Existing academic classes with different achievement requirements have to be filled with pupils under the influence of current demographic development, so that school organisation can sustain its function of instructing homogeneous ability groups without disruptions. Beside pupils' and

their families' cultural capital as indicators of learning ability, symbolic capital acts as a credit for better instructability of particular groups of students under advanced achievement demands. Students who are ascribed to potentially disturb the instruction of school classes with advanced requirements thus are more frequently allocated to tracks with basic demands, their school performance being comparable with those going to upper classes. Boys and foreign students are particularly affected by this mechanisms. The former because of their expected extroverted (male) social behaviour, the latter due to their anticipated language problems or their assumed "cultural difference".

Without being able to observe those tracking mechanisms directly, two hypothesis can be deduced from the above:

Hypothesis 1: Selection processes in schools result from the availability of academic compartments and classes affecting the educational opportunities of pupils depending on ethnicity and gender.

Hypothesis 2: Their academic achievement being comparable, girls and Swiss pupils get more often allocated to classes with advanced demands of secondary school than boys and non-Swiss pupils respectively.

Method

Hypothesis 1 was tested by analysing cantonal data of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

Thus, the sample consists of 25 Swiss cantons (the canton Basel-Stadt had to be excluded from analysis being an outlier for several reasons). For each canton, a proportional measure of available places with basic requirements in secondary schools can be computed by calculating the ratio of the number of all pupils attending schools with basic classes (numerator) and the number of all pupils attending secondary school at all (denominator). For each canton again, a measure for over-representation of non-Swiss pupils in schools with basic classes can be computed, calculating the ratio of two proportions: For that purpose the numerator is defined as the rate of all non-Swiss pupils participating in schools with basic classes in proportion to all non-Swiss pupils participating in secondary school at all; whereas the denominator is defined as the rate of all Swiss pupils participating in schools with basic classes in proportion to all Swiss pupils participating in secondary school. The same procedure can be used to calculate the over-representation of boys in schools with basic classes. Having computed these measures for each canton (i.e. the over-representation of non-Swiss and male students as well as the relational supply of places in schools with basic demands), a simple correlation between them can be calculated to check, if the cantonal supply of places in schools with basic demands has an influence on the over-representation rate of pupils being appraised as problematic.

To test *hypothesis 2* data of 1425 sixth grade pupils (from 87 classes in 18 cantons) representing Switzerland's German-spoken part was processed². For each pupil, academic skills and the tracking decision were measured in the school year 2000/2001, supplemented by cultural resources at home (as a measure for the families' socio-economic status SES). The

² I very appreciate being able to use the data of my colleagues Winfried Kronig and Michael Eckhart. Supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF grant-no. 1114-050489.97), both are currently accomplishing a study on the issue of "Cultural and performance-related heterogeneity in school classes" at the Institute for Special Education, University of Fribourg / Switzerland.

effective achievement in German and Mathematics (both indicators for school- and selection-relevant cultural capital) has been tested twice near school organisation came to a decision concerning further allocation. Academic achievement is operationalised as the mean of those four test results, leading to a reliable measure for school knowledge. The tracking decision was regressed on pupils ethnicity, gender, school performance, and SES using a binary logistic multilevel model³, thus allowing to estimate the probabilities of selection for all subgroups, academic achievement and SES being controlled.

Results

Hypothesis 1: The factors of over-representation of non-Swiss pupils in secondary schools with basic classes range from 1.69 to 3.90 depending on the canton. There is a highly significant relationship between this measures of over-representation and the supply of places in schools with basic demands. The Pearson correlation coefficient amounts to $r = -.624$ ($p = 0.001$), explaining 39% of the inter-cantonal variance. Thus, the more available places in schools with basic classes, the less are non-Swiss pupils over-represented in these schools. Whereas in regard to gender, no significant correlation could be found ($r = -.235$, n.s., with a smaller range of 1.10 - 1.87 signifying the factor of over-representation of boys in schools with basic classes).

Hypothesis 2: Empirical significance was found for the hypothesis that Swiss as well as female pupils get allocated more often to schools with advanced requirements than boys and non-Swiss pupils, their academic achievement and their SES being controlled. *Table 1* shows, how allocative decisions were taken in favour of specific subgroups under the conditional assumption of an *average* academic achievement (defined as the mean achievement of the whole sample).

TABLE 1. Allocative decision for secondary school: probabilities of school's decision-making in favour of a school with advanced requirements by ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status under the condition of average achievement (all pupils: .65).

ethnicity	gender	socio-economic status	
		low	medium / high
Swiss	female	.63	.82
	male	.42	.66
not Swiss	female	.43	.67
	male	.24	.45

The differences between Swiss and non-Swiss pupils remain significant if the SES is being controlled. Under the condition of an *average* academic performance, the probability of an allocative decision in favour of a secondary school with advanced classes amounts to 82% for

³ Estimations have been carried out using the software MIXOR (Hedeker & Gibbons 1996).

a Swiss girl with a medium or higher socio-economic background whereas it amounts only to 24% for a non-Swiss boy with a lower SES.

Discussion

The results indicate on the one hand, that non-Swiss pupils, i.e. pupils from less legitimate ethnic groups, face more balanced (not equal!) educational opportunities in school systems where places in lower qualifying classes are less short. As those classes seem to be not attractive at all to all parents, the latter try to hold off their children from such an educational destiny. In doing so, they are backed or disabled by the school to a different degree. As non-Swiss parents can less resist school's decision-making in consequence of their enfeebled status as non-citizens, school organisation has to utilise this weakness most, if there are only few places in schools with basic classes. For – if short on offer - those classes are even more deterrent as the value of the linked academic title (i.e. their graduation) is most devaluated on the Swiss market of vocational training if this title is rare. Discussing the issue from this point of few, it makes sense, that no significant gender differences have been found, since having male or female children is independent of one's juridical status.

On the other hand, the results indicate that the conversion of incorporated cultural capital into academic titles – which is a long-term effect of allocative decisions - seems in part to occur depending on organisational needs. And it seems to occur with the help of institutionalised knowledge concerning ascribed life- and learning-conditions of specific groups of pupils. Even though the result, that non-Swiss pupils being allocated to a lesser degree to schools with advanced requirements irrespective of their academic achievement, could be interpreted as a consequence of parent's individual decisions, this argument can not be held to explain the unequal allocation executed with regard to gender. Here – and this may equally apply to some degree to the category ethnicity – the pupils' symbolic capital seems to structure the decision-making process of schools. Furthermore, as the result concerning the cantonal over-representation rates of non-Swiss pupils in basic classes indicates, the parent's decision-making process, if it really matters, has to be seen as a function of organisational offers mediating themselves the amount of unequal educational opportunities.

In any case it has to be concluded, that a better comprehension of the allocation issue requires much more research focusing on the effective *mechanisms* being performed at the edge between primary and secondary school. Educational research necessarily needs to investigate, how organisational decision-making processes of schools *interact* with the individual impacts of teachers, head teachers, parents and their children and with the collective impacts of school committees. Therefore, the behavior of these actors has to be linked to the organisational constraints of schools. To date, most of the research attended to the issue of tracking – the presented endeavours included - has focused on the *effects* of allocation not being able to give evident proofs for some theories or others.

Notwithstanding this (self-) criticism, it can be gathered from the theoretical and empirical above arguments, that schools are prompted to construct their target audience closer to reality in order to diminish unjustified institutionalized expectations of their clientele. It is

recommended to allow for linguistic, cultural and social heterogeneity when it comes to the definition of school values and standards in pluralistic societies.

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