

Cultural and Social Diversity

An Analysis of Minority Groups in German Schools

Rolf Werning

Jessica M. Löser

Michael Urban

Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany

This article focuses on the special situation of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and children from immigrant backgrounds within the German school system. This analysis presents an overview of research results showing a strong overrepresentation of these two minority groups within the special education system, particularly within special schools for students with learning difficulties. The authors emphasize the exclusionary and inclusionary processes within the German school system, showing that the strong tendency toward homogeneous grouping in German schools leads to disadvantages for minority students.

Keywords: *cultural context; comparative education; economic factors; ethnicity; family environment; German school system; immigrants; learning disabilities; minority groups; poverty; school segregation; socioeconomic status; special education*

As the history of education shows, every school system is challenged to cope with differences among children and to create a balance between the right to be treated equally yet individually. Therefore, school systems must create systems to deal with the tensions that result from these potentially conflicting purposes.

In Germany, there is a long tradition of preferentially organizing students into homogeneous learning groups in distinct different school categories (Werning, 2006). The founding and development of special schools for children with special needs is one example of homogeneous grouping. The idea of this structure is to construct disparate schools with different academic levels and to organize homogeneous learning groups within these schools. The question of students' appropriate support is tied closely to the question of which school a student should attend within the German school system. Despite extensive discussion over the past 30 years concerning the advantages of inclusive learning, specifically the benefits of heterogeneous learning groups with regard to culture, gender, and academic achievement in schools for all children, there has been little progress in promoting inclusive education to date (Werning, 2006).

In this article, we show that the German school system still follows the traditional orientation of constructing homogeneous learning groups in different forms of schools. We also point out that this strong institutional grading leads to inequities when educating children from low socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are those whose families' incomes are less than 60% of the average German household income. In 2003, 15% of children and youths under age 16 in Germany lived in such households (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Soziale Sicherung, 2005). Most of the respective studies in the educational sector discussed in this article apply to this group by indirect indicators, mainly parents' occupational status.

The group of students from immigrant backgrounds is very heterogeneous. It contains students with or without German citizenship in the first, second, or third immigrant generation. According to Gogolin, Neumann, and Roth (2003), 9% of students in Germany do not have German citizenship, 22% have at least one parent who was born in a country other than Germany, and 8% have family languages other than German.

The disadvantage of these two student groups can be analyzed using different data sources, such as

school qualifications, competencies, and overrepresentation in special schools within the German school system, as well as via international comparison studies. One must consider that there are great differences between migrating groups in traditionally high immigration countries such as Canada in comparison with Germany. To present this in more detail, these students' situations will be shown in general education schools and also in special schools for learning difficulties. Prior to presenting the current data, a brief introduction to the German school system is necessary.

An Introduction to the German School System

The German school system includes different types of schools that offer different levels of school qualifications. Its basis is formed by 4-year primary schools, which all children aged 6 to 10 years are obliged to attend. These are schools for nearly all children, following the concept of comprehensive schools. After fourth grade, children are selected to attend different schools designed with different levels of education. These different types of secondary schools include basic secondary schools (Grades 5 to 10: *Hauptschulen*), the general level (Grades 5 to 10: *Realschulen*), and advanced secondary schools (Grades 5 to 12: *Gymnasien*). One can see the previously mentioned tendency of homogeneous grouping within secondary schools. In addition, a few comprehensive schools exist that integrate the educational courses of the above-mentioned levels. In addition to the general school system, one can also find eight different types of special schools (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2005a). Special schools imply specially educated teachers, special curricula, and small learning groups. In the context discussed here, special schools for children with learning difficulties are of high importance. The reason for this is primarily that approximately half of all students with special needs are educated in these schools. Second, this form of school contains the majority of students with special needs from low socioeconomic and, more recently, immigrant backgrounds.

Apart from the special schools, there are also inclusive concepts to educate students with special needs. Despite an intensive 30-year discussion of inclusion, there has been no notable breakthrough in inclusive education in Germany to this day. Only 12.9% of students with special needs were educated in inclusive

settings in 2003 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2005b). From this perspective, special schools hold a specific "easing function" as institutions for the support of students with special needs. These children's specific and individual needs are removed from the standard school system and tied to special-needs schools institutionally. This complies with the principal of structuring groups homogeneously, which is repeatedly evident in different parts of the German school system. In the following section, data concerning the situations of students from low socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds are presented.

Students From Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds in the General Education School System

The disadvantaged situation of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has been discussed since the late 1960s (Roth, 1969). On this basis, significant effort was put forth to optimize the educational opportunities of working-class children in the German school system. Since then, the general educational proficiency level of the educational inclusion of students with low socioeconomic status (Baumert, Cortina, & Leschinsky, 2003) as well as the educational achievements of female working-class students have been improved (Geißler, 2005). Nevertheless, this success cannot be considered satisfactory. Studies in the 1980s (Helsper, 1992) showed that working-class children are underrepresented in advanced secondary schools (*Gymnasien*) and overrepresented in basic secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*). Although in the past two decades, the rate of working-class children at advanced secondary schools has increased, disadvantages still exist. According to Baumert and Schümer (2001), the first international school comparison study, Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), in 2000 showed that the relative chance to gain access to advanced secondary schools was more than 4 times higher for children of professionals in comparison with children from the working classes.

In the subsequent PISA study, conducted in 2003, access to the different secondary school types was analyzed on the basis of the economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS; Ehmke, Siegle, & Hohensee, 2005). In addition, on the basis of this index, the sociostructural bias appeared to be very high. Ehmke et al. (2005) showed that the relative chance to attend advanced secondary schools was 4.01 times higher for a student belonging to the highest ESCS quartile

compared to a student in the 25% to 50% ESCS quartile, when reading and mathematics competencies were statistically controlled. For students in the 0% to 25% ESCS quartile, the relative odds of attending advanced secondary schools were even lower. On the basis of the international socioeconomic index (described by Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Teiman, 1992), Ehmke et al. pointed out that no other country within the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), except for Belgium, had such a strong relationship between students' competency levels and the socioeconomic status of their parents as Germany. Because the correlation between ESCS index and mathematics competency is very high, it is possible to forecast differences in mathematics competency by differences in sociocultural background much more precisely than in most of the other OECD countries (PISA-Konsortium Deutschland, 2004). The highly segregated structure of the German school system functions in the sense of institutional discrimination and leads to an accumulation of students with a variety of problems in the lower level schools (Dravenau & Groh-Samberg, 2004). Besides the special schools for learning difficulties, this concerns especially basic secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*). This school type has to deal with different forms of learning difficulties and with a great many problems stemming from a large proportion of students coming from family systems that are characterized by their remoteness from the educational system and/or a multitude of distinct problems (Bohl, 2003). The total number of students who did not achieve basic secondary school certificates increased from 76,000 in 1995 to 82,600 in 2004 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2006). This last sum is equivalent to 8.8% of all students after Grade 10 in 2004 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2006). Many of these students have to be assumed to be attendees of basic secondary schools.

Students From Immigrant Backgrounds in the General Education School System

The underrepresentation of students from immigrant backgrounds in advanced secondary schools and their overrepresentation at the basic secondary school level is well known (Diefenbach, 2002). The first PISA study showed that in Germany, 20% of 15-year-old students whose parents had immigrated to Germany belonged to the category "very weak reader," 50% had not achieved the basic level of competency, and only 2% had achieved a very high level of competency in reading (Baumert & Schümer, 2001). In an

actual study concerning the reading competencies of students in elementary schools, it becomes obvious that achievement levels are not as diverse as in high school. Many elementary students reach the highest reading level. Their performance in elementary school is not as dependent on their social backgrounds as is the case in high school. However, the relationship is still higher than in most other countries (Schwippert, Bos, & Lankes, 2003).

Looking in particular at children from immigrant backgrounds already within the elementary system, the relationship between national origin and school success is higher than in most countries (Schwippert et al., 2003). The differences in the school system's success in providing competencies to immigrant students comparing the elementary and secondary levels can be understood as a strong hint about the discriminatory effects of the structures of the German school system. The relative reduction in the underachievement of immigrant students in elementary schools corresponds to the comprehensive school structure.

Existing studies show that students from immigrant backgrounds are disadvantaged within the German school system in terms of school achievement and length of school attendance (Nauck, Diefenbach, & Petri, 1998). The educational disadvantages of immigrant students can also be found when comparing their final certificates with those of nonimmigrant students (Diefenbach, 2002). Official data (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, 2005a) show that compared with German students, students without German citizenship complete their schooling with much lower level certificates. In the 2003–2004 school year, 18.1% of these students did not achieve the basic graduation certificate, which is the lowest general education secondary school qualification (by comparison, 7.4% of Germans did not achieve this). Furthermore, this annual survey of school statistics showed that only 8.9% of the immigrant group achieved the academic certificate, the highest school certificate, in contrast to 24.3% of German students.

The first PISA study revealed a high correlation between the low educational achievement of children from immigrant backgrounds and difficulties with the German language (Baumert & Schümer, 2001). Another result was a lack of support to learn German as a second language. This is significant, considering that 70% of these students spend their school terms entirely within German schools (Gogolin et al., 2003). Gogolin (1994, 2002) pointed out that the German school system is "monolingual." Children's first languages are

often not supported, even though many children living in Germany speak other first languages.

Students From Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds in Special Education

At the end of the 19th century, the founders of the first special schools for students with learning difficulties in Germany stated that children from poor economic backgrounds had a tendency to fail in general education schools and attended special schools more often than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Stötzner, 1864). In the 1970s, significant research results showed that more than 90% of students who attended schools for students with learning difficulties were from the low social classes (Klein, 1973). Since that time, the situation has not changed fundamentally with respect to children from poor, socially marginalized families. However, there are new groups that can be observed as disadvantaged in the German school system at present. Krappmann, Leschinsky, and Powell (2003) described three groups of students who are highly overrepresented in special schools: male students, students from immigrant family backgrounds, and students who live in low socioeconomic circumstances.

Very little recent empirical research concerning the socioeconomic background of students from special schools in Germany exists. Nevertheless, the results of some smaller studies can give an idea of the situation of marginalized students within special schools. Klein (2001) described the stagnation of those students from middle-class families and an increase of students from lower-class families in schools for learning difficulties, comparing the results from his more recent study in 1997 with those of his former study from 1969. In addition, the proportion of students whose parents were unemployed increased from 1.3% to 16.4%. On the basis of a sample of 1,986 students from special schools for learning difficulties in Germany, Koch (2004) noted that their parents had not achieved basic secondary school certificates 4 times more often than the average of the German population. The parents of this group of students were faced with a high rate of unemployment: 32% of the fathers and 50% of the mothers were unemployed. Furthermore, 58.6% of the students grew up in poor households with less than half the average net income in Germany at their disposal.

A small and interesting follow-up study by Wocken (2000) was based on a large school achievement study investigating the initial learning positions of all

fifth graders in general education schools in Hamburg. Wocken focused on seventh grade students in special schools for learning difficulties in Hamburg. In this context, the most important finding was that although basic secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*) are attended mainly by students from marginalized societal groups, there still existed a gulf between this type of school and special schools with regard to the degree of social marginalization of their students. According to Wocken, the fathers of students in special schools did not have basic secondary school certificates themselves twice as often as the fathers of students from basic secondary schools (19% vs. 9%). Moreover, compared with this group, half as many of them held certificates from advanced secondary schools, which provide access to university studies (3% vs. 7%). The students' mothers showed an even stronger discrepancy: One quarter of special school students' mothers had not achieved basic secondary school certificates (11% of mothers of students from basic secondary schools), and only 2% (8% in the comparison group) had obtained certificates from advanced secondary schools. With respect to the professional situations of the parents, Wocken pointed out that 23% of the fathers and 33% of the mothers of students from special schools in Hamburg were unemployed, compared with 11% and 19%, respectively, of the comparison group. Similarly, divergent results have been found regarding the number of siblings, the forms of media consumption, and the sociocultural status of the families. Questioning the qualitative supremacy of special schools in the provision of special needs education, Wocken came to the conclusion that "the special school is a school for the poor, the unemployed and the welfare recipients" (p. 501, translation by the authors).

With respect to competency levels, the German parts of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and both PISA studies do not provide detailed information concerning students in special schools (Deppe-Wolfinger, 2006). Wocken's (2000) study included a comparison of the writing competencies of seventh graders in special schools with those of fifth graders at basic secondary schools. The results showed that the average writing competency level of students in special schools, although they had been instructed for 2 years longer in smaller learning groups and by specialized and well-trained teachers, was far below that of students in basic secondary schools. The significant difference in writing competencies persisted when basic cognitive abilities, measured using a basic intelligence scale (Weiß, 1998),

were considered. Regarding the certificates of students from special schools, another dimension of disadvantage becomes visible. A student in a special school has the option to obtain a basic secondary school certificate. However, the probability of doing so is very small, especially if the student is attending a special school for learning difficulties. According to official statistics for 2004 (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, 2005b), 79.1% of special school students did not gain certificates at this basic secondary level.

Students From Immigrant Backgrounds in Special Education

After a long period of ignoring the educational disadvantage of students from immigrant backgrounds (exceptions are Reiser, 1980; Schmidtke, 1980), their disadvantage has been acknowledged recently by several authors (Gomolla & Radtke, 2002; Klein, 2001; Kornmann & Kornmann, 2003; Wagner & Powell, 2003). Basic evidence for the overrepresentation of students from immigrant backgrounds can also be found in official German school statistics. Whereas the proportion of students without German citizenship in the entire German public school system amounted to about 10% in the school years from 2002–2003 to 2004–2005, the proportion of this student group who attended special schools in the same period was between 15.8% and 16.0%. In schools for learning difficulties, the percentage (19.5%) of immigrant students in 2004–2005 was even higher (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, 2005b; Kornmann & Kornmann, 2003). On the basis of official data (Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland, 2005b), approximately 84.5% of immigrant students attending special schools had not obtained basic secondary school certificates at the end of their compulsory schooling.

According to Wagner and Powell (2003), the overrepresentation of immigrant students in German special schools must be seen as a form of institutional selection that is based mainly on the perception and redefinition of language deficits into “learning disabilities.” A similar understanding of these problematic processes was put forward in the study of Gomolla and Radtke (2002). They discussed the much higher rate of immigrant students in special schools as a form of institutional discrimination. When considering school certificates, it becomes obvious that a significant number of immigrant students are experiencing educational exclusion. The situation of children and their families from immigrant backgrounds can be conceptualized as multisystemic exclusion. The families’

exclusion from citizenship and their marginalization in the possibilities to participate in the economic system and in their access to the labor market are linked with strong restrictions in their children’s potential for educational success. This relationship cannot be understood as unidirectional but rather in terms of a vicious cycle.

Perspectives on Cultural and Social Diversity in German Schools

Using current data, we demonstrate in this article that students from low socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds are underprivileged within the general education German school system. The structurally selective orientation of the school system appears to be least appropriate with respect to these students. One explanation for these results is the strong tendency toward homogeneous grouping within the German school system. This aspect will be analyzed in greater detail to emphasize the link between empirical data and interpretation.

It can be stated that students’ early segregation into different schools with different qualification levels after the fourth grade produces a homogeneous grouping within each school. “Within the international comparison, there is hardly any secondary school more homogeneous in terms of capacity and skill than in Germany” (Deutsches PISA-Konsortium, 2001, p. 454, translation by authors).

The effects are primarily that weak students are segregated in certain educational organizations, especially within basic-level schools and in special schools for children with learning difficulties. Additionally, specific support for students with learning difficulties is mainly tied institutionally to special schools, not to general education schools (Werning & Lütje-Klose, 2006). This applies especially for less advantaged student groups as follows:

1. The concentration of students with learning difficulties has a rather negative effect on their learning development. This has been shown in various studies: Especially students with learning difficulties benefit from heterogeneous learning groups with higher performing students in terms of social inclusion, learning development, and self-concept (Hildes Schmidt & Sander, 1996). Stronger students do not learn less in heterogeneous groups than in homogeneous groups (Opp, Budnick, & Fingerle, 2004).

2. Teachers' beliefs about educating groups with learning difficulties often produce negative effects of self-fulfilling prophecy (Nestle, 1976). Nestle (1976) also criticized the deficit orientation, in which students' weaknesses form the basis for methods and curricula especially made for such students. This again fosters the underachievement of these students.
3. Homogeneous grouping might lead to negative self-assessments of weaker students. In special schools especially, but also in basic-level schools, the institutional exclusion often shows stigmatizing effects (Ammann & Peters, 1981). These negatively affect students' learning motivation, their self-confidence, and their learning attitudes. Homogenizing learning groups leads to the amplification of learning difficulties for students from minority groups.

Our hypothesis of the negative effects of homogeneous grouping is supported by the observation that the learning performance of students from low socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds is much better in elementary schools (Bos et al., 2003). Elementary schools, as opposed to secondary schools, are designed to be comprehensive and therefore offer more heterogeneous learning groups.

Another effect of homogenization is that special educational support is strongly tied to special schools. To this day, general education schools have not developed a sufficient number of specific support concepts to accommodate children with special educational needs. Instead of asking which type of support might be appropriate once learning difficulties become obvious, the question is asked whether these schools are the most suitable or whether students should be referred to other schools at lower educational levels. In this context, the priority of educational assessment lies within the task of finding students' "adequate" schools. Thus, it is not surprising that specific support concepts within general education schools are very rare. This effect is exacerbated within schools with higher qualifications (e.g., advanced secondary schools). Instead, students are obliged to fulfill the curricular requirements or risk the possibility of being referred to other schools with lower secondary school qualifications.

Educators too often interpret learning difficulties as individual deficits rather than as a challenge to develop a culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum or to compile and implement support plans. General education schools therefore remain institutions oriented toward the socially privileged milieu. This endangers the capability of less privileged milieus to keep up with those standards. Educational

careers are much more successful, if the family milieu and the school conditions have close connections (Lauth, Brunstein, & Grünke, 2004). Yet this is not often the case for students from low socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds. Within the German school system, the pressure of adjustment lies strongly on students and leads to overstraining. Therefore, there is a high risk for these students that a lack of orientation, fear, feelings of insecurity, and thus learning difficulties as much as aggressiveness and defiance within the school are reinforced (Golz, 1996). Learning deficits and educational disadvantages may develop because of related disturbances resulting from the structural difference between family and school milieus. Overall, it becomes evident that the German school system must develop inclusive structures to support the development of students who are from low socioeconomic or immigrant backgrounds.

Also, there are intensive ongoing debates on how to best organize teaching practices and to reduce the disadvantages of these groups ("Aufwachsen in Armut," 2005). Some schools in different regions of Germany have laid the cornerstones for such development. They have developed school profiles that accept and value heterogeneity with reference to performance, ability, gender, social, and cultural backgrounds. This includes also cooperation between mainstream and special school teachers, as well as concepts for teaching within heterogeneous groups and networking with extracurricular support systems (e.g., school psychologists, social workers). Furthermore, specific support is offered for students with special needs without immediately having to refer them to special schools. Further research must be conducted to show if these innovative orientations will significantly decrease the disadvantages of the described student groups.

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Rolf Werning is a professor in the Department of Special Education at Leibniz Universität Hannover. His research interests include inclusion and integration, the social conditions of learning difficulties, family-school relations, teaching students with learning problems, and counseling.

Jessica M. Löser is a research assistant and lecturer in the Department of Special Education at Leibniz Universität Hannover. Her research interests include inclusion, international comparisons, and new media and students with special needs. The topic of her PhD dissertation is a comparison of how Germany, Sweden, and Canada include students from immigrant backgrounds.

Michael Urban is a social scientist in the Department of Special Education at Leibniz Universität Hannover. He has conducted research and taught in the fields of learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders since 1998. His research interests include the social conditions of learning disabilities, family-school relations, consultation and teacher-support systems in the context of emotional and behavioral disorders, and systems theory in education and sociology.