Educational Inequality in Germany
Scientists Determine the Factors Contributing to Unequal Opportunities at the Transition to Secondary Education

The transition from elementary to secondary education has far-reaching implications for young people's educational and career biographies. In a new special issue on Educational Decisions published by the German education journal *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* (ZfE), renowned educational scientists investigate this point of transition, reviewing recent studies from the fields of educational science, psychology, and sociology. In almost 400 pages, they document the social inequalities existing in the German education system and identify the causal factors and mechanisms (ZfE, Sonderheft Bildungsentscheidungen, VS Verlag 2010, Editors Jürgen Baumert, Kai Maaz, Ulrich Trautwein).

It is now 10 years since the German education system was rocked by the results of the OECD's PISA study. Not only was the country's performance poor in international comparison, the findings showed that students' educational outcomes are closely tied to their social background in Germany. Subsequent waves of the PISA study and the large-scale educational assessments TIMSS and PIRLS/IGLU indicate a certain improvement in the situation, but social inequality remains the harsh reality of the German education system. Where does inequality come from and what are the contributing factors?

The transition to secondary education is a critical point for the emergence of inequality

The new special issue on Educational Decisions published by the German education journal *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* (ZfE) examines this topic systematically, focusing on the transition from elementary to secondary education. Editors Jürgen Baumert and Kai Maaz, both from the Berlin Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and Ulrich Trautwein, University of Tübingen, open the special issue with a review article on social inequality in the education system. Drawing on the available theoretical and empirical research, they identify the transition to secondary education as one of the critical points for the emergence of inequality.

Transfer to an academic-track *Gymnasium* depends on social background and classmates' achievement

In another article, Kai Maaz and Gabriel Nagy examine the primary and secondary effects of social background on the transition to secondary education. They show that inequality emerges to a considerable degree prior to the actual transition and is attributable to differences in student learning, grading practices, and the tracking recommendation made by the elementary teacher.

In some German states, this recommendation is merely a suggestion, and parents are free to enroll their child in any secondary track. In other states, however, parents wishing to enroll their child in a higher secondary track than that recommended have to provide further evidence of the child's suitability. In their article, Cornelia Gresch and colleagues investigate how these differing regulations impact social inequality. Their findings show that parents from socially
privileged backgrounds are more likely than less privileged parents to enroll their children in an academic-track Gymnasium without a corresponding recommendation. This pattern can be observed across Germany, but it is particularly pronounced in those states where the teacher’s tracking recommendation is not binding.

Anne Milek and colleagues compare how “reference group effects” impact teachers’ tracking recommendations across Germany. They show that teachers’ recommendations are not independent of the class-mean level of achievement. Rather, teachers across all states assess individual students’ achievement against the background of their classmates’ achievement.

Further articles in the special issue address parents’ educational aspirations, children’s experience of the transition process, and the influence of ethnic background on the transition to secondary education.

The special issue is available now in bookshops.

Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft (ZfE), Sonderheft Bildungsentscheidungen, VS Verlag 2010, 397 pages, €39.95.
ISBN 978-3-531-16717-6

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