



Inequality in educational systems: 'homemade'?

The way educational systems and schools are organised is of pivotal importance, not only for the development of young people but for providing equal educational opportunities for all pupils. If the school manages to be a place of common learning where children are supported in their development independently of their gender, their familial background, or their religion, then the school fulfils a central, integrative function, which is indispensable for our society.

Significantly unequal education opportunities between children with low and high socioeconomic family background

However, we know that not all educational systems and not all schools are equally successful in supporting pupils in their development. Furthermore, in many countries pupils with a high socioeconomic family background outperform their counterparts with a low socioeconomic family background significantly. But why is that the case? Why are socially advantaged children more successful in school? Is this because they are more intelligent, motivated or competent than the other children? Or are they more supported by their teachers and get favoured by the educational system? And finally: How can educational equality be achieved for all pupils?

The 'grammar of inclusion and exclusion' within educational systems

In our research project 'KoS – Context-Oriented School Development' (www.ife.uzh.ch/kos), we assume that there are certain mechanisms and processes in the educational system and schools that cause some pupils to be favoured while others are disadvantaged. By analogy with a language, which is based on a certain set of rules, e.g. those of syntax or semantics, we assume that those mechanisms do not occur randomly, but that they are equally governed by a system of rules. We call the sum of these mechanisms 'grammar of inclusion and exclusion'. Based on empirical results, which kind of mechanism can be identified? Since the educational system is multilevel in nature, mechanism on system, school and teaching level have to be differentiated (see Fig. 1).

Grouping pupils on secondary level one by several tracks:

Separating pupils according to different tracks with different achievement requirements after primary school is such a mechanism. Due to special resources and interests of families, pupils from families with a high socioeconomic background can manage those transitions better than pupils from a lower socioeconomic background. Every transition thus leads to a reproduction of and an increase in educational inequality. In educational systems without such transitions, however, the disadvantage for pupils is not as distinct.

Differential support strategies at school level:

In a school system with strong vertical and horizontal stratification, the allocation of pupils in primary schools to school tracks with extended or basic requirements on secondary level starts early. Schools and their actors have a determining influence on the decision of which groups of pupils should attend high or low demanding tracks. So, schools regulate who will get talented support or access to support strategy as a preparation for 'gymnasium' (highest level of requirements on secondary level one). In turn, pupils identified as low-achievers or labelled as pupils 'in need' are pre-selected for lower school tracks.

Our findings indicate that the distribution of pupils into school-based support measures is decided through 'framing' orientations of the school actors and their organisational and professional socialisation. Data show that school actors categorise their pupils into fixed characteristics based on traditional categories as migration status, behavioural disorders or familial educational background. This leads to the mechanism of social closure and educationally handicapping these groups of pupils, because they don't get the same access to relevant support for the access to schools with extended requirements. Accordingly, these pupils are penalised twice because the actors charged with the decision to support measures are often as well in charge for the transition to higher educational tracks.

Grouping pupils within classes:

Not only on school level, but also on class levels, teachers often make decisions regarding single pupils while looking at more than just their abilities. When selecting adequate support measures for fostering pupils or when deciding on promotion of pupils at the end of the school year, teachers consider pupil's familial background at the same time. Pupils who do not come from the 'right' families are often thought incapable of and discouraged from attending more demanding courses, even when in fact they would have the competences to do so.

Summary

The empirical results show that inequality in educational systems and schools is influenced by several factors. Particularly important findings showed that educational outcomes are not limited by pupils' academic abilities or family educational aspirations alone, but are also influenced significantly by structures and processes within schools and school systems. This means that inequality in educational systems and schools is also 'homemade' and influenced by the school system, the schools, and the teachers themselves.

Considering this important result, it is obvious that educational institutions and teachers are responsible for adapting learning opportunities to pupils' capacity for using them and to develop support strategies that help all pupils to achieve educational success.

Accordingly, the key determinant of high educational equality is how well educational systems are structured and how educators and teachers adapt their learning opportunities, curriculum and resources within the educational system to each pupil's specific requirements, abilities and family background (see Fig. 1).

Strategies to reduce educational inequality

Reducing educational inequality is very challenging, but is of high importance for modern society. Although the goal of decreasing educational inequality can not only be achieved through educators and teachers alone, there are several strategies that have the potential to reach the goal, particularly if the 'grammar of inclusion and exclusion' within educational systems is considered:

Educational system

- Strong public educational systems with a wide range of educational opportunities for all pupils in order to provide all pupils 'short distances' to the next high quality and demanding school is very important in every society. If these distances are too far, socioeconomically or ethnically disadvantaged pupils will not have the resources or the skills to deal adequately with this challenging situation;
- Mandatory pre-primary education and all-day schools particularly help pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged families to catch up on relevant learning goals;
- The stronger the stratification system is implemented in educational systems, the more important the family background for successful learning. Therefore, reducing vertical and horizontal stratification in school systems where students get selected at a young age for different tracks and providing a comprehensive educational system are important strategies to reduce educational inequality; and
- Low-stakes monitoring at the system level as to whether educational goals are achieved by all pupils regardless of their family background, gender or ethnicity helps policy makers and all actors to identify strength and weaknesses and to improve the educational system.

School processes and teaching practices

- Building up a high capacity for managing change on organisational, teacher and class level is a core requisite to improve school and teaching practices and processes;

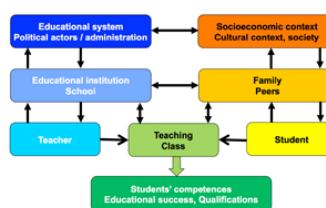


Figure 1: Students' school success is the result of a complex interplay between several actors in the multilevel system

Fig. 1 Students' school success is the result of a complex interplay between several actors in the multilevel system

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- Of particular importance are the implementation of sustainable co-operation between principal, teachers and further educational staff and the reflection on supporting and selection practices within schools and classes;
- This includes critical analyses of grouping practices to foster pupils in the single classes and the access to support measures;
- Continued professional learning of teachers helps to bring awareness to specific diagnosis, selection and grading biases and to change these practices into a more consistent and fair system within the whole school; and
- Low-stakes monitoring systems about teaching practices and pupils' achievement levels in the sense of 'assessment for learning' helps teachers to improve their teaching competences and to assure high comparability of learning requirements, diagnostic and grading criteria among classes and schools.

Reducing educational inequality is hard work, takes time and requires shared responsibility between society, policy makers, school authorities, schools, teachers and further educational and administrative professionals. It is important to keep in mind, however, that educational systems are multilevel in nature. Therefore, teachers and educational staff in schools have only limited leeway to change practices if regulations, guidelines and rules at the system level hinder the implementation of more effective practices in schools that foster better equality between pupils. Therefore, it is in the hands of policy makers to develop an educational system that makes deep and sustainable learning for all children possible. In turn, schools and teachers are responsible for choosing effective strategies to support all children to the best of their knowledge independently of their family background and to work hard on improving these strategies. Without a joint effort, educational equality will not be easy to achieve.

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