

European Group of Organizational Studies (EGOS) – Conference 2010

“Waves of Globalization”

Sub-theme 45:

Engines of Inequality: Organizations and Stratification in the New Millennium

Short paper

School Organization, Decision Making, and Accounts.

The Case of Institutional Discrimination at Swiss Elementary Schools¹

(Total word count: appr. 2700)

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¹ This contribution is based on research on inequalities of the educational system. The project “Organization and Inequality. An Empirical Investigation in Institutional Settings and Accounts of Decision Making at Schools” addresses the allocation of students with a migration background to low level secondary schools. From 2009 to 2012 the project is funded by the Swiss National Funds (SNF).

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Summary: Decision making in terms of grading and evaluating significantly contributes to unequal opportunities of students with a migration background. In Switzerland, this particularly holds true for the transition from elementary school to the stratified system of secondary schools. Based on case studies, our contribution explores linkages between decision outcomes on the one hand and collectively available accounts on the other. While some of these accounts reflect organizational rationalities in the form of incentives, procedural considerations and functional requirements, others are based on broader cultural accounts. An appropriate estimation of a student's future potential, the ideal to protect him or her against excessive demands and accordance with the supposed long-range aspirations of a student may serve as examples, here. Such accounts counterbalance programs and reforms which aim at overcoming persistent inequalities. Accounts and decision making in terms of grading and evaluating students find their parallel in recruitment practices and promotion patterns in economic work organizations. As the latter also contribute to social inequality and to the provision of unequal opportunities, the research perspective is not restricted to educational achievement.

As suggested by EGOS, this short paper summarizes the course of argument with respect to (1) purpose, (2) theory background, (3) research gap, (4) approach, (5) method and case, and (6) findings and contribution.

(1) Purpose

Research on inequality and class analysis have found out that work and education are the most important determinants of social stratification. Most of this research does neither emphasize on the organizational set-up of work and education nor does it focus on organizational decision making. Against this background we focus on how organizations and organizational decision making contribute to the reproduction of social inequality. Particular emphasis will be on the relation of decision outcomes to collectively available accounts. While some researchers have highlighted a contradictory relation between practical decision making on the one hand and formal representation of legitimising accounts on the other, our interest is in the ongoing framing of routinized decision making. We assume a tighter coupling between decision practices and accounts in which accounts are not only ex post-legitimizers of decision outcomes. Instead, they also serve as frame of reference for ongoing decision processes and thus to a substantial degree determine decision outcomes. The purpose of this paper is thus to shed light on accounts which contribute the effect of robust discrimination. While we refer to a concrete case - decisions determining the assignment of students to secondary schools – we seek to contribute to a more general perspective for organization

research. This perspective reflects on organizations as producers of durable inequality by decision making-processes having profound effects on the allocation to available positions.

(2) Theory Background

Organization research has offered basic insights into the stratification-effect of organizational structures. A classical reference is Arthur Stinchcombe (1965) who emphasizes on the organizational foundation of available social positions. Stinchcombe also argues that relations between social positions are regulated by organizational forms – stratification stemming from hierarchies in universities, e.g., are supposed to have a very different meaning as compared with hierarchies in a military context. Another general perspective on the organization base of inequality has been provided by Charles Perrow (2002). Perrow focuses on work organizations and convincingly shows that US-society profoundly has been moulded by work and occupations in large corporations. Thirdly, there is a great bulk of case studies in which the impact of organizational forms on unequal opportunities has been investigated. In these studies it has been shown that organizational core features such as size and age do have profound impacts on social positioning and on issues of mobility (cf., e.g., Pfeffer 1977; Baron 1984; Brüderl et al. 1993; Haveman & Cohen 1994). It also has been shown that recruitment practices and decisions with respect to promotion tend to reproduce social inequalities by discriminating minorities and women (Bielby & Baron 1986). It can be concluded that the organization of modern economies determines social positions, issues of mobility, and relations between these positions. Accordingly, changes in the economic structure as e.g. the shift towards service societies, the IT-revolution, ongoing trends towards globalisation, and the strengthening of network structures correspond with changes in the social composition of societies.

A second frame of reference is provided by the new institutionalism. By emphasizing on the educational sector this line of research compensates the strict focus on work conditions and on the occupational set-up of modern economies. In particular John Meyer (1977) has argued that education is crucial for legitimising inequalities. Such legitimation, however, requires that education is considered to offer equal opportunities. As there is profound evidence for the fact that equal opportunity is rather a myth than social reality, new institutionalists have identified tensions and modes of loose coupling between normative expectations on the one hand and deviating forms of practice on the other (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Thus, they are not surprised when ideals of equal opportunity are not met in everyday practice.

(3) Research Gap

International comparisons show that durable inequality of educational opportunities is a problem of transnational significance (Shavit/Blossfeld 1993; Hodges Persell et al. 2004). In

education research, school failure or underachievement of disadvantaged social groups is predominantly interpreted by referring to the students and their family background. Accordingly, a great bulk of research has focussed on individual characteristics (e.g. language competences) and on impacts of the family context (educational background of the parents; material living conditions; appreciation of educational achievement etc. pp.). Other researchers have insisted that the considered variables may at best offer a partial explanation since schools are actively involved in the production of educational disadvantages. Corresponding research findings show that the degree of immigrant students' disadvantage varies considerably between national or regional school systems. The research question is thus: Which organizational factors contribute to the reproduction of inequality?

The addressed research question is crucial because unequal opportunity is considered as severe problem which has triggered a great bulk of reforms and programs. How can we explain the robustness of effects which are not in line with ideals and policies at schools? One answer to this question stems from organizational institutionalism. Researchers in this field have argued that the links between the technical core of educational institutions – teaching and learning in classrooms – and the formal structure of schools – e.g. official guidelines and programs – are weak (Meyer et al. 1977; Meyer & Scott 1983). In a retrospect reflection of this perspective H.D. Meyer & B. Rowan (2006) argue that “new social developments ... have produced novel institutional practices with which institutional theory and research have yet to catch up” (Meyer & Rowan 2006: 2).

Against this background our contribution addresses departures from norms and ideals of equal opportunity not as idiosyncratic variations of practical decision making. Instead, we emphasize upon accounts which determine the decision making process. These accounts are assumed to be highly institutionalised and collectively available. We, thus, do not address a loose coupling between the institutional set-up and local practices. Instead, we rather focus upon contradictions which results from tension between formal arrangements on the one hand and highly institutionalised decision making processes on the other.

(4) Approach

School selection, tracking, displacement, and school exclusion are based on decision making in schools, often on a group level (conferences) and sometimes in collaboration with students and parents who then get involved in client work. Our study concentrates on exploring discriminatory mechanisms that operate in the allocation of students from elementary to secondary school.² Though details vary between and within cantons, the class teachers`

² As in other European countries, the school system in Switzerland is characterized by different types of secondary schools - low level or higher level schools, e.g. schools with basic or extended demands. At the end of

evaluation and recommendation significantly determines the assignment. Since later mobility between types of secondary school is low, this assignment decision has profound impacts (Buchmann et al. 1993). As it has been shown in empirical evaluations of decision making processes and in experiments using manipulated files, students with a migration background tend to be disadvantaged systematically in these decisions – in particular if they are male and have achieved more or less average results (Coradi Vellacott & Wolter 2005).

The chosen approach emphasizes upon structures and processes of schools which contribute to the (re)production of inequality. One assumption is that a focal organization is not only embedded in an abstract wider institutional context. Instead, there are also concrete stakeholders in the form of administration, parents-associations or representatives of other schools which address expectations to a focal organization. Another assumption is that accounts have an imprinting effect on organizational decision making. Accounts may be supplemented by more reflexive and purposive decision making which has been emphasized in an influential qualitative study conducted in Germany (Gomolla and Radtke 2002). In this perspective, accounts serve as *retrospective legitimizers* for decision making which is closely related to what is considered as functional requirement and/ or organizational interests.

Another conceptualization assumes that accounts are *constitutive determinants* of decision making. From this point of view, accounts are enacted routinely, as, e.g., the under-evaluation of achievement – quasi-automatically - is legitimised with respect to accounts of, e.g., the estimation of the future potential of a student, his or her protection against expected excessive demands and accordance with a student`s long-range aspirations. Such accounts strengthen the discrimination of students with a migration background, and they can be made objects of investigation.

(5) Method and Case

The case at hand stems from an ongoing research project which is funded by the Swiss National Funds (SNF). The project deals with schools as an organizational context which significantly contributes to the reproduction of social inequality. It addresses the robustness of evident statistical discrimination with respect to the educational achievement of ethnic minorities (Hodges Persell et al. 2004; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993). The specific focus is the allocation of students into the stratified order of secondary schools after 6 years at elementary school.

their time in elementary school - which most often is about 6 years - young students are assigned to a certain type of secondary school.

According to longitudinal studies and current statistical data, the ethnic and cultural origin of a student still is a key determinant of academic success in Switzerland (BFM 2006, SKBF 2006). In 2004 about 50.000 of overall 192.467 students with migration background attended schools with only basic demands (`Sonder- und Realschulen`). The proportion of children attending such schools in the immigrant population added up to 26% and was about twice as high as in the native population (13%). In the same year, just 22,8% of the native students finished obligatory school time (after 9 years) in a school with basic demands, while the proportion of students with migration background was nearly twice as high, more precise about 43% (BFM 2006).

Methodologically, the project is based on case studies. At its core is a comparative analysis of four schools. Their decision outcomes and processes will be analysed by using documents and files on the one hand and on the basis of interviews with teachers on the other. Our aim is to show that

- the allocation of students is not determined by educational achievement or by decision making of students (resp. parents),
- the outcome of school decision making does neither result from a cost/benefit-calculation of individual teachers` nor can it be reduced to school incentives and functional requirements,
- decision making is embedded in accounts which, though often operating tacitly, can be made objects of investigation.

(6) Findings and Contribution

Our case sheds light on an organizational field which profoundly affects social inequality. Nonetheless are schools in comparison with economic work organizations under-researched both in organization research and in research on inequality. While the latter acknowledges the impact of educational achievement on the availability of social positions, it does only rarely focus on organizational mechanisms that produce and reproduce this effect. Our focus on schools contributes to the compensation of this one-sidedness. In particular does the emphasis on decision making processes allow for an incorporation of a broad range of organizational approaches into research on inequality. From this perspective, discriminating decision making is neither based on individual biases and stereotyping, nor are de-legitimized practices and functional requirements the only remaining candidates which explain evident effects of inequality.

Our research perspective emphasizes on collectively available accounts which are constitutive for decision making practices with discriminating effects. In so doing, it sheds light on the robustness of unequal opportunities by offering insights into the framing and embeddedness of decisions. The result is a counterbalancing of many reforms and programs that aim and

overcoming unequal opportunity structures. By locating the causes for counterbalancing institutionalised norms of fairness and equal opportunity in persistent and taken for granted accounts of, e.g., protection, potential-estimation and homogeneity-seeking, it offers a new explanation for an old, yet not understood phenomenon.

The research perspective may thus offer new insights into the organization-based reproduction of inequality. This perspective is not restricted to education. Instead, it may also stimulate research on inequality which is related to economic work organizations. The assignment of students and issues of educational achievement may then be compared with issues of recruitment and promotion patterns which also contribute to social inequality and which are also providers of unequal opportunities. As in the case of schools, we find a broad range of programs and reforms which aim at a compensation of discriminating effects – and we find persistent departures from norms of fairness. The case of decision making in Swiss elementary schools may thus offer a much broader understanding for the organization-based re-production of inequality and discrimination.

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