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# **Inequality decisions and accounts: The case of tracking in a Swiss elementary school**

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# Introduction and research question

Educational achievement can be considered as a legitimate determinant of social status and positioning ...

if educational achievement itself is based on principles of fairness.

Nonetheless, the selection of pupils in accordance with social categories has institutional qualities – it is a robust pattern which empirically is to be expected.

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How is such an “illegitimate institution” reproduced / maintained and how can it be overcome?

What is the contribution of organizations and organizational decision making?

Here: Which accounts serve as frames?

# Course of argument

(Introduction and research question)

1. Education and inequality
2. Decision making and case
3. Formal accounts and procedural arrangements
4. Verbal accounts and underlying assumptions

Discussion

# 1. Education and inequality (1/2)

Inequality is related to life chances ... and determined by social categories ...; it refers to positions and relations.

Positions and relations in work organizations are considered as most important determinants; they result from

- (a) the organizational setup of economies, and
- (b) the entry into the labor market entry and from mobility/ promotion.

Educational achievement can be crucial for two reasons:

- (a) it may affect the labor market-entry and issues of mobility (due to its function as provider of cultural, social and human capital);
- (b) it may legitimize inequalities (due to the ideal of meritocracy).

Note: Both functions refer to modern societies – empirically and normatively.

# 1. Education and inequality (2/2)

Modernization theory: expectations, reforms & robust disappointments.

Meyer & Rowan 1977: there is a loose coupling between formal structures and practices (as a requirement and based on strong beliefs).

Loose coupling in a retrospect reflection: “new social developments ... have produced novel institutional practices with which institutional theory and research have yet to catch up” (H.D. Meyer & Rowan 2006: 2).

Argument:

- new organizational forms such as standardized tests of students and continuous evaluations of school performances produce data;
- these data easily can be communicated to authorities and to the public which utilize them for consequential decision making;
- this makes schools responsive to incentives and sanctions;
- schools have become competitive actors and need to reduce their loose coupling.

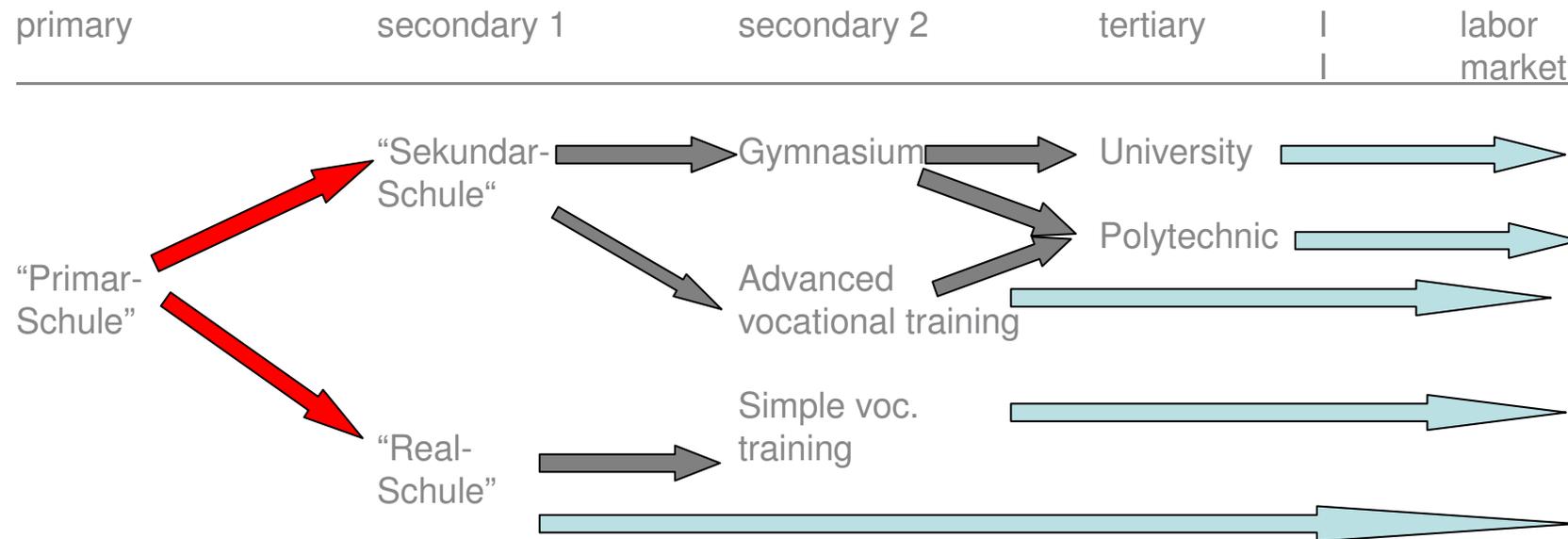
## 2. Decision making and case (1/2)

<u>Focus</u>	<i>Students/ parents:</i>	<i>School authorities:</i>
<i>Dispositions:</i>	e.g. social capital	e.g. curricular, districts
<i>Decision making:</i>	investment	<b>grading &amp; tracking</b>

Starting points and assumptions:

- agency and organizational rationality as empirical issues
- two sorts/ dimensions of accounts:
  - formal representation (organizational accounting),
  - practical considerations (social psychology)
- mutual entanglement of accounts and decision making

## 2. Decision making and case (2/2)



### Regulations and guidelines:

- two thirds/ one third - outcome (deviance less than 5% in 2000's)
- agreement with parents (always achieved in the last 5 yrs.)
- in line with achievements (some ambiguity/ degrees of freedom)

### 3. Formal accounts and procedural arrangements (1/2)

The minimum procedure (parents/ students meet with class teacher)

1. obligatory information of students and parents about the procedure
2. test results and assignment-expectations are discussed
3. signing of assignment decision form

“Complications” (parents/ students meet with other authorities)

4. meeting with principal
5. negotiation with school council who places a vote
6. the cantonal director of education draws a decision

### 3. Formal accounts and procedural arrangements (2/2)

- *very high institutionalisation (obligatory)*
    - *high institutionalisation (not obligatory, but routinely applied to all students)*
    - *low institutionalisation (only applied to ambiguous/ controversial cases)*
    - *very low institutionalisation (applied only in exceptional cases)*
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- many class tests-results
- other marked examinations
  - detailed performance portfolio
  - students` self evaluation
  - parents` observation form
- preliminary assignment form
  - parents` letter of intent
  - other teachers` evaluations
  - further expert tests (psychology etc.)
- school report 1 (winter term)
- final assignment form
- school report 2 (summer term)

## 4. Verbal accounts and underlying assumptions

Appropriateness with long range ambitions: *“Children with a migration background ... are influenced by a special mentality ... They are not willing to achieve.”*

Protection against future demands: *“Allocation is always prognosis ... How will the child react when confronted with higher demands?”*

Protection against parents: *“The most problematic case is when parents want to realize some form of late self-fulfillment at the expense of their children...”*

Disclaimers: *“I always show to parents that school assignment is not a life decision ... to relief the parents and ourselves and in the end also the child.”*

## Discussion

- (1) In verbal accounts, emphasis is on individual cases and exceptions; devaluation of significance – decoupling from formal accounts.
- (2) References to organizational interests and school objectives are very rare; there are only few incentives and sanctions.
- (3) In case of non-agreement there are process costs for school authorities and individual teachers – but the process costs for parents and students are higher – and resources and competencies are required which obviously are not distributed equally.

Disclaimer: 1 case, preliminary results – and presented accounts not as causes

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**Thank you !**