

How schools justify the allocation of immigrant students to disadvantageous secondary tracks

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Abstract

Ethnic inequalities in the allocation of elementary school students to secondary school are well documented for German-speaking countries (Germany, Switzerland, Austria). Yet, when it comes to the conceptualization of the causes behind such inequalities, the consensus between scholars is weak. This paper assumes that school inequalities are partly caused by teacher's tracking recommendations beyond individual school performance criteria. I particularly ask how schools justify the allocation of immigrant students to low qualifying secondary schools.

Referring to the concept of Institutional Discrimination (Gomolla & Radtke 2002) and to the moral sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) I propose a pragmatic model of school selection. Preferring homogeneity to heterogeneity as a main organizing principle of schooling, schools install appropriate measures to attain homogeneity (such as tracking and other forms of ability grouping). In doing so, they create a decision problem: Which students will be more or less capable in the future, especially when it comes to 'average achievers'? Moreover, the matching of these students with distinct ability tracks needs to be justifiable in public. Central to my model are therefore norms of school coordination and orders of justification, which cause and legitimate the negative selection of immigrant students. In light of this, and referring to different political philosophies, one can distinguish at least four 'worlds' of the school to understand the disadvantageous allocation of immigrant students: the 'world of general interest and equal opportunity', the 'community-structured world', the 'efficient world', and the 'market world'. Each of these worlds represents a normative school model which points to a specific form of social bonding, according to its own criteria of justice (such as equality, mutuality, efficiency etc.).

In a first step, I will draft the coherence between the legitimate form of knowledge, the pedagogy, and the social relations specific to each world of the school. In a second step I

clarify the significance of each world for student assessment and academic selection. I thereby reinterpret the empirical findings of Streckeisen, Hänzi & Hungerbühler (2007) and Gomolla & Radtke (2002) to illustrate how the different worlds affect the negative selection of immigrant students.

My reinterpretation of these data shows that schools largely mobilize the justifications of the community-structured and of the efficient world to legitimate the discriminatory allocation of immigrant children to low qualifying secondary schools. However, the different forms of coordination and justification usually don't occur in their pure form. Situations at school are often hybrid situations with conflicting underlying assumptions of justice. Only the formation of compromises enables the social bonding of school actors and the stability and continuance of schools over time. This also holds true for academic selection and its justification: Equity, mutuality and efficiency are conflicting selection principles. But compromises between them allow for the suspension of latent debates and hence for decision-making at school. Thereby compromises between the community-structured and the efficient world account for the negative selection of immigrant students in particular.