Excellence in Primary Education: The "Best School" as a Matter of Negotiation in the Discourse of School Choice – Sub-Project 3

Project Director: Prof. Dr. Georg Breidenstein
Research Associates: Anna Koch M.A., Dr. Jens-Oliver Krüger

The project analyses the discourse surrounding communication in the context of parental decisions on primary schools. It can be assumed that primary school allocation according to place of residence has been increasingly challenged in academic and ambitious milieus. The parents concerned have come to regard the issue as a matter of personal choice. The research project explores how ideas on “best school”, “excellence” and “elite” emerge. We assume that the discourse on elite and excellence faces taboos in the primary education sector: in the context of the research group, primary education is found to be the area most strongly bound to the notion of equality in the sense of “a school for all children”. The project furthermore analyses the perspective of the school itself, which in turn competes for children from specific milieus. From a discourse analysis perspective, the “best school” is presented as the result of ongoing processes of negotiation within the widely ramified field of referring discursive exertions. Field research will be carried out in two different regions and follows the discourse on parental school choice, using a combination of participant observation and qualitative interviews. The second period of the research project focuses on the longitudinal analysis of school choice practices and the changes in parental relationships to certain schools. Furthermore, we explore how regional school landscapes develop and analyse the operative mode and functionality of the various school choice arenas.

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Exclusive Educational Careers of Young People and the Role of Peer Cultures – Sub-Project 5

Project Director: Prof. Dr. Heinz-Hermann Krüger
Research Associates: Catharina Keßler M.A., Dipl.-Päd. Daniela Winter

This qualitative longitudinal study looks at the educational careers of young people and the role peer cultures play in their biographical narratives. The project based on the educational biographies and interpretative frameworks of excellence of pupils from four secondary schools with various claims of exclusiveness and one secondary school with an alternative concept. Beginning with sixteen-year-olds, we accompany these young people from grade ten until completion of their first two years at university or at work. We study the relevance of peer cultures outside the classroom and beyond graduation from school for their professional careers. The focus of our analysis lies on educational careers, mechanisms of distinction and the construction of coherence in circles of friends. Social reconstructive and praxiological perspectives are the key theoretical points of reference. Methodologically we rely on qualitative interviews with school heads and pupils, and on group discussions with the latter and their friends. Analysis of the second round of expert interviews with head teachers and particularly the conducting and analysis of longitudinal interviews and group discussions with young people and their peers lies at the core of the second funding phase. This approach not only allows for a deeper understanding of institutional codes at exclusive secondary schools, but also gives us new insights into the educational strategies and early career paths of perhaps society’s future functional elites and the role of peer cultures in this process.

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Elite Formation and Universities – Sub-Project 6

Project Directors: Prof. Dr. Manfred Stock, Prof. Dr. Reinhard Kreckel
Research Associates: Dr. Roland Bloch, Alexander Mitterle M.A.

The project analyses the social construction of “elite education” in German higher education. As this process is in statu nascendi, we look at the different ways in which stratificatory distinctions enter the field of higher education and understand the study of such differentiation as key to exploring the social construction of “elite education”. The project concentrates on two sectors that claim superiority in the field of higher education: (A) universities that position themselves as superior by claiming to educate outstanding “leadership personnel” for different areas of society and (B) doctoral programmes that claim to produce “excellent junior researchers” and refer to a corresponding status in the field. During the first project phase we conducted a field analysis to identify the “promoters” of stratification in these two sectors. This was followed by a survey of organizational case studies that served to identify and align stratificatory characteristics across both sectors (A + B).

Against the background of positioning effects on the part of these promoters to visibly mobilize these characteristics, we expect feedback effects in the field of higher education. The second project phase explores these effects and focuses on the response in the field to stratificatory distinctions mobilized by “promoters”.

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The research group analyses processes of social construction and creation of excellence from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to higher education in Germany, and their significance for recipients and professionals alike. In the first funding phase, six research projects explore educational discourses on elites and excellence, cooperation between families and institutions in child care and primary schools, exclusive secondary school selection, high-cost childcare centres, and with a qualitative longitudinal study of the educational biographies of adolescents at exclusive secondary schools at the transition stage to higher education or working life. Moreover, a typology of mechanisms of excellence from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to higher education will be identified systematisically.

In the second funding phase, the research group intends to explore the ongoing transformation of discourses on excellence and equality, and the exclusive educational landscape in a chronological comparison. It will also examine changes in the selection strategies and educational orientation of parents with pre-school and primary school children, and with a qualitative longitudinal approach, study the educational biographies and interpretative patterns of excellence of adolescents at exclusive secondary schools at the transition stage to higher education or working life. Moreover, a typology of elements for exclusive educational institutions will be identified systematically and the significance of international ECEC and primary and secondary schools taken into account in view of the current internationalization of the German educational system and transnational elite formation. Here, an innovative method of linking micro-analytical qualitative studies with discourse analysis comes into the fore. At the end of the second funding phase, the research group’s findings will shed light on the dynamics of elite formation and coherence construction, as well as on an examination of the implementation and dissemination of policy-driven excellence and elite semantics.

The project addresses itself to commercial high-cost childcare centres, whose recent proliferation is a new and unusual phenomenon in the German context. Using qualitative methods we investigate how these providers establish themselves and how they manage to persist. What are the consequences for the further differentiation and hierarchization of centre-based childcare, and what processes of institutional distinction can be identified? Since 2011 we have been working on parental choice of childcare centres, family selection by the centres and practices of social distinction. Besides finding a strong recency in processes of choice and selection, we learned that reconstructing a centre’s organizational culture is key to understanding practices of distinction.

Looking at the social construction of excellence and equality, and the project examines the discursive formation and practical effects of two rationalities in the contemporary system of education in Germany, both of which are political and counter-directional. Taking up the position of Contre-Ennicity and system theory, the project analyses the rules of justification to which these counter-directional rationalities refer. The study also reveals the construction mechanisms of distinction and coherence and of inclusion and exclusion in the educational system, as well as how they are organized. The second phase will first analyse the institutional practices and forms of subjectivation associated with excellence and equality tendencies, and, secondly, critiques of these tendencies and potential crisis points. The study examines the practical schools and colleges employ to make organizational distinctions in terms of excellence and equality, allowing us to describe the struggles in the education system that accompany opposing tendencies of excellence, on the one hand, and equality, on the other. At the level of subjectivation, the project illustrates how mechanisms of excellence and equality translate into the individual demands on teachers and students.

Distinction in Institutional Settings in Early Childhood Education and Care – Sub-Project 2

Project Director: Prof. Dr. Johanna Mierendorff
Research Associates: Lena Dreier M.A., Katrin Kotzyba M.A., Dr. Mareke Niemann

The project deals with the rarely explored area of "exclusive" "Gymnasiums" in relation to public discourses on excellence and top performance. Our fundamental aim is to research the circumstances and significance of "exclusive" "Gymnasiums" in Germany in two contrasting regions, with particular emphasis on the development of the educational habitus among pupils. Five of these schools are "exclusive", while two have non-exclusive concepts. Against the backdrop of the hypothesis on differentiation and valorization of excellence, we use sequential analysis and reconstructive methods to gain an insight into pupil selection procedures, the pedagogic concept and its reference to distinctive semantics and institutional concepts of pupil habitus. The institutional analysis will subsequently be connected to a longitudinal survey of pupils’ careers. Four data collection waves will take place consecutively in the 8th, 10th and 12th grades, and six months after the Abitur. Processes of creating habitus in "exclusive" "Gymnasiums" will be analysed during adolescence and interrelated to the creation of coherence and distinction, as well as to the matching of institutional concepts and the habitus of school pupils. The project aims to contribute to new insights into the creation of habitus in "Gymnasiums" in the context of a differentiated field of secondary education.

Project Director: Prof. Dr. Werner Helsper
Research Associate: Lena Dreier M.A.

Distinction in the German "Gymnasium": Processes of Creating Habitus in "Exclusive" Secondary Schools – Sub-Project 4

Project Director: Prof. Dr. Werner Helsper
Research Associates: Lena Dreier M.A., Katrin Kotzyba M.A., Dr. Mareke Niemann

Associated Researcher: Dipl.-Päd. Anja Gibson

The German “Gymnasium” is a secondary school that prepares pupils for advanced academic studies. Pupils take a final examination that allows them to enter university.

The final examination in the German school system

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