

What counts in educational research? Quantitative and qualitative explanations of educational inequalities.

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Proposal Submission Form*

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Fee:	<u>full</u> (200 €)	students' (150 €) Eastern European (75 €)
Paper presentation:	<u>yes</u>	no
Audio Visual requirements:		
overhead projector	yes	no
computer projector	<u>yes</u>	no
Abstract:		

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Individual versus organizational explanation of educational inequality and its methodological implication

International comparison research of educational achievement shows amongst others, that the degree immigrant students are affected by lack of school success varies considerably from one national school system to the other – with Swiss and German schools doing especially poorly. But how can we interpret such effects? What are the institutional mechanisms behind it and how can they be investigated? Statistical analysis of quantitative datasets is valuable to *reveal* educational inequalities. But as it typically refers to students as unit of analysis, it cannot provide for an unbiased empirical base to *understand* such inequalities in a comprehensive way. In case researchers tempt to do so, their data constrains their choice of theoretical arguments to interpret inequalities within a framework of methodological individualism and therefore human resource theory often seems self-evident. But do resource theories adequately consider the complex production of educational inequality particularly at the crucial intersections of educational institutions?

To alternatively explain educational inequality, theories of human resources and human decision-making can be countered by organisational theories. As such the concept of *Institutional Discrimination* takes into account the crucial resources and decision-making processes of educational institutions. Institutional discrimination can be considered as a central mechanism of inequality production. The basic process goes like this: (1) Schools ordinarily take internal decisions reflecting their own organizational logic (e.g. they have to distinguish between strong and weak students, as the respective tracks have to be filled up with pupils). Especially in selective contexts, (2) such decisions come along with unequal access to educational resources for distinguishable groups of pupils. (3) Schools have to *make sense* of their unequal internal treatment by referring to external, ascribed categories of pupils in such a way, that (4) this external categories allow for a cost-efficient ex-post justification of their internal distinctions. This represents a very ordinary process of daily problem solving in organisations and it can explain the production of ethnic, gender and other social inequalities in schools.

That's the theory. But how can it be empirically verified? First of all,

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educational inequalities are not explained with methods but with theories. Methods are just the tools to serve theory building. A verification of the above theory obviously requires opening the black box called ‘school’. The methodological implication is to use methods suited for organisational analysis. If one rather goes for “qualitative” or “quantitative” research instruments depends on the previous knowledge. So far, only sparse ideas about how schools decide and how they make sense of their decisions are available. Hence one rather goes for observation-, interview- or text based interpretative methods.

In my previous research, I showed empirical plausibility for the concept of institutional discrimination with regard to the distribution of apprenticeships in Swiss training firms. Based on texts resulting from semi-structured interviews with gatekeepers in 65 enterprises, I applied argumentation analysis to reconstruct the organisational logics of selection in the firms under investigation. I especially paid attention to the organisational exclusion of candidates considered as “foreigners”.

The results show that previous inequality research has ignored significant organisational rationalities of selection in the educational field and in the labour market by settling for a narrowed notion of individual productivity. There are manifold productivity-related reasons why firms deny membership to “foreign” youth – far beyond human resources and far beyond discriminatory ‘tastes’. Firms fear other disturbances of production and selling processes of their goods caused by “foreigners”. The self-restriction of traditional inequality research – both in theoretical and methodological terms – may not afford such insights.