

# The “Equity Paradox”

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Schools are faced with an irresolvable dilemma: if they treat pupils equally in line with their mission, they inevitably reproduce the inequalities they bring with them. Only if it systematically treats learners unequally—favoring some and disadvantaging others—could it change this. However, in doing so, it reaches its institutional limits. We will briefly outline this problem below.

## Inequality

“All men are created equal.” The promise of equality, as expressed in the American Constitution, was constitutive for modern society but at the same time counterfactual. Those who formulated this promise in the United States and, since the Reformation, also on the old continent, were well aware of the issue. The central functional areas of modern societies—the economy, politics, education, health, etc.—have at least formally followed the promise of equality. They have not presupposed inequality either empirically or normatively in their constitutions. In this sense, it can be said that modern society was constructed along the difference between promised equality and empirical inequality. This was possible by transforming inequality in society into a social and biographical burden of the individual (cf. e.g., Beck, 2008; Nassehi, 2011, esp. pp. 123–125).

The promise of equality was transformed into a “not yet, but soon,” which means the vision that the fully developed modern society with its institutions would succeed in ensuring the expected equality—at least of the starting conditions of subsequent generations. With this, any remaining inequalities would not be attributed to society and its institutions but to individual decisions and achievements. It is no coincidence that the main burden for this promise was placed on the education system. If the education system were to live up to this ambition, it would have to ensure that any preschool and out-of-school inequalities that are present or otherwise still exist do not have

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Hopmann, S. T., & Bauer-Hofmann, S. (2015). *Das »Equity-Paradox«*. Bildungsqualen: Kritische Einwürfe wider den pädagogischen Zeitgeist, (pp. 93–104). Springer. Permission for re-publishing granted by Springer and the authors.

any lasting consequences for opportunities within the education system and beyond. Simply said, the cards are completely reshuffled for everyone when they enter school, and everyone can make their own luck.

The eternal problem with this promise has been that the very institutions through which the promise of equality was to be realized actually perpetuate inequality instead. As Luhmann (2000, p. 394) argued, “With the help of its organizations, society allows the principles of freedom and equality, [...], to fail.” The organizations do not do this out of ill will or following a secret plan, but because they require the continuous production of inequality to ensure their own production of difference. The basic mechanism in an education system for describing the progress of teaching and instruction is “pass/fail.” Only by ‘passing’ a marker on the way, such as a test or evaluation, is it expressed that a certain section of an education track has been mastered. This mastery is necessary to start on any subsequent section. It does not actually matter how something is “passed,” whether it happened through prior knowledge or learning acquired at school. The main thing is that it can be confirmed in accordance with the organizational practices of schooling. To abandon this practice would mean giving up the temporal structure and, thus, the organization itself. “With all due respect,” at some point, a decision has to be made about transfer or reassignment in order to enable or allow progress within the school system.

Instruction draws on an unequal availability of knowledge. Its success is measured by the extent to which the participants succeed in balancing out this difference. If this difference did not exist, there would be no need for teaching. The existence of difference inevitably reflects the extent to which the knowledge already available relates to what must be worked through at school. Schools can, therefore, only guarantee equal starting points when they distance themselves from what actually exists outside their walls. This is where the never-ending complaints about the school’s “distance from real life” come in. However, to the extent that instruction centers around what is supposed to be “really” important for the future of the economy and society, it must be expected that differences brought in from outside the school will have a significant influence on its products. The cards are by no means completely reshuffled.

Despite this criticism, it must be acknowledged that the modern education system has not been entirely unsuccessful in tackling inequalities: Up to today,

the system has been able to counteract a large number of disparities caused in particular by religion, gender, and geographical location. This has happened especially in the course of the educational expansion of the second half of the 20th century and the associated broadening of school education. It is no longer primarily the "Catholic working-class girl from the countryside," in the words of Ralf Dahrendorf, who is subject to disadvantages in the education system. Instead, other distinguishing features such as migration status or mother tongue have become popular reasons for inequality (cf. for many Baumert et al., 2006; Becker & Lauterbach, 2007; Wößmann & Peterson, 2007).

However, it is striking that the difference-generating social inequality in social backgrounds, i.e., the different preschool and out-of-school access to school-relevant knowledge and resources, is still "persistent" (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993), if not growing once more (cf. Shavit et al. 2007). The flood of publications on the topic of unequal opportunities for education is evidence of this (see Hopmann et al., 2010, for a summary). This described situation can be formulated as an "equity paradox" in highly developed school systems: The more effort made to reduce social inequality by harmonizing or even standardizing school performance conditions and expectations, the more the social inequality grows in significance. Indeed, it is precisely the means that are supposed to create equality that actually perpetuate and increase inequality.

Educational policy means such as the extension of years of compulsory education, integrated school formats, all-day schooling, national testing systems, or language proficiency testing in conjunction with language support are concretizing these homogenization efforts. These means are currently very popular in the OECD countries (see Hopmann et al., 2010). Two examples illustrate the unintended—largely paradoxical—interdependencies that can arise in an attempt to achieve homogenization of education opportunities: On the one hand, the often controversial and equally historical debate on school structures, and on the other hand, the increasingly widespread comparative studies on school student performances.

## School Structures

First of all, the hope that schools could contribute to fulfilling the promise of equality was not unfounded, even if the post-Reformation school was constructed in terms of the formal equal treatment of unequal students. As long

as schools do not become the norm or schooling is offered in a very unequal quality, successful school attendance certainly opens up important options for further education. Consequently, schools contribute more or less intentionally to the development of opportunities for previously disadvantaged students. However, as we have known since the Heynemann/Loxley debate, this applies at best to the initial phases of modern mass schooling (cf. Baker et al., 2002; Shavit et al., 2007). Once those involved have adjusted to the differentiation of the school system, the differences they have brought with them can again become important. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, the organized school system that emerged from a long tradition of school history indisputably served to reproduce social differences. Differences no longer had to be based on origin itself but could be attributed to varying school successes. Certain entitlements were linked to certain school careers, whereby the educational qualification—preferably the *Abitur* or *Matura*—was more important than the educational content or actual individual achievements themselves. Following the “pass/fail” principle, successfully certified sections marked progression within the school and beyond. However, in line with the equity paradox, the more highly and homogeneously a school system is developed, the more likely it becomes that sociocultural and socioeconomic variables explain differences in school success.

The probability of passing certain stages of education and thus acquiring opportunities to progress further was and is distributed unequally across society. Since the middle of the 20th century in particular, the massive underrepresentation of children from “lower” social classes in higher education has triggered broad international “equity” debates (cf. Coleman, 1990). In the German-speaking world, the question was primarily framed as one of how socially “equitable” access to higher education is, and *de facto* how socially equitable access to the *Matura* or *Abitur* is. “The low proportion of children from different population groups (workers, farmers, girls) could only be justified with difficulty by referring to fair selection in the education system [...] They were also, at least in part, the result of unequal opportunities and structures that could in principle be changed” (Kast, 2006, p. 239).

Indeed, designs for common, homogeneous schooling for all pupils can be traced back directly to the 17th century (cf. Bauer, 2009), but so can the fact that, in practice, they have never eliminated school inequality. If it were the case that surface structures determined the social distribution of educational careers

or school performance in whole or in large part, this should be demonstrable in countries where integrated and tracking forms exist side by side. This is not the case (cf. e.g., Fend, 2009). Furthermore, in countries with integrated mainstream schools, problems relating to the distribution of social opportunities and the promotion of achievement should be significantly lower. However, as the results of the PISA study seem to confirm, this is not the case. On the contrary, it is precisely among the comprehensive school countries, such as the United States, where social background correlates most closely with academic success. This raises the question of whether school organization and the associated transition decisions should not be seen as an instrument but rather as a consequence of socially unequal developments. For example, it should be asked to what extent different social preconditions have not already been reflected in performance differences at the time of the transition decisions. This would mean that even strictly performance-orientated transition decisions would still result in a considerable socially unequal distribution (Hopmann et al., 2010).

Many years of research can confirm that school structures have no lasting effect on equal opportunities over the life course, i.e., on forms of education and training (see, for example, even comprehensive school promoters such as Helmut Fend, 2009). Any PISA level can be achieved with any school structure. Even the oldest comprehensive school system in the world, in Norway, demonstrates how social differences increase with expanding schooling. The attempt to create equality through formal harmonization of educational pathways produces exactly the opposite over the long term (see e.g., Bakken, 2010). In the course of integrated structures, anything but homogeneous conditions prevail. Instead, other, seemingly more "legitimate" mechanisms of differentiation become significant, such as differentiation according to ownership (e.g., private versus public), according to program (Montessori, bilingual, music, etc.), according to social geography (concentration of "educated classes" in the catchment area of schools regarded as "good"), or the reproduction of differences by investing in higher educational qualifications (university) (cf. e.g., Labaree, 2010).

## Student Performances

While the "equity" problem was initially debated primarily in terms of granting access to higher education qualifications, developments since the

1960s have also gone in a different direction. Back then, international student performance measurement research emerged, culminating in the PISA study. This approach expanded the "equity" problem to include the question of the distribution of individual student performance.

International cross-national comparisons focus on student performance at certain stages of the education system in the subjects identified as central—mathematics, languages, and science—(subjects that are assumed to reflect relevant competencies for coping with life in the future even if there is no research to prove this). Such comparisons understand what was previously perceived as social differences as individual characteristics of pupils on the one hand and school differences as differences in quality between school locations, school types, and even school systems on the other. Unsurprisingly, the results of this research show that the variance within school types is higher than between them and that social differences not only reflect differences in access to education but also a significant explanation of the differences in performance (cf. Hopmann, 2008; Hopmann et al., 2008).

Initially, as the first example illustrates, attempts were made to neutralize social starting conditions through the homogenization of school structures. Now national standards are intended to first make the individual differences visible so that they can then be specifically compensated for. However, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that centralized control mechanisms—such as standards implementation—will raise the general level of achievement or reduce social inequalities. National standards are based on the theoretical goal of improving school quality and teaching all pupils the same content to the same extent, regardless of their geographical or social background. In the current testing euphoria, the experience that has been available for over 20 years (cf. Madaus, 1994) is being overshadowed by the fact that standardized procedures are actually reproducing, if not deepening, inequality and marginalization. With the introduction of standards and national performance tests, after marginal initial successes, high-achieving pupils learn to deal with the system. Consequently, there is regularly an increasing gap between the “strong” and “weak” pupils in school, related to standard testing implementation. In the sense of the equity paradox, the higher and more homogeneous the performance requirements in a school system are, the more likely it is that socio-cultural and socio-economic variables lead to differences. In particular, pupils with

appropriate material and cultural resources (often in the form of increased use of "shadow education") can adapt to this new situation better (cf. Baker, 2006). In this respect, research findings show a Matthew effect insofar as, if any, high-achieving pupils in particular benefit from standards, they are given the opportunity to master learning material in a shorter time. The opposite applies to low-achieving pupils (cf. e.g., Stamm, 2008). Moreover, the unreflective use of standards and performance tests can lead to unintended side effects such as increased drop-out rates or marginalization (cf. Hopmann et al., 2010).

## Boundaries

These two examples illustrate that every attempt to counteract the "equity" problem with "homogenization," which means to compensate for inequality through equalization, brings other differentiation mechanisms to the fore. The mechanisms are strongly linked to sociocultural and socioeconomic variables and have a negative impact on equal opportunities or equal opportunity parameters. This applies not only to the harmonization of external structures or national standards. The list could be extended to include several examples that are currently in vogue (see Hopmann et al., 2010, for a summary). Formulated in terms of the equity paradox: The more efforts are made to hide social differences in school, the more extracurricular socio-cultural and socio-economic variables explain differences. The question, consequently, is how this power comes about that would do the good ever do, but ever does the evil.

School is not an ontological phenomenon or a "social fact" with fixed characteristics but must be created as a school over and over in every instructional situation. All kinds of psychological, anthropological, social, economic, architectural, etc. circumstances may play a role in this matter. Ultimately, however, every lesson points toward the unavoidable decision of "pass/fail." It takes stock of results and reflects on them. By this rationale, it can establish a connectivity for new lessons. Like other social functional systems, the school is also constituted by the factual dimension, in its case by what becomes the subject of a lesson. After all, the school owes its origins to the simple experience that simply experiencing life is not instructive enough to acquire all the knowledge necessary for society. In addition, sufficient

cultivation is required in order to be able to participate in school processes as such. In order to decouple itself from its own prerequisites and external conditions, the school must become esoteric to a certain extent (Luhmann would say: autopoietic, i.e., self-referential). That means it develops formats in the factual and social dimensions that usually do not exist outside its walls (cf. Hopmann & Künzli, 1995). It achieves this by respecifying knowledge as school knowledge and expected behavior as school culture, in each case in relation to the necessary decisions about “pass/fail.” As Seneca already knew, we learn at school for school and not for life.

Indeed, those involved are not only at school but also take part in other social contexts, such as the family and their other immediate social environment. These actors, like the students themselves, are able to observe and react to the behavior within the school to varying degrees. Depending on cognitive and social prerequisites, it can be easier or more difficult to decipher what is required within the school and to communicate it in an appropriate form. If knowledge and cultural resources are distributed unequally outside of school, then this inequality is usually reflected within the school: either in advantages for those who have dual access to this knowledge or—if equalization is to be achieved—in necessary double efforts for those who do not have this dual access to the same extent. Helmut Heid formulated this paradox many years ago as follows:

Given equal individual learning preconditions [...], unequal learning opportunities [...] are likely to lead to correspondingly unequal learning outcomes. The, in reality, more frequent case of highly complex, unequal individual learning preconditions are more likely to lead to increased inequality if learning opportunities are standardized (equal). (Heid, 1988, p. 3).

When looking more closely at the history of school structures or performance comparisons, precisely this condition of school education is observed, but its consequences are not taken into account. Comprehensive school systems often fail in their pursuit of equality, not least because those who can seek other forms of horizontal (public or private schools, programs, etc.) or vertical production of difference (by qualifications) in order to escape the equality requirements within the school. Nothing else happens when homogenizing and tightening the performance screw, if necessary, with massive use of private resources (such as shadow education).

For those who do not have such resources, the conditions are more difficult unless schools can neutralize these advantages in some way. In purely formal terms, this could be done in various ways:

- By constantly changing the conditions of "pass/fail." This strategy would make it more difficult for those involved to adapt to this. However, this would make it more difficult for the organization of the school itself to maintain its progressive, incremental nature in the long term.
- It could refrain from generating decisions about "pass/fail," but would then have to reckon with other systems ignoring schools, such as the labor market or university system, when regulating their respective entrance conditions. This would also undermine the school's legitimacy as a producer of selection criteria.
- Finally, it could systematically take into account the differential starting conditions in its decisions on "pass/fail" (e.g., by statistical weights), but would have to renounce its constitutive claim to formal equal treatment. There are historical examples of this strategy (e.g., "affirmative action" in university admissions in the United States), but they have not proven to be very successful in the long term. This is because they chronically call into question the legitimacy of the academic selection process.

This thought experiment could be continued but would always end at the same point: Through homogenization of any kind, schools cannot neutralize inequalities (i.e., differences in resources in relation to the level of performance expected at school). Schools can only reduce the inequalities arising from the unequal availability of school-relevant resources through three modes: either by making themselves more inaccessible to other observers, i.e., by becoming more esoteric and unpredictable; or by relativizing the fundamental production of differences of "pass/fail" to a point where their self-preservation would be jeopardized; or by not only allowing inequality internally, but by deliberately exercising it.

In all three cases, this touches on the "bottom line," because it is *not* possible to not differentiate - at least not in schools if they are not to give up the mode of their own reproduction through instruction that leads to decisions. However, the school as an institution must at least strive toward formal equality. That is why it cannot use any parameters such as origin,

gender, or place of residence as a reason for its decisions. It is, therefore, faced with the dilemma that it can neither ignore nor change precisely those conditions that empirically correlate clearly with probabilities of success. Still, the example of the gender gap also shows that the school is not just helpless. How can it be explained that girls are now outperforming boys in most school subjects, after it had been different for centuries (cf. Blossfeld et al., 2009)? This must also be an effect generated in classrooms and schools. Without being able to go into this topic in depth here, it can be assumed that changes in the composition of the teaching staff (“feminization”) as well as in the curriculum, i.e., the current school knowledge and school culture, may have played a role.

A similar approach should be taken to other disadvantages: if you want to help the disadvantaged, you have to help them directly - either by providing additional resources that are only available to them or by ensuring that the resources they bring with them (such as linguistic or cultural diversity) are given decisive importance for success at school. This does not completely disconnect those who are currently able to respond to in-school teaching through their extracurricular resources. They could also respond to this change. However, limiting their advantage with in-school measures would be possible: The inequality of learning success can be reduced if pedagogical interventions compensate for unequal learning conditions. This could happen in particular by offering disadvantaged learners more and more appropriate learning opportunities in relation to how much more they need them (Heid, 1988).

However, this must all be decided situationally, as the resources that can be brought into the school would vary considerably depending on the location and those present (cf. e.g., Berliner, 2009; Böhm-Kasper et al., 2007). This means that a reduction in disadvantages within the school is inextricably linked to the recognition of social, cultural, regional, etc., inequalities and the willingness to recognize them. Inequalities within the school must be linked to recognizing social, cultural, regional, etc., inequalities and the willingness to differentiate the parameters of instructional decisions and thus of school knowledge and school culture more clearly from those that prevail outside the school. This would be a clear counterprogram to PISA and other dreams of homogenization.

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