

Übersetzung k10e01

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Hello, my name is Gabriele Bellenberg from the Ruhr University in Bochum. I have a professorship there for school research and school pedagogy and am part of the management team of the Professional School of Education. The topic I would like to talk about today is the relation between social background and education.

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The aims of my short lecture are the following: I would like you to be able to describe the relationship between social background and educational success after my lecture and also to be able to explain approaches to this relation on the basis of scientific theories. Secondly, I would like you to be able to explain the importance of educational transitions for this relationship and thirdly, I would like you to be able to give information about the mitigation of this relationship, i.e. the question to what extent one can mitigate this tight relationship.

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As we approach the problem, you will certainly already have encountered this issue in your everyday life, in your perception of the media. I have brought you three short excerpts from relatively recent press articles that clearly illustrate this issue. I am only going to refer to the headlines now, because we are going to address the topic in depth in a moment: "Social background determines educational success", "Educational background is still decisive for participation in higher education" and "Socially disadvantaged students are disadvantaged twice". These excerpts already show that the topic is not exclusively related to schools, but refers to the entire course of education from very young children, from early-born children to adult learning, and higher education can also be found here.

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I will now approach the topic with you in such a way that I want to show you the basic relationships with a school study. Please consider this school study to be an example because the effects can also be shown in other educational institutions. I will then present three selected theories to explain the relationship, and in a third step I will show you that these relationships can also be demonstrated when entering higher education, and finally I will present approaches to how we can contribute to mitigating these relationships.

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I will now start with the school-related study to give you real-life insights into the issue. The study I am referring to is an old study. It dates back to 1970, was conducted by Otmar Preuß and is called "Soziale Herkunft und die Ungleichheit der Bildungsschancen" (Social Background and the Inequality of Educational Opportunities). I did not choose it because I do not have more recent data. There is an enormous amount of data, e.g. from the Pisa studies, but no other study can explain the mechanisms so well, which is why I use it. To help you understand the study, I will first explain what I am going to talk about, what the study researched. The study focused on fourth grade students in North Rhine-Westphalia and collected data on the social background of the students, operationalised according to whether they were children whose parents belonged to the working class, the self-employed or civil servants.

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The researchers conducted a school performance assessment among the fourth grade

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students to check whether these students are fit for the German 'Gymnasium'. The study also included the primary school teachers' recommendations for the subsequent school form. At that time, North Rhine-Westphalia had a three-tier school system, the 'Hauptschule', the 'Realschule' and the 'Gymnasium'. But we only look at the recommendation for the 'Gymnasium'. And finally, the study also took into account the parents' transition decision, that is, what the parents actually decide, where they enroll their children, at which type of school they enroll their children.

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Ok, I am now showing you the data which are based on this type of presentation. You can see three different groups that the study differentiated, namely the fourth grade students sorted by the father's social background. And you can see the differentiation into three groups. The first group are students whose father belongs to the group of workers, described here as "semi-skilled and unskilled and other non-skilled workers", to the group of "skilled workers and non-self-employed master craftsmen" or to the group, a very large group, "executive employees, civil servants in higher service or freelance professions". We are looking at the data of the first and the third group, namely the group of children with a working-class background and the group of children from civil servant families.

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The first data I want to show you relates to the school performance assessment. The researchers went in and gave the students in the three groups a school performance assessment. And you can see the data that tells you what percentage of the students in these three groups are fit for the Gymnasium transition according to this objective test.

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And if you look at the data, you will find that out of the first group, children with a working-class background, 15 percent of the students tested fit for the Gymnasium, and 40 percent from the group of civil servants' children. Now you have to ask yourself, what is the reason for this systematic difference, which you find again and again in all other studies, including more recent ones? And the explanation is not about differences that have something to do with intelligence, but rather differences that result from the childrens' socialisation. The families in which these children grow up differ systematically in the conditions under which they grow up. In the civil servant families, we can assume that school-desirable behaviour that is appreciated and considered good in school is much more strongly promoted in these families, for example, early promotion of reading, regular reading of stories in the family, stimulating toys or also the use of the language of education, which is also spoken later in school. We assume that there are systematic differences between these groups, which explain why there are already systematic differences in the learning prerequisites of the groups when they enter primary school and also when they enter daycare. The children from working-class households have received a less stimulating potential from their parents and family than is the case with children from higher civil service professions.

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We will now look at how teachers recommend children from these groups for the 'Gymnasium'. And I put the data next to it. I will present them to you very briefly. From the group of workers' children, 8 percent are suitable for the 'Gymnasium' according to the teachers' judgement, from the group of civil servants' children, 59 percent are suitable

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according to the teachers' judgement. This, too, needs explanation, and I will try to give you explanations. The question of teacher judgement, i.e. their recommendation for the transition from primary school to secondary school, stipulates that teachers should refer to the performance shown so far in primary school, but at the same time also give a prognosis about the success, how they estimate the success, for example in the transition to the 'Gymnasium'. And you can see that systematically teachers tend to underestimate the potential of the group of working-class children, if you measure that based on the test, and tend to overestimate the potential of the civil servants' children, because they assume that the support that the families provide is stronger for the civil servants' children in the higher school form, that they can give extra tuition, that they know that they themselves can perhaps support their children in school. And the teachers assume that this is less the case for the group of working-class children.

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The third factor that becomes apparent here is the actual enrolment at the 'Gymnasium'. And perhaps you will be surprised by the data that I am about to show you, namely that only 5 percent of children with a working-class background are actually enrolled in the 'Gymnasium', while 72 percent of children of civil servants are enrolled in the 'Gymnasium'. So, this is very socially selective. Why is that? It is because the parents, who come from the working class, weigh up how much, what do I have to put in so that my children are successful at the 'Gymnasium'. They make considerations, they make decisions, they make choices at the transition. They think about how the costs, what I have to invest in the child, relate to the benefits I expect from attending a 'Gymnasium'. And the decision is much more difficult for parents with a working-class background than for parents with a civil servant background, because the latter already have academic experience, because they also assume, because they know, for example, how important the 'Abitur' is for a university career, and all this applies less in working-class families, and there we have the social gap, so to speak.

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With this example, I have tried to explain which mechanisms are at work to tighten the relationship between social background and success and participation in education in Germany. Next, based on these data, I would like to briefly present three relevant theories which explain why this relationship shows itself in the way I have now presented to you on the basis of the data.

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As a first theoretical offer, I would like to refer to the theory, to the habitus theory of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who always plays a very important role in such questions. Pierre Bourdieu has developed central theories for understanding the relationship between society, socialisation and the educational system. And in his interpretation, in his empirical studies, he has found that, or he has condensed the theory in such a way that he says that social background, which is determined in childhood and adolescence, leads to internalised possibilities and limitations, to likes and dislikes that are peculiar to the respective milieu. So he is saying: the taste you have, your preferences, how you behave, is not only an expression of your individual personality, but there is always a part that is socially shaped. And this social component has something to do with your milieu, with your social

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background. That means we are all born into social classes that have different resources, different value systems, which simply differ systematically from one another. In this theory, he distinguishes between three different types of capital with which people from different social classes are equipped in very different ways, which imply very different levels of power and influence in society. These three types of capital are economic, social and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, families from a socially privileged background have more capital of all three types than families from a lower social background, whereby the types of social and cultural capital are clearly more important for this context than economic capital. Let me briefly explain: economic capital, and you are already familiar with this term, refers to income, assets, money, goods that you can own and convert into money. Social capital refers to relationships, i.e. the extent to which you are integrated into social structures. For example, if the parents are graduates of an elite university, they have a network that they can use for their children. It is cultural capital, the extent to which educational titles have been accumulated in a family, which is the result of successful educational processes. And in many school studies, they measure, or students are asked to give information on how many books they have in their home, in order to have an indicator of cultural capital.

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Bourdieu argues that these forms of capital are more present in socially privileged families than in less privileged families. And that is why these children can successfully implement what they have received through this capital in educational institutions and educational processes, or more successfully than the other group would be able to.

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The second theory I would like to present goes back to a French sociologist, Raymond Boudon. Boudon has developed a theory that is highly compatible with that of Bourdieu and that distinguishes between primary and secondary effects of origin. The primary effects of origin describe everything that families pass on to their children while they are growing up, during their socialisation. And the resources available to families for this differ systematically between socially privileged and socially less privileged groups. And because these resources, which represent the primary effects of origin, differ systematically between different families, they have a direct impact when children enter school. The differences in performance that were measured in the study that I presented to you, by Preuß, with a school performance assessment, go back to the primary effects of origin that Raymond Boudon describes.

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What is valuable about his theory is that he discerns secondary effects of origin and these secondary effects of origin refer to the decision-making behaviour of individuals on their educational path. I explained this to you in the study using the example of the transition to primary school, and parents or education users as a whole are repeatedly faced with decision-making situations at educational transitions: Do I choose the path to higher education or do I continue my educational path via vocational training? These are decision-making processes. And social background plays a role in these decision-making processes because the question of what we decide for is answered systematically differently, depending on the family of origin and social background. If you imagine a highly educated family, the parents have an academic background, have gone through higher education

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themselves, and the child is faced with the question of whether to go to university or not, then the parents will always want their child to do as well as they do. And they therefore consider higher education to be very valuable and also know that they can support their child in successfully following this path and therefore decide in favour of this university career. If you imagine families that do not have this experience with higher education, then the risk that goes along with it, the risk of failure and also the question of what do I have to invest, the child still has a long way to go before earning any money, has to be supported financially, is held much higher and that is why different weighing processes systematically take place, which Boudon represents as secondary effects of origin.

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This also shows that the secondary origin effect always strikes at educational transitions, when decisions have to be made. And the more such decisions have to be made in educational careers, the more this relationship can play a role.

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A third theory also seems important to me in this context, which argues in a completely different way. It is called the theory of institutional discrimination. Gomolla/Radtke are leading representatives of this theory from an educational science perspective. This theory is not about looking at individual behaviour, which is influenced by the family of origin, but instead at the educational institutions. And the theory states that the rules that institutions establish can have a discriminatory effect. The practices that emerge in institutions can activate effects of origin. An example is if you imagine that in secondary schools in a multi-tier school system, language support, which can be of fundamental importance especially for students with a migration background, is offered in two- or three-tier systems at the lower-status schools, but not at the 'Gymnasium', then, when deciding on the transition from primary school to secondary level 1, the teachers - if they want the students to receive language support - have good reason to enroll them in the lower-status school forms, which they might not do if such language support were also available at the 'Gymnasium'. That would be one such mechanism that works at the level of the institution and contributes to the relationship.

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So far, I have chosen many examples from school and so next I would like to show you that this relationship also exists when entering higher education. I could also show you that this is still the case when graduating from university. And there are also studies that show that this all still plays a role at work and when pursuing a doctorate. But what I have selected for you here is data on the transition to higher education. In this figure, you can see, I will try to explain it, the figure is taken from the current education report of 2018 and I refer to the two columns. If you look at the left column, you will find percentage points that explain the composition of the population by educational origin and you will see that 28 percent of the population has at least one parent with an academic degree, that is the figure that looks orange to me, that you see here. And highlighted in blue is the proportion of people in the population whose parents have at least a vocational qualification, which is 53 percent. On the right-hand side, on the other hand, you see a column showing the composition of first-year students in the same year. And here you can see that the group with highly educated parents make up 53 percent, but in the population, it was only 28, the group with parents

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with vocational degrees makes up 30 percent in the student body but made up 53 percent in the population. Here you have the opposite pattern, so to speak. And you might notice that this is exactly the same finding as you saw in the very old study from 1970 for the school context.

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Yes, that is quite an alarming finding, which at least we education scientists are always concerned about. And that is why the next question we have to ask ourselves is: Is there anything we can do about this very close relationship which restricts individual life opportunities and also goes against the ideas we have, which are written down in the constitution? And the most important message I would like to share is that yes, there are possibilities to loosen this relationship.

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I would like to present two indications. The first is that there are big differences in international comparisons of school studies. Germany is a country where the relationship is particularly tight, but if you go to the Scandinavian countries, it is much looser, you cannot get rid of it completely, but it is much looser. That is the first indication. The second indication, which relates to Germany, is a study by Helmut Fend, who has shown that in comprehensive schools, i.e. in forms of education that provide individualised support, that do not divide by performance, the relationship can also be significantly loosened during the years spent in school.

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That is the first most important message for me. We can work on this issue, even if it is a tough and repeatedly proven finding. If you want to do that, then it is always a good idea to start as early as possible, i.e. to mitigate the primary effects of origin, outreach family support would be a keyword here. You cannot just look at schools, but at the entire educational pathway, as I tried to explain with example of higher education. So we have to look at the entire educational pathway. I think I made it clear in my presentation that educational transitions are particularly sensitive points. Here we have to make sure that the consequences of educational decisions are not far-reaching for the individuals. Counselling and support at educational transitions are crucial and all educational institutions should rethink and work on this. Institutional discrimination, which is not easy to prove because it is mostly not related to the formal rules but their effects, needs to be kept in mind, examined and tried to be dismantled. And finally, I think it is important to know that the long arm of social capital is there and for everyone who moves in society, this knowledge is important in my eyes. It helps to question why am I where I am? What hurdles do I actually have? These hurdles might not have anything to do with me as an individual and as a person, but with mechanisms that lie beyond that. And if you work in educational institutions, even if you work in the economy, you are confronted with other people who bring something along, who bring a social background with them and that can be conducive or not conducive. But it is beyond what the people you meet can accomplish. And knowing this may help our society to develop well and to give everyone the educational opportunities they deserve.