

FLAWED SELECTION – THE EXAMPLE OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN SWISS EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Abstract: In contradiction to official guidelines, children of immigrant families are increasingly assigned to special classes for pupils with learning difficulties. The analysis of statistical data concerning the educational system reveals the limits of individual theoretical interpretation patterns for the over-representation of immigrant children in special classes. Apparently, regional characteristics as well as an inappropriate orientation of the teachers towards the different reference groups in their classes play a rather important part in the academic success of these children. In addition, the benefits and advantages of segregation practices cannot be justified by practical or scientific evidence.

Keywords: school selection, migrant students, effectiveness research, equal opportunities, learning disabilities, failure at school

Introduction

Criticism of selection is not new. In the 1960's already, manifold arguments against selective practices put an increasing pressure for legitimization on various forms of selection. The objections were related to three main areas: the general accuracy and reliability of the decision making for segregation, the problem of the specific discrimination of special groups of pupils like children and youths of a lower and less favoured socio-economic status, and finally the question concerning the general efficiency of the high selectivity of school systems as it had been established in many countries in the course of the industrialisation of education. Parallel to this criticism there have been decades of discussions on educational policy such as the debate on comprehensive schools in Germany or the discussion on mainstreaming and inclusion in the USA and in many other countries (cf. UNESCO 1995).

It is astonishing what little interest the criticism and the research results of that time find in today's discussions on the low educational success of many children and youths of immigrant families. The most serious example, illustrating this problematic matter is the assignment of children with learning difficulties to special classes. Numerous analyses of educational statistics show that children of immigrant families are highly affected by this early form of selection (e.g. Powell & Wagner 2001, Kronig 2001). Not only is the number of immigrant children in special classes for pupils with learning difficulties disproportionately high, but it is growing almost continuously. In Switzerland, the number of pupils with a foreign passport in special classes for children with learning problems has more than trebled since the early 1980's whereas the quota of these pupils in ordinary classes has only increased by 35 percent. At the same time, the number of Swiss children in special classes has decreased by almost one quart (Kronig 2001). It seems as if the phenomenon of the growing number of people of low socio-economic status at the base of the economic pyramid ("Unterschichtung", Hofmann-Nowotny 1973,24), characterising the trends in the labour market in the 1970's, is also effective in school education. The more the children of immigrant families fill up the lower positions of the educational pyramid, the higher the chances of promotion for Swiss pupils.

In German speaking countries, the education authorities have repeatedly issued recommendations to defuse this problematic situation (e.g. Conference of the Cantonal Ministers of Education 1995, Gomolla & Radtke 2000, 329-332), but obviously they could no more prevent the developments mentioned above than the widespread offers and possibilities for special courses in German language. In search of the reasons for the problem the interpretations are still based on individual theories. The explanations which try to find the causes for the development in the child's personality seem to receive a fresh impetus. In the following paragraphs we try to take up the argumentation lines of the former criticism of selection and to consider their meaning and importance for the problems outlined above.

Insufficient reliability of selection

Overlap of academic achievements between hierarchical forms of schooling

A first clue to the faultiness of the actual selective practice can be seen in the high overlap of academic performances and achievements between hierarchically grouped forms of schooling. Already in the early 1960's, Schmalohr (1962) found almost half of the IQ-values of children with learning difficulties also in the group of pupils in ordinary classes. Almost forty years later a longitudinal study backed up by the Swiss National Science Foundation results in similar observations (Kronig, Haeblerlin & Eckhart 2000, 20-21). The investigation includes 2129 second grade pupils of the German speaking part of Switzerland and the Principality of Liechtenstein. The results prove that it is no longer possible to draw a clear borderline between pupils of ordinary and pupils of special classes in order to legitimate selection. With reference to the intelligence performance as well as to the academic achievement in language the dissemination of immigrant children in special classes almost exactly corresponds with the variance of performance in ordinary classes. The most successful pupils of special classes even score in the upper third of performances of ordinary classes. However this phenomenon is not typical for immigrant children, the situation of the Swiss children is quite comparable. These findings invalidate the hypothesis that most of the immigrant children are assigned to special classes due to unsuitable test instruments in German language. Although native children are not confronted with such injustice, the problem also exists with this group of pupils. It is quite understandable that in the field of social sciences errors in measurement or borderline cases may occur, but the legitimation for segregating classes can hardly be maintained if there is no difference between pupils of special classes and pupils of ordinary classes when it comes to essential characteristics for selection. Or – in other words – if the so called borderline cases constitute 80 percent of the population.

Non-standardised selection practices

Probably the mentioned above phenomenon is partially generated by distinct regional differences in selection practices. These differences indicate that the decision for the assignment to a special class is rather based on local characteristics of the school system than on characteristics of the pupils concerned. A comparison of the German Bundesländer as well as a comparison of the Swiss cantons reveal that in both countries the quota of assignments of

immigrant children to special classes is seven times as high as the quota of native children (Kronig 2003, 133-135). These differences do not depend on the percentage of immigrant children in ordinary classes. Moreover they can hardly be explained by the immigration of migrant families of different origins, because the same differences can be observed in the group of native children. This means that a pupil of an immigrant family showing a certain school performance will be assigned to a special class in one place of residence whereas in another place he or she can stay in the ordinary class. Therefore the risk to be schooled in a special class is highly dependent on the respective place of schooling and thus it is largely determined by an extra-individual factor.

Classroom composition and selection

Apart from the system characteristics another explanation for the serious diagnostic problems could be the unsuitable reference group orientation of the teachers. An extreme example extracted from the current National Fund study will illustrate the possible influence of the classroom composition on the teacher's diagnostic perception. This actual study is a continuation of the above mentioned research by Kronig, Haeberlin and Eckhart (2000) and it aims at clarifying the differences between school classes. For this purpose, part of the former random sample of second grade pupils is analysed again under a new perspective. By now the pupils are in sixth grade. Figure 1 shows the academic performances in a German language test of two classes of the new random sample. Class A consists of 20 pupils, five of whom are immigrant children, in class B there are 22 pupils, including four immigrant children. Both classes are located in a small Swiss town.

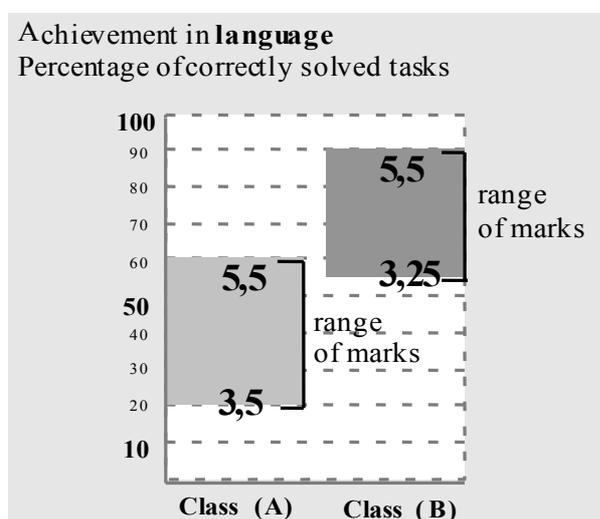


FIGURE 1. Example of different class composition and assessment of academic achievement
(1 = worst / 4 = sufficient / 6 = best)

The teacher of class B may have the impression that the pupil with the poorest performances is in urgent need of special support and guidance or that he should even be assigned to a special class. The mean of his marks lays at 3.25, which is insufficient compared to the performances of his class mates. If the same child were in class A, he would be one of the best pupils and he could count on a mark above 5. Both classes are at the critical stage of selection for continuation schools. The pupil in class B will be referred to a secondary school with basic requirements, whereas in class A he could join a secondary class with advanced requirements.

The problematic matter of reference group orientation, shown in this extreme example, has already been identified and criticised 25 years ago (e.g. Ingenkamp 1977), but the assessment procedures never have fundamentally changed. Only lately the problem of distorted assessments has become the focus of research again (e.g. McMillan, Myran & Wirkman 2002).

Figure 2 represents the significance of distorted assessment for our random sample. For reasons of presentation only whole and half marks between 4 and 6 are listed. The T-line of the box-plot indicates the upper respectively lower 25 percent of each category. In mathematics as well as in language there are overlaps between the highest and the lowest category. Pupils with a certain performance can obtain either a four or a six in their report.

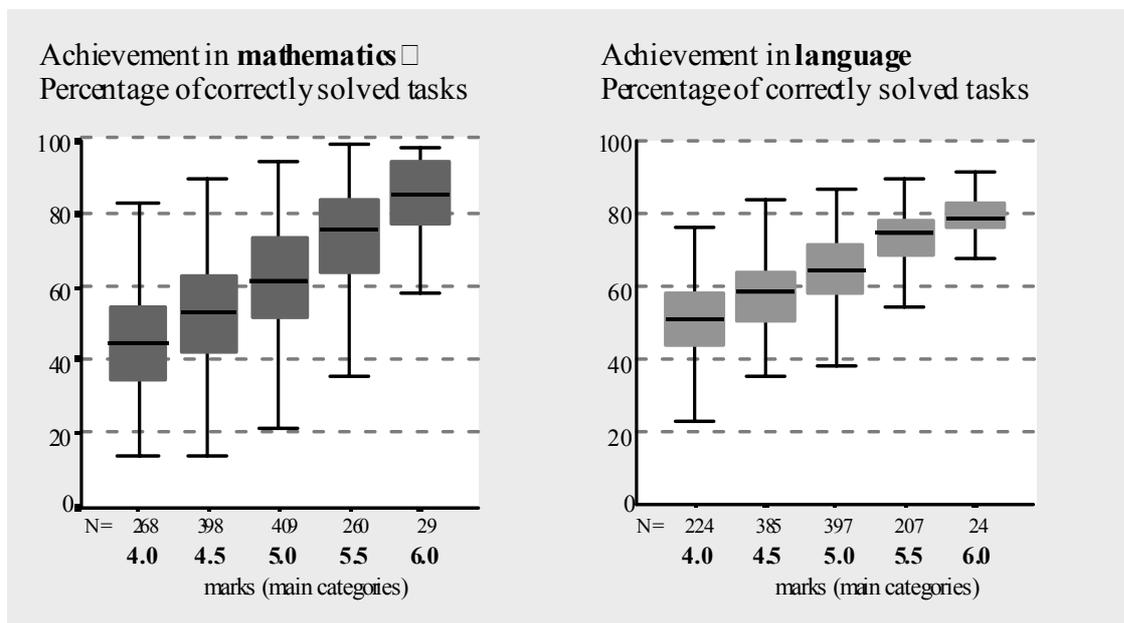


FIGURE 2: Box-Plots of Academic achievement and assigned marks (4 = sufficient / 6 = best)

Such bizarre faulty assessments can only occur by comparing one class with another. Assessments within the class may be realised with distinctly less failings. Thus the common reference group oriented assessment is only suitable for the comparison of performances within a given group of pupils. Therefore school marks might be completely inappropriate for selection decisions. In the further course of our research we try to clarify to what extent personal characteristics such as ethnic or social origin or gender may have a distorting influence on the marking of pupils. In addition we will study the long-term effects of the classroom composition (second to sixth grade). The publication of our final report can be expected in 2004.

Insufficient effectiveness of selection

So far we have been criticising the accuracy of the selection decisions. Another topic is the question concerning the effectiveness of selective measures. The longitudinal study

mentioned above deals with the effects of a change in selection structures. For this purpose the increases in the achievement in the language performance of immigrant children in ordinary classes, special classes for pupils with learning difficulties and special classes for pupils with a foreign mother tongue have been compared. From each form of schooling one pupil has been chosen, all three of them of the same gender and comparable in age, intelligence and the initial achievement in the language of instruction (Kronig, Haeberlin & Eckhart 2000, 116-132). The verification of the development in the learning process of the three groups by means of a multivariate analysis of variance with repeated measures shows a significant main interaction of $p = .006$ ($F = 5.77$; Effect size = 0.49). With regard to the mentioned criteria, the immigrant children in ordinary classes achieve the highest progress, followed by the children in classes for pupils with a foreign mother tongue and the children in special classes for pupils with learning difficulties. Most of the empirical studies could prove the positive effect of a stimulating learning environment on the academic achievements, irrespective of the methodical approach (e.g. research review in Schofield 1995). But how does the abrogation of the selection hurdle affect all the other pupils in a class? With a similar research procedure the often suspected unfavourable influence on the learning development of the class mates could not be proved. Pupils in classes including four to eight immigrant children with learning difficulties achieve the same learning progress as pupils in classes without immigrant children with learning problems (Kronig a.o 2000, 139-142). The mostly older empirical studies show comparable results (e.g. Patchen 1982, 2097-303, review in Schofield 1995, 603).

The central preconditions to justify selective measures are in the first place the reliable knowledge on which pupils shall be selected, and in the second place the proof of the effectiveness of selective measures. Based on today's data, both preconditions cannot be considered accomplished, no more than 30 years ago.

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