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Organizational discrimination. An empirical investigation in institutional settings and accounts of decision making at school – Summary of the research plan (SNF)

Longitudinal studies and current statistical data on schools prove that the ethnic and cultural origin of a student is still a key determinant of academic success in Switzerland. Several sociological studies have traced the problem of unequal educational opportunities back to an inherent bias in the school system. Against this background, this research project is interested in the basic mechanisms which produce these inequalities among students. Education research (1), organization research (2), and sociology of social problems (3) will be considered as relevant research fields.

This study focuses on decision processes which result in the frequent and disproportional placement of immigrant (non-Swiss) children into low level secondary schools. It aims to provide an organizational answer to the question, how are students in this highly consequential selection process construed as problematic cases? The research strategy is based on a detailed examination of selected schools and their decision making-processes. The analysis of surveys, documents and group interviews will be used to identify practices and routines in the evaluation of students. These practices and routines will also be related to the institutional parameters and organizational identities of schools.

The implementation of this research strategy will be as follows: After a secondary analysis of educational policy and relevant empirical data of the Swiss educational system, the main study will focus on four elementary schools in at least two Cantons. The first phase of this main study is based on an organizational analysis of school specific characteristics. The second phase relates to a decision analysis which emphasizes the warrants and accounts, which guide the selection of students. Methodologically, this research is based on the assumption that forms and mechanisms of institutional discrimination can be analyzed by reconstructing decisions and examining the involved processes of meaning attributions. The aim is to identify institutionally available knowledge which bias selection processes. On the basis of the results of single case studies, emphases can be put on a comparative evaluation which sheds light on similarities and differences.

This project fills in a research gap in educational research by exploring the discriminatory selection mechanisms in the allocation of students from elementary to secondary school. More generally, this study aims to better understand the contribution of school organizations in regard to the creation of unequal educational opportunities. The expected result is the generation of comparative knowledge about schools and Cantons, as well as the development of an international research perspective for further comparative research on the basis of international cooperation.