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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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The Challenge of Super Diversity for Education in Europe

Ingrid Gogolin*

Abstract
Children and youth at risk are a major challenge facing education systems in Europe. Some systems seem to be mastering this challenge better than others. Observations of the educational fate of immigrant minority children can shed light on the efficiency and performance of European education systems with respect to their ability to deal with children and youth at risk. None of today’s European education systems deliberately puts children and youth from immigrant families at a disadvantage. Nevertheless, the reality is they have unequal chances. Historical analysis and comparative studies can help uncover the root causes of this phenomenon. My contribution presents some thoughts on both of these approaches.

Keywords: immigrant children and youth, monolingual habitus, super diversity, international comparative research

How does and how should education in a social and democratic society react to societal change? In my reading, these questions form a golden thread through Lisbeth Lundahl’s research agenda and publications. Her research is embedded in the context of the Swedish social welfare state and the transitions towards a stronger market orientation. She strives to analyse the consequences of these developments not least for children and youth at risk – in Sweden as well as in the broader European context (Lundahl, 2002; Lundahl, 2007). Our research interests coincide at this point. My own work is concerned with the question: which features of education systems on one hand, and of a specific selection of pupils on the other, contribute to the effect of lasting inequality in many European education systems. The focus of my research is on children and youth from immigrant minorities. One guiding question of this work is: How does the conceptualisation of “normality” in a society and its schools contribute to the educational disadvantage of students, namely those from immigrant minorities – a group that is especially “at risk” in so many education systems?

In this contribution to the Festschrift, I will offer some thoughts on this question. The starting point of my considerations concerns the fact that the diversity of languages and cultural heritages in a society is still regarded in many countries as “exceptional”. Yet a brief inspection of demographic and social reality shows that (not only) due to migration, cultural and linguistic diversity is a general feature of...
societies in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Education systems, however, are still based on the assumption of homogeneity as normality in a (school) population. Thus, they make difference look like disadvantage or, in the worst case, they turn difference into disadvantage.

Here I focus my considerations on a description of observations concerning the German education system. A comparative analysis of these and the Swedish system could be worthwhile as for a long time the policies for migrants in education were much more welcoming and caring in the Swedish welfare state than they were in the German-speaking countries of Europe. Sweden officially promoted an extensive integration policy – including precautions fostering bilingualism and bilingual education. Does this also indicate a different view on diversity and especially a different concept of “the normal pupil” in a diverse society? I conclude my contribution by sketching a comparative research perspective that could help seek answers to this question. A respective project has been discussed, but not yet realised; it would be a great pleasure to take the initiative up again together with Lisbeth Lundahl – not least because of her excellent insights on the difference between the political rhetoric and the actual practice of education.

**Super diversity**

In my opinion, migration is one of the most challenging and provocative features of contemporary education systems. Yet there is a related problem: The conceptual tools which we are used to applying – in research as well as pedagogical practice and the political sphere – are deeply rooted in traditions of binary constructions of reality. These constructions lead to notions such as immigrant or non-immigrant, mono- or bilingual, integrated or disintegrated... and so on; constructions that easily transfer into guiding principles for governing schools and of political frameworks for such governance. In such binary frameworks, immigration is considered to be a context that leads to temporally specific features of students (or other members of society) and thus warrant specific measures that can be applied temporarily to the respective pupil. Once they have gone through these measures, a student would be transformed into “normal”; some people call this procedure “integration”.

Yet even a superficial observation of reality in European societies and schools reveals that such a binary construction is no less than insufficient; Bertolt Brecht’s “The Beggar’s Opera” offers a nice and perfectly applicable metaphor for assessing it: “Doch die Verhältnisse, die sind nicht so” (in other words: reality is different)(Brecht 1968).

A more suitable theoretical framework for describing and interpreting the many influences migration exerts on societies and individuals is delivered by the concept of “super diversity” that I took up for my own work. This concept was offered by Steven Vertovec, Director of the Max-Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen (Vertovec, 2007). It sheds light on the level and kind of
complexity of orientations, cultural and linguistic heritages which constitute reality in societies and, as a mirror of these, their schools.

The concept of super diversity was developed by observing the features of immigration in British society over the past roughly two decades – but the observations can easily be transferred to other contemporary societies (Vertovec, 2006; Römhild, Vertovec et al., 2009). In a nutshell, the results of these observations point to the fact that the nature of migration has changed dramatically since the 1990s. The more recent forms of migration have brought with them what Vertovec describes as a transformative “diversification of diversity”. This refers not only to the fact that recent migration is bringing more ethnicities and nationalities to the recipient countries. Moreover, the new features of migration also lead to a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live – or in schools where, how and with whom people teach and learn.

Examples of such additional variables include differential immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights (that can directly affect rights to education). They also include divergent labour market experiences. Moreover, they include discrete age profiles as well as patterns of spatial distribution and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. The interplay of these factors is what is meant by super diversity in Vertovec’s description of the concept. And every one of these factors is highly influential on education.

Thus, education systems and specifically schools can be considered micro-images of all these developments. Within school populations the described features as well as the societal effects of super diversity can be observed and they play a role in both learning and teaching. Within a conceptual framework of super diversity, binary constructions of reality can be replaced by constructions within which the multiplicity and interactivity of features of migration are taken into account.

Yet the emergent concept of super diversity as well as the phenomena it captures have only scarcely been taken up as a challenge for education research or development, let alone for political activity with respect to migration or integration; at least this holds true for immigration countries in Central Europe. As already indicated, past education activities in relation to migration considered the phenomena that are to be treated in and by schools as temporary and transient. Consequently, measures aiming to adjust schools to the diversity among their student population in these countries have not taken into account that super diversity might be (or I would indeed say is) a constant characteristic of contemporary schools and must be taken up with regard to structure as well as teaching practice.

**School failure – failure of the school**

The insufficient adaptation of certain school systems, e.g. the German one, to the features of super diversity are mirrored in studies on school achievement such as
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the PISA studies. PISA 2009 showed again that students from immigrant minorities considerably lag behind their non-migrant peers in reading skills as well as mathematics and science – with some exceptions in Asian states, Canada or Australia (OECD, 2010). According to (not only) my reading, one reason for these results is the deficit perspective on diversity, namely on linguistic diversity that is an underlying feature of education systems. This perspective leads to the construction of children and youth who operate in two or more languages as “at risk”, and their language abilities in other languages than the language of schooling (or the national or majority language) are widely neglected. This general underlying feature can be identified in many Central European nation-states. It is the result of what I have called a “monolingual habitus” – namely, the creation of a monolingual self-concept during the era of the foundation and establishment of the European concept of nation.

In this era, after the late 1700s a debate about the inseparability of a people’s language and the state erupted in Central Europe. According to this concept, the monolingualism of a whole country or territories in a country is one of the key characteristics of a well functioning and “sound” nation-state. Information about the language (or languages) a person operates in therefore signified not only a matter of language usage, but also the allegiance to one (their) country and state. The official language of the nation mutated to the “mother tongue” of its constituents. Since then, use of the “correct” language in the sense of the language of the nation – which was later on a standardised version of one selected vernacular – implied solidarity with the community of all those living in the respective state.

Important philosophers of the time (Fichte, 1896) introduced and legitimated the notion that the bonds between nation and language are inseparable by their very nature. According to historical analysis, this has been one of the reality-shaping myths of European nations since the close of the 18th century. In the course of the 19th century, these myths became common sense in conceptions about the best and appropriate functional systems for societal institutions, such as: education, public administration, the judiciary, and they were assimilated in the individual’s self-identity (Hobsbawm, 1990), and they have remained common sense since then. This common sense is what I have described as *monolingual habitus*. It appears in the structures of public institutions, most notably the education system, but also in regulations of everyday matters of social existence (Gogolin, 1994).

In retrospect, the “successful career” of monolingualism as common sense is justified by societal and technical development of the epoch. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution initiated the emergence of a civic public sphere. Access to a common language thus simultaneously meant inclusion and participation. The Industrial Revolution, namely the invention of printing, made it possible to standardise languages as well as circulate the standardised versions among a large number of people. Systems of general education were founded and allowed access to the common language in its standardised form. At the beginning, the creation of
a monolingual public sphere was one of the necessary prerequisites for the development of democracies in today’s sense.

The ambiguity of this development relates to the fact that the notion of nation was transferred to nationalistic concepts in the course of the 19th century. Participation in the civic public sphere was no longer considered a universal human right as it was initially conceptualised, but an exclusive right of the acknowledged member of a state, or the citizen. The focus on functional aspects of language as a tool for communication and participation became ever more accompanied, if not replaced, by the connotation of language use as an expression of solidarity and loyalty with “Emperor, People and Fatherland” – as it was expressed in late 19th century Germany. This development shows the interconnection between language and power. The creation of a “common language” inevitably meant the exclusion of other languages in a nation-state from the privilege of commonness – or the creation of language minorities.

All classical nation-states, at one point or other in their histories, experienced processes of the aggressive assimilation of linguistic minorities, be it in their own state territories or in the course of conquest. In contrast, more or less generous exceptions were made for certain languages which were provided with exclusive privileges – generally after more or less aggressive claims for linguistic minority rights on one hand, and ditto aggressive rejections by majorities on the other. These struggles for language rights are in essence elementary struggles for participation and inclusion, and access to power in a society (Bourdieu, 1991).

Until today, most European countries have not provided any such privileges to immigrant minority languages. These are the languages with the lowest esteem in most countries. Consequently, only very few speakers have access to education and literacy in these languages. In our research we assume that, put simply, this represents one of the main reasons for the lasting disadvantage of immigrant minority children in schools in Central European countries: The monolingual habitus works for the protection of linguistic hierarchies and for the wasting of language potential that accompanies the refusal to accept multilingualism as a general feature of a contemporary society. At the same time, it is to the detriment of immigrant minority students because it prevents them from revealing their full language potential (Cummins, 2000; Gogolin & Neumann, 2009).

**Sweden – Germany: the design of a comparative study**

The PISA studies revealed that in Sweden – like in Europe in general – immigrant minority students significantly lag behind their non-migrant peers. It nevertheless attracts attention that within three waves of PISA studies the differences in reading comprehension between first- and second-generation immigrants dropped considerably. In a re-analysis of the PISA 2006 data, it turned out that first-generation immigrants lagged 68 score points behind their non-migrant, Swedish class mates. In this respect, Sweden belonged to the majority of countries included in the study.
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where first-generation students scored more than 50 points less than non-immigrant students (Christensen and Segeritz 2008). Yet, with respect to the second generation, the analysis found that in Canada, Sweden and Switzerland second-generation immigrant students performed significantly better than those from the first generation. The performance gap was less than half the size as for the first-generation students. Contrary to this, in some other European countries, namely in Germany and Austria, the performance gap expanded with the second generation. This could be read as: the longer an immigrant student attends a school in Sweden, the greater his chances to catch up with his non-migrant peers. In Germany, it seems to be the other way round: the longer an immigrant student attends a German school, the worse ... at least for a significant share of the immigrant population.

Observations like this lead to initial considerations about a possible comparative research project that would seek to answer the following question: Which conditions and characteristics of national education systems and educational practices within this framework can explain – at least a relevant part of – the basic mechanisms that underlie the construction of ethnic inequalities and differences in performance (particularly in language skills) between students from different ethnic groups in the different countries? The study we had designed focused especially on the school success of second (and further) generations (as defined in the PISA studies) because their status can serve as an indicator of the social integration of migrants as one element of cohesion in super diverse societies (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

A comparison of Sweden and Germany can help ascertain systematic explanations of the disadvantage of immigrant minority students against the background of the different social welfare and integration regimes of the two countries (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Bade, 2003). A second dimension of analysis is concerned with the characteristics of education systems: their general political framework, especially with respect to reactions to migration to the respective country; and characteristic features of school organisation, governance and actual teaching practices.

Due to the different linguistic regimes in both countries, a comparison of Sweden and Germany is particularly tempting. Sweden is one of the very few European states that care for immigrant minority languages in school. Here, access to literacy in the family language of a migrant child was (and in certain circumstances still is) offered in the framework of the regular education system. The “German story” is different; in the following section I will examine it a little more deeply.

Migration has played an important role in Germany over time. Today, roughly 15 percent of the population carry non-German passports (for this and the following data, see: Statistisches Bundesamt, 2010). The share of immigrants in the sense that a person or at least one of their parents is born outside Germany is much higher. With respect to these criteria, about 22 percent of the German population are migrants. For the education system it is relevant to note that “migration is young”: the share of migrants is much higher in the younger population than in the older one. On average,
nearly 30 percent of the school population has a migrant background. As is the case everywhere in the world, cities attract more migration than rural areas. In some bigger cities – such as Hamburg – around 50% of the children between 0 and six years stem from a migrant family; roughly 45% of all children aged 6 to 18 have a first-, second- or third-generation migrant background.

Although this situation has developed over the last half century, the public self-conception was – and still is – that of a monolingual, mono-cultural country. Cultural and linguistic diversity was considered a threat and a danger to social coherence. “Germany is no immigration country” was the official political dictum up until 2007, when the very first “National Integration Plan” was developed by the government of the time (Bundesregierung, 2007). The public climate is relatively unfriendly; migrants are often confronted with negative attitudes and discrimination.

The actual diversity of the migrant population can hardly be estimated by statistical data. There is no census data on languages; all official information about migrant backgrounds is based on citizenship and birthplace. To date, the immigrant communities in Germany represent more than 200 nationalities and certainly even more languages as most states of the world have multilingual populations (Lewis, 2009). The largest language group – next to the German – is Turkish, followed by Russian, Polish and the languages of former Yugoslavia, some Asian and African languages; the rankings may change, as the originating countries of migrants also change, sometimes quite rapidly.

Quite in keeping with the monolingual, mono-cultural self-concept, Germany did not care for immigrant minority languages at schools. A small number of schools offer bilingual programmes in some minority languages, for example 29 schools in Berlin, 6 schools in Hamburg and individual schools in other big cities. With the exception of the federal state of Nordrhein-Westfalen, the family or community languages of migrants are only rarely taught in the German school system. Mostly this teaching only addresses migrant children who speak the respective language at home, but there are also some schools that open their courses to all children.

On a theoretical level, all German federal states have adopted a “multicultural ethos” since the 1980s for their school systems. In most curricula and education acts, statements of acknowledgement of linguistic and cultural diversity can be found, as well as the undertaking that no child be disadvantaged due to their linguistic or cultural background. In practice, this does not lead to respecting cultural diversity or multilingualism. On the contrary, a “German-only-policy” is widespread among schools and in the public sphere. One spectacular but by no means exceptional example is the case of the Herbert Hoover School in Berlin. This school prohibited the use of languages other than German on its premises – be it during lessons or in the school yard in leisure time. This decision was applauded by the German public, and the school was rewarded with a prize for being an “exceptionally good school” by the German Federal President in 2006.
The “National Integration Plan” I already referred to may mark a turning point in this situation. The plan takes all policy areas into account, as well as the economy, cultural and social institutions and individual members of civil society. It asks for their contributions to integration as a task for the whole society, not only – as was conceptualised before this – as a responsibility of migrants themselves. This plan recommends the acceptance of multilingualism. It declares German as the main language of communication in Germany, but does not stylise the immigrant languages as endangering linguistic coherence. With respect to education, the plan points out that of course children should have access to German, but the option additional maintenance of heritage languages is also mentioned.

Possible ways forward

All education researchers know that such recommendations are characteristic of committees that are enlightened, well informed and benevolent. But they may be working against the tide of public opinion, the opinion of the next government, or they may well function to camouflage effective inaction. Only future empirical research can show if the political declaration of intent that is incorporated in the “National Integration Plan” has any impact on the public sphere or the education system in Germany, let alone on the educational success of immigrant children and youth.

A research project comparing the Swedish and German ways of dealing with linguistic and cultural diversity could yield deeper insights into the structural reasons for the fact that students – especially second- or third-generation migrants – are obviously more successful in Swedish schools than they are in Germany. It is more than probable that some political rhetoric is similar in both states – at least with respect to rhetoric framing educational measures such as curricula, idealised goals, and visions. In any case, the explicit public and political climate seems to be different in both countries; in Sweden, there seems to be no public denial of being an immigration country. The treatment of immigrant minority languages could be emblematic for this difference and at the same time a major factor influencing the chances of educational success; a tendency towards a “multilingual habitus” may support students’ linguistic abilities as well as their motivation and self-concept.

The detection of similarities and differences between the two systems could help reveal relevant factors that positively or negatively influence the chances of educational success of immigrant minority children and youth. These students can serve as a metaphor for “students at risk” as their lives are often marked by an accumulation of conditions that predictably reduce prospects of success. The questions are: what is the room for manoeuvre for an education system in these circumstances, and how can this freedom to act be exploited extensively?

In my reading, the concept of super diversity is helpful for the development of a conceptual framework for research into these questions. It allows the multiplicity of factors which may (or, in the end, may not; this is open to empirical research) influ-
ence educational attainment and success to be taken into account. Application of the concept opens up the requirement of multilayer activities and multilevel methodologies for research aiming to provide answers to questions that are relevant to actual education practice. An international comparison involving interdisciplinary research teams may well be a silver bullet for the respective problems (Schiffauer et al., 2002).

Ingrid Gogolin is a Professor for International Comparative and Multicultural Education Research at the University of Hamburg. Her main research areas are the: international comparison of education systems; consequences of migration for education; multilingualism and linguistic diversity management; historical development of national education systems, their linguistic habitus; and the role and function of national languages for education.
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Endnotes

1 This was the guiding question of a proposal that we intended to launch in a European research programme; Lisbeth Lundahl was a member of the preparation group. Unfortunately, we were unable to finalise the proposal – but, as I noted already, it would be worthwhile taking the idea up again.

2 The German education system is decentralised. The central government hardly has any influence on general education; this lies within the sole responsibility of the 16 German federal states.
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