

Lerning from the Neighbors International Comparisons Dispel False Myths About Education in Germany

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Education is becoming more and more important. There is broad consensus in Germany about that fact. The proportion of university-educated adults is growing, and the proportion of people earning the credentials for entering higher education has reached an all-time high. There is a growing number of all-day schools, and day care services are finally available for our youngest ones as well. Can we be content, then? Many people think so. To defend the status quo, they draw on a variety of myths. The power of these myths is a challenge for education researchers. Examining some of these myths by means of international comparisons shows that a lot remains to be done in Germany as well.

Myth: There will always be people with little education

In Germany, 13 percent of the population aged 25 to 34 do not have a secondary school degree. 15 percent of all 15-year-olds were found to have insufficient cognitive skills. Although these students do have some elementary skills, they are unable to apply those skills in real-world contexts, the PISA consortium finds. Young people without a school leaving certificate and with low-level cognitive skills can be called “educationally deprived.” It is often said that society needs this ten percent proportion of educationally deprived individuals. A certain percentage of the population, the argument goes, simply cannot be educated and trained.

If we look at other European countries, however, we find evidence that educational deprivation is not inevitable. In 15 of 28 EU countries, the proportion of young people without a school leaving certificate is lower than it is in Germany. In the Netherlands, Finland, Poland, Ireland and Estonia, there are fewer young people with low-level skills than there are in Germany. What is more, these countries are successful in achieving a good average level of educational attainment. This means that it is indeed possible for countries to avoid educational deprivation without cutting back on the quality of education.

Myth: Social selectivity in outcomes is inevitable

In Germany, the educational opportunities and educational outcomes of children heavily depend on the social and educational status of their parents. Children from educationally disadvantaged social groups and from immigrant families face inferior opportunities in terms of education and vocational training than children from middle and upper class backgrounds, even if their cognitive performance is the same. Striking differences in skills acquisition between children with university-educated parents and children from families with no such qualifications emerge as early as elementary school. Similar results are found for children with and without a migration background. These educational inequalities are perpetuated at the secondary level. The children of university-educated parents are four times as likely to attend university-preparatory high schools (*Gymnasium*) as the children of skilled workers, and six times as likely as the children of unskilled and low-skilled workers. Of all 15-year-olds with a migration background, only 29 percent attend a *Gymnasium* school, compared to 40 percent of their peers without a migration background.

Summary: Debates on education are highly polarized in Germany. While in some ways the system is successful, the image often painted is too rosy. The self-image of being a front-runner in the field of educational and training is being upheld by a number of myths. Internationally comparative tests enable us to draw comparisons and debunk myths: myths on social stratification in education, on government spending, on the level of inclusion, and on youth unemployment.

These close links between social background and educational outcomes are far from inevitable. In Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Luxemburg and Sweden, the effect of social background on educational success is not as strong as in Germany. In most countries, the differences in secondary level II attainment between students whose parents have a tertiary degree and students whose parents have a degree below secondary level II are much less pronounced than in Germany. In Finland, for example, the difference is only 2 percentage points. Similar findings emerge with regard to cognitive skills.

Countries in which educational outcomes are less predetermined by parental background tend to invest primarily in early childhood education and let children of various abilities share the same classroom for a longer period of time. Furthermore, teacher training in these countries was improved by introducing incentive systems such as offering professional development opportunities, giving teachers free time to spend with students, and providing support from trained social pedagogues. Special programs were introduced to support weaker students, and schools were given more operative autonomy.

Myth: Segregated school systems improve performance

In Germany, education at secondary level I is divided into different school types that permanently segregate cohorts when students are between 9 and 12 years old. The idea behind forming such competence clusters and homogenous ability groups is to have the brightest students learn with and from their brightest peers.

If it were true that homogenous ability groups enable higher academic achievement, then countries with segregated school systems should also be seeing more students scoring at the top levels than countries that do not segregate students that early and choose not to put them in homogeneous ability groups. The opposite is the case: In reading literacy (PISA), 9 percent of students in Germany score at very high proficiency levels (levels 5 and 6). In Finland, that figure is 14 percent, in France 13 percent, in Belgium 12 percent, in Ireland 11 percent and in the Netherlands and Poland 10 percent. Likewise, with regard to mathematical literacy, a particularly high proportion of highly proficient students is found in Belgium and the Netherlands, with nearly 20 percent scoring at levels 5 or 6. These are countries that do not segregate or track students until they are 15, 16 or 17 years old. Although these figures do not imply a causal link between mixed-ability groups and a high percentage of top performers, sharing the same classroom for a longer period of time certainly doesn't hurt students either.

Myth: Inclusive schooling is impossible

In the 2012–13 school year, the share of students with special educational needs in Germany was more than 7 percent. Most of them attended one of various special needs schools, which enroll children and young people with learning disabilities, mental or physical disabilities, or sensory disabilities (i.e., hearing, vision and speech limitations). 28 percent of special needs students attended mainstream schools with inclusive policies. That national average isn't very informative, however, because of the strong differences between individual German states. In Bremen, for example, 63 percent of special needs students are taught in an inclusive setting, compared to only 20 percent in Hessen.

Comparative research on inclusive education has identified three systems: the dual system, the combination system and the uniform system. Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland are classified as dual systems, because large numbers of special needs students are enrolled not only at mainstream schools but also at special education schools. A different situation is found in Finland, Great Britain and Austria, where a combination system is in place, featuring institutionalized pathways between mainstream schools and special education schools. Here, the proportion of special needs students excluded from mainstream schooling is around 1.2 percent. Italy, Norway and Sweden are among the countries classified as having a uniformly inclusive system, boasting a share of ex-



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cluded students that borders on 0 percent. Germany made a legal commitment when it ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. Most German states, however, have been very slow in implementing the convention's provisions.

At the same time, German society is seeing a fierce debate over inclusive education. That's because the special education system is firmly entrenched here. The belief that children with special educational needs require a protective space to be able to thrive is widespread and deeply rooted in German society. What is needed more than elsewhere, therefore, is a level-headed and determined approach, accompanied by a necessary boost to state education budgets and reforms in teacher training curricula to prepare teachers for the inclusive classroom.

Myth: Germany's youth unemployment rate is low

Youth unemployment in Germany is currently 3.5 percent (2014). Compared to other European countries, that is a very low rate, with only Denmark and the Netherlands doing better (3 percent). All other countries, especially Spain and Greece, have much higher levels of youth unemployment. A similar picture emerges if we look not at unemployment but at NEETs, which have become a popular indicator in international comparisons. NEETs are people not in employment, education or training. That group includes not only the unemployed but also the economically inactive, that is, those who do not even make an effort to find employment, either because of cultural norms or because of poor labor market prospects. In Germany, the proportion of NEETs is 5 percent, compared to 11 percent in Hungary, 13 percent in Romania, 15 percent in Italy and 17 percent in Bulgaria.

Although youth unemployment and labor market inactivity rates are low in Germany, the problem of the so-called "transition system"—a diverse array of pre-vocational programs—has yet to be solved. In 2013, more than 250,000 youth interested in vocational training wound up in that system—that's about 3 percent of all 15- to 24-year-olds. The majority of them are young people without a lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*) leaving certificate (three-fourths of all youth without a leaving certificate), with a *Hauptschule* leaving certificate (two-fifths of all *Hauptschule* graduates) but also, albeit to a much smaller extent, graduates with a middle school leaving certificate (one-sixth of all middle school graduates). Graduates with a university entrance certificate are not represented in the transition system. Across all categories of educational attainment, the transition situation is much more unfavorable for immigrant youth than it is for their German counterparts.

Immigrant youth account for almost 85 percent of all new entrants to the transition system without a *Hauptschule* certificate, and for almost 60 percent of those with a *Hauptschule* certificate. Even among those with a middle school leaving certificate, immigrant youth are twice as likely to wind up in the transition system as their German peers. Men are much more likely to encounter transition problems than women: three in five youth who end up in the transition system are male.

In order not to lose those 250,000 young men and women early on in their biographies, we need, first and foremost, binding and cross-institutional strategies. Different educational institutions, such as general and vocational schools, have to cooperate with institutions of the social welfare system, such as the youth welfare service, and the labor market, that is, employers and the labor administration. Moreover, preventive measures have to be installed early on in students' biographies to start reducing the number of people without a school leaving certificate at the very beginning of their education.

Myth: Germany spends a lot of money on education

Almost 250 billion euros—that's what Germany spent on education, science and research in 2012. That's 9.3 percent of the gross national product (GNP). Howev-

er, if we only consider the budget for public and private educational institutions, that figure is down to 5.1 percent of the GNP.

For more than ten years now, public spending on education in Germany has been somewhere around those 5 percent of the GNP. Over the same period, spending has also been below the European average (2011: 5.25 percent). Compared to its European neighbors, Germany ranks in the bottom half, along with Lithuania and Bulgaria, which invest 5.17 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively, in education. Education spending is highest in the Scandinavian countries, with education budgets of almost 9 percent of the GNP.

Aside from the low overall level of education spending, it is also striking to see the uneven distribution of that money across the various education levels. The 28 EU member states spend an average of 1.19 percent and 1.27 percent of the GNP on primary and tertiary education, respectively. That's a ratio of 48 percent to 52 percent. The figures for France are in line with that average. Great Britain spends more public money on primary education than it does on tertiary education (58 to 42 percent). In Germany, most public spending goes to the tertiary sector. The ratio here is 32 to 68 percent. Now one might argue that this isn't all that different from Finland (38 to 62 percent), the European poster child when it comes to education. It is important to note, however, that Finland spends 1.35 percent of the GNP on primary education, more than twice as much as Germany (0.66 percent). By contrast, the difference in spending on tertiary education, while also considerable, is not quite as dramatic (Germany: 1.40 percent of the GNP, Finland: 2.17 percent of the GNP).

Education as preventive labor market policy

A good education is something that matters on a daily basis. Well-educated people live longer and lead healthier lives; they are more involved socially and politically. A better education leads to more participation, in the labor market and beyond. More than ever, education is also essential to maintaining a good position in the labor market. In the foreseeable future, there will not be a shortage of work but a shortage of workers. The percentage of seniors is rising rapidly in German society, increasingly exceeding the OECD average. In 1960, 17 out of 100 people were 64 and older; fifty years later, it is as many as 32 people. This trend is accompanied by a rapid increase in welfare state spending on pensions and health care. This growth in spending is a threat to fiscal democracy, as the money available for discretionary spending has declined further and further—from 62 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2009. To preserve the opportunities for youth, the education budget should be increased as long as this is still possible. Even if our aim is merely to keep the absolute number of well-educated persons at the present level, their proportion in the population has to grow accordingly. Germany still has plenty of resources: just think of the 250,000 young men and women that get lost in the transition system every year. Fears of a decline in educational quality are unwarranted. Our neighbors have shown how to provide many people with a quality education.

References

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