

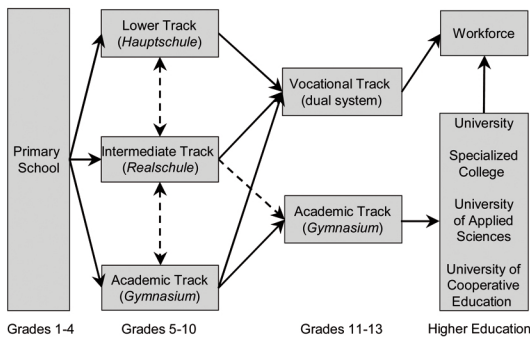


# Transitions in the German Educational System: Effects of Social Background on Educational Decisions

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## Theoretical and Institutional Background

Students in Germany must navigate a number of transitions during their educational careers. Each requires a complex decision-making process that is not independent of societal and institutional conditions and that has far-reaching implications for educational and occupational biographies (Maaz et al., in press).

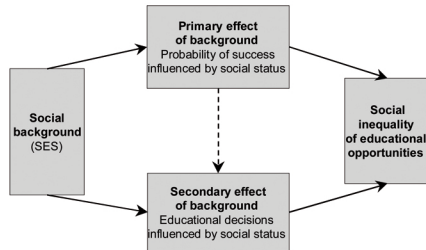


The figure presents a simplified version of the rather complex German educational system. Arrows symbolize the main educational pathways. For reasons of clarity, comprehensive and multitrack schools are not included.

Although the link between educational success and social background has been weakened somewhat in recent years, the German educational system is still marked by social inequality.

### Distinguishing the primary and secondary effects of social background:

- **Primary effects** are differences in the knowledge and skills acquired by students of different social backgrounds.
- **Secondary effects** are differences in the educational decisions made by students of different social backgrounds given the same levels of knowledge and skills.



## Research Questions

- What are the effects of social background at points of transition in the German educational system?
- What are the mechanisms behind socially selective educational decisions?
- What are the long-term implications of socially selective educational decisions?
- What influence do the institutional structures of the educational system have on educational decisions at points of transition?

## Results

### Transition to Lower Secondary Level (Results from PISA)

- The PISA studies have found evidence for both primary and secondary effects of social background leading to severe social inequalities in Germany.
- In particular, social status impacts students' chances of attending the academic-track *Gymnasium*.
- Adolescents from higher social status families are approximately three times more likely to attend a *Gymnasium* relative to a *Realschule* than their peers from working-class families – even if they have the same levels of ability and achievement.

SES	School track (ref.: intermediate track)			
	Lower track		Academic track	
	I	II	I	II
Higher-grade professionals (I)	.49	.71	4.28	2.96
Lower-grade professionals (II)	.46	.62	3.34	2.38
Routine non-manual employees (III)	ns	ns	1.80	1.79
Small proprietors, farmers, and smallholders (IV)	ns	ns	1.87	1.61
Skilled workers (V, VI)	1	1	1	1
Semi- and unskilled manual workers (VII)	1.50	ns	ns	ns

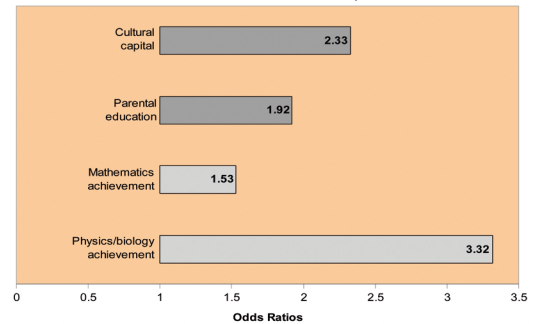
I: Without controlling for covariates.  
II: Controlling for basic cognitive abilities and reading literacy.  
Source: Baumert & Schümer (2001, p. 357).

### Transition to Upper Secondary Level (Results from TIMSS)

At the end of lower secondary education, students must decide whether to enter vocational education or to transfer to upper secondary level.

Given the same levels of academic performance,

- cultural capital and
  - parental education
- prove to have considerable effects on this decision (Schnabel et al., 2002).

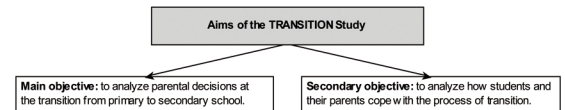


### Transition to Higher Education (Results from TOSCA)

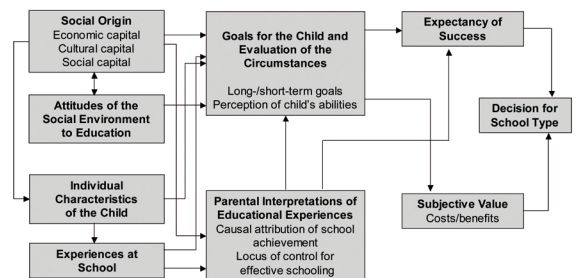
Predictors	r	Model 1	Model 2
School performance ( <i>Abitur</i> grade)	.32	.31	.20
Socioeconomic status (ISEI)	.13	.07	n.s.
Expected benefit	.20	.17	
Value of status decline	.14	.11	
Expected status decline	.21	.15	
Probability of success	.29	.11	
Costs	-.14	-.05	

Secondary effects of social background are found at the transition to higher education. These disparities can be explained by social differences in the subjective costs and benefits of attending a particular school type (Maaz, 2006).

## Outlook: Transition From Primary to Secondary Education

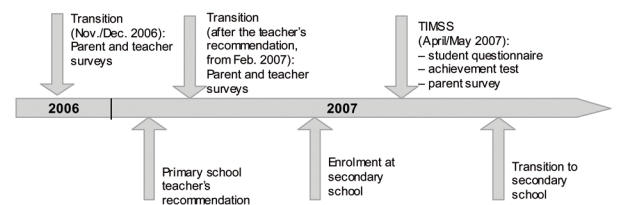


The theoretical framework for the study is provided by an extended expectancy-value approach that specifies the mechanisms operating between background variables and the expectancy and value of success at different school types (Maaz et al., 2006).



### Study Design

Fourth-grade students from 253 classes throughout Germany, their parents and form tutors were assessed on several occasions over the school year.



## Key References

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