



## Socio-economic Background and Reading

Reading attitudes, fluency and literary education in the  
German *Hauptschule*

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## Abstract

Germany exhibits a much stronger connection between success in education and social origin than that in other comparable societies. The article starts by outlining the three types of secondary schools in Germany that follow fourth grade at elementary school, the virtual absence of standardized methods to measure educational performance, the long-term neglect of measures for migrants to support their linguistic development, and the most important results of current studies of achievement in literacy in relation to the poorest 25 % of readers at “Hauptschulen”. This is followed by an organic and systematic explanation of the connection between unfavorable conditions for learning outside of school, the lack of a specific reading curriculum at German secondary schools, the social stigmatization in the school system and the poor reading abilities found in “Hauptschulen”. The article proposes some suitable approaches for promoting literacy and ends with a summary in the form of a set of theses.

## 1. Context: the school system in the Federal Republic of Germany

Providing equal educational opportunities for young people from all backgrounds is one of the major tasks for the educational systems of democratic states. However, in practice this objective is accompanied by considerable difficulties: schools in areas with social problems frequently do not fulfil their aspiration to provide their pupils with basic qualifications for leading an independent life in society. As a rule families from low socio-economic backgrounds do not provide the necessary context that so often forms the implicit basis for formal education. But wherever the school cannot compensate for family deficits, it fails to offer its pupils equal educational opportunities, and thus runs the risk of contributing to the perpetuation of social inequalities.

In Germany, since the first PISA study, discussion about educational policy has been increasingly directed towards the lower educational segment in particular. There is an unusually large risk group that at age 15 does not have the minimum level of literacy that is required for an independent existence in a modern industrial society. In total almost one quarter of the pupils tested do not reach a satisfactory level. Most of these children are attending a *Hauptschule* (providing basic secondary education up to grade 9) or in the corresponding departments of the *Gesamtschulen* (comprehensive schools providing all types of secondary education) - that is, at schools that strive to provide children with a general education and that should enable them to make the transition to vocational training.

In Germany's federal political system, the individual federal states are responsible for organizing the educational system. However there is agreement in major areas: the German school system comprises the primary/elementary school (grades 1 to 4, age 6-10), followed by secondary level I (grades 5 to 9 or 10) and secondary level II (grades 11 to 12 or 13). Children at elementary schools are all taught together, i.e. there is no differentiation/streaming, but at secondary level there are three different types of schools. A distinction is made between *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*. *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* (secondary level I) aim at providing a general education, including a foreign language (English); in a *Realschule* French may also be taken as an optional subject. Pupils with a school-leaving certificate from a *Realschule* who have done well enough can then go on to secondary level II and earn the general school certificate qualifying the holder for entry to higher education (*Abitur*). To some extent this is also possible for pupils who have attended a *Hauptschule*. The *Gymnasium*, which includes secondary levels I and II, aims to provide a more thorough general education with two compulsory foreign languages and one optional one, and finishes with the general certificate for entry into higher education. An alternative form is found in the *Gesamtschulen*, which usually include both the secondary levels I and II and offer a chance to gain any of the various school-leaving certificates. However here, too, there is a tendency for the pupils to be streamed by ability and to attend separate classes.

## 2. Institutional literary education

In relation to actual teaching, the staff have guidelines to follow that set out the topics and the content to be covered in each grade, but no standardized methods are used to record successful learning. For this reason the forms that classes take vary greatly depending on the individual teacher. Yet most recently more prescriptive educational standards have been added to the rather general and descriptive curricula and are going to replace them in due course. These standards define the competencies that

school pupils are to develop. Focus on output has generated a lot of controversial discussion, but is now enshrined in law.

Until now the prevailing view was that children learnt to read at primary level and thereafter there was no longer any need to teach text comprehension systematically at secondary level. Here language teaching traditionally continues to play a role in the areas of spelling and grammar. However teachers of German, especially at *Gymnasien*, believe that teaching literature is at the heart of their subject: as the children become older, German literature becomes more dominant in German lessons and pupils are introduced to the interpretation of literary texts. German lessons are very much seen in the context of education in the arts - an image that is probably widespread in all types of schools. Where the teaching of literature is in fact accorded less importance, German lessons are sometimes thought to have shortcomings. Even at the early stages in teacher training, particular emphases can be seen. German as a subject is traditionally studied at universities and teacher training colleges as part of philology (German language and literature). Learning to read and write is principally a topic that only occurs in courses for primary school teachers. Emergent literacy and procedures for systematically building up reading literacy is not an established part of the course for all students in teacher training.

German as an academic subject is still ultimately always regarded in terms of teaching the mother tongue. However, there is a growing awareness that in many places bilingual schoolchildren are the rule rather than the exception. Now new concepts are being tried out which take into account the fact that children experience learning German as second language acquisition, especially in towns with a high proportion of migrants. Just what form any successful concepts in this area should take has not yet become apparent, however, and there is still a lot of research to be done. German as a second language is only offered sporadically in regular schools and only in special courses to support weak students. Furthermore, the manner in which it is taught in regular schools is not particularly professional.

In Germany there is not yet much of a tradition of considering international comparative studies and this only started for German as a school subject after the first PISA study was published in 2001. Since that time there have been calls for the development of a reading curriculum, in particular for secondary level I.

Until now it has not been possible to match the increasing awareness of the problem with necessary measures in schools. One major factor is that little is known about the course of these children's education that goes any further than general assumptions. While over the last 15 years there has been extensive research in Germany into reading socialization, concentrating on reading behavior and its genesis in young middle-class adults, little attention was paid to the settings where people do not habitually read. Accordingly, there is a lack of insights into how children use media (including print media) and how this is rooted in their biographies. It is almost impossible to provide answers - based on sound data - to questions about what useful and promising concepts for promoting reading might be like.

The goal of enabling the children to move on to higher education is being pursued more and more in the courses offered at the *Hauptschulen* and *Realschulen*. The transition to secondary level II can take various forms and/or certain degree courses can be taken. This goal lies within the overall context of the education-policy aim of enabling more school-leavers to enter university. However, the actual uptake of these opportunities is only small. The majority of pupils are moved to a less academic type of school or have to repeat years of schooling, with the result that as a rule the upper

years in *Hauptschulen* comprise more classes than when these pupils started at secondary school.

However, the reality at *Hauptschulen* in large cities in particular appears to be different for pupils from backgrounds where the parents did not receive much formal education and which are strongly characterized by migration: often the primary goal of enabling pupils to move on to vocational training after obtaining the leaving certificate from the *Hauptschule* is not achieved.

The teaching climate at *Hauptschulen* also suffers due to the relatively poor occupational prospects of the pupils: roughly 9% of all pupils (around 85,000 per year) finish their schooling without having at least the *Hauptschule* school-leaving certificate. And even with it, the chances of obtaining a place on a vocational training course – and thus of earning a training certificate (which is extremely important in Germany) – are slim for the 25% least qualified children in a year. Currently, only about 40% of those leaving *Hauptschulen* find a place on a training course. Because of the lack of alternatives, more than half of these young people (about 500,000) complete what is called a basic vocational education year or a vocational preparatory year (depending on the individual German state). These courses are organized by the states with the aim of providing teenagers who have low levels of school education with extra qualifications, or of parking them in a course for a year. But in reality these additional school years do not raise the chances of getting onto vocational training. From around the age of twenty, these young adults are regarded as too old for an initial vocational training course.

The paucity of opportunities on the vocational training market has even more severe effects on the children of non-German parents. Almost one quarter of young men aged between 20 and 25 from Turkish families in Germany are out of work. This is because unskilled workers in Germany have hardly any prospects of finding a job (according to the expert group Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, 2006).

### 3. The connection between social origin, type of school and reading competence in Germany

In general the different types of schools in Germany reflect very strongly the social background the pupils come from (Rekus et al., 1998). The PISA study shows that the connection between social origin and acquired literacy competence is stronger in Germany than in any of the other comparable industrial nations investigated (Baumert et al., 2001).

There is a disproportionately high number of young people from lower social backgrounds and/or from migrant families in German *Hauptschulen*. In the research the decisive hurdle in making the transition to the higher-level classes after the fourth grade is thought to be the lack of sufficient linguistic and literacy competence (Bos et al., 2004). Linguistic deficits have cumulative effects in secondary schools when the pupils attend classes in other subjects, so pupils whose reading comprehension is insufficient are at a disadvantage when it comes to learning about any particular subject.

In the year 2000, 19.36% of fifteen-year-olds attended a *Hauptschule* and 18.2% attended a (combined or integrated) *Gesamtschule* (Baumert et al., 2001). So one can assume that around one quarter of children in a school year complete the shortest of the three types of secondary schooling. Hardly any of them have had uninterrupted schooling from elementary school through to the *Hauptschule*; the educational biographies of most of them are strongly characterized by failures, relegation to other



schools and repeating school years, which has a negative reinforcing effect on their self-image in relation to reading (Möller & Schiefele, 2004, Pieper et al., 2004).

The proportion of pupils at *Hauptschulen* both of whose parents were born in Germany is around 60% on average. According to the statistics, 63% of children at *Hauptschulen* come from manual workers' families, while only 13% have at least one parent with a school certificate qualifying them for higher education. About 15% of all *Hauptschulen* can be viewed as a cluster in which the average proportion of young people from immigrant families is over 70%, and half of these belong to families that do not speak German at home (Baumert et al., 2001, 463 f.). This type of *Hauptschule* is most commonly found in large conurbations. On average more than one half of the pupils at German *Hauptschulen* are poor readers, although in relation to literacy the *Hauptschulen* exhibit great differences between rural districts and the conurbations.

#### 4. Prototypical course of acquiring competence in literacy in Germany

The amount and intensity of the (para-)literary communication with children of pre-school age are highly dependent on the communicative climate in the family. Oral communication with small children using texts such as songs, picture books and rhymes, occurs long before the children start school, to a much greater degree and in a manner appropriate to the age of the children, in families of a higher social background than in families of a lower social background, which means that these children start school with better linguistic skills (vocabulary, syntax) and more differentiated literary competence (knowledge of genres, narrative skills). In addition, in particular the motivation to enter into fictional stories to discover themselves and find answers to their questions, and to perceive the stories as patterns of imagination that go beyond reality and as a stimulation for personality development, is given a basis within the family by the parental role-model and through the participation of the adults in the literary experiences of their children (Hurrelmann, 2004). Later on, the stability of the gradually maturing intrinsic motivation to read arising from these situations is the decisive factor for the continuation of reading socialization. While children are learning to read in their first year of elementary school, the differences linked with social background tend to be slight (Groeben & Schroeder, 2004, pp. 323 f.).

By contrast, as far as reading socialization is concerned, the phase from late childhood to puberty is characterized in children from the middle classes by a high standing accorded to the reading of books in leisure time. Empirical studies reveal that more than half the children in this age group like reading, and read frequently; the problem group, which hardly has any contact with books, makes up 13% of this age group and is smaller than in all subsequent age groups (Hurrelmann, 1993; Harmgarth, 1997). This is the age at which reading fluency and the independent use of printed media are acquired, and stabilized through leisure-time reading.

As a rule this bookworm phase is followed by a severe motivational crisis in what is termed 'literary puberty', which has been found in all the studies. From around the age of eleven onwards children's willingness to read falls steadily, along with their enjoyment of reading and actual reading practice. At about the age of 14, from seventh grade onwards, there is another marked decline in the statistics, which continues to around tenth grade. The extent of this decline during secondary school can be differentiated by social group and gender, but it is still clear in all groups. Roughly two thirds of youngsters have virtually stopped reading in their free time altogether when this development reaches its lowest point in the eighth or ninth grade. Only a minority of them return to reading during adolescence (Rosebrock, 2003). Most children / teenagers from families of a lower social background where the parents did not receive

much formal education and little reading and writing takes place, hardly read anything at all in their free time during and directly after puberty. The *Hauptschulen* provide fewer contexts encouraging children to read than other types of schools.

The link between unfavourable conditions for learning outside of school and below-standard reading ability is exacerbated by the lack of a specific reading curriculum at German schools and especially in the secondary levels I and II. Following the learning of decoding in the first year at school, in Germany the continuation of the process of learning to read is less directed by specific instructions and exercises. Fluent reading is intended to be acquired mainly through undirected learning arrangements in the various school subjects and/or leisure time reading. This is of less benefit to the weaker students because they do not have the level of constructive initiative or self-motivation and regulation demanded by such a learning environment.

The prevailing ideas about trained reading ability upon entry into secondary school and the fiction of a homogeneous standard of learning attained by the pupils at different secondary schools is only slowly giving way to a more realistic evaluation of the true state of affairs, in the wake of the large-scale studies of pupils' achievements that have been conducted in recent years. These fictions may have given rise to the proven lack of knowledge on the part of the teachers concerning the level at which text comprehension challenges the reading abilities of their pupils (e.g. vocabulary, structure, assumed knowledge) and their problems in identifying weak readers (Baumert et al., 2001).

#### 5. Reading behaviour, reading ability and reading interest in the mother tongue of *Hauptschule* pupils at the end of compulsory schooling

The general reading ability of adolescents in their mother tongue is documented in surveys from the 1990s (incl. investigation of the reading abilities of *Hauptschule* pupils by Lehmann et al. in 1995 and reading of young people in general by Bonfadelli & Fritz in 1993). The results of these surveys were confirmed and differentiated by the first PISA study focusing on reading literacy published at the turn of the millennium (Baumert et al., 2001).

The reading ability of 15-year-old *Hauptschule* pupils is generally poor. Furthermore, pupils at these schools in large conurbations do not reach the average reading ability for all *Hauptschulen*. In the first PISA study the average value for these urban schools came to 389 points, compared to 397 points for *Hauptschulen* overall (average value of the total sample: 484 points).

The average *Hauptschule* pupil achieves the lowest competence level I. Almost 43% of *Hauptschule* students reach at least competence level II, which is defined as the minimum standard, while 25% of them remain at or below competence level I (Baumert et al., 2001, 127). Specifically this means that they are not able to extract clearly marked information from texts, to identify a main thought marked as such in a text about familiar topics, or to create a simple link between information in a text and common general knowledge.

The risk group identified by the authors of the PISA study that does not reach competence level I totals nearly 10% of an annual cohort. This group is not literate enough to be able to take part in working life. Half of them attend a *Hauptschule* (34% attend a special school, 7% attend an integrated *Gesamtschule*, 5% a vocational school, and 4% a *Realschule*; Baumert et al., 2001, 116-117). The largest proportion of students in the risk group is of German origin, although there is also a

disproportionately large number of young people from migrant families in this group (ibid., 118).

The reading ability of youngsters from migrant families shows no significant difference if at least one of their parents was born in Germany. If they come from a home where both parents are immigrants, the proportion of extremely weak readers rises to 20 per cent. Almost 50 per cent of youngsters from immigrant families do not get above the elementary competence level I in reading (level II is regarded as the minimum standard), although over 70 per cent of them have gone all the way through the German school system (Baumert et al., 2001).

Regarding the gender-specific differences in reading ability, there are nearly twice as many boys as girls in this risk group (6.8% of girls as compared to 12.6% of boys), with somewhat weaker gender-specific differences also visible at the other competence levels. While the abilities of girls and boys in tackling tasks based on non-continuous texts (principally logical images such as graphs, diagrams, etc.) do not show any significant differences in any type of school, when pupils are given tasks based on continuous texts in a *Hauptschule* (or in a *Gymnasium* or a *Realschule*) the girls clearly perform better.

The *Hauptschule* pupils know less about learning strategies in particular than pupils at other types of school (Baumert et al., 2001, 291). They are also less motivated to read than pupils at *Gesamtschulen* and *Gymnasien* (ibid., fig. 292; see also 113).

## 6. Measures for improving reading ability

In Germany there is a fundamental lack of a systematic reading curriculum to follow on from the early stage of learning to write through to the end of compulsory schooling. Only recently have efforts been made to introduce such a reading curriculum. The academic concepts currently being put forward to promote reading in school in the German-speaking region (see Artelt et al., 2001; Beisbart, 2003; Buhrfeind et al., 1999; Franz, 2002; Kämper-van den Boogard, 2004; Schiefele et al., 2004) reveal a high level of awareness of the problem. Two major focuses can be identified in relation to the pedagogic modelling of the term 'reading competence': the planning of promotional programmes, and their programmatic implementation in specific teaching settings. On the one hand, one aim is to improve reading by imparting and supporting *reading strategies* (see Demmrich & Brunstein, 2004; Gold et al., 2004; Willenberg, 2004). On the other, the intention is to promote reading by realizing a more holistic concept of a *reading culture*, based on a comprehensive reading competence model (Groebe & Hurrelmann, 2002; 2004).

Both these approaches to promoting reading have in common a focus on macro-structural reading processes. However for weak readers, including those in secondary school, it would appear necessary and useful to have additional approaches in the micro-structural processes in reading ability. Regarding the factors closely related to the reading process there is reason to suppose that the majority of weak readers at secondary schools have problems related to the speed of word recognition and reading fluency, a comparatively small working memory and a deficit in specific subject knowledge. It is assumed that there are difficulties on the level of syntax/morphology that compound problems in reading comprehension. This appears to be especially true of students from a migrant background. The dominant reading problem for this group seems to be the lack of familiarity with the linguistic structures of written German, so that the simultaneous processing of larger units during reading and the formation of propositions either do not occur at all or not sufficiently rapidly (see also Baumert et al., 2001, 117 ff.; Ehlers, 2003; in detail: Stanat & Schneider, 2004, 250 ff.). For poor

readers in particular, possibly with insufficient knowledge of the language, procedures for promoting reading fluency should be adapted and integrated into the curriculum, as has been done in the Anglo-American region (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

7. Summary: problem areas in reading socialization of children of less educated parents

- The connection between social and linguistic origin and reading ability is extremely strong in Germany compared with other countries.
- Insufficient attainment of an appropriate level of German has the primary effect of putting this group at a disadvantage against the background of social position and/or cultural distance. The lack of sufficient linguistic and reading ability is less well compensated for in the German school system than in other countries.
- Around one quarter of German youngsters leave school without having acquired sufficient reading competences.
- Youngsters in Germany have a particularly low interest in reading, in an international comparison.
- German teachers are insufficiently able to identify pupils who are weak in reading and to generate appropriate tasks for them.
- There is an extremely large spread of reading abilities among pupils at German secondary schools, which is strongly reflected by the different types of schools.
- This spread of reading abilities amongst secondary school pupils in Germany is due to the following factors in particular:
  - lack of early compensatory work on language skills
  - lack of unified standards of achievement;
  - lack of a reading curriculum for secondary schools and the corresponding lack of effective promotional concepts;
  - the stigmatizing effect and the absence of same-age role models (for learning) in the *Hauptschule* owing to the separation of the three types of secondary schools, coupled with poor prospects of finding a job in the future.

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