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## Observing – Treating – Classifying: On the Educational Practice of Human Differentiation

Herbert Kalthoff<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Institute of Sociology, Germany*

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### Abstract

Sociological research often states the reproductive function of educational systems. Thus, students are differentiated according to their cultural capital and their social background. One central dimension of the selection process is the grading performed by teachers. The paper outlines a conceptional framework of dealing with this kind of human differentiation sociologically. It therefore gives insight into the prerequisites provided by the school administration and into the empirical organization of grading – from classroom assessment to teacher meetings where final decisions are taken. Two forms of objectifying students' performances are presented: a social as well as a numerical-administrative objectification. The term 'social objectification' describes the orally conveyed assessment; the term 'numerical-administrative objectification' refers to the practice of translating student performance into mathematical and other symbols for further aggregation and editing.

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### 1. Introduction

Modern societies organize the education of their offspring in specialized and diverse institutions which themselves are subject to public control. With the historical enforcement of school attendance, families are obliged to force their children to undergo the school curriculum up to a certain age. In Germany and a few other European countries, it is

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [kalthoffh@uni-mainz.de](mailto:kalthoffh@uni-mainz.de)

compulsory to get education outside of one's family in the specialized institution of a 'school' (compulsory schooling). This coercion to go to school is based on a deficiency hypothesis: The family has lost its ability to convey the increasingly refined knowledge inventories of the various disciplines and is therefore not able anymore to sufficiently qualify its children for the occupational system; therefore, a publicly organized and controlled institution is necessary, which – being placed between family and the job market – organizes the conveyance of knowledge and controls the acquisition of this knowledge through assessment (i.e. 'grades'). An alternative educational path is not provided for. Moreover, all children have to pass through the school path without exception – constant knowledge acquisition, grading, and differentiation. Furthermore, school attendance is supposed to take place well-regulated, i.e. in relatively homogeneous age groups, periodic rhythms (from one class level to the next), and with increasing difficulty (from simple to complex topics).

According to (educational) sociological conceptions, the institution of the school fulfills various functions, such as teaching and assessing the acquired positive expertise. The institutional assessment practice is sociologically interesting in that it conveys socially relevant knowledge about students through grades and school leaving certificates – a knowledge making students comparable with each other (within a subject) as well as themselves (over time) through school differentiation. The production of commensurability mainly takes place by way of numerous oral and written exams whose results are offset against each other and are documented in a ranking. An important aspect is the homogenization of the school population along age groups, which enables the school and the public school administration to operate with a twofold equality assumption:

First, public administrations ensure age-homogeneous of students by determining a biological age (six years) for their school enrollment. Before enrollment, the administration assesses whether the individual registered child has 'developed normally' and can be sent to school at all. This regulated and systematically registering enrollment of age groups – so goes the assumption – ensures relatively identical starting conditions for the children's educational careers. This equality assumption is based on the attributes 'biological age' and 'normality of development'; all other differences (gender, social or ethnic background, family socialization, body height, etc.) are disregarded, although the institution of the school is in fact being confronted with quite heterogeneous children, since their socialization experiences within their families are diverse and they go to school with various degrees of preparedness. In other words: The primacy of two characteristics corresponds with the *inhibition* of all other differences.

Second, all students undergo the same treatment program according to the iterative time of schooling and the standardized curriculum: The school path sends them from one class level to the next, from simple to complex topics. Therefore, all students hear, see, and experience the same educational topics and can thus be treated as equals in exams. This assumption corresponds with the container model of school teaching and implies permanent attention by the students, comprehensibility of the subject, and possibilities of learning through continuous interactive participation in class. Finally, the goal of exams and assessments is to present the supposedly equal students as *dissimilar*. The school principle to 'flag' fictitious equals as real unequals is in itself not a procedure that could fulfill standard quality criteria: Too inhomogeneous are the assessments between teachers, subjects, classes, and schools; too unequal are the chances of being moved or to finish school with a good graduation.

Sociology and social sciences do know little on "how teachers actually evaluate students" (Kingston 2001: 92). Therefore, the aim of the paper is twofold: Firstly, the paper gives an empirical insight into the grading practices in school as well as into the objectivation of teachers' evaluation. Secondly, it outlines some theoretical ideas by which these processes can be analyzed.

## 2. Contingency of Grading

There is agreement in assessment research that the teaching staff's verdict has an impact within and outside of school. It allows for a differentiation of the school population and to make decisions about the continuation of a student's school career, as well as making suggestions for students' professional post-educational careers. However, there is disagreement about the quality of teacher verdicts. Therefore, many publications concentrate on the quality criteria of school assessment – their objectivity, validity, and reliability. As Schreiber (1899) already critically asked at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (sic!): Do school exams in their written and oral forms generate objective, valid, and reliable results? Afterwards, the concepts of "equality", "quality criteria", and "performance" dominated school assessment practices. Because already early publications raised the question: "How can performance ratings (...) be

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