



## Learning in context from an interdisciplinary perspective



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### ABSTRACT

First, the merits and limitations of international large-scale studies in this respect are taken up from an international and a national perspective. Second, the conditions that contribute to inequalities in competencies are discussed, emphasizing the role of families and peers. In a third step we focus on the impact of linguistic skills as key competences in acquiring knowledge, explicating central theoretical concepts such as language acquisition and (learning) context. On the basis of a methodological section devoted to the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the aim of the last section is to outline the leitmotif of the selection and arrangement of the contributions to this issue.

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### 1. Introduction

The present special issue aims to make a contribution to current scientific discourses on primary and secondary disparities in students' educational success by focusing on linguistic competencies and by targeting an interdisciplinary perspective in both theory and methodology from the perspectives of psychology and linguistics. To illuminate the scope of this issue and the added value of the contributions that follow, we structure this introduction into four parts.

Since large-scale international assessments (such as PISA, TIMSS or PIRLS) have extended earlier findings on educational inequalities in many ways, we start the first part with a summary of their main results and discuss how far they nevertheless suffer from certain limitations in their explanatory power. Next, we point to concerted national research programs that were implemented in response to these international studies and emphasize the usefulness of work that explores the options and restrictions inherent in a specific (national) educational system.

In the second section, we switch from the macro- to the micro-level in order to explore in greater depth the mechanisms that contribute to inequalities in competencies and achievements. Our synthesis of findings from different lines of research both emphasizes the impact of parents and peers on students' educational success and spotlights the research questions that have been somewhat neglected up to now but are addressed in some of the contributions in this issue.

The purpose of the third section is to underline the impact of linguistic skills on educational inequalities. This part provides some linguistic insight into the conceptions of language, and the acquisition of linguistic skills, and of context for the interdisciplinary framework of the issue. Empirical findings on the antecedents and consequences of verbal competences are presented and differences are highlighted in the methodological orientations of researchers from different disciplines.

Finally, on the basis of a section devoted to methodological issues, the aim of the last section is to outline the leitmotif of the selection and arrangement of the contributions to this issue. For this purpose, we summarize our thoughts about the specific and joint impact of different learning environments on the development of key competencies that contribute to or impede educational success.

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## 2. Unequal educational chances – contributions and restrictions of international large-scale studies

For decades, researchers from different disciplines have provided empirical evidence for substantial variation in the academic achievement of students with different social and/or ethnic backgrounds. The results of cross-national studies employed as an instrument to monitor the quality of educational systems have extended the existing findings in several ways.

First of all, they have pointed out that the impact of students' socioeconomic background on their performance differs remarkably between nations. In fact, analyses of the first wave of measurement in PISA have shown that in Germany the link between socioeconomic status (SES) and students' competencies was stronger than in most other countries (Baumert & Schümer, 2001; Bos, Schwippert, & Stubbe, 2007). Moreover, it was found that the average performance of German 15-year-olds in reading was below the OECD average and that the variability in student performance between and within schools is high. These and other disconcerting results provoked a heated public debate in Germany and brought forth strenuous efforts to improve the quality of the German educational system. Several funding programs were launched in order to gain more information on both the genesis of disparities and the potential of interventions with different addressees and aims, including programs that aimed at the role of language in educational achievement. The present issue brings together articles that take up these approaches and are relevant to theoretical issues in the international educational research.

Traditionally, inequalities in education have been analyzed predominantly by referring to “formal” criteria such as grades, type of school attended, and probabilities of retention, graduation or occupational attainment (in terms of employability chances, income or prestige ratings). In contrast, large-scale international assessments focus on indicators for the assessment of “key competencies”, i.e. of skills and knowledge in the domains of reading, mathematics and science. Since these competencies are defined and operationalized independently from national curricula and are assessed via tests with evidentiary psychometric qualities, this kind of research offers the chance to disentangle primary and secondary disparities. However, the conceptualization of “key competencies” within these international studies is (probably due to pragmatic reasons) quite narrow and abstracts somehow from discourses in relevant disciplines.

For example, there is some consensus that “language competencies” are essential for educational success. However, the test items in PISA and PIRLS are restricted to reading competencies. This is unsatisfactory because (a) the differentiation between production and comprehension in language use is fundamental to linguistics, and (b) existing research indicates that developmental paths may be variable from one linguistic domain to the next. In this context, results concerning the interrelations between the structural development of language, reading and writing skills are somewhat mixed (e.g., Weinert, 2007) and support the idea of distinct “pathways” rather than the notion of a parallel progression in all these (sub-)domains. In particular, productive discursive oral and written skills above the sentence level were actually not investigated in these studies. This desideratum is addressed by some of the articles in this special issue.

As is generally known, large scale studies such as PISA serve as a “global monitoring instrument”. Therefore, students from different cohorts but of the same age are investigated at regular intervals. Due to this design, age-related intraindividual changes in competencies cannot be described or predicted.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, then, international comparative studies abstract from theoretically important predictors (such as students' epistemological beliefs) that are given attention in some of the contributions to this special issue (e.g., Chng et al., 2014-in this issue).

A specific merit of more recent international large-scale studies is founded in their power to offer empirical evidence for the effectiveness of governance strategies and practical endeavors to overcome national problems over a prolonged period. According to results of PISA 2009, for example, Germany is one of the countries where the average reading competence of 15-year olds significantly increased over the last 9 years (Klieme et al., 2010). At the same time, however, IGLU shows that the reading competencies of German 4th graders could not be improved (Bos, Tarelli, Bremerich-Vos, & Schwippert, 2012), although many programs had been launched to identify and foster children with deficits in early literacy competency (for example, by offering special courses for children with multilingual backgrounds). Cross-national large scale studies cannot offer explanations for these somewhat frustrating results, but they highlight the necessity to explore in more depth the impact of teaching and learning settings outside the school. Most contributions in this volume apply this notion, but it is addressed in particular in the work of Domenech & Krah, Heller, Morek, and Stude.

Coordinated comparative studies addressing different age cohorts (but similar competencies) are especially instructive when they are conducted in nations with different educational systems including diverse tracking procedures.<sup>2</sup> With respect to the German educational system it has become apparent that observable disparities in competencies of primary school students are quite stable across the first four years of schooling, but increase in the course of secondary education. In this context, Maaz, Trautwein, Lüdtke, and Baumert (2008) have shown that explicit tracking procedures (but also implicit forms inherent in most educational systems) serve as an instrument to group rather low- as well as high-achieving pupils into “homogenous” learning groups. As a consequence, qualitatively different learning environments (“Lernmilieus”) are established that will influence students' progress differently merely because of compositional effects.

<sup>1</sup> Note however that in the course of PISA, national supplementary studies have been conducted. In Germany, for example, subsamples were investigated longitudinally.

<sup>2</sup> In Germany, most students in most states are assigned to different school tracks at the end of the 4th grade. This institutional arrangement is part of a broader set of strategies (such as retention, assignment to a lower track within secondary education or to a school exclusively for students with special needs; cf. Wild, 2013) to exclude low-achieving students from mainstreaming.

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