

# Educational inequality in diverse classrooms: understanding and addressing disparities

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## Abstract

A central goal of the education system is to provide learners—regardless of individual characteristics and family living conditions—with equal opportunities for education, social participation, and social integration. Yet, as has repeatedly been shown by large-scale assessment studies, the German school system fails to adequately achieve this goal (e.g., McElvany et al., 2023; Stanat et al., 2025). While disparities with regard to language and immigration background, gender, socioeconomic status, and special educational needs have been well documented in the pertinent literature, the interplay of these different social categories is less well understood. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical findings on supportive institutional conditions and effective interventions that help to overcome these disparities. Against this background, the research area aims to deepen our understanding of the interplay of various social categories in explaining school success and to gain insights into beneficial conditions for successful teaching and learning in superdiverse contexts.

## Background & Key Theories

- The **Social Identity approach to education** (Haslam et al., 2017) suggest that classrooms are intergroup arenas where social categorization processes, (self-) stereotyping, and ingroup bias affect both student-teacher as well as student-student relations, and learning outcomes
- **Micro-level interactions** in classrooms reflect broader structural macrosystem factors, shaped by power, ideology, and history (Rogers et al., 2021)
- **Language scaffolding** (Gibbons, 2002), the **language transfer hypothesis** (Cummins, 1981) and approaches of multilingual teaching (e.g., García, 2009) imply that multilingualism can be a resource for fostering language development and conceptual learning
- **Culturally responsive teaching** (CRT; Gay, 2002) assumes that effective teaching requires to actively incorporate and validate all students' cultural knowledge and identities

## Overarching Research Questions

General research questions addressed by the research area

1. How do different social categories interact in explaining educational inequalities?
2. How can (student) teachers be prepared for teaching superdiverse classrooms and which teaching strategies (e.g., CRT) prove most effective and for whom?
3. How can students' multilingualism best be integrated into everyday classroom teaching for fostering learning and which adaptations best serve this highly diverse student group?

## Prominent Methodological Approaches

- The research area covers a broad range of – mostly quantitative empirical – approaches, such as
- (quasi)experimental field trial studies
  - integrative data-analyses of large-scale assessment studies
  - (intensive) longitudinal data analyses (including experience sampling methodology)
  - analyses of classroom processes based on video- and transcript analyses.

Open science practices are strongly supported.



## Social Relevance

- Given the increasingly diverse society and student body in Germany overall, and particularly in the metropolitan area of the UA Ruhr, nuanced and robust knowledge of how best to adapt classroom processes and teaching to students' needs is of utmost importance to ensure that all students can thrive and succeed.
- By addressing persistent educational inequalities in Germany and the limited understanding of how multiple social categories intersect, this research contributes to developing evidence-based conditions and interventions that can reduce structural disparities and promote equitable educational opportunities and social integration in superdiverse societies.

## Examples of Related Research Projects and Networks

- **Immigrant and social background in education – a quantitative analysis of their interplay (ISBE)** – Michael Becker, Aileen Edele, Kristin Schotte
- **Multi-professional cooperation and professional development for content-focused language-supportive teaching in all-day school settings (KoPaS)** – Birgit Heppt, Ilonca Hardy, Jennifer Paetsch, Sofie Henschel
- **Shaping linguistic education together with elementary schools, families, and educational professionals: What works? (SPEAK)** – Nele McElvany, Fany Lauermann
- **Skills over the Lifecycle (SOTL)** – Philipp Jugert, Silja Bellingrath, Lisa v. Stockhausen
- **Partizipation in staatlichen und zivilgesellschaftlichen Institutionen stärken: Perspektive migrantischer Eltern (PARMEL) (Strengthening participation in governmental and civil society institutions: Immigrant parents' perspectives)** – Philipp Jugert, Aileen Edele
- **DaZFlexPro – Flexible DaZ-Professionalisierung im Lehramt** – Katja Cantone-Altintas, Christoph Closta, Lena Heine, Shinichi Kameyama, Heike Roll, Tobias Schroedler



## Future Perspectives

As we build up the research area, we aim to foster scientific exchange and collaboration among researchers of the UA Ruhr with expertise in related fields. Starting off with guest lectures across the participating institutions and proposals for joint symposia at conferences, this should eventually lead to the development of joint research proposals. Given the high social relevance of the research agenda, we are particularly committed to ensuring effective research-practice transfer. Thus, we plan to initiate and participate in workshops and events aimed at the general public (e.g., school outreach projects, teacher professional development) and to consider participants' voices when conceptualizing research projects and preparing interventions and material for educational practice.

## Key Literature

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