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Between powerlessness to act and thirst for action – Dealing with educational inequalities in primary school in Germany and Argentina

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Between Powerlessness to Act and Thirst for Action – Dealing with Educational Inequalities in Primary School in Germany and Argentina

Abstract

This article addresses the (re)production of educational inequalities in primary schools through a binational comparison between Germany and Argentina. An interview study conducted in primary schools from 2020 to 2022 in both countries is used to analyse how teachers position themselves in dealing with educational inequalities. Across countries, the teachers interviewed draw lines of difference between students that primarily stem from their family background. While they outline family support as necessary for higher academic achievement, they also observe a lack of parental support due to family problems. The German teachers tend to problematise this and see the aforementioned inequalities between students, as well as the associated effects on learning, as a limitation to their actions, while the Argentinian teachers show more understanding and do not tend to see these inequalities as a limitation to their pedagogical actions. Overall, a line of contrast emerges: the German teachers recognise a sense of *powerlessness to act*, whereas the Argentinian teachers display a *thirst for action*, which is a contrast that will be explored further in the article.

Keywords: Argentina, Educational Inequalities, Germany, Grounded Theory Methodology, International Comparison, Primary School, Teachers

1 Introduction

This article addresses the (re)production of educational inequalities in primary schools through a binational comparison between Germany and Argentina. The starting point is the global persistence and exacerbation of educational inequalities (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Even though the right to education is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948 [2018]) and specified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) – which we understand here as an *educational promise* –, access to and participation in education are neither equitable, nor is education able to “break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage”¹ (Becher, 2008, p. 41, translated by the authors). Even universal access to education and universal participation in education cannot prevent the reproduction of existing structures and inequalities (Willemss & Budde, 2009).

Increasing social segregation tendencies within and between schools can be observed worldwide (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; for Europe, see Butterwegge, 2013; Fölker et al., 2015; for Latin America, see Arcidiácono et al., 2014; Gasparini et al., 2011; Kessler, 2002; Saraví, 2015). While primary schools are ostensibly ‘schools for all’ that aim to provide (needs-based) equitable education for all students, this is not necessarily the case. Not only institutional structures (Maaz et al., 2007; Murillo & Garrido, 2017), but also the actions and orientations of teachers as the individuals responsible for teaching (Ditton et al., 2005), contribute to the (re)production of educational inequalities. Among other things, teachers may hold lower or higher performance expectations for students depending on their social background, which can negatively impact students’ academic performance and/or self-esteem (Shevchuk & Glock, 2022; Wang et al., 2018; Tenti Fanfani, 1999; Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1998).

This research project focuses on an international comparative analysis between Germany and Argentina. On the one hand increasing social inequality and segregation tendencies can be observed globally; on the other, socio-political orders and education systems are no longer maintained solely by nation-states. Historically, schools have developed differently across countries, shaped by their respective political, social and cultural characteristics (Blömeke et al., 2007; Waldow & Caruso, 2023). In the era of globalisation, schools continue to be shaped by nation-states, yet they pursue similar – if not identical – educational goals worldwide (Lang-Wojtasik, 2008). Aligned with the notion that globalisation processes influence pedagogical theory and school practices globally, similarities and differences in teachers’ professional orien-

1 All direct quotations from German or Spanish language sources have been translated into English by the authors.

tations across countries can be revealed. As will be shown in the following section, Germany and Argentina are particularly suitable for a comparison, because recent developments and differentiations in their school systems are not only distinct but sometimes even contradictory.

Building on this, the differences between the German and the Argentinian education systems will be discussed in relation to educational inequalities. Furthermore, the (re)production of educational inequalities and the role of teachers' professional pedagogical actions are briefly examined. The methodological approach is then explained, followed by a presentation and discussion of the empirical findings.

2 Theoretical Frame

2.1 Education Systems and Educational Inequalities in Germany and Argentina

As outlined in the introduction, educational inequalities persist and are continuously (re)produced in schools. This has been repeatedly demonstrated by the results of the PISA studies, for example. The findings for both Germany and Argentina frequently show a strong correlation between family background and academic success (OECD, 2023a, 2023b). However, as a large-scale cross-sectional study, the findings of PISA are incapable of explaining the reasons behind this in greater depth – although it would be useful to examine this within the context of distinct education systems and country-specific differences.

At the structural level, similarities are found: in both Germany and Argentina, the school system is organised federally (for Germany, see Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024; for Argentina, see IBE, 2010; Romualdo, 2022). In both countries, the primary level is followed by a secondary level; in Germany, the primary level usually comprises four school years, while in Argentina it comprises six or seven grades, depending on the province². However, there are differences regarding the prevalence of private schools versus state run schools as well as different types of schools depending on the respective educational qualifications. These aspects, both similarities and differences, can be linked to the (re)production of educational inequalities. This section thus examines the role of inequalities in the educational context of both countries, embedded within their respective school systems.

2 The basic structure of the German school system can be found in the diagram of Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung (2024, p. xvi), while the basic structure of the Argentinian school system can be found in section 2.1.2 *The School System in Argentina* (please see Figure 1; see also SITEAL, accessed in 2025).

2.1.1 The School System in Germany

The German school system is multi-tiered, the hierarchical character has a long history: these structures intensified during the Weimar Republic in particular, for example so-called “advanced” and gifted classes were established (see Schregel, 2021, p. 136, translated by the authors). The division into different types of secondary schools still exists today. These school types differ in terms of the instructional requirements and the qualification levels they offer. During the Weimar Republic, primary schools in particular, but also secondary schools, were intended to be accessible to children regardless of their families’ socio-economic background (see Kluchert, 2006) and as part of this effort, there was a “restrictive regulation of private school provision” (Caruso, 2019, p. 457, translated by the authors). Nevertheless, the selective function of school became structurally embedded during secondary education through entrance examinations, which remains highly pronounced today.

In retrospect, the structured school system was maintained or further developed during the educational expansion that began in the 1950s (Kuhlmann, 2018). Schleicher (2013) points out that “structured school systems” do not have a “clear effect on performance”, but exert “an extremely negative influence on equal opportunities” (Schleicher, 2013, p. 107, translated by the authors). The early transition to secondary school, particularly in Germany, represents a “mechanism for reproducing the structures of social inequality” (Edelstein, 2006, p. 128, translated by the authors). In the context of school transition recommendations, it becomes evident that these are “influenced by social background and cultural capital in the parental home” (Hinz & Groß, 2006, p. 220, translated by the authors). Against this background, parental influence on a child’s educational path is comparatively greater in Germany than in other countries (Solga, 2008; see also Budde, 2020; Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2024). Additionally, research findings by Hillmert and Jacob (2005) state that “the social selectivity of the educational qualifications achieved increases with each additional opportunity or during the further course of life – and does not decrease” (Hillmert & Jacob, 2005, p. 173, translated by the authors). Thus, there is a continued risk of reproducing existing (educational) inequalities, if school systems leave a *de facto* higher educational path open and decisions can still be revised at a later point in time. This is because decisions that determine the school-related educational path are made depending on social background (see Paulus & Blossfeld, 2007) and are generally not adjusted afterwards.

2.1.2 The School System in Argentina

The school system in Argentina is federally regulated and the responsibilities with regard to financing and organization of schools lie with the individual provinces (Romualdo, 2022). The school system is defined in its entirety as public by law (Feldfeber, 2003), but consists of three different types of management: state-run, private, and social or cooperative schools. 82 % of Argentinian primary schools are state-run, and 75 % of the 18 % that are privately run receive some kind of state subsidy (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina, 2022)³. The provision of privately run schools is highly heterogeneous, and some low-fee private schools (Moschetti, 2015) may resemble state schools more closely than unsubsidised private schools with significantly higher tuition fees. Subsidised low-fee private schools are attended by children from various socio-economic backgrounds. This phenomenon also varies greatly among provinces, which have different proportions of privately run schools (Bottinelli & Sleiman, 2015). Furthermore, disparities in the quality of education across provinces can often be attributed to differences in financial resources. Segregation tendencies can also be observed between urban and rural areas (Gajardo, 2016). In summary, although students do not attend different types of school depending on their academic performance, as in Germany, the Argentinean school system is fragmented and unequal, but in a different way to the German one.

The current National Education Act (Ley N°26.206/2006) also defines four education levels: initial level (comprising kindergarten and preschool), primary school, secondary school and higher education. Compulsory education extends from the age of 4 to the end of secondary education; in total 14 years. Primary education begins at the age of 6 and lasts until the age of 11 or 12, depending on the province. The secondary level runs from the age of 12 or 13 to 17, depending on the province, and it is divided into two cycles: the basic cycle, common to all orientations, and the oriented cycle, diversified according to areas of knowledge, the social world and work. Less than two decades ago, the current law has established the compulsory nature of the secondary level, regardless of the age of the person, encouraging completion policies and promoting adult education. Furthermore, unlike in Germany, there are no selective examinations for secondary school entrance in Argentina with the exception of a few elite or national university-dependent schools. The basic structure of the school system can be seen in Table 1.

3 For comparison: 96.5 % of primary schools in Germany are state-run, while 3.5 % are private run (Klemm et al., 2018, p. 19).

Table 1: Basic Structure of the School System in Argentina (own illustration, 2025)

Age	School System (compulsory years) Two possible structures depending on the province:		Grade		
17	Secondary school (nivel secundario ciclo orientado)		12		
16			11		
15			10		
14	Secondary school (nivel secundario ciclo básico)	Secondary school (nivel secundario ciclo básico)	9		
13			8		
12		Primary School (nivel primario)	Primary School (nivel primario)	7	
11	6				
10	5				
9	4				
8	3				
7	2				
6	1				
5	Pre-primary education (nivel inicial)				
4					

When examining participation in education and access to education, strong inequalities between different population groups are evident in Argentina (see Sassera & Herger, 2024; Acosta 2022; Dussel, 2005). The socio-economic status of the family plays a major role in the child's success at school (Adrogué & Orlicki, 2014). In terms of attendance at compulsory years or levels, there is almost full attendance at preschool (5 years), primary school and the first part of secondary school (from 12 to 14 years). Primary school has been compulsory in Argentina since 1884 and nowadays is almost universalised for all income levels. The completion rate rose from 95.6 % in 2000 to 99.4 % in 2022 (SITEAL, accessed in 2025). However, almost 10 % of Argentinean children do not attend kindergarten at the age of 4 and the same percentage of students don't attend the last years of secondary school (from 15 to 17). In 2022, only 54 % of students who started secondary school completed it (Ministerio de Educación de la Nación Argentina, 2022).

2.2 The (Re)Production of Educational Inequalities - and Teachers as 'Agents of Change'?

Selection mechanisms in schools can be 'hidden', making educational advancement appear possible, while concealing the actual challenges (Tiramonti, 2016,

p. 168). However, school selection and the (re)production of educational inequalities do not only occur through institutional structures, but also in everyday (inter)actions. Teachers play a decisive role here, which is why they are the focus of this section.

They do not only accompany the learning process, but also serve as reference persons for students; they are even described as “the most important curricular influencing factor in the entire teaching process” (Jürgens, 2013, p. 221, translated by the authors). For example, the encouragement of teachers can positively influence student’s motivation and learning behaviour at school, leading to “measurably significant improvements in educational performance” (Schleicher, 2013, p. 106, translated by the authors). Teachers’ action-guiding orientations also place them at the centre of attention when it comes to the (re)production of educational inequalities in school practice.

If teachers encounter heterogeneous learning and performance levels among students with homogeneous learning and performance requirements, this may result in students being under- or over-challenged (see Gellert, 2013; Hummrich, 2016). If teachers create distinctions between students in their teaching work by differentiating among students in the sense of *Doing Difference* (see West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Budde, 2023; Kampshoff, 2013; Walgenbach, 2017) or through stereotypical attributions towards students (see Yendell et al., 2023; Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1998), inequalities may emerge. Consequently, school transition recommendations made by teachers may be biased by family background and become socially selective or have socially selective effects (see Dumont et al., 2014).

Yet in everyday school life, it is not only teachers and students, but also families and parents who play a key role in a child’s school attendance. In this context, the school-family interface also comes into focus regarding the promotion of educational inequalities or the creation of educational disadvantages (Budde & Bittner, 2018). A cooperative relationship between the school and the families is important in supporting the child’s school affairs – it is not uncommon to even speak of an educational partnership in this context (Walper, 2021). Breakdowns in cooperation between teachers and families can ultimately have a negative impact on a child’s school attendance (Gniewosz & Walper, 2017).

2.3 Research Questions

The (re)production of educational inequalities can be observed both at the structural level and in teachers’ actions. On the one hand, teachers can be confronted with limiting institutional conditions, but on the other hand “[...] this can also open up specific spaces of possibility for action, which in turn – through the actions of the school actors – can be transformed and changed” (Helsper, 2008, p. 67, translated by the authors). The overarching research

interest leads to the question of how teachers position themselves in the area of tension between *educational promises* and *educational inequalities*, and what orientation frameworks teachers show with regard to this area of tension. It is of interest to examine which *educational promises* teachers articulate and how they address *educational inequalities*. Consequently, both limitations and spaces of possibility in teachers' approaches to educational inequalities are explored.

The research questions are therefore as follows:

1. RQ1 How do German and Argentinian teachers position themselves in the field of tension between *educational promises* and *educational inequalities*?
 - a) RQ1.1 What *educational promises* do teachers create?
 - b) RQ1.2 How do teachers deal with *educational inequalities*?
 - c) RQ1.3 What are the differences between the German and the Argentinian teachers?

3 Methodological Approach

Eight semi-structured expert interviews (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021) were conducted in both Germany and Argentina with teachers⁴ who were class teachers in first or second grade at a state-run primary school (2020 to 2022). Primary schools were selected which a) are located in medium-sized towns and large cities (up to 300,000 inhabitants) and b) whose catchment areas can be described as rather heterogeneous in terms of the socio-economic resources of the families living there in order to have the opportunity to interview the teachers about contrasting case studies. The study is based on an ad hoc sample. The teachers interviewed in Germany have an average of 13,5 years of work experience (5 female, 3 male); the teachers interviewed in Argentina have an average of 12,5 years of work experience (8 female, 0 male). The expert interviews in this study were designed to focus on both the school as an institution and on the teachers' actions within it. First, operational knowledge (Meuser & Nagel, 1991) about the institution should be revealed and, following this, this knowledge should be used to gain an insight into which effects the institutional level has on the teachers' actions according to their respective point of view. Secondly, reports on everyday professional life at school were used to develop insights into the tensions between *educational promises* and *educational inequalities*. In summary, overarching patterns among teachers from each country were developed based on the interview material⁵.

4 We thank the teachers interviewed for making this scientific project possible.

5 As the interviews with the teachers were conducted in German and Spanish, all quotes are translated accordingly by the authors.

The data material was analysed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 2008), with the aim of developing typologies (based on Glaser & Strauss, 2008; please see Heiser, 2018, pp. 139-150). In the analysis, the three steps of open, axial and selective coding were run through. The data were coded (1) openly with the help of the analysis program MAXQDA. In (2) axial coding, the codes were further systematised and in (3) selective coding, intermediate findings were merged and systematised. In this step, ten higher-order categories were formed. Finally, four central categories were derived from the higher-order categories (for an explanation of all results see Claus, 2024):

1. The School as an 'Ideal Counterworld'
2. Dealing with Disruptive Families
3. Homogeneous Requirements for Heterogeneous Students?
4. Contradictions of Professional Responsibility

These four core categories were then examined in relation to each other, and cross-national patterns were identified. Based on the differences between the German and Argentinian teachers, two different types were identified: *Powerlessness to Act* and *Thirst for Action*.

4 Empirical Findings

The empirical findings are presented below using selected interview excerpts. Each of the four core categories is introduced with a specific analytical focus⁶.

4.1 The School – as an 'Ideal Counterworld'

Based on the considerations about which areas of responsibility and functions are assumed and performed by the school as an educational institution, the school is portrayed as a safe space where the teachers ensure the well-being of the students as caregivers.

Maybe first of all before learning – the most important thing for me is that the children enjoy coming to school. They should enjoy learning, they should come here and feel comfortable, they should feel safe and secure, they should know that they can come to me even if they have fears, worries and hardships. (D2 LP1 TU, Pos. 42⁷)

6 Each core category can only be presented here in excerpts and in a necessarily abbreviated form. For comprehensive explanations, see Claus (2024).

7 Any data was always treated as strictly confidential and was pseudonymized as well as eventually anonymized. An abbreviation was added to all interview citations in this paper. For example, if the abbreviation is D2 LP1 TU: D = Germany (German: *Deutschland*), 2 = School 2, LP1 = Teacher (German: *Lehrperson*) 1, TU = anonymous initials, Pos. 42 = the position in the interview. If the abbreviation starts with A (e.g., A2 LP2 LM) it means that the teacher comes from Argentina.

Three overarching functional roles are frequently mentioned by teachers. School is primarily described as (1) a place of retreat and protection. Additionally, the teachers portray the school as (2) a place for teaching and learning, highlighting that enjoyment and motivation are prerequisites for effective educational processes. Furthermore, the school is seen as (3) a social meeting place. Teachers repeatedly emphasize the importance of reliable social integration within the (class) community. School is depicted as a positively connoted space – an environment actively shaped by teachers: “In math, the first thing I always do – because this is my own class – is to see how the children are doing. That’s very important [...]” (D3 LP2 RT, Pos. 16). At the start of the lesson, a learning atmosphere is created by the German teacher interacting with the students on a socio-emotional level, detached from subject content and requirements. On the one hand, he gains an overview of the students’ well-being. On the other hand, he creates a space in which the children can discuss their emotional states. In doing so, the teacher sees himself as a trustworthy contact and reference person who has a holistic understanding of his students and thus creates an atmosphere of wellbeing in the classroom. This is an integral part of the teaching routine and is a prerequisite for being able to conduct lessons. The Argentinian teacher LM makes clear that the school is not only reduced to its educational mission and talks about the diverse tasks and functional areas of the school:

“Here we call it ‘glass with milk’, we give the children their afternoon snack and breakfast. [...] school today has many functions, not just to educate. And, you have to be a psychologist, you have to be a doctor, you have to be everything. And today they use schools as kindergartens, you know, because they [parents] have to work and leave the children there. And the function of the school has changed a lot nowadays, [...]” (A2 LP2 LM, Pos. 28)

She notes that the function of school has changed over time. There are various aspects associated with this, which the Argentinian teachers in particular address: (1) the changed role of teachers, for example as “psychologists” or “doctors,” (2) the distribution of food such as breakfast or afternoon meals by the school and (3) the expansion of school support services. They referred to the childcare services and reported the impression that these are increasingly being demanded by parents and are the focus of their interest, whereas the educational needs of parents are less of an issue. Other teachers also report that the school provides students (4) with clothing or school utensils such as workbooks.

In connection with this, both the German and Argentinian teachers observe shifts in responsibility. They are assigned tasks that were previously – according to their perspective – taken on by the families. In this context, a difference between the teachers interviewed in the two countries emerges: While the

German teachers tend to reject these attributions of responsibility, the Argentinian teachers tend to accept them. In the second case, the school then takes on tasks in a compensatory function, as seen here: "I buy it out of my own pocket. I have my cupboard with a little box, with pencils, a little box with scissors, with modelling clay. I always have one or two notebooks, in case one [student] is left there in the classroom without a notebook" (A2 LP1 EF, Pos. 58).

4.2 The Families (Parents) – as Protagonists or Antagonists

Families were a central topic in all interviews. Both German and Argentinian teachers primarily attributed differences among students to family background and linked this to disparities in students' learning and school performance. According to this, a failure to meet the learning and performance requirements at school is mostly attributed to a lack of parental support, for example.

Cooperation between the school and the families, i.e., teachers and parents, takes different forms. This also influences teachers' actions and the associated scope for action. All teachers interviewed, emphasise the importance of working with families, but in some cases find it challenging. Parents show varying degrees of willingness to cooperate, are involved to varying degrees and show different degrees of interest. Both the German and Argentinian teachers report on those parents who cultivate a 'responsible' pattern of behaviour and interaction, who are therefore involved in school matters, show interest and support the children. These in turn are contrasted with those parents who do not succeed in this. As a result, teachers tend to "have extra problems" (D1 LP1 IH, Pos. 28) with (certain) families – those families are described by the teachers as having deficits. In the case of the German teacher IH, the necessary and intensive exchange with parents entails a workload that she problematises as too much, so that it is difficult or impossible for her to manage. The teacher argues that certain parents are not open to cooperation or that cooperation with them is problematic. This shows that the teacher has certain expectations, which must be met in order to enable successful collaboration.

The Argentinian teacher MN points out that some parents do not consciously refuse to cooperate with the teachers, but simply cannot guarantee such cooperation (in line with the teacher's expectations) due to their living conditions: "[There is a] difference in the way parents look after their children. And it happens that – well, you have to understand, because there are parents who work, there are parents who [...], well, don't have time to work with their children and leave them with their grandparents. But well, you try to find a way [...] We always try to find a way so that the child gets an appropriate [...] education." (A1 LP1 MN, Pos. 36)

The Argentinian teacher MN talks about the different levels of families' support and points out that she, as a teacher, has to "understand" the parents and their (life) situation. She explains that some parents do not have the opportunity to "work" with the child due to their professional activities and that the child is therefore looked after by the grandparents. However, the teacher does not perceive this circumstance in a problem-oriented way – she neither problematizes the behaviour of the families, nor does she address negative consequences that may impact the concerned students or her own work. She points out that she is looking for coping strategies to enable all students to participate in education in line with their needs.

In contrast, the German teachers repeatedly note an irreconcilable divergence between the parents' behaviour and the institutional framework with which the schoolwork is inevitably intertwined. A line of contrast between the German and the Argentinian teachers emerges in terms of their understanding of families' problems; the Argentinian teachers appear to be more understanding.

4.3 The Students – and Different Learning and Performance Requirements

All teachers describe the heterogeneity of the students in their classes in terms of socio-economic/socio-material background, behavioural characteristics, and differences in learning and performance:

"And the best thing is when they are different. So, we support each other, we listen to each other and the one who sometimes has it a bit harder is supported by the other who sometimes – because yes, we are different, we all have our own speeds, some are faster, some are slower. So, we form groups in which – [...] we support each other." (A1 LP2 PR, Pos. 35)

The diversity of the students is described by the Argentinian teacher as something positive and enriching, which also creates opportunities for mutual support among classmates. Nevertheless, there are signs that student heterogeneity is not fully addressed. For example, students who have already completed their compulsory tasks are, to some extent, left waiting for their peers. This illustrates a challenging tension between individual learning needs and collective classroom structures. Both the German and Argentinian teachers acknowledge the difficulty of "picking up the students where they stand", i.e. responding to their varying levels of ability and prior knowledge. In this context, differentiation plays a central role in lessons for all teachers. Both the German and Argentinian describe a self-imposed commitment to offering individualised learning tasks tailored to each student's potential. For instance, the German teacher RT stresses the importance of "constantly reinventing lessons and adapting them to the learning group" (D3 LP2 RT, Pos. 56). He focusses on the individual and holistic needs of the students, as well as their

overall well-being. He also places strong emphasis on student agency and participation in shaping the learning process.

It is notable that both German and Argentinian teachers talk less frequently about high-achieving students than about lower-achieving students; although German teachers mention high-achievers slightly more often than the Argentinian teachers: "But I think the top [students], they don't get enough attention" (D3 LP2 RT, Pos. 78). This reveals a contrast in institutional focus: German teachers tend to direct attention toward higher-achieving students in their lessons, while Argentinian teachers place more focus on lower-achieving students. For example, the Argentinian teacher MN states: "There is always a point in the middle that you have to look for. [...] because there are two levels of children, let's say, those who are more advanced and those who are further behind. I always try to stay in the middle" (A1 LP1 MN, Pos. 88). In her lesson planning and implementation, the teacher aims for a middle ground in terms of content difficulty, with particular attention given to students who are further behind. As a result, all students engage with content at a uniform level. Although some degree of flexibility exists, the intermediate level tends to be the norm, especially among Argentinian teachers.

It becomes clear that while the idea of differentiation is based on recognising unequal learning and performance levels, most of the measures described do not fully accommodate this heterogeneity. Instead, both German – and especially Argentinian – teachers tend to apply approaches that strive for homogeneity in classroom instruction.

4.4 The Teachers – and Contradictions of Professional Responsibility

All teachers reflect on the possibilities, excessive demands, and limitations of pedagogical and professional action in the classroom, i.e. working with students.

German teachers, for instance, often view their training as inadequate, expressing that they are not sufficiently prepared to work with students who have special educational needs. While the German teachers tend to perceive these training-related gaps as an irreversible limitations on their professional practice, Argentinian teachers see them as modifiable – e.g. through participation in additional training. In this way, spaces of opportunity are created and actively shaped. For Argentinian teachers, student inequalities and their effects on classroom learning are not typically seen as fixed constraints, but as challenges that can be addressed by adapting their own teaching.

"I worked for eight years in a school attended by children affected by extreme poverty. [...] These are children who have other needs, who are hungry, who are cold, who don't have families to accompany them. [...] you have to put your

heart and soul and more into it. If it's hard to inspire the children [...] – then you have to look for other strategies.” (A1 LP2 PR, Pos. 29)

The Argentinian teacher describes her experience teaching in a school where most students came from severely disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Many students' basic needs were unmet, and their families were unable to provide academic support. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, the teacher saw it as a call for different teaching strategies such as collectively extending the time allocated to class projects due to the lack of support at home. These strategies differed significantly from those she now uses at the school where she currently teaches. In contrast, German teachers tend to either (1) call for external support or (2) perceive the pressures of their role as insurmountable:

“The fact that this range is always wider, and we are always different means that it doesn't actually work for me to do justice to all the children. To be honest, that doesn't work either. [...] And that's the big danger, which I'm seeing more and more over time, that we're simply losing more and more children because we can't do justice to all.” (D2 LP2 BC, Pos. 85)

This teacher appears to struggle with the admission that he cannot meet the expectations placed on him (whether externally or self-imposed) – specifically, the expectation to do justice to all children. He does not appear to develop strategies of his own to address this challenge. Like several other (primarily German) teachers, he shifts the solution outward, calling for smaller class sizes or increased staffing levels. For him, a transformation of the broader institutional framework seems necessary in order to cope. While German teachers do acknowledge the challenges and contradictions involved in fulfilling their professional responsibilities, they appear less able to formulate adequate strategies to navigate or resolve them. As a result, the excessive demands they face often translate into a feeling of powerlessness.

5 Discussion of the Findings – Between Powerlessness to Act and Thirst for Action

An overarching commonality emerges regarding the *promise of education*: both German and Argentinian teachers describe the school as an 'ideal counterworld', where this promise is rooted. In this 'ideal counterworld', the school is a safe space where students can learn and engage with one another. Furthermore, the school is portrayed as the 'opposite site' of the family environment. The findings indicate that the German teachers interviewed in this study, tend to frame the failure to fulfil on the educational promise or to address educational inequalities as systemic or institutional, distancing themselves and their actions from responsibility. Most of the German teachers do

not express a sense of future oriented agency in relation to their work with students and instead tend to see the fulfilment of the educational promise as unattainable. In contrast, the Argentinian teachers interviewed in this study, tend to view the failure to fulfil the educational promise or to respond to educational inequalities as personal. They reflect on their own role in this context and position their actions accordingly. As a result, most Argentinian teachers identify future-oriented spaces of possibility within their work with students, though which they aim to uphold and sustain the education promise.

The (re)production of (educational) inequalities takes place on two key levels: first, in cooperation with the families, and second, in day-to-day teaching with students. Two empirically derived teacher types can be distinguished based on these dimensions:

The (1) *Powerlessness to Act* type is characterized by limited empathy toward families – especially those considered “disruptive” – and a tendency to frame them as antagonists. In classroom practice, this type often uses homogeneous performance requirements that are geared more toward higher-performing students. When faced with pedagogical dilemmas, these teachers tend to see limits to their pedagogical actions. They do not feel empowered to shape educational processes in a way that would uphold the educational promise, which reinforces the experience of *powerlessness*. German teachers in this study primarily align with this type.

The (2) *Thirst for Action* type is characterized by greater understanding toward families facing challenges, viewing them as protagonists. In their work with students, they also implement homogeneous performance expectations, but gear them more toward lower-performing students. Although they recognise the tensions and contradictions in their pedagogical responsibilities, they do not necessarily perceive these as rigid limitations. Instead, they remain committed to fulfilling the educational promise – this commitment is reflected in their *thirst for action*. Argentinian teachers in this study primarily align with this type.

For both types, the instructional and relational approaches employed may create disadvantages for families and particularly for students who are unable to meet the expectations set by the school or teacher. In both cases, the educational promise remains unfulfilled. However, there are important distinctions in how inclusion and exclusion operate within each type. It is assumed that parent-blaming and performance-focused orientation of the first type promotes school practices that reproduce exclusion. In contrast, the more inclusive, empathetic, and less achievement-oriented approach of the second type suggests a form of education that favours inclusion. Nevertheless, the (re)production of educational inequalities is not eliminated by the inclusive approach and the exclusionary approach may, in fact, intensify them.

6 Concluding Remarks

In connection with the *Powerlessness to Act* type, reference can be made to Reh (2005), who reports “a prevailing mentality among German teachers that makes it significantly more difficult for them to deal with heterogeneity in learning groups” (Reh, 2005, p. 84, translated by the authors). This finding can in turn be linked to Kabel (2019), who, based on case studies, concludes “that [...] the primary school is entangled in the ongoing educational inequality” (Kabel, 2019, p. 227, translated by the authors) and “that it is pedagogy that is depriving itself of its possibilities for impact” (Kabel, 2019, p. 227, translated by the authors). However, it should also be pointed out that scientific studies do not offer consistent conclusions regarding the attitude and role of teachers in the context of the (re)production of educational inequalities. For example, Kramer (2015) discusses this with regard to the question of the extent to which teachers are “Reproduction Agents” or “Transformation Agents” (Kramer, 2015, translated by the authors). Following this line of thinking, it is worth emphasizing that Argentinian teachers tend to more actively assess the spaces of possibility within their professional roles and attempt to use them, while German teachers do this to a comparatively lesser extent. In this regard, the *Thirst for Action* type aligns with the findings of Abramowski (2022), who describes “unconditional dedication as a founding component of the Argentinean teaching profession” (Abramowski, 2022, p. 383, translated by the authors). According to her, Argentinian teachers demonstrate extraordinarily commitment to their work, something that can be seen as a defining professional trait (Abramowski, 2022).

As outlined earlier, neither the German nor the Argentinian teachers are fully able to fulfil the *educational promise* or successfully counteract educational inequalities. One possible explanation suggests that in Germany, ‘educational failure’ is perceived as an individual failure, given that the state provides a range of support mechanisms and opportunities for accessing educational programmes. As a result, German teachers may assume that affected students are capable of organising their own access to these supports. However, the actual existence of support services does not necessarily mean that students (or their families) are in a position to make use of them, which is often overlooked. In this context, the call for ‘support from outside’ seems to reflect a tendency to shift responsibility to other institutions, which are often viewed by teachers as better suited to addressing issues such as family-related challenges. By contrast, although access to education is also formally enshrined in law in Argentina, the state mechanisms available to guarantee this right are frequently insufficient. As a result, schools in Argentina often ‘step in’ to fill the gap, assuming a compensatory function. From the teachers’ perspective,

external support services in Argentina are not always effective, which leads them to view educational failure not as an individual issue but rather as a collective one.

That said, this study has some *limitations*. The findings presented here cannot claim universal validity; rather, they reflect country-specific tendencies, highlighting key similarities and differences. It should also be emphasized that while the German teachers in this study are primarily assigned to Type (1) and the Argentinian teachers to Type (2), this classification represents a tendency rather than a rigid categorization. These types are ideal constructs that exist on a spectrum, meaning that individual teachers can be assigned to one or another type, even if they do not exhibit all characteristics.

From the findings, some initial *implications for educational theory and practice* can be drawn: In view of the fact that teachers – regardless of the respective type – are not necessarily aware of the extent to which they are involved in the (re)production of educational inequalities and how this in turn is connected with the institutional framework of the school, it seems valuable for teachers to engage in a self-reflective examination of their own pedagogical practices to better understand how they respond to challenges, adjust their professional actions, and act as ‘Agents of Change’ (see also Kramer, 2015). This self-reflection should also take place collectively, through open discussion among colleagues, allowing them to explore concerns, share fears, and provide mutual support. Further research aiming to generate more generalizable empirical findings should consider larger samples and also take a closer look at the individual stakeholders involved.

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