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Educational Discourse in Germany: A qualitative Analysis of Media Reactions to PISA 2022

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Master in Sociology

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SOCIOLOGIA
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Department of Sociology

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Resumo

O recente estudo PISA realizado em 2022 revelou um declínio significativo no desempenho escolar dos alunos alemães, ultrapassando o impacto negativo observado após o primeiro choque do PISA em 2001. A divulgação destes resultados gerou uma atenção substancial dos meios de comunicação social e suscitou comentários generalizados de especialistas em educação, políticos e figuras públicas. Este estudo tem como objetivo investigar as diversas perspectivas apresentadas nos meios de comunicação social relativamente aos recentes resultados do PISA, com especial ênfase na desigualdade social. A investigação envolve a realização de uma análise de conteúdo qualitativa dos conteúdos publicados nos meios de comunicação social para analisar as várias posições e opiniões em diferentes jornais. Esta abordagem ajudará a compreender como os indivíduos interpretam e avaliam os resultados do PISA e as suas implicações para a crescente desigualdade social na Alemanha. O estudo procura identificar as deficiências sentidas no sistema educativo e as correspondentes reformas propostas para resolver os problemas que o PISA revelou. O estudo também explorará os temas que são enfatizados nos meios de comunicação social e a forma como estes moldam o discurso público sobre a educação, com especial atenção para a ênfase na desigualdade social e a sua relevância para os maus resultados do PISA.

Palavras-chave: PISA 2022, desempenho escolar, desigualdade social, sistema educativo, perspectivas dos media, discurso educativo

Abstract

The recent PISA study conducted in 2022 revealed a significant decline in the educational performance of German pupils, surpassing the negative impact observed after the first PISA shock in 2001. The release of these results generated substantial media attention and sparked widespread commentary from education experts, politicians, and public figures. This study aims to investigate the diverse perspectives presented in the media regarding the recent PISA findings, with a particular emphasis on social inequality. The research involves conducting a qualitative content analysis of the published media content to analyse various positions and opinions across different newspapers. This approach will help to understand how individuals interpret and evaluate the PISA outcomes and their implications for growing social inequality in Germany. The study seeks to identify the perceived shortcomings in the education system and corresponding proposed reforms to address the problems that PISA has uncovered. The study will also explore which themes are emphasized in the media and how they shape public discourse on education, with special attention to the emphasis on social inequality and its perceived relevance to the poor PISA results.

Keywords: PISA 2022, educational performance, social inequality, education system, media perspectives, educational discourse

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Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in tackling and mitigating inequality in society. The strong link between educational inequality and social position makes it a central theme in educational research, reflecting social inequality. Research has repeatedly proven that social disadvantages originating from family background have a profound impact on individuals' lives and can last across generations (Broer et al., 2019, pp. 1-2; Machin, 2011, pp. 2-7). Education, therefore, is of great political importance, with education policy playing a crucial role in societal well-being.

Germany's disappointing performance in PISA 2000 marked an important turning point in the country's educational discourse and policy (Niemann, 2015, pp. 141-142). The results not only indicated that German pupils' performance was far below average, but also revealed that Germany had one of the highest levels of educational inequality (Teltemann & Rauch, 2018, p. 36). This triggered an intense public discourse and called for substantial political action. The extensive media coverage over several weeks led to the coining of the term "PISA Shock". The unexpected low ranking confronted policymakers and the public with the deficits in Germany's education system, making it impossible to ignore these issues and placing them squarely on the policy agenda. The aftermath of the PISA Shock spurred years of reform efforts aimed at addressing these deficits. Thus, the OECD has significantly influenced the agenda in German education policy thanks to PISA and its findings. The scandalization of the PISA outcomes and the political response that followed showcased how public debate can drive political action, making it highly relevant for both society and academia. (Davoli & Entorf, 2018; Jerrim & Zieger, 2023, pp. 438-439; pp. 1-2; Niemann, 2015, pp. 141-150).

Despite all the efforts and reforms of recent decades, social inequality still persists in the German education system (Davoli & Entorf, 2018, p.1; Niemann, 2015, p. 151). The latest PISA study confirmed this once again. However, it doesn't stop there; the performance of German students in mathematics, reading and science continued to follow the downward trend and is now below the level of the first PISA study more than two decades ago (Lewalter, Diedrich, Goldhammer, Köller, & Reiss, 2023; OECD, 2023). Following the release of these alarming results in December 2023, there was, just as in 2001, a major media outcry, with many referring to it as a new PISA shock.

As seen after the first PISA Shock, the media can initiate debates, shape perspectives and opinions and thereby steer political and social discourse. The relevance of this study lies in its ability to shed light on the complex dynamics of the public debate on the recent PISA results and the related issues of social inequality. When media highlight social inequality as a key determinant of educational outcomes, this can increase pressure on policymakers to take action to address these inequalities. The insights gained can help to enrich public discourse, promote informed policy decisions and ultimately contribute to improving the education system. By analysing the different perspectives and opinions in the media, the study can help to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in education. Therefore, the goal is to answer the following research questions:

How do positions and opinions on the PISA results vary in German media representations? What role does the issue of social inequality play in this context and how is it thematised in the public sphere? To what extent are causes and potential solutions for educational outcomes discussed in the media?

In a first step of this thesis, key concepts relevant to the research will be outlined. Examining definitions and dimensions of social inequalities and the reproduction of these inequalities within the German education system will provide a comprehensive understanding of how systemic disparities are perpetuated through educational structures. As a central point of reference for this work the basis of the PISA Study, its relevance for Germany and its outcomes will be briefly thematised. Theoretical background on the interplay of media discourse and political action and an overview of research that analysed media reactions to PISA will follow. Methodologically, a document analysis will be conducted, systematically evaluated through qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA, as detailed in Chapter 2. The results section in Chapter 3 will present the reactions to the PISA findings, with a strong focus on identified causes, proposed solutions and social inequality. The discussion will summarize the findings, address the research questions, and reflect on methodological challenges encountered. Finally, the concluding remarks will assess the significance of the findings for educational policy and suggest directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

1.1. Social Inequality in Education

The following chapter deals with the theoretical foundations of social inequality and the mechanisms of its reproduction. Reference is also made to the reproduction of social inequality through the education system.

1.1.1. Social Inequality

Social inequality has long been a subject of debate and remains a central topic in academic research, reflecting its persistent relevance in shaping societies worldwide. Over the years, scholars have approached inequality from various perspectives, resulting in multiple definitions that emphasize different dimensions. As Carmo (2021) highlights

“[...] inequalities necessarily imply multidimensional and systemic processes where they cross creating dynamics of intersectionality; they are produced by complex formulations of categorisation generating mechanisms of social closure and exclusion; they should be framed by territorial dynamics and in different analytical scales; they have considerable impacts on social mobility trajectories and on forms of social reproduction; and they constitute regimes that are also produced and reproduced in the realms of ideology and political struggle” (Carmo, 2021, p. 9).

Since this work focuses on social inequality in the context of education, the dimension of resource inequalities and their reproduction holds particular significance. Many social and economic factors are inherited by subsequent generations and impact people's chances and expectations for the rest of their lives. These factors have an influence on a number of aspects of life, including social networks, work and education. Therefore, there is a relationship between an individual's initial level of inequality - that is, the disparities in wealth, income, or position they inherit - and their likelihood of rising through the social ladder. When inherited factors like family background, social class, or education have less influence on a person's opportunities, there is greater equality of opportunity. In such a scenario, individuals have a better chance to seize the best opportunities in life, regardless of their family or social origins.

Therefore, the more society minimizes the impact of these inherited conditions, the more likely it becomes that people can succeed based on their abilities and efforts rather than the circumstances they were born into (Carmo, 2021, pp. 7-8). As this thesis relates to social inequality in the context of education, the reproduction of inequality, as described by Bourdieu's capital theory, is explained in more detail below and illustrated in the light of the school system.

1.1.2. Forms of Capital by Pierre Bourdieu

According to Bourdieu's theory, opportunities for success are predetermined and do not rely on chance, which is a result of the power imbalance caused by the unequal distribution of resources within society (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, he defines capital as follows:

“Capital [...] is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. And the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices” (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-242).

He distinguishes among three types of capital that people possess in varying degrees: Economic, social, and cultural capital. Economic capital is based on economic theory and refers to financial resources that can be transformed into material assets. To some extent, all other forms of capital are based on it as economic capital provides the necessary foundation for acquiring and sustaining both cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 242-243).

Social capital encompasses all the resources inherent in social relationships and the associated obligations that are linked to these connections. The individuals involved gain additional value from these networks in the form of economic or cultural benefits. The amount of social capital that a person owns results from the size of the network of connections and the inherent scope of this type of capital. These exchange relationships, such as families, political parties or friendships can differ in their degree of institutionalization and require constant relational work to continue (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 248-250).

Particularly crucial for addressing educational inequality is cultural capital, which can manifest again in three forms. When cultural capital is in an embodied form, it refers to the accumulation of education, which is based on a process of internalization that requires an investment of time. This means that the acquisition must occur through one's own efforts and cannot be transmitted through the influence of others, such as through sale, exchange or gift.

Therefore, the individual must personally engage in the learning process because, due to the corporeal nature of embodied cultural capital, delegating the acquisition of education to someone else is not possible. It is important to consider the initial situations of individual people based on family background. The widely varying levels of embodied capital, and thus accumulated education, result in different starting points that provide advantages or disadvantages for each individual. Consequently, the time required for learning to achieve the same level of education varies depending on the starting point. It must also be considered that the available learning time is determined by a person's or their family's economic situation, meaning that the more economic capital is available, the more time can be invested in acquiring education. Additionally, the era, society, and social class from which the individual originates influence the nature and extent of embodied cultural capital. The unequal distribution of cultural competence provides it and its owner with a rarity value that can be exploited for profit (Bourdieu, 1968, pp. 243-246).

Acquiring embodied cultural capital generally requires objectified cultural capital. This form of capital is not bound to the body but is material in nature and can therefore be transferred in the short term. It is important to clarify that only legal ownership can be materially transferred, but not its internalization, which can only be achieved with the help of cultural skills. Objectified cultural capital can thus be decoded, internalized, and utilized through embodied cultural capital. This utilization provides users with knowledge advantages and enables them to achieve profits. Books, machines, or paintings, for example, are material carriers of cultural capital. To be able to understand a book (objectified), the ability to read (embodied) is required. The acquisition of objectified cultural capital necessitates the availability of sufficient economic capital and is thus also unequally distributed in society (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 246-247).

The possession of institutionalized cultural capital presupposes the existence of the previously explained forms of cultural capital. This refers to (educational) qualifications that certify a person's cultural competencies, thus allowing for the comparison of otherwise difficult to recognize, embodied capital. This permanent, legally anchored certification of internalized cultural capital empowers the holders and provides them with advantages in the job market. It should be considered that this institutionalization creates two groups. On one side are those whose cultural competencies are recognized, and on the other side are all those who, without qualifications, continue to be under pressure to prove themselves, even though they possess the same amount of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 247-248).

1.1.3. Reproduction of Social Inequalities within the School System

As described in the previous subsection, cultural capital can be created and institutionalized through the use of economic capital and transformative work in the form of learning time, which in turn can be converted into economic capital in the labor market. These interactions highlight the causes and vicious cycle of perpetually reproducing educational inequalities. Based on Bourdieu's theory of capital, the following can be noted:

The economic capital available in a family determines the intensity of educational attainment, which is determined by the time spent on it. Due to the required learning time, immediate costs arise from the delayed entry into the labor market. Additionally, there are monetary costs for the material resources needed for further education, such as books. On the other hand, higher long-term gains can be achieved, the higher the acquired educational qualifications that continuously increase through the invested learning time. However, since economic capital is unequally distributed in society, not all families can afford to provide their children with high-quality educational qualifications due to a lack of financial resources. As a result, high educational qualifications are particularly reserved for children of financially strong families, who thus have better chances of accumulating economic capital later in life. This creates a hegemonic position of the highly educated and financially strong segment of the population, which is continuously transferred to their offspring, while a contrary effect is observed for socioeconomically disadvantaged population groups. The German education system also reinforces these mechanisms because it certifies and legitimizes the cultural capital passed down through inheritance in the form of educational qualifications, thereby ignoring the unequally distributed socioeconomic prerequisites for acquiring capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

1.2. Education and Social Inequality in Germany

The following section provides a brief overview of how the German school system works. This is followed by empirical evidence on how the structural conditions of the German school system reproduce social inequality.

1.2.1. The German School System

In Germany, the federal organization of the state dictates how education is managed. Therefore, different approaches can be found from state to state. Nevertheless, with the start of compulsory schooling, all children begin their education in a common primary school. At an early age, after having completed 4 years of primary school (in Berlin and Brandenburg after 6 years), pupils

transition to a secondary school. Primary school teachers provide recommendations that guide the choice of secondary school, with the options varying across different states. The children are placed into different school types depending on their previous school performance. The three main school types are Hauptschule, Realschule, and Gymnasium. Education at a Hauptschule ends after the 9th grade, with students receiving the Hauptschulabschluss certificate, providing them with the opportunity to either enter vocational training or continue their studies. At a Realschule, students conclude their studies after the 10th grade with the Realschulabschluss certificate, allowing them to either pursue vocational training or further their education, such as at a Gymnasium. Those enrolled in a Gymnasium graduate after the 12th or 13th grade with an Abitur certificate, qualifying them for university admission. Additionally, there are schools that bring together two or three different tracks within a single school, offering all of the described certificates (Schüttler-Hansper, 2024; Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany, 2021)

1.2.2. Educational Inequality in Germany

Studies have shown that systems where students are divided into different tracks or levels based on ability tend to have larger gaps in educational outcomes between social classes. Tracking in schools can therefore reinforce or even increase the educational disadvantages faced by students from lower social backgrounds (Batruch et al, 2019, p. 486). As previously explained, the German secondary school system is divided into different tracks. These tracks have multiplied in recent years leading to a diverse landscape of different types of schools (Schneider & Tieben, 2011, p. 139).

"In comparative social stratification research, Germany is thus frequently mentioned as the prime example for an education system working as a 'sorting machine'. This means that the degree of educational inequality and occupational returns to education are closely related to the degree of stratification (i.e. having differentiated secondary education curricula) and vocational specificity (i.e. a close link between vocational education and the labour market) of an education system" (Schneider & Tieben, 2011, p. 140).

Therefore, a considerable amount of research points to the high level of educational inequality present in Germany, largely driven by the structure of the country's education system, which plays a crucial role in perpetuating social disparities (Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 425).

Much of the observed inequality comes from students being placed into different tracks when starting lower secondary education (Dräger & Müller, 2020, p. 6; Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 425; Schneider & Tieben, 2011, p. 139). Studies have found that children from less advantaged social backgrounds are less likely to receive a teacher's recommendation for the Gymnasium, even when they have the same cognitive skills or reading abilities as their peers from wealthier families. In addition, parents from lower social classes tend to follow teacher recommendations more closely when making decisions about their children's education compared to parents from higher social classes (Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 428). Moreover, parents with low socioeconomic status are more likely to choose vocational tracks for their children, even if they have a recommendation for an academic track, while parents with high socioeconomic status tend to do the opposite. This difference is often attributed to the fact that these parents have higher educational aspirations for their children (Dräger & Müller, 2020 p. 2; Gil-Hernández, 2019, p. 7). Consequently, the chances of pupils from the lower social classes attending a Gymnasium after elementary school are significantly lower even though they have the same abilities and perform equally well. (Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 428). Although it's possible in theory for students to switch tracks, it rarely happens. This applies in particular to the upward mobility. The track a student is placed in early on can heavily influence their chances of getting into higher education and shaping their future career. Therefore, the structure of the system continues to make it hard for students to change their educational path once they've been placed in a lower track (Dräger & Müller, 2020, pp. 5-6; Gil-Hernández, 2019, p. 7; Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 427).

Even before students are placed into different school tracks, there are already significant differences in academic abilities based on their parents' backgrounds (Gil-Hernández, 2019, p.7). Additionally, those differences widen as wealthier families tend to have higher educational aspirations as well as the resources to make up for their children's poor academic performance. Strategies like private tutoring, helping with homework, and setting high expectations are used to prevent them from losing their social status across generations (Dräger & Müller, 2020, p. 8; Gil-Hernández, 2019, pp. 3-4).

“Thus, the combination of developmental and socialization disadvantages in the educational starting position which have not been compensated for during the elementary school years and the socially biased performance criteria, which mean that children from lower social positions in society have to perform much better in school than their peers from higher social positions in order to be sent to the Gymnasium by their parents, leads to a double disadvantage in the transition from primary to secondary school for socially underprivileged children in Germany” (Pietsch & Stubbe, 2007, p. 439).

In summary, it can be said that the German school system is not only unable to compensate for existing social inequality, but actually exacerbates it, making the social origin of students matter for their achievements in life.

1.3. PISA

As the PISA study is a central point of reference for this work, the following section briefly explains what the PISA study is, what it measures and why it is so highly relevant to society. In addition, important facts about the survey in 2022 are presented and the results of the study for Germany are outlined.

1.3.1. PISA & its Relevance

“PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges” (OECD, n.d.-b). Additionally, it collects information on the attitudes, motives, and abilities of the students, including creative thinking, global competency, and cooperative problem-solving. The program is managed by the OECD Secretariat, the PISA Governing Board, National Project Managers (NPMs), and international contractors to ensure the effective implementation and management of the assessment. To get more insight into how well-prepared students are for modern challenges, PISA constantly includes new fields, such as critical media literacy and digital learning. The examination is not curriculum-specific and draws from topics found in a variety of curricula around the globe, emphasizing students' use of knowledge and abilities (OECD, n.d.-a; OECD, n.d.-b).

Its consistency and global reach are decisive advantages. With more than 100 nations having participated in PISA so far, the surveys, which are typically conducted every three years, enable economies to monitor their progress toward achieving important learning objectives. Furthermore, it tackles issues of public policy, assisting governments and educators in comprehending the best teaching practices and how effectively schools prepare children for life. In a 2012 OECD study, the majority of economies and countries taking part in PISA stated that their own policy choices were influenced by the practices of high-performing nations. In addition, PISA frameworks were utilized by several nations to compare and enhance their curricula and establish common national standards (OECD, n.d.-a; OECD, n.d.-b).

1.3.2. PISA 2022 & Germany's Outcomes

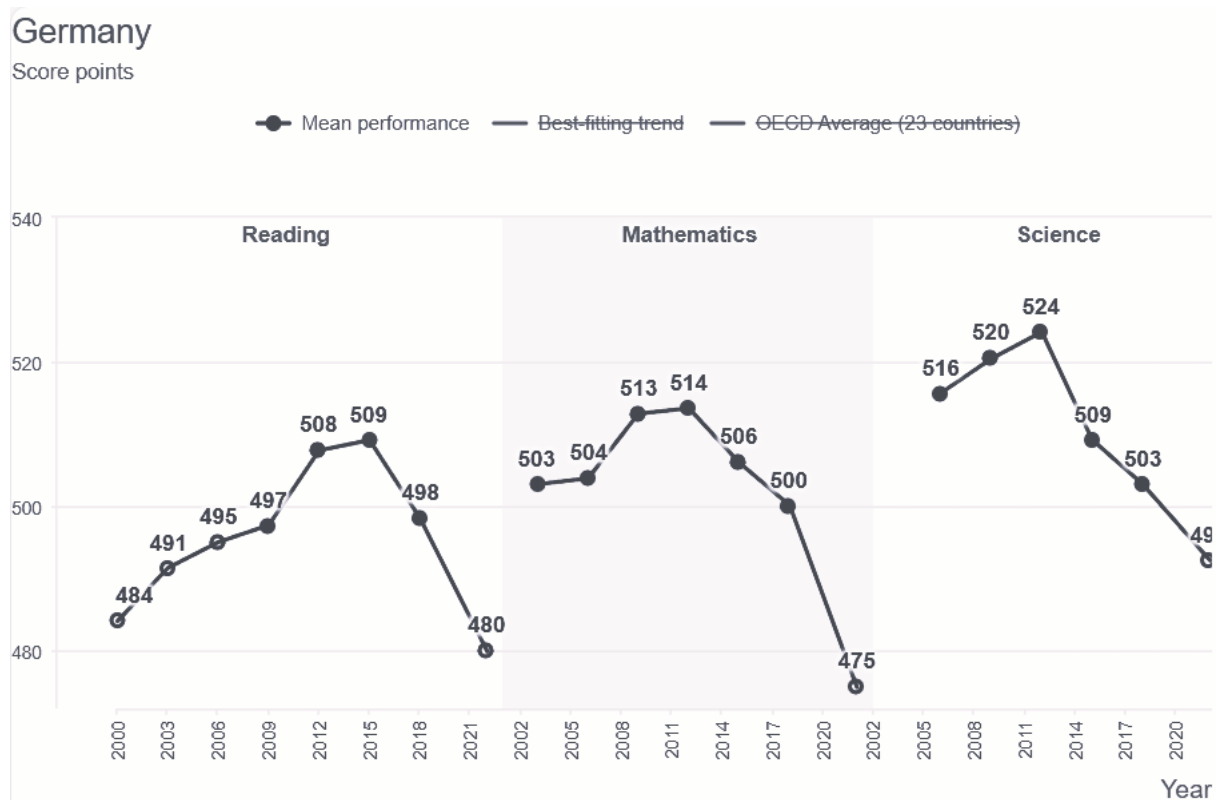
The OECD revealed the results of the latest study, conducted in 2022, which included 81 economies, on December 5, 2023. It especially concentrated on mathematics but also included reading, science and creative thinking. The Covid-19 pandemic along with its difficulties caused the assessment to be delayed, which was originally intended to take place in 2021. Approximately 690 000 students participated in the two-hour computer-based exams. Using an adaptive approach, questions for reading and math were assigned depending on prior performance. Additionally, students answered a 35-minute background survey. Written response and multiple-choice questions were included in the exams. Two volumes containing the initial PISA 2022 findings have been published. The first one analyzes variations in student performance between pre- and post-pandemic and looks at patterns among student groups. The second one highlights resilient education systems during COVID-19 and concentrates on the well-being of students (OECD, n.d.-a; OECD, n.d.-b).

Germany's outcomes for science, math, and reading are much lower than they were in 2018 and indicate a declining trend that the earlier PISA publications have already started to show. The current results in mathematics and science are lower than they were in the PISA studies from the 2000s, when these subjects were first thoroughly examined. In reading, the results are similar to those from the PISA 2000 study. Each of the three areas shows performance losses significantly above average. In at least one of the three assessed areas, about one-third of 15-year-olds demonstrated very low skill levels.

Around one in six pupils shows significant deficits across all three categories. Since 2018, the proportion of students with very poor scores has increased to over 30% in mathematics, around 26% in reading, and about 23% in science. Furthermore, there are fewer high-achieving students in Germany when it comes to reading and math proficiency. Additionally, there are notable differences in competency based on the type of school attended; students attending a Gymnasium tend to score better. Disparities according to origin are especially pronounced in Germany compared to other countries, with the socioeconomic background of parents being closely linked to students' performance in mathematics (Lewalter et al., 2023; Technische Universität München, 2023).

Figure 1

Trends in mathematics, reading and science performance



Source: <https://de.statista.com/themen/1200/pisa-studie/#topicOverview>

1.4. Media Discourse, Political Action & PISA

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw laid the foundation for understanding the connection between media discourse and political action. In their paper “The agenda-setting function of mass media”, they present and investigate the idea of agenda-setting during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign. They argue that the public's perception of the importance of certain problems is

greatly influenced by the mass media. By setting thematic priorities in reporting, the mass media determine what is important and place it on the political agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Holtz-Bacha (2009) describes the relationship between science, politics and the media. Politics wants power, science strives for truth and the media seeks attention. These different goals often lead to conflicts, especially between politics and the media, which are both fighting for influence. Despite these differences, the three systems are interdependent. Politics uses science as an advisor to make informed decisions, while science seeks to educate the public through the media. The media, in turn, bring issues into the public debate, which often forces politicians to deal with them. However, as the media work according to their own, often economically driven rules, politics and science have to skillfully position their interests in order to be heard. This inevitably leads to tensions, as the objectives and methods of the three systems are not always compatible (Holtz-Bacha, 2009, pp. 86-87, 89-92).

Ever since the first PISA study, published in December 2001, it has been clear how far-reaching the consequences of the publication have been for education policy. In Germany, the public reaction to PISA was extraordinary, with the so-called "PISA shock" breaking through the long-standing stagnation in education reform. This shock pushed the country to implement new and compulsory educational changes. Compared to other nations, Germany responded more strongly to PISA, which is particularly notable because PISA, as a study, doesn't have the authority to enforce policies or directly incentivize reforms. However, by sparking the PISA shock, the OECD created an opportunity for reform in Germany and gained influence over the direction of those reforms. PISA's ability to stir public and political demand for improving the education system also helped resolve the impasse among German policymakers, leading to a unified push for change (Nieman, Martens & Teltemann, 2017, pp. 175-180). A major reason for the shift in the political and scholarly debate on education in Germany was identified as the widespread social consensus that reforms are needed.

Almost all significant social groups called for changes to secondary education as a result of the PISA results and how they were interpreted in Germany. Although Germany had started developing national standards for education in the late 1990s, the implementation of these standards was actually sped up by the PISA results and the heated public discussion they sparked. Germany's strong reaction can also be attributed to the country's lack of participation in many other major international educational comparisons since the 1960s, or to the fact that when it did participate, as in the case of TIMSS, the results were largely overlooked by the media and politicians (Erlt, 2006, pp. 621, 628-629).

PISA made certain problems in the educational system obvious to a wide general public, creating a sense of crisis and thus forcing educational policy makers to react. However, the form this reaction took differed widely and did not necessarily bear a very clear and empirically demonstrable connection to the problems highlighted by PISA” (Waldow, 2009, p. 481). The resulting educational policy decisions were often attributed to the PISA results, even if these decisions had already been made before the PISA data was published. The results and their processing by political actors have shown how educational research can be used politically. The reactions to PISA were motivated not only by the desire to solve educational problems, but also by the need to maintain and strengthen political legitimacy. Political actors used the research results of PISA and the public’s high acceptance of educational reforms to achieve their own political goals and legitimize their positions. Therefore, public opinion and societal beliefs about the worth of a policy can be more influential than empirical assessments of its efficacy (Waldow, 2009, pp. 479-481).

PISA 2000 showed that the media is willing to deal with scientific topics if these topics have the potential to arouse public interest. It also made it clear that political actors become aware and react when scientific findings reach the general public through the media and attract attention. Therefore, both the media and politicians react more strongly to scientific discussions when they have a large public resonance and thus become more relevant for public opinion and political decisions (Holtz-Bacha, 2009, p. 92).

1.5. Literature Review

The analysis of media reactions to PISA studies has already received attention in academic research. Despite previous research, there has been no comprehensive qualitative analysis of media reactions to PISA 2022 in Germany to date. The current state of research is briefly outlined below in order to illustrate the relevance and the research gap addressed by this study.

Acke and Heikkola (2021) analyzed the reactions in Finnish and German media to the 2018 PISA results. They used discourse analytical methods to examine the coverage in national newspapers and online news and to analyze the construction of vulnerability in the educational context.

Zindel, Oubaid, Ukena, and Wierum (2019) compared the media reaction to PISA in Germany and the USA and attribute differences in reporting to different interpretations of the performance comparison. Their discourse-analytical study focuses on headlines and the quantitative differences in reporting, while this thesis delves deeper into the qualitative aspects. Maas (2016) examined how the topic of social inequality is treated in the media, particularly in the context of the PISA debate in Germany. However, it does not cover the latest PISA debate as it was published in 2016. Tillmann (2015) published a comprehensive empirical analysis of the reporting on PISA 2000. He analyzed how frequently, intensively and over the long-term PISA was reported on and which thematic priorities were set. Tillmann examines the reflection and influence of political discussions by the press but does not go into the detailed discursive construction of educational problems and social inequalities, as this thesis aims to do. The edited volume by Knodel, Martens, De Olano and Popp (2010) examines international reactions to the PISA study and the subsequent reforms. The authors ask questions about the factors that explain different reactions to PISA and why reforms have been introduced in some countries and in others not. However, the authors focus primarily on the political and educational policy changes triggered by PISA and not on a qualitative analysis of media coverage. Popp (2010) provides comparative findings with her qualitative press analysis of the reactions to the PISA study in Germany, Austria, Spain and Mexico. She emphasizes the role of the international level in the renewal of national education systems and how the OECD contributes to the harmonization of reform measures through the dissemination of best practices. Popp's work concentrates on the macro-political reactions and focuses less on the specific media content. In his work, Ertl (2006) sheds light on how the PISA results have influenced the educational discourse in Germany, particularly in the areas of political discourse, curriculum development and academic debates on education.

While these studies address various aspects of media reactions to PISA, they differ in focus, methods, and do not cover the most recent PISA reactions. Therefore, this thesis fills a research gap by providing a qualitative analysis of media reactions to PISA 2022 in Germany.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

The research design defines a structured approach for collecting and analyzing data that enables the investigator to answer the posed question. Therefore choosing a research design means deciding what aspects of the research are most important and how to focus on them throughout the study (Flick, 2022, p. 3). In this study, a qualitative research design was chosen. This chapter provides information on the logic of qualitative research and why this approach is particularly fitting for answering the presented research questions. Following on from this an elaboration of the data collection and its analysis will be given.

2.1. Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was selected to investigate the dynamics of public debate surrounding the recent PISA results and the related issue of social inequality. This decision is based on several fundamental characteristics highlighted in the following text.

The term “qualitative research” encompasses a wide range of theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches to understanding social reality. It takes a primarily interpretative and meaningful approach and can be seen as an independent complement to other research methods or as a contrast and distinction from the more experimental, model-based, and quantitative social research. (Kardorff, 1995, pp. 3-4). In other words, it is a method of inquiry that focuses on understanding natural social life through nonquantitative data (Saldana, 2011, pp. 3-4). By taking an interpretative approach, qualitative research enables an examination of how various media outlets and public figures present and discuss the PISA results and social inequality. It enables to capture rich and detailed information about people's thoughts and positions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative data. Qualitative research “emphasizes the way people interpret and create meaning of their perception in recognizing the social context” (Tümen-Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021, p. 2).

This focus is crucial for understanding the diverse and subjective perceptions in media reactions to PISA results. Most qualitative studies focus on understanding specific situations and environments. They look at how social processes and individual cases fit within their unique settings. They also pay close attention to how people interpret and make sense of things within their particular cultural and social backgrounds. Qualitative data provide rich and important insights. They offer detailed and meaningful information about people's experiences, feelings, and social contexts. Instead of looking at numbers and measurable factors, qualitative research focuses on patterns, main ideas, differences, and perspectives. Collecting qualitative data means noting what people actually say, including their words, gestures, and tone of voice (Neuman, 2013, pp. 176-177). Following this approach allows to delve deeply into the reactions, capturing not just what is being said, but also how and why it is being communicated in specific ways.

In qualitative research designs scientists watch how people behave, analyse written documents, and look at visual images like photos or videos. These types of data showcase the variety of methods used to communicate and document individual and social experiences, helping to understand the detailed and real aspects of people's social lives. (Flick, 2022, p.2; Neuman, 2013, pp. 176-177). Having the freedom to select from a vast pool of material allows to easily tailor the data to suit the specific contexts of this study. By analyzing national newspapers, this study uncovers public opinion on the PISA outcomes and policy debates, providing a comprehensive view of the media discourse.

Findings of qualitative research can include “[...] documenting cultural observations, gaining new insights and understandings about individual and social complexities, evaluating the effectiveness of programs or policies, creating artistic interpretations of human meanings, and/or critiquing existing social structures while promoting social justice” (Saldaña, 2011, p.4). The outcomes of this study aim to shed light on the broader social and political implications of the media's portrayal of PISA results and social inequality. The goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role media plays in shaping societal attitudes and driving educational and social reforms.

2.2. Document Analysis

Documents must be recognized “as ‘social facts’ that are created, consumed, shared and utilized in socially organized ways”(Dalglish, Khalid, & McMahon, 2020, p. 1425). Therefore they are not just static records but are imbued with social meanings and functions providing insights about the phenomenon to be investigated. Consequently, documents should be viewed as more than just objects, rather, they must be appreciated and subjected to the proper research procedures (Hoffmann, 2018, p. 10; Mogalakwe, 2006, pp. 221-222).

Document analysis is a systematic approach to examine and assess divers types of public or private documents, containing text, audio or visual material, in a qualitative or quantitative way (Mogalakwe, 2006, p. 223; Morgan, 2022, pp. 64-65) “for the purpose of finding and or understanding patterns and regularities” (Mogalakwe, 2006, p. 221) as well as “to provide context, generate questions, supplement other types of research data, track change over time and corroborate other sources” (Dalglish et al., 2020, p. 1425). It can provide insights or achieve research goals that other methods cannot. In cases where other methods fall short, document analysis can fill the gap. Additionally, when used in conjunction with other methods, document analysis can significantly enhance and deepen the findings, adding layers of understanding and context that might otherwise be missed. As documents, unlike live interactions, are static and unchanging once created the data within them remains consistent over time. In methods like interviews or observations, researchers can unintentionally influence participants. Researchers doing document analysis mitigate these risks because the documents are not subject to real-time interaction. Another advantage of this approach is the conveniences of low costs, good accessibility and less ethical concerns (Dalglish et al., 2020, pp. 1424, 1430; Morgan, 2022, pp. 64-66, 70).

The document analysis method is particularly well-suited for analyzing the reaction to the PISA results, bringing with it the perfect set of advantages for this type of study. Firstly, it allows for a thorough examination of various media sources, which are easily accessible and often freely available. This enables to gather a comprehensive dataset without the logistical challenges, costs and worries about the potential biases introduced by presence associated with data collection methods like interviews or surveys. While those methods require significant resources and careful handling of personal data, document analysis utilizes publicly available documents, simplifying the research process while maintaining ethical integrity.

Contrary to its advantages mentioned above, document analysis is underutilized in qualitative research, often overshadowed by methods like interviews and observations. Despite its potential to offer unique insights and complement other research methods, it is frequently marginalized and rarely used as a sole method. Some researchers are not aware of its value or prefer generating new data rather than reanalyzing existing documents. This bias is reflected in both academic training and public reporting. While historical precedent shows the value of document analysis, already performed by Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, some scholars doubt its methodological integrity as well as potential benefits (Dalglish et al., 2020, pp. 1424-1425; Hoffmann, 2018, pp. 7-8; Mogalakwe, 2006, pp. 221-224; Morgan, 2022, p. 64).

Document analysis was selected as the research method not only for its inherent value but also as an academic challenge. It presents an opportunity to broaden the methodological repertoire and is expected to develop new skills that will enhance overall research capabilities. Embracing this approach will hopefully contribute to the academic discourse surrounding the validity and utility of document analysis in qualitative research.

2.2.1. Limitation

Similar to interviews and observations, documents alone are unlikely to provide all the important information that might be uncovered by other methods. Depending on the research goal document analysis therefore needs to be complemented by other research methods to obtain a more complete understanding. This also applies, when the content and scope of available documents might shape or limit the direction of the study (Morgan, 2022, pp. 66-67).

Documents may include biases and perhaps false or misleading information due to the subjective opinions or interests of the people who created them. Furthermore, the material supplied can often be selectively presented in an effort to generate a positive impression. As a result of inexperience or self-interest, authors can present distorted or false information instead of making a sincere attempt to offer truthful facts. In order to guarantee the validity of the data utilized in the research, it is important to evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources that generated the documents under analysis (Morgan, 2022, pp. 66-72).

In this specific case the analysis is limited to a certain period of time after the PISA results were made public. This temporal restriction cannot fully represent the media debate that takes place over time as media content is constantly evolving, with new articles and opinions emerging regularly. The findings can also not account for later developments or changes in the discourse since it is restricted to the material that was accessible at the time the data was collected. Furthermore, the choice of media outlets analysed influences the results. Different types of media have varying levels of influence, credibility, and audience reach, which limit the generalizability of the findings.

2.2.2. Ethical Concerns

When the content being analyzed is likely to be considered public, there is a reduced need to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the individuals who created it. Even though publicly available documents pose fewer ethical concerns, documents can contain personal records that can be ethically problematic unless they are willingly provided for research. It emphasizes the importance of obtaining consent from individuals whose personal records are being analyzed. In general researchers need to consider the potential harm their research might cause to the authors of the content being analyzed. This is especially true if it's not apparent whether the material is meant to be private or public. (Morgan, 2022, p. 69). “For instance, blogs are examples of sources containing pre-existing text, but researchers disagree as to whether participant consent is needed to analyze them” (Morgan, 2022, p. 69). It underscores the ethical responsibility of researchers to assess and mitigate any negative impact their work may have on individuals who produced the documents (Morgan, 2022, p. 69).

Although the following analysis focuses on public media sources there is always an ethical consideration regarding whether those quoted or involved in the media content are aware of how their statements will be used in academic research. Even if publicly available, it is important to reflect on the rights of individuals regarding how their opinions and perspectives are represented, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics like education and social inequality.

2.3. Sampling

In this study, the sampling strategy is aligned with the research objectives, focusing on media reactions to the PISA 2022 results in Germany. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was employed, targeting specific media outlets that are influential in shaping public discourse with the keyword “PISA” guiding the search for relevant media documents. The selected documents include articles, opinion pieces, and interviews from 8 of the best-known national newspapers in Germany: Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Stern, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, Focus, Handelsblatt and TAZ (Die Tageszeitung). All of the documents analysed were taken from the websites of the respective newspapers. These outlets were selected due to their wide readership, political diversity, and strong influence on both public discourse and policy debates in Germany. This ensures a broad representation of viewpoints, covering both conservative and progressive political spectrums, as well as different journalistic formats in which teachers, pupils, politicians, trade unions, journalists and entrepreneurs, among others, speak out. The temporal scope of the sample is limited to the period following the release of the PISA 2022 results. The documents that were analyzed are all from the period between 05.12.2023 and 31.03.2024, with the majority from December 2023. This period was chosen as it represents the most intensive phase of media coverage and public discussion on the topic.

2.4. Data Analysis

This section describes the evaluation methodology selected to analyze the collected data. It also briefly discusses how scientific quality criteria were maintained in the process.

2.4.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis based on Philipp Mayring's structuring approach was selected for organizing and analysing the data. Its objective is to identify and isolate a defined structure within the chosen material. A category system is used to classify the material in order to do this. All parts of the text that fit into one of the categories are systematically filtered from the source. Essentially, it involves selecting and extracting relevant data from the material and organizing it in accordance with established rules (Mayring, 2000, p. 197).

Determining the structural dimensions and their corresponding characteristics is the first step in the procedure. Once the dimensions are established, a category system is compiled. In this study, inductive categories arising from the data analysis are combined with predefined deductive categories derived from theory. Creating coding guidelines is the next stage. These consist of specific coding rules, anchor examples that represent the categories, and detailed definitions of the categories. This process entails several rounds of revisions and refinements to the definitions and the category system. This guarantees that the categories maintain their relevance and accurately represent the data. In light of the research topic and theoretical framework, the coded information will then be summarized and interpreted as part of the final analysis (Mayring, 2000, pp. 197-199).

2.4.2. MAXQDA

To support this process, a popular program for evaluating qualitative data in empirical social research, called MAXQD, was used. It facilitates the management and analysis of a wide range of data types, including surveys, texts, audio and video recordings, and data from social media. The program has several features to organize data, transcribing, analysing text both qualitatively and quantitatively, and creating visualizations. (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 1–5) One of the main features of the program is data coding, which involves categorizing (or assigning codes) to specific data segments. This is especially helpful for assessing media responses as it permits an organized and comprehensive examination of the data (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 70–71).

2.4.3. Quality Criteria

The anchor examples and definitions are essential as they help in maintaining consistency and reliability throughout the coding process. The coding guidelines facilitate a more accurate and replicable analysis, as they provide clear instructions on how to interpret and classify the data. By continuously revising the categories, the analysis adapts to the nuances of the material, leading to more meaningful and insightful findings. Structuring content analysis, therefore, is a detailed and rigorous method that emphasizes systematic categorization and theory-driven analysis. It allows for a comprehensive examination of the material, ensuring that the analysis is both reliable and valid.

CHAPTER 3

Results

3.1. Social Inequality

During this analysis, it quickly became evident that social inequality is highlighted as one of the most pressing issues in the educational discourse after PISA 2022. It was discussed particularly frequently in the context of migration and early childhood education.

Many actors criticize the persistent high level of social inequality within the education system:

“The Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW) called it a 'scandal' that the dependence of children's and adolescents' academic performance on their family background has not decreased in over 20 years. Germany has had both a performance issue and a glaring justice problem for decades” [my translation] (Bensinger-Stolze as cited in Stern, 2023a, December 5).

Germany's poor performance in the PISA test is also attributed to the struggles of disadvantaged students. *Stern* writes: “One reason is considered to be the low educational success in Germany among children from socially disadvantaged families” [my translation] (Stern, 2023, December 10). Aladin El-Mafaalani, sociologist and education researcher, summarizes the structural problems and the injustice of the system: “Too much responsibility still lies with families - this is unfair for children from disadvantaged households because their parents cannot support them in learning” [my translation] (El-Mafaalani as cited in Boldebeck, 2023b, December 5). Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director of Education and PISA Coordinator, emphasizes, however, that it is precisely the parents who must take responsibility, as schools alone cannot solve this problem:

“The educational success of a child is too closely linked to their social background. [...] Our idea so far has been: We need schools to compensate for all the deficits of the family environment. That was naive. The new data shows us: We cannot do it without the parents” [my translation] (Schleicher as cited in FOCUS Online, 2024, January 19).

Simone Fleischmann, President of the Bavarian Teachers' Association (BLLV), also acknowledges that the support for disadvantaged children is insufficient: “In Bavaria, we are currently unable to support children from socio-economically weak backgrounds as they need to be” [my translation] (Fleischmann as cited in Metzler, 2024, March 18).

3.1.1 Migration

Migration emerges as one of the most discussed topics in the latest German PISA discourse. The challenges associated with integrating students with migrant backgrounds are frequently addressed in the analyzed newspaper articles and are linked to the PISA results. Aladin El-Mafaalani, a sociologist and expert on migration, describes the current situation in schools as follows: "In urban areas, the majority of children in kindergartens and primary schools now have a migrant background. In these primary schools, 20 different languages are spoken. This is a new superdiversity" [my translation] (El-Mafaalani as cited in Boldebeck, 2023b, December 5). This diversity presents significant challenges for the education system in dealing with heterogeneous classes. The author of an article in *Welt* sees one of the challenges in the fact that many teachers are not prepared for this superdiversity: "Discipline and motivation alone are of little use if the teacher is neither prepared for the demands of teaching a class with 40 percent migrant students nor competent in subject-specific pedagogy" [my translation] (Posener, 2023, December 15). Gerhard Leibl, a private tutor, focuses on the issue of social inequality and highlights the additional challenges faced by students with migrant backgrounds: "Children with a migrant background carry a double burden. Their parents were far less able to replace teachers at home compared to other households" [my translation] (Leibl as cited in Casper, 2023, December 8). Christine Streichert-Clivot, President of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, emphasizes the socio-economic conditions and stresses that it is not solely the migrant background that is decisive, but the living conditions of families that have a significant impact on educational success: "The migration experience of students only hinders their success at school if their parents live in precarious conditions. PISA shows this clearly" [my translation] (Streichert-Clivot as cited in Gillmann, 2023, December 27). A broad consensus that the integration of students with migrant backgrounds in the German school system is failing can be seen in many statements. One example is the remark of the Honorary President of the German Teachers' Association, Heinz-Peter Meidinger, who points out the insufficient integration of immigrants in schools: "It is obvious that [the students from the 2015/16 migration wave] were not successfully integrated into the school system" [my translation] (Meidinger as cited in Sabin, 2023, December 6). The author of a *Zeit* article also comments on the significant educational gap for migrant children and views it as a failure: "The story of marginalized migrants is true. On average, they lag behind children without a migration background in every subject, sometimes by several school years" [my translation] (Agarwala, 2023, December 9). Many of the individuals mentioned in

the articles agree, however, that migration itself is not the problem, but rather the handling - or lack of handling - of it. Migration alone is not a sufficient explanation for the poor PISA results. For example, a comment in *Handelsblatt* notes: "But even countries like Italy, Turkey, and Portugal have managed to improve continuously in PISA, despite the fact that migration has exploded globally for political and economic reasons. We have not" [my translation] (Gillmann, 2023a, December 5). *TAZ* editor Ralf Pauli also emphasizes an important point regarding the PISA results: "It is not immigration itself that is lowering our school performance, but the lack of support for the socially disadvantaged" [my translation] (Pauli, 2023a, December 5). This statement shows that it is not solely the migration background that influences educational success, but rather the lack of support and assistance for socially disadvantaged students - regardless of their migrant status. Florian Fabricius, Secretary General of the German Student Conference, shares a similar view and highlights the structural deficits of the German education system: "But students with a migrant background are not to blame for this; it is a structural failure of politics. Successful integration begins in the classroom" [my translation] (Fabricius as cited in Peters, 2024, January 26). Fabricius makes it clear that the problem does not lie with the students themselves, but with the inadequate education system that has failed to implement the necessary integration measures in a timely and effective manner.

3.1.2 Language Barrier

Within the migration debate surrounding the PISA 2022 discourse, language barriers have emerged as a frequently cited problem. Birgit Stöver, the education policy spokesperson for the CDU parliamentary group in Hamburg, highlights this challenge: "A key issue is the fact that German is spoken in fewer and fewer households" [my translation] (Stöver as cited in Witte, 2023, December 7). Many articles point out that in families with a migration background, the primary language spoken at home is often the mother tongue, which limits children's access to the German language and negatively impacts their academic success in school. This language barrier is also a crucial point for former teacher Tayfun Taylor. He argues that the heterogeneity in classrooms, especially regarding language proficiency, can overwhelm both teachers and students. "For me, it's absurd to bring children with different languages together in one class [...] It's pure wishful thinking if people believe that this [...] could work" [my translation] (Taylor as cited in Hussendörfer, 2023, December 30). Moreover, the concept of classes for German as a second language (DaZ) does not seem to function smoothly. In an article in *Zeit*, Anant Agarwala describes the hurdles faced by two immigrant students within the German education system: "Six months pass before he gets a spot in a DaZ class" [my

translation] (Agarwala, 2023, December 9). The waiting period to secure a place delays the integration of migrant children into the German school system. According to Doris Lewalter, an education researcher, the failure to establish comprehensive and widespread language support has been a missed opportunity. She explains: "A key reason is certainly that we still have not managed to consistently provide early language support for everyone who needs it" [my translation] (Lewalter as cited in FOCUS online, 2023, December 5). This lack of support results in children with migration backgrounds starting school with language deficits, which affects their entire academic trajectory. Kirsten Kruzek, a former teacher, underscores how crucial understanding the German language is for solving PISA tasks: "To tackle these mathematical problems, one must be able to read for meaning and have a broad vocabulary. This is an additional challenge for children from non-German-speaking families" [my translation] (Kruzek, 2023, December 18).

3.1.3 Early Childhood Education

The analysis of newspaper articles reveals that early childhood education stands out as a central theme in the discourse on social inequality within the PISA debate in Germany. It becomes particularly clear that social inequality is already established before children start school and intensifies throughout their educational trajectory. Kai Maaz, a sociology professor, emphasizes: "The problems seen in ninth or tenth grade are rooted much earlier. [...] The gap widens within the first six years. Schools can only partly compensate for it" [my translation] (Maaz as cited in Peters, 2023). Therefore, the causes of later academic deficits are not primarily found in the school system but much earlier, during the phase of early childhood education. Education researcher Ulrich Vieluf also stresses the necessity of investing in early childhood education: "The developmental differences children bring with them at school entry are extremely large. We need to invest much more in early childhood education. That's where the foundation for participation is laid" [my translation] (Vieluf as cited in Kutter, 2024). This assessment suggests that without adequate preparation before school entry, educational disadvantages are reproduced and amplified. Catrin Boldebeck highlights in her commentary that children from socially disadvantaged families are particularly in need of early support: "Especially at the beginning of an educational biography, children from socially disadvantaged families need support. Every euro invested here is well spent and pays off in the long run" [my translation] (Boldebeck, 2024, February 2). Investments in early educational measures are thus not only seen as necessary for promoting equality but also as economically viable, as they foster long-term educational success and reduce social disparities. The lack of daycare places,

particularly for children from non-German-speaking families, is identified as a significant issue. Julia Krippenstapel, head of the Kleine Kielstraße elementary school, emphasizes: “[There is] a lack of daycare places. Children who do not speak German at home especially need a place and support before starting school” [my translation] (Krippenstapel as cited in Boldebuck, 2023c, December 5). This indicates that many children's educational paths are negatively affected by structural deficits even before they enter school. Another element identified as key to improving educational opportunities is the need for better cooperation between daycare centers and elementary schools. Bertram Brossardt calls for: “To integrate children from different backgrounds into the education system, daycare centers and elementary schools need to work more closely together” [my translation] (Brossardt as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2024a, February 2). This underscores the need for coherent, integrated educational approaches to facilitate transitions within the education system and reduce disadvantages.

3.2 Teacher Shortage

In the qualitative content analysis of the causes, problems, and critiques related to the results of the latest PISA study for Germany, teacher shortages emerge as one of the central issues. Nicole Bäuml, spokesperson for education and culture in the Bavarian state parliament, reveals, “The decisive reason for the poor PISA results, in my view, is the teacher shortage” [my translation] (Bäuml, as cited in Metzler, 2024). Similarly, Lars Lamowski, state chairman of the Verband Bildung und Erziehung (VBE) Rheinland-Pfalz, emphasizes, “The missed and substituted teaching hours have consequences” [my translation] (Lamowski, as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023d, December 5). This shortage is described by various experts and stakeholders as a severe problem, known for years but inadequately addressed. The analyzed text excerpts clearly show that this shortage significantly burdens the educational landscape, both quantitatively and qualitatively. A recurring theme is the country's insufficient training of qualified teachers, which has led to the current crisis. This structural shortfall is insufficiently compensated by short-term measures such as employing career changers and substitute teachers. Consequently, individuals without formal pedagogical training are hired, which could negatively impact education quality in the long term. Serpil Midyatli, SPD faction leader, criticizes: “Currently, one in ten teachers at our schools is not properly trained. In primary schools, it's 16 percent. And that's the average” [my translation] (Midyatli, as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023d, December 13). Barbara Gillmann shares a similar view, writing in *Handelsblatt*: “Already, almost nine percent of teachers are career changers who have not studied

pedagogy” [my translation] (Gillmann, 2023, December 10). Moreover, precarious working conditions for teachers are cited as one of the reasons for their departure from the profession or the decreasing attractiveness of teaching. Critics from various sectors argue that the profession is made more difficult by a lack of support and poor working conditions. As a result, various sources report that the existing teacher shortage is worsening. “One central problem is the lack of teachers. The states responsible for education policy are failing to attract talented people to the teaching profession” [my translation] (FOCUS Online, 2023, December 19). It is also pointed out that this shortage is not only a matter of numbers but also of the overburdening of the current teaching staff, who are faced with too many tasks. According to Kerstin Rehm’s observations, many teachers are

“walking a fine line towards burnout. Despite illness and fever, they attend school to avoid abandoning their classes, fully aware that no substitute is available. The mobile teacher reserves, usually meant for such cases, are already permanently assigned to various schools to combat the acute teacher shortage. This leads to classes often being combined and supervised by a single teacher, making it nearly impossible to meet the needs of slower learners or adequately challenge high-achieving students” [my translation] (Wiedemann Goncalves, 2023, December 20).

The few available teachers are often confronted with a high workload, leading to long-term overwork. This results in high absenteeism and long-term health issues. As Lea Meyerhof, a parent, reports: “Sometimes I wonder why I even send my child to school anymore. [...] The best, most dedicated teacher has been sick for months. Every week classes are canceled, sometimes entire days” [my translation] (Meyerhof, 2023). Maja Zaubitzer, a student, can confirm this: “Many teachers are on long-term sick leave, and those trying to compensate are overworked and end up getting sick more often too” [my translation] (Zaubitzer as cited in Moncke, Sadigh & Vooren, 2023). The articles also reveal that the teacher shortage is unequally distributed across regions and types of schools. There is a severe lack of teachers, especially in rural areas and schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. “The teacher shortage has recently exacerbated inequalities, as studies from the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin have shown. Classes are canceled more frequently in schools with many children from poor families. At the same time, more career changers without pedagogical training are working there” [my translation] (Spiewak, 2023). In an interview with *Spiegel*, the chairman of the Philologists' Association of Baden-Württemberg, Ralf Scholl, states: “The teacher shortage is very unevenly distributed—there are hardly any vacancies at grammar schools and generally in large cities”

[my translation] (Scholl as cited in Olbrisch, 2024 February 2). Additionally, structural inequalities, such as differences in teacher salaries, are highlighted, which reduce the profession's attractiveness for certain types of schools. In an interview with *Handelsblatt*, Christine Streichert-Clivot, President of the Conference of Ministers of Education, notes: "[...] the pay differences between grammar schools and primary schools persist in many cases. Addressing these discrepancies could quickly alleviate the teacher shortage" [my translation] (Streichert-Clivot as cited in Gillmann, 2023, December 27).

3.3 Covid-19 Pandemic

The analysis shows that the COVID-19 pandemic is frequently cited as one of the causes for the decline in educational performance and PISA results. Many of the analyzed newspaper articles contain similar statements, such as the one by German PISA coordinator Doris Lewalter: "A major reason for the poorer performance is the school closures during the COVID period. That's why the results are weaker in many countries, said German PISA coordinator Lewalter. However, in Germany, the decline was well above average" [my translation] (Gillmann, 2023, December 7). Sixteen-year-old student Cem-Riza Aydemir also emphasizes: "I think COVID had a big influence on the poor PISA tests. [...] Those who had no help lost a lot of material. Many parents cannot motivate their children" [my translation] (Aydemir as cited in Monecke, Sadigh & Vooren, 2023, December 18). A frequently criticized point is the attempt to implement digital education during the pandemic. FDP member of parliament Anna von Treuenfels-Frowein notes: "A central reason [for the poor PISA results] was the failed attempt to conduct digital education during the COVID period" [my translation] (Witte genannt Vedder, 2023, December 7). Authors at *Focus Online* also criticize: "The excessively long school closures during the pandemic were a mistake, and there was also a lack of technical equipment and trained teachers for remote learning" [my translation] (FOCUS Magazin, 2023, December 16). Particularly affected were disadvantaged children, who often had no access to technical devices or a suitable learning environment during homeschooling. Julia Krippenstapel, head of an elementary school, reports: "Many children from poor families had no computer, no space to learn- for them, the weeks of homeschooling were especially devastating" [my translation] (Krippenstapel as cited in Boldebuck, 2023c, December 5). Despite these massive impacts, some articles also emphasize that the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be seen as the sole cause of Germany's educational decline. PISA experts note: "The decline in performance can only be partially attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. Performance in reading

competence and natural sciences had already started to decrease beforehand” [my translation] (Posener, 2023, December 15). Former teacher and education activist Philipp Dehne also expresses criticism: “I find it wrong and dangerous for politicians to now blame the results on the pandemic and the high proportion of students with migrant backgrounds” [my translation] (Dehne as cited in Pauli, 2023, December 14).

3.4 Curricula

Curricula are defined as another weakness in the German education system in the analysed articles. Jochen Ott, opposition leader in the NRW state parliament and education expert, aptly stated: “[...] school administration [must] move away from a narrow and overloaded curriculum that puts blinders on our teachers and ties their hands” [my translation] (Ott as cited in Stoldt, 2023, December 6). This, along with many other assessments, illustrates that the current curricula are not flexible enough to meet modern educational demands. Thomas Emrich, a school principal, also sees an urgent need to revise the curricula: “Something needs to change. The curriculum we are working with dates back to the year 2000 and was revised in 2014. That was ten years ago, and a lot has changed since then” [my translation] (Emrich as cited in Rösel, 2024, March 20). This critique, like the one that follows, highlights that education policy has not sufficiently kept pace with the rapid societal and technological changes, leading to a growing gap between the demands of the present and the contents of the curriculum. Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director of Education and PISA Coordinator, drives the point home by emphasizing: “[We] are still working with outdated curricula. This no longer works today. The Google world no longer rewards us for answers, but for asking questions” [my translation] (Schleicher as cited in Menkens, 2024, February 29). In addition, Reinhard Oldenburg, chairman of the Society for Mathematics Didactics, points out another issue: “There are too many inauthentic tasks and too little sense of relevance” [my translation] (Oldenburg as cited in Krefting, 2024, January 1). A concrete example of the irrelevance of certain curriculum content is provided by Bernd Kreps, a FOCUS-Online user, who asks: “Do I really need to learn in school what the ancient Greeks thought 3,000 years ago, or wouldn't it be more important to know something about personal finance and budgeting or nutrition” [my translation] (Kreps as cited in Husendörfer, 2023, December 20)?

3.5 Infrastructure

In many articles, the negative impacts of the lack of investment in educational infrastructure are highlighted. This is reflected in several key statements and quotes, which underline the need for action at a structural level. Sven Christoffer, chairman of the Teacher's Association in North Rhine-Westphalia (Lehrer NRW), describes the current state of educational infrastructure in Germany as alarming. He states: "In the worst case, the investment backlog continues to grow: dilapidated school buildings and hopeless lags in digitalization are just the most visible consequences" (Christoffer as cited in Stoldt, 2023, December 6) [my translation]. This shows that the investment backlog is not just a short-term problem but has built up over years.

3.5.1 Buildings

Dr. Rainer Pippig, writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, notes that the reasons for the poor performance in PISA have been known for decades, and among other factors, "too many dilapidated school buildings without digital equipment" [my translation] (Dr. Pippig as cited in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2023, December 15) are partly responsible. Here, the lack of political will to invest in the renovation of school buildings and the proper equipping of schools is implicitly criticized. A similar criticism is raised by Martin Löwe, chairman of the Bavarian Parents' Association (BEV), who states: "Contrary to the pleasant assurances made in Sunday speeches, dilapidated school buildings as well as a lack of teachers and teaching materials demonstrate the genuinely low esteem held by political leaders for general education" [my translation] (Löwe as cited in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2023a, December 6). This statement underscores the symbolic importance of investment in educational infrastructure: the condition of schools is seen as an indicator of society's and politics' valuation of education. Schools in poor condition convey the impression that education is not a high priority. Florian Fabricius, the Secretary General of the German Student Conference (Bundesschülerkonferenz), vividly describes the everyday challenges faced by students: "The buildings are falling apart, lessons are canceled, we are still writing on chalkboards" [my translation] (Fabricius as cited in Peters, 2024, January 26). These words illustrate the tangible effects of poor infrastructure on daily school life. Dilapidated buildings and outdated teaching materials directly impact the classroom environment, hindering the creation of a productive learning space. Once again, the central thesis is emphasized: the poor physical state of schools and inadequate equipment obstruct student success and contribute to declining educational outcomes.

3.5.2 Digitalisation

"The simplest answer to Germany's disastrous performance in the PISA study is: digitalization" [my translation] (Schröder, 2023, December 21). This is the thesis of author Dr. Kristina Schröder in *Welt*. Similarly, Gerhard Brand, federal chairman of the Association for Education and Training (VBE), sees one of the reasons for the results in the "insufficient digitalization of schools" [my translation] (Brand as cited in Kohler, 2023, December 5). This widely shared view of inadequate digital equipment and integration in schools is also supported by Catrin Boldebuck, who emphasizes in her commentary: "There is a lack of money, the equipment with computers, and the handling of digitalization are still outdated" [my translation] (Boldebuck, 2023a, December 5). Another central criticism is the insufficient training of teachers. Barbara Gillmann quotes representatives of teachers who complain about "far too few training sessions for digital teaching" [my translation] (Gillmann, 2023, December 19), indicating that teachers are often not sufficiently prepared for the challenges of digital learning. The lack of know-how among teachers is hindering the digital transformation in the education sector. Educational researcher Dirk Zorn from the Bertelsmann Foundation further emphasizes that "Digitality is a part of school today, and it requires more than just a pact. [...] A powerful digital infrastructure must be as self-evident today as the blackboard and chalk once were" [my translation] (Zorn as cited in Stern, 2024a, February 2). Here, it is argued that mere political initiatives like the Digital Pact are not enough to address the deep-seated structural problems in the area of digitalization. Frank Moos also expresses his concerns in a reader comment: "From my own experience, I know that while schools are publicly granted tablets, they are left alone with the follow-up costs and work" [my translation] (Moos as cited in Müller, 2023, December 14). He criticizes the fact that short-term measures are often taken without long-term planning, as schools are left to bear the ongoing costs and responsibilities on their own.

3.6 Political Responsibility

The political responsibility in the context of the PISA results is frequently addressed and plays a central role in public discourse. Numerous voices from politics itself, as well as from research and society, criticize the lack of implementation of necessary educational reforms that have been repeatedly called for since the first "PISA shock". Silke Fokken summarizes the general disillusionment: "Germany performed significantly worse in the PISA test than in previous years. This was foreseeable, yet depressingly little has happened on a political level" [my translation] (Fokken, 2023, December 5). This statement highlights the frustration that, despite repeated poor results in the PISA study, no decisive measures have been taken. This lack of willingness to act is discussed in numerous articles, and the accusation of political inaction pervades the entire media coverage. A similar criticism is voiced by Saskia Esken, chairwoman of the SPD, when she describes that "whenever poor results from the international PISA study for Germany are published, there is great outrage, but nothing changes afterwards" [my translation] (Esken as cited in Stern, 2023, December 10). Esken's observation emphasizes the political failures that are repeatedly mentioned but remain without long-term consequences. Educational researcher Olaf Köller also describes the political stagnation in implementing educational reforms as frustrating, "because we largely know what needs to be done, but it is not politically implemented" [my translation] (Köller as cited in Kerstan & Spiewak, 2023, December 2023). The accusation that the crisis in German education policy is not only due to failures but also to active wrongdoing by political actors seems particularly serious. Ralf Pauli expresses this in clear terms: "The crisis is [...] self-inflicted. For more than 20 years, since the first PISA shock, the federal and state governments have been trying to get the dependence of school success on family background under control. Without success" [my translation] (Pauli, 2023a, December 5). Britta Seite, a user on *FOCUS Online*, believes that political actors shy away from in-depth reform work because it requires considerable effort: "Our future is the children, as was already evident during the COVID era. But nothing will happen. No politician wants to get that involved because it means a lot of work" [my translation] (Seite as cited in FOCUS Online, 2023, December 20).

3.6.1 Bureaucracy

Germany's bureaucracy is identified in several newspaper articles as a central hurdle to a successful education system. Numerous experts and actors within the education system criticize the excessive administration, which hinders reforms and blocks progress. Viola Patricia Herrmann, an education expert, states this clearly: "What we do not need is a bloated administration that drains funds and slows down structural reforms" [my translation] (Herrmann, 2023, December 6). This criticism reflects the frustration of many stakeholders working within the education system, who observe the paralyzing influence of bureaucracy on the efficiency and innovative capacity of schools. Among them is Reinhard Oldenburg, chairman of the Society for Didactics of Mathematics, who notes: "Bureaucracy often makes it difficult to try out new approaches, says the professor" [my translation] (Krefting, 2024, January 5). On a higher political level, bureaucracy also hinders progress. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) has even been deemed ineffective, as Armin Himmelrath reports in *Spiegel*: "Ineffective, sluggish, bureaucratic: a consulting firm has assessed the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK) as largely incapable of action in an organizational review" [my translation] (Himmelrath, 2024, January 16). This example illustrates that bureaucracy is seen as a burden to reforms and innovations not only at the local level but also at the political level.

3.6.2 Financial Investments

In the analysis of the political and societal discussion surrounding the PISA results, it becomes clear that financial investments in the education system represent a central issue. Numerous voices from the business sector, trade unions, and society emphasize that the lack of investments is one of the main reasons for the disappointing performance of German students in the PISA study. Sebastian Dettmers and Mark van Mierle, CEOs of major educational companies, succinctly summarize the problem in one of their quotes: "20 years after the PISA shock, Germany has not invested enough in education" [my translation] (Dettmers & Mierle, 2023, December 27). This statement points to the continuous underfunding of the education system, which has been repeatedly criticized since the first PISA shock in 2000. Dettmers and van Mierle go even further in their criticism, warning of the long-term consequences of continued reluctance in educational investments: "If we continue to delay investments, we will burden the younger generation one-sidedly, fully aware of the immense consequences this will have for them" [my translation] (Dettmers & Mierle, 2023, December 27). Here, they place an important moral aspect at the center of the discussion. The hesitation is depicted as a conscious

failure of political responsibility. The GEW Sachsen points to the problems that have arisen due to the lack of investments: "The austerity policies of the past have led to too few personnel, overburdened teachers, and a delay of years in digitalization and media education" [my translation] (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023o, December 5). At the school level, the financial pressure is also evident, as a reader's comment by Frank Moos illustrates: "I can say that I know schools that really have to stretch to make ends meet financially. In the end, the state is not providing the money needed for an adequate number of motivated teachers and teaching materials" [my translation] (Moos as cited in Müller, 2023, December 14). This statement highlights the daily struggle of schools to secure enough resources to maintain operations. Another issue that arises in this context is the lack of planning security due to temporary funding programs. Barbara Geist, Professor of Didactics of German Language Education, describes this dilemma as follows: "Germany spends a lower proportion of its gross domestic product on the early childhood and primary education sectors compared to other countries. Funds are sometimes only available temporarily, making it impossible for institutions to plan" [my translation] (Geist as cited in Posener, 2023, December 27). In this context, the author Alan Posener points to a particularly concrete example of the end of important educational programs:

"Nationwide, about one in eight daycare centers is a language-focused daycare. From 2016 to 2023, they were funded as part of a federal program. However, the program has ended and has not been renewed. Not because there is no need" [my translation] (Posener, 2023, December 27).

This example illustrates how successful support programs are being terminated due to a lack of financial support, even though the need still exists.

3.7 Demands & Solutions

While analyzing the documents, it became noticeable that there is significantly less room for solutions than for problems and criticism. However, demands crystallized that were repeatedly mentioned by various stakeholders in order to combat the problems identified. The main topics that emerged were early language support, a focus on core competencies and the introduction of multi-professional teams.

3.7.1 Language Support

Many voices emphasize that the focus must increasingly be placed on early childhood education. Corinna Kleinert from the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories supports this approach by highlighting the social dimension of early childhood education: "Children from families with a low socioeconomic status particularly benefit from attending daycare. [...] The daycare can reduce social inequalities" [my translation] (Kleinert as cited in Pauli et al., 2024, January 28). This illustrates that focusing on early childhood education is also a measure for promoting equal opportunities and social justice. Karin Prien, Minister of Education for Schleswig-Holstein, underscores the importance of language development in daycares: "Daycares must take more responsibility for language acquisition and foundational academic skills" [my translation] (Prien as cited in Posener, 2023, December 27). She calls for daycares to function not only as care facilities but also as places of early childhood education. Language acquisition must be systematically promoted here to prepare children optimally for school. Walter Zellmeier, Principal of the Viscardi-Gymnasium in Fürstentfeldbruck, concurs and clearly states: "The [most important thing] is language development. For every area. If we get this right, for example through support programs, the negative trend will likely be halted" [my translation] (Zellmeier as cited in Rosch, 2024, January 2). Katharina Günther-Wünsch, President of the Conference of Ministers of Education, calls for a long-term language development strategy that extends beyond early childhood: "We need targeted language development that begins in early education and continues to support learners for a longer period" [my translation] (Günther-Wünsch as cited in Kohler, 2023, December 5). This highlights the need for language development not to stop after daycare, but to be continued in elementary school and beyond to achieve sustainable learning outcomes. Thomas Kerstan, an education journalist, echoes this sentiment and offers concrete measures: "The recipe for success: language tests before school enrollment, combined with pre-school language development; regular assessment of student performance and targeted support through free tutoring" [my translation] (Kerstan, 2023, December 6). Here, systematic approaches are introduced to ensure that children with language difficulties are identified and supported early on. Ralf Pauli, an education editor, emphasizes that steps have already been taken in some federal states:

"It is a good first step that after Hamburg and Berlin, other states like Mecklenburg-Vorpommern or Bavaria are now also implementing mandatory language tests at daycare age. The logical consequence would be to introduce mandatory support measures nationwide and gradually transform daycares from care institutions into educational institutions" [my translation] (Pauli, 2023a, December 5).

His statement makes it clear that language development should not be introduced regionally but requires a nationwide system that is mandatory throughout Germany. Bertram Brossardt, CEO of the Bavarian Business Association (VBW), supports this approach: "We need consistent language development and mandatory language assessments already in daycares" [my translation] (Brossardt as cited in Stern, 2024b, February 2). Through early language development and language tests, it must be ensured that all children acquire the necessary language skills before entering school. Kerstin Rehm, District Chair of the Bavarian Teachers' Association (BLLV), describes the concrete situation in many schools and calls for targeted measures: "Actually, these children need a basic language course before they can be integrated into a class. A targeted and sustainable promotion should ideally start already in daycare" [my translation] (Rehm as cited in Regelein, 2023, December 15). Rehm points out that many children with a migration background or insufficient German skills require special support to keep up in regular classes. Early support, starting in daycare, could help them build their language skills in time.

3.7.2 Core Competencies

The analysis of the evaluated newspaper articles clearly shows that the focus on core competencies, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, is seen as a key solution to improving PISA results as well as the overall educational performance in Germany. Various stakeholders from politics and educational policy emphasize the need to realign the education system by strengthening basic skills and restructuring lessons accordingly. Kai Wegner, Berlin's Governing Mayor, puts it clearly: "We must have the courage to rethink education. [...] We must also have the courage to focus again on what is essential. [...] By that, I mainly mean that children should be able to read, write, and do arithmetic" [my translation] (Wegner as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, December 26, 2023). This statement reflects the call to focus on fundamental educational goals and to prioritize the teaching of basic skills. Hendrik Wüst, Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia (CDU), expresses a similar view, emphasizing in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and PISA 2022: "This shows how important it is that we all prioritize ensuring that these children first learn the basic competencies, namely language skills and math" [my translation] (Wüst as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023f, December 7). Wüst sees the strengthening of these foundational skills as a prerequisite for further educational success. Particularly in the early school years, the focus must be on ensuring that every child is adequately supported in these essential areas. Anna Stolz, Minister of Education in Bavaria, also sees the need to return to fundamental

educational goals. She advocates for reducing unnecessary content in the curriculum to create more time for basic skills: “On the one hand, we must have the courage to leave certain things out in order to allow more time for pedagogical work and the focus on basic competencies” [my translation] (Stolz as cited in Gerl, December 2023). Simone Oldenburg, Minister of Education in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, supports this approach: “This requires a fundamental reform of our timetable regulations and the strengthening of core competencies” [my translation] (Oldenburg as cited in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 7, 2024). She advocates for allocating more time for these subjects in the timetable and emphasizes: “The students need more time to learn, practice, and consolidate” [my translation] (Oldenburg as cited in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 7, 2024). Initial measures have already been approved for her state for the 2024/2025 school year, as reported in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: “After the latest PISA shock, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania’s Minister of Education, Simone Oldenburg (The Left), believes her measures are on the right track. The central task is to strengthen core competencies in German and mathematics, she declared on Tuesday following the announcement of the results of the PISA 2022 study” [my translation] (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 5, 2023). Ties Rabe, Hamburg’s Senator for Education, also calls for a clear focus on basic competencies, pointing to the changing student body: “In light of the changing student population, we must devote more time and more focus to learning basic competencies such as reading, writing, listening, and mathematics” [my translation] (Rabe as cited in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 5, 2023). For Rabe, it is crucial that schools take more time to ensure that all students master these fundamental skills. He therefore demands: “We need to focus more on basic competencies — we must devote more instructional time to them” [my translation] (Rabe as cited in Peters, December 6, 2023).

3.7.3 Individual Support & Multiprofessional Teams

In the documents, individual support for students and the use of multiprofessional teams in schools are identified as two central approaches to addressing educational challenges. These approaches are discussed by various stakeholders in the education sector and are backed by specific proposals. Miriam Vock, an educational scientist at the University of Potsdam, emphasizes the need to focus more on individual support: “We must invest in early individual support, which is offered in small groups at school. A more immediate measure would be courses during the summer holidays” [my translation] (Vock as cited in Spiegel, 2024a, January 26). This targeted support is intended to help close learning gaps early and meet the specific needs of individual students. Regina Knape, a school psychologist, suggests the following: “To

make up for these deficits, we need individual learning coaching, content-specific support, time, and money for school social workers and school psychologists" [my translation] (Knappe as cited in Günther, 2024, March 17). She emphasizes that such measures are necessary to effectively address the gaps that have arisen, particularly as a result of pandemic related school closures. Klaus-Peter Hammer, the chairman of the GEW Rhineland-Palatinate, advocates for increased use of multiprofessional teams: "In my view, schools need more staff" [...] This is not only about teachers, but also about multiprofessional teams with school social workers who support the schools in their educational work as well as the children and adolescents" [my translation] (Hammer as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023, December 31). Annette Schavan, former Federal Minister of Education, also calls for more personnel in schools. She advocates for the use of "language mentors and reading mentors who help new arrivals early on to master the German language at a high level" [my translation] (Schavan as cited in FOCUS online, 2023b, December 7). This form of support aims at linguistic integration, which is a central prerequisite for academic success and social participation.

3.7.4 Teacher Training

The restructured training and enhancement of the teaching profession were frequently mentioned as strategies to counteract the shortage of teachers. There is broad agreement that the attractiveness of the teaching profession must be increased, both through improved training pathways and better working conditions. The SPD demands, "Pedagogical professions should become more attractive, among other things, through an increase in pay" [my translation] (Stern, 2023, December 10). Improving salaries is seen as a key incentive to make the teaching profession more appealing in the long term. The Standing Scientific Commission suggests, "Teachers should no longer necessarily have to study two subjects. This way, we could attract mathematicians or computer scientists to the teaching profession" [my translation] (Gillmann, 2023, December 10). This would make the entry into the teaching profession more flexible and attractive, promote lateral entrants, and help alleviate the acute shortage of specialists in subjects like mathematics or computer science. Katharina Günther-Wünsch, President of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK), supports these considerations and proposes, "Shortened training for single-subject teachers or dual study programs should be discussed" [my translation] (Günther-Wünsch as cited in Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2023d, December 8). Nicole Bäuml, the SPD's spokesperson for education and culture in the Bavarian state parliament, emphasizes that "in the long run, the training of teachers is a crucial aspect" [my translation] (Bäuml as cited in Metzler, 2024, March 18). Felicitas

Thiel, Co-Chair of the Standing Scientific Commission, also highlights the importance of teacher training: "It is extremely important that prospective teachers learn something about diagnostics before they enter the field. [...] It is highly relevant to train them well so that they find their workplace attractive" [my translation] (Thiel as cited in Menkens, 2023, December 8). These statements underscore the importance of comprehensive and practical training, which equips teachers not only with pedagogical knowledge but also with practical skills essential for their daily work in schools. Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education at the OECD, advocates for a reduction in administrative burdens for teachers: "I am in favor of reorganizing teachers' working hours and relieving them of administrative tasks in particular" [my translation] (Schleicher as cited in FOCUS online, 2024, January 19). Teachers should be relieved of such duties so that they can focus more on their pedagogical responsibilities. This could help make the profession more attractive and improve the quality of teaching.

3.7.5 Targeted Investments & The “Startchancen-Pogramm”

Many actors advocate for targeted financial investments and their needs-based distribution. In particular, the recently adopted “Startchancen-Programm” is seen as an important tool to reduce social inequalities in education and to promote the academic success of children and adolescents. Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education at the OECD, highlights: "It's about focusing resources where they are most needed. First and foremost, in elementary schools and even before that – and not so much in secondary schools" [my translation] (Schleicher as cited in FOCUS online, 2024, January 19). This statement emphasizes the importance of investing in early education to combat social inequalities in the long term. Detlef Storm, principal of a primary and secondary school in Stuttgart, offers insights into what could help specifically: "In principle, it helps us when we can use money flexibly according to our needs. [...] For us, the money would be most important for staff. For additional teachers, [...] for school assistants, [...] for school social workers" [my translation] (Storm as cited in Müller-Lancé, 2024 February 2). A much-discussed measure is the “Startchancen-Programm”. It is intended to "break the strong link between social background and educational success" [my translation] (Stern, 2024a, February 2). The *TAZ* reports:

"The program's goal is to reduce the persistently high social inequality in the country. It is now confirmed that the federal and state governments will provide a total of 20 billion euros for the program. And: A large portion of the funded schools will be elementary schools" [my translation] (Pauli, 2024, February 2).

Ria Schröder, the education policy spokesperson for the FDP parliamentary group in the Bundestag, also emphasizes the importance of targeted allocation of funds. She notes: "Through the allocation of resources based on social criteria, the money reaches exactly where it is needed" [my translation] (Schröder as cited in Pauli, 2024, February 2). This underscores the social focus of the Startchancen-Programm, which specifically targets schools facing significant social challenges. Julia Willie Hamburg, like many others, welcomes the initiative. As *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reports:

"With the Startchancen-Programm adopted by the federal and state governments, Lower Saxony's Minister for Education, Julia Willie Hamburg, sees an important step towards more educational equity achieved. The aim is to ensure that all children succeed in education, regardless of their family background" [my translation] (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2024b, February 2).

Even the "National Students' Conference sees the program as a potential 'game-changer'" [my translation] (Stern 2024, February 2) but notes that the funding may be too limited to fully achieve the desired impact.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

The analysis of the selected media shows a remarkable diversity of positions and opinions on the PISA results. However, all actors agree that something must happen in the education system and that immediate political action is necessary to prevent worse things from happening. Accordingly, reporting, comments and opinions have been negatively colored and have revived the famous PISA shock.

Among the causes discussed, social inequality, the lack of teachers and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic stand out in particular. It is clear that the connection between social background and educational success is a central topic, if not the central topic, of the PISA discussions. Various stakeholders criticize the continued strong influence of family background on the school performance of children in Germany. This structural problem points to deep systemic injustices that have become anchored in the education system as explained in the theoretical part of this thesis according to Bourdieu's capital theory. The results impressively show that social inequality remains one of the most pressing problems in the German education system. This aspect is frequently addressed in the debate, particularly in relation to migration and early childhood education. It is criticized that the education system is not able to balance out social inequalities, but rather reinforces them. Children from socio-economically disadvantaged families often do not receive the support they need, which severely impairs their educational career from an early age. The content analysis also shows that the heterogeneity of the student population, which is primarily due to migration, poses enormous challenges for the education system, especially in terms of language skills and teaching methods. Many teachers feel poorly prepared for this new reality, which has a negative impact on integration and educational success. However, migration is not seen as the main problem for the poor PISA results; rather, the failure of the system to address the needs of socially disadvantaged students is highlighted as crucial. It is repeatedly pointed out that social inequalities arise before school entry and are reinforced during the educational biography.

The need to invest in early childhood education is emphasized by numerous stakeholders. A lack of kindergarten places, particularly for children from non-German-speaking families, is seen as a significant structural deficit that massively impairs the educational success of these children. A large part of the discussion focuses on the structural deficits of the German education system. It is frequently emphasized that the teacher shortage is a central cause of the poor results, as this not only leads to class cancellations but also negatively affects the quality of teaching. The inadequate digital infrastructure in schools is also identified as a significant shortcoming, especially in light of the pandemic-related school closures. The media also discuss that curricula are outdated and no longer in line with modern society's demands, leading to lessons that fail to meet contemporary educational needs. The analysis also shows that political actors are repeatedly criticized for their inaction. Although the problems in the education system have been known for a long time, it is lamented that no deep-rooted reforms have been implemented to effectively combat social inequalities.

What also stands out in the analysis is a certain imbalance between the extensive problematization of the causes and the relatively limited discussion of concrete solutions. Often, the need to expand early childhood education measures, especially in socially disadvantaged environments, is emphasized. It is also suggested that more investment should be made in early language support and that teaching should focus more on fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Other frequently discussed solutions include the introduction of multiprofessional teams in schools to provide individual support for students, as well as targeted investments in educational infrastructure to address existing deficits. The Startchancen-Programm is also mentioned and seen as a good starting point for a shift in the political prioritization of education. However, comparatively little space is given to concrete, and especially creative and innovative, solutions in educational matters.

At this point, reference should also be made to the methodological challenges that arose in the course of the analysis. Due to the massive coverage of the results of the current PISA study, the analysis had to be limited to one medium. Despite this limitation and focus on only newspapers, it was difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of the media reaction, as the number of publications was also enormous. Due to the limited scope of this work, not all positions of the analysed articles could be included in the evaluation presented here, which is why it is limited to the prevailing perspectives. It was also not possible to extend the analysis dimension to specific patterns or frames, as was initially planned. In summary, it can therefore be said that focusing on the essentials and underestimating the scope presented particular challenges.

CHAPTER 5

Final Remarks

As the years since the first PISA study have shown, it is not enough to pull a single lever and pass isolated reforms to address the issues within the education system. Never has it been clearer that educational policy must be holistic, considering both structural and social factors. However, the question remains whether the political will exists to implement these changes. The challenges are complex, and there will be no easy solutions. Yet, the pressure is higher than ever before. This work has demonstrated that, even this year, PISA results received widespread public attention, and all eyes are on the political response. With the agreement on the Startchancen-Programm, the federal government and the states have taken an important first step. It also highlights how swiftly action can be taken when education policy is approached nationally rather than federally. But simply launching new funding programs is no longer enough. It requires more courage and creativity to break out of an education system that legitimizes social inequality. To achieve this, we must also listen to what science has been advocating for years, and long-standing traditions, such as the early selection of children, must come to an end. It is to be hoped that politicians will finally give education the importance it deserves and place it at the top of the list of priorities. This can be the starting point for future research. How much of what was promised was actually implemented? Did the media discourse on PISA 2022 act as a catalyst for political reforms? Did the measures adopted succeed in reducing educational inequality? Future research will be crucial in assessing the effectiveness of political decisions and reforms and providing the necessary impulses for the further development of the education system. Only through continuous scientific monitoring and evaluation can it be ensured that education policy meets the demands of contemporary society and effectively combats social inequality in the long term.

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