



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

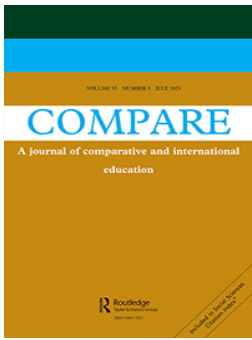
*Family strategies of educational advantage in the Australian and German school systems: a comparative analysis*

This is the Published version of the following publication

Doecke, Esther (2023) Family strategies of educational advantage in the Australian and German school systems: a comparative analysis. *Compare*. pp. 1-16. ISSN 0305-7925

The publisher's official version can be found at  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03057925.2023.2220070>  
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/46867/>



## Family strategies of educational advantage in the Australian and German school systems: a comparative analysis

Esther Doecke

**To cite this article:** Esther Doecke (2023): Family strategies of educational advantage in the Australian and German school systems: a comparative analysis, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03057925.2023.2220070](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2220070)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2220070>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 235



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Family strategies of educational advantage in the Australian and German school systems: a comparative analysis

Esther Doecke 

Centre for Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Families are active agents in school systems and apply different strategies of educational advantage to help their children succeed at school. These strategies are planned and enacted by families with their children in mind, but they are always a response to the broader education system design. This article explores how through their strategies families engage with school system structures. A comparative approach which takes up Turner's typology of education systems examines the Australian comprehensive ('open-contest') and the German tracked ('elite sponsorship') school systems. The two systems are not typically studied together. Families in both systems employ various strategies differently according to their local context, but there are some important shared practices that reveal recent structural changes in both the Australian and German education systems at a subnational level, and, above all, a common concern amongst families for their children's futures increasingly predicated on success at school.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 September 2022  
Accepted 27 May 2023

## KEYWORDS

Family strategies;  
comparative educational  
research; Germany; Australia;  
school choice; upward  
mobility

## Introduction

Families are fundamental to 'class-making' and one important way they do this is by supporting their children through school by using strategies of educational advantage (Ball 2003; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Lareau 2011). Family strategies of educational advantage typically include school choice, seeking placement in academically selective classes, obtaining tutoring or coaching for their children and providing homework support at home (Ball 2003; Lareau 2011). The actions of families and their strategies of educational advantage are significant and when employed together they can transform education systems (Bourdieu and Boltanski 1978; Trow 1973).

Identifying and classifying family strategies is an important task, though it is also crucial to consider how their strategies constitute a response to the school system structures in which their children are obliged to participate. With the range of education systems that exist around the world, it is legitimate to ask: which system structure intensifies the use of educational strategies of advantage? This is an important question as education systems which provide families with the most assurance that their children

**CONTACT** Esther Doecke  [Esther.doecke@vu.edu.au](mailto:Esther.doecke@vu.edu.au)  Centre for Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, 300 Queen St Melbourne, Melbourne 3000, Australia

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

will be able to thrive at school may be able to ease their anxiety and their reasons to use strategies of educational advantage. Education systems, which reduce the need for family strategic intervention, may be regarded as the most equitable and high-performing.

Initially, I outline the distinctive structures of the school systems in Germany and Australia. I look at how they set up different conditions for success and frame the ways in which families strategise and support their children. An initial impression is that the differences between the two systems at a national level are too significant for any meaningful comparison to occur. Australia has a comprehensive system. Germany has a tracked or segmented system, with various school pathways. Building on these terms often used in comparative research, I bring in Turner's typology, where Australia's system is characterised as an 'open contest' and Germany operates through 'elite sponsorship' (Turner 1960). Turner's (1960) model is important as it captures the interrelationship between school structures and key stakeholders (children, teachers and families) who participate in schools and invest in the promises made by education systems. I then briefly address the recent structural alignment apparent between Australia and Germany due to various school reforms at the subnational level, which not only demonstrate the complexities of constructing an idealised picture of a 'national' education system but also show how families continually adjust their strategies to align to new policies and conditions.

Throughout this article draws on select data specific to each country's school system. A comparative picture is provided by international datasets including Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which provide useful insights for comparative analysis at the national level.

Using the available data, the second section identifies common strategic interventions used by families. I identify key similarities in the application of family strategies in the Australian and German school systems, even with their substantial differences. Common practices are evident, which include German and Australian families increasing their use of strategies at high-stakes moments, investing financially in education and demanding access to academic or socially selective schools.

## **A theoretical framework for comparative analysis**

How do the distinctive school systems in Australia and Germany influence how families strategise and support their children? Research undertaken in France and the United Kingdom has clearly shown how structural environments specific to each education system informs how families – often middle-class families – use strategies that advantage their children over others (Ball 2003; van Zanten 2009). Here, the two systems – Germany and Australia – provide a useful counterpoint to one another and they have not been the specific focus of any previous comparative studies looking specifically at families. Interestingly even with their substantive structural differences, on average both jurisdictions achieve similar results on international student assessment, such as PISA 2018 (OECD 2019).

To undertake a comparative analysis of the two systems, I use Turner's research into how societies accept how education systems operate that was originally developed in 1960. In both countries, education systems continue to provide possibilities for upward

mobility through student achievement. Their promise of upward mobility sits at the core of their social contract. School systems deliver on their promise using historically different structures that continue to inform their operation. Germany's system was developed for 'elite sponsorship' and Australia's system was an 'open contest' (Turner 1960). Turner's comparative framework was developed over 60 years ago and it has recently been used by other comparativists including Mortimer and Krüger (2000) and Kerckhoff (2000), but it has fallen out of common contemporary usage. This may be because the way that systems promise and deliver on social mobility may be regarded as less important in contrast to other educational issues that feature in comparative studies (Mountford-Zimdars 2015). Nevertheless, hopes for their children and their futures drive the active engagement of families. For many families, it is entirely without question that school success is paramount and will help their children to get ahead, in part through access to higher learning and university credentials (Trow 1973).

Families seeking to realise ambitions for social mobility by supporting their children to succeed at school, have to work within specific school systems which carry long and complicated histories. This complication is exacerbated in Federalised systems such as Australia and Germany, which commonly share the fact that different educational arrangements exist within each state or territory. Families strategise within localised conditions, which can vary quite markedly from state to state.

### **School systems in Australia and Germany**

The German system operates with the promise of 'elite sponsorship'. The system has multiple secondary school tracks that run in parallel. Students are allocated or 'sponsored' into the horizontally configured tracks with their own school-leaving certificates that hold different levels of social, economic and cultural prestige. Each one of the 16 German states has its own systems comprising different secondary school pathways. Some secondary schools in Germany comprise one track, others have multiple tracks to the different school-leaving certificates. Ambition for the 'Allgemeine Hochschulreife' known as the 'Abitur', which offers the clearest path to university, is not sufficient in and of itself. Students have to meet the necessary academic achievement benchmarks to enter the Abitur track and maintain a sufficient level of achievement to ensure they are not asked to repeat or be demoted.

Recruitment or sponsorship implies that the choice concerning secondary school pathways is not a student's own choice, instead in many states it is a negotiated process (the 'Empfehlung') shared between students, teachers and families. In order for the German system to ensure 'control over selection and training', recruitment into the various secondary pathways occurs relatively early in life (Turner 1960, 859). Early selection (commencing from Grade 5) into the tracks is accepted by many families as common practice, but it follows different processes within each state. States like Bavaria which have strong adherence to the tracked model support early selection into the various secondary school pathways with less scope for family intervention. Other states, such as Hamburg, initially enable students and families to choose their secondary school track, although academic streaming is still necessary and it occurs subsequently when the student is older.

It is important to recognise that each secondary school track has its own curricular requirements, which are dictated by the demands set out by the school-leaving certificates. Each school-leaving certificate has its own curriculum designed to facilitate different pathways into further education and training opportunities. The different school-leaving certificates within the German system essentially determine the degree of social mobility awarded to the successful student. The 'Abitur' continues to dominate in all jurisdictions, and it is regarded by most German families as the school-leaving certificate with the greatest historical prestige (Wippermann, Wippermann, and Kirchner 2013). The Abitur provides the clearest entrée into university, in addition to opportunities in the jobs market and the dual sector. Some of the other school-leaving certificates, particularly the Hauptschulabschluss, are quite applied or practical in their learning orientation and were once regarded as providing young people in Germany with strong footholds in the labour market (Kerckhoff 1995). Yet ultimately the relative early division of students, and the specificity of pathways gave less flexibility to change occupation or education and training pathway over time (Kerckhoff 1995; Müller 1987).

Although the curricular requirements are specific for every state, generally students who complete the Abitur have to demonstrate their academic skill in two languages (apart from German) as well as various mathematics and science subjects. Over one-third of German students (nearly 35%) achieved this school-leaving certificate in 2016 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2018, 30). Students who complete the Mittlere Reife (over 43% in 2016) or Hauptschule school-leaving certificate (16% in 2016) have restricted education and training opportunities, although their opportunities and pathways have changed and improved over time (Statistisches Bundesamt 2018, 31).

The Australian schooling system operates according to Turner's open-contest design (Turner 1960). Historically the Australian system was deliberately structured to mitigate the perceived problems inherent in other education systems, including those systems with rigid secondary school tracks that run in parallel to each other (like Germany) (Sherington and Campbell 2006). The Australian comprehensive system included only one track that lead students towards a generic secondary school-leaving certificate that is equivalent in every state or territory. However, there are downsides to this approach, as the comprehensive system leads to a longer transition period for young people entering the labour force, with less occupational direction and minimal workforce contact during school (Kerckhoff 1995). In Australia, there are apprenticeship or Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes available that run as part of the secondary school learning programme, but the academic curriculum remains the dominant pathway.

There is limited academic selection in Australian schools, and there is no formal selection when students move from primary (Grade 6 or 7) into secondary school (Grade 7 or 8 until Grade 12). In Australia, the open-contest culminates in high-stakes assessment and externally moderated examinations that occur during the final two years of secondary school (Grade 11 and Grade 12).

Attainment of the school-leaving certificate in Australia is important, but a summary ranking measure, which is used for university selection, has even more prominence amongst families. This is the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Every Australian student who takes part in the examination processes during Grade 11 and 12 is ranked on this measure. The ATAR is a score from 0.0 to 99.95, and it is calculated on the student's achievement in the subjects they have chosen for their final years of

secondary school. Students have significant latitude in the subjects they choose to study and in some states, such as Victoria, the only compulsory subject is English. Student achievement is assessed using external exams and statistically moderated coursework. The ‘raw’ student scores are scaled upwards or downwards, depending on whether subjects are viewed as ‘hard options’ or ‘soft options’ - a process designed to reward students who participate in subjects that are perceived to demand more intellectual rigour (e.g. central European languages are often scaled up, vocational subjects are often scaled down) (Teese 2000).

As a measure, the ATAR is largely unquestioned and it is held up by many families as predictive of what the future may (or may not) hold for their children. High-ranked students are assured of a successful transition into education and training, mostly into universities and the prestigious degrees including medicine and law. Low-ranked students typically have a much more troubled transition, where the education and training pathways are less clear. Students who achieve low ATARs more often experience periods of unemployment or must be content with part-time, casual work as adults (Lamb et al. 2015). Poor exam performance in the final years of school weakens self-esteem and may turn young people off further study. It is important to recognise that even with the ‘open contest’ governed by the one track school system, a significant number of students drop out of secondary schooling and leave without any school-leaving certificate (or equivalent) (Lamb et al. 2015).

### **Taking care with generalisations about ‘systems’**

Comparative frameworks that provide a perspective on the ‘ideal’ function of each education system are important, but a closer look at the Australian and German school systems, quickly demonstrates that each system is more complex than first thought. Rather than positing a fixed or unified picture of a ‘national’ education system, which operates according to its ‘ideal’ function, it is vital to engage with the differentiated nature of education within each national setting. In the case of Australia and Germany, recent school reforms at the subnational level have brought the two systems closer together. In both Australia and Germany, these subnational reforms show that at a subnational level they actually operate differently from their ‘ideal’ national picture (Trow 1973). It is apparent that there is no ‘one’ German or Australian education system, instead there are increasingly many different systems operating within an overall national picture, to which families adjust accordingly (Broschek 2021).

The German education system is arguably more open and flexible than it has ever been, due to the various reforms undertaken in recent years (Baumert and Maaz 2010). In many German states, students are now within schools that offer pathways towards more than one school-leaving certificate (Autorengruppen Bildungsberichterstattung 2020). Students who are enrolled in multi-track or comprehensive schools undertake a more integrated learning programme. The ‘sponsorship’ into the various tracks occurs later, although the way that the schools integrate students by divided classes, learning groups within the classes or full integration is again different in every state (Autorengruppen Bildungsberichterstattung 2020). This is because German schools in every state, even those classified as comprehensive or with multi-track pathways, continue to deliver various school-leaving certificates. No German state offers a pathway to only one school-

leaving certificate. The different curriculum frameworks and their competing demands mean that the newly-formed schools in the German system have to operate with distinct pathways. Although it may be easier for students in integrated schools to change their school-leaving certificate pathway, as opposed to students in schools with only a single-track where students who wish to undertake another school-leaving certificate need to change schools entirely. In Germany, the comprehensive schools also compete for students in all states with the prestigious Gymnasium that only delivers the Abitur, circumstances which ultimately compromise the ability of ‘comprehensive schools’ to be truly comprehensive.

On the other hand, Australian families know that underneath the open-contest comprehensive system sits a sophisticated schools market, where different schools operate under different conditions. Historically, the system has always maintained both public and publicly subsidised private schools. Ideologically, school choice has been constructed as the ‘great equaliser’, but families are not given equal choices (Ball 2003). In Australia, the schools market has a very local character, which is specific to each state and territory, and even for each neighbourhood. Specifically in the two most populous states (i.e. Victoria and New South Wales), practices of academic selection have been reintroduced into the public schools system to counter the competition from private schools, which serves as an example of how privatisation and choice have effectively upended the ‘logics of action’ by which the system operates (van Zanten 2009). Practices of selection operate at the macro-level in New South Wales where academic selection is controlled centrally by the state and there are a significant number of select-entry schools. Academic selection has started to occur from primary school, so that students and families are given the opportunity for academic selection from Grade 5 – the same time that formal tracking begins in some states within the German system (Ho 2017). Micro-practices of selection are apparent in states such as Victoria, where there is a limited number of fully selective secondary schools, but many partially selective public secondary schools. Partially selective public secondary schools result in some classes consisting solely of so-called ‘high-achievers’, students who are selected according to measures of ability that are different for every school. The growth in academic selection within public schools that are apparent in select Australian states, run contrary to the ideal of the comprehensive system that notionally ensures an ‘open’ and fair contest for all students.

## **A comparative method**

My primary focus is on families and the strategies they adopt in response to the systems in which they are obliged to operate and how those systems shape the strategies they use. I will use various datasets to address my central research questions. To be able to assess family strategies of educational advantage comparatively, I draw on key international datasets including the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These data collections were not primarily designed to assess the perspectives of families, but they are useful nonetheless as a resource for comparative analysis of the kind I am conducting here.



Data collected from the PISA 2015 student questionnaire have been used and all analysis has been weighted. TIMSS 2015 analysis includes information collected from the parent/guardian of Grade 4 students. Unfortunately publicly available TIMSS data omit any information about state for Australia and Germany and it can only be used to generate findings at the national level. These transnational data collections can only provide limited insight into how localised structures in both countries shape parent strategies of educational advantage differently. Therefore, all conclusions are necessarily circum-spect. To complement the international comparative data, the analysis is supplemented by country-specific data collections.

### **Common ways that families apply strategies of educational advantage**

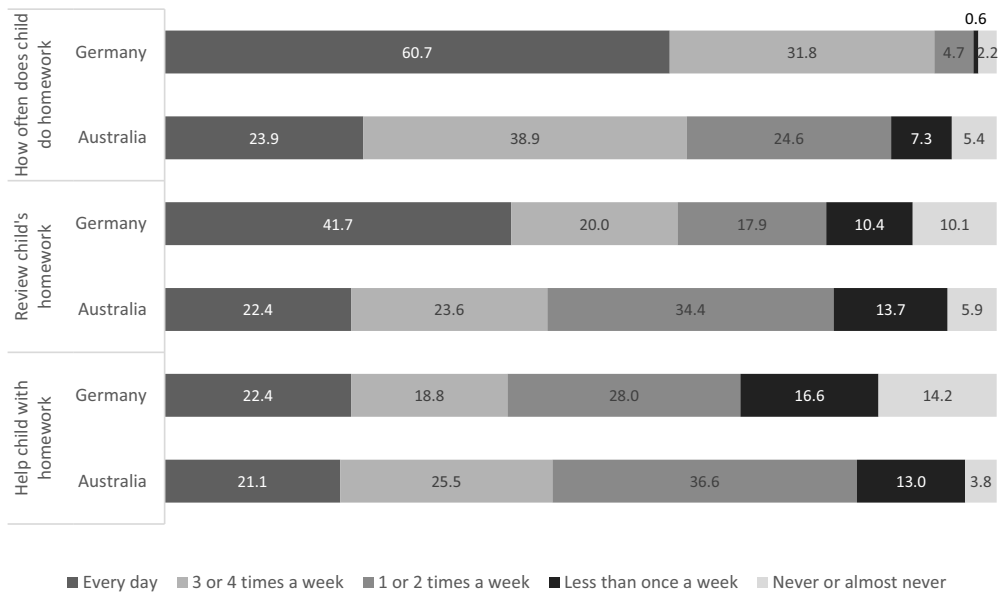
School systems with distinct structures, like Germany and Australia, can effectively conceal common functions or characteristics (Ringer 1979; Teese 2011). This article places the focus on families and how they seek to advantage their children within both systems. Considering the application of educational strategies of advantage requires a structural understanding of specific education systems. On the other hand, it is equally important to view families as having agency, as these decisions are felt personally and enacted in the interest of their child. Turner also argues that despite their adherence to structures, families have ‘wide latitude in the strategies they employ’ (Turner 1960, 856). When enough families use specific strategies en masse, there is the potential that they can transform education systems or have a significant impact on education policy.

In Australia and Germany, common ways that strategies of advantage are used by families include:

- intensifying strategies at high-stakes moments
- increasing private investment in education
- demanding access to socially or academically selective schools.

### ***Intensifying strategies at high-stakes moments***

The German school system places families and students under pressure quite early on. This is due entirely to the early transition into secondary-level education, which triggers the ‘Empfehlung’ or ‘recommendation’ based substantially on their child’s academic achievement in Grade 4. The school recommendation operates differently in each German state and there is no nationally consistent process. Nevertheless, studies identify that many German families feel under pressure to be ‘active supporters’ and ‘assistants’ to their children’s educational needs at this time (Merkle and Wippermann 2008, 37). This is not an uncommon experience in Germany, and many families describe how their lives are increasingly ‘educationalised’ and structured around the demands of the school system (Lareau 2011). In comparison, Australian children have a later transition from primary into secondary school, which takes place at the conclusion of Grade 6 in most states or territories. Australian primary schools do not typically conduct high-stakes assessment. Therefore, an Australian child’s educational future is less threatened by poor



**Figure 1.** Family views about volume of homework and assistance provided at home (%).  
Source: TIMSS 2015.

achievement and a negative assessment in primary school than the threat posed by the academic selectivity which occurs early and is inherent to the German system.

TIMSS 2015 provides useful measures of engagement and involvement in their children's homework in Grade 4 amongst German and Australian families (Figure 1).

Figure 1 reveals that German students undertake a greater amount of homework than Australian students. Many German Grade 4 students complete homework every day (60.7%), while close to one-third (31.8%) report that they complete homework for most of the school week (three to four times a week). The greater volume of homework undertaken by German students at this early age may be associated with the transition into secondary schooling discussed earlier, where pathway determination is based substantially on academic performance. In Australia, just under a quarter (23.9%) of Grade 4 students have homework to complete every day. Only very few Australian or German students never have any homework to complete.

Figure 1 provides insight into the activities associated with family strategic intervention into learning at Grade 4 and the intensity of involvement at a national level. The data suggests that German and Australian parents invest equally in helping their children with the homework they are set each day. Over one in five (22.4%) of German families help their children with homework every day, and a similar proportion of Australian families (21.1%) report providing daily assistance. Australian families indicate that they helped with homework three to four times a week (25.5%) or one to two times a week (36.6%). German families are less likely to report such a degree of intensity in assistance with homework, with 18.8% reporting they helped three to four times a week and 28.0% one to two times a week. Some German families (14.2%) do not help their children with their homework at all. German families may not see their role as 'helping' or they do not want to be perceived as actually providing their children with answers. Figure 1 reveals that

German families are more engaged with ‘reviewing’ their children’s homework. This suggests families may prefer to look at their children’s work rather than actively ‘helping’ to develop work and put it together. Over two in five (41.7%) of German families reviewed their children’s work daily and an additional 20.0% did this three to four times a week. Australian families were also actively involved on a weekly basis with reviewing their children’s homework, albeit with slightly less intensity (22.4% reviewed homework daily and 23.6% reviewed homework three to four times a week). In Australia and Germany, approximately two-in-five families do not review their children’s homework at all, or only review it weekly, despite the high volume of homework provided to children in both countries at this relatively young age.

### **Increasing private investment in education**

Families are more likely to personally provide academic support to their children in the early years and engage in tutoring services or coaching as their children prepare for high-stakes selection, which occurs at different points within each school system (Bray and Lykins 2012). Some families make significant private investment into tutoring or coaching for their children. This is because these services promise two things. They offer strategic assistance for high-stakes assessment and help students meet the increasing cognitive demand of the school curriculum. The curriculum demands are greater for students who wish to achieve success in high-end subjects that are typically central for university selection, such as mathematics, science and foreign languages.

Table 1 compares PISA data from Australia and Germany, where students were asked whether they had taken part in any additional tuition outside of school hours in certain subjects. This data provides a perspective on the use of this strategy in both countries during secondary school and is able to consider family socio-economic background through the OECD’s index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). Table 1 classifies students by their family’s ESCS grouped into quintiles. The highest quintile consists of students from the most socially and economically advantaged families, while the lowest quintile reflects the most socially and economically marginalised students and their families. The subjects that students reported additional tuition in have been classified according to their strength of relationship to the curriculum. Students with additional instruction in foreign/native languages, science, mathematics or social science subject areas receive ‘academic only’ tuition support. Students with additional tuition

**Table 1.** Students with additional tuition grouped by family socio-economic advantage (ESCS) (%).

		ESCS %				
		Lowest	Low	Mid	High	Highest
Australia	Academic and extra-curricular	36.9	40.8	40.8	40.7	42.1
	Extra-curricular	12.7	14.5	17.5	22.9	26.7
	Academic only	8.4	8.6	7.5	6.8	6
	No tutoring	41.9	36.1	34.2	29.6	25.2
Germany	Academic and extra-curricular	33.6	34.5	35	34.3	30.7
	Extra-curricular	9.6	12.2	13.8	18.2	27.2
	Academic only	13.4	17.7	16.6	15.8	11.7
	No tutoring	43.3	35.7	34.7	31.7	30.4

Source: PISA 2015. Data is weighted.

only in performing arts, sports or music receive ‘extra-curricular’ tuition. Some students have additional tuition in various subjects encompassing both ‘academic and extra-curricular’ subjects and other students identify that they had ‘no tuition’ in any subject.

Table 1 shows that in both countries many families, regardless of their socio-economic background, secure additional tuition for their children. The most disadvantaged Australian families (lowest ESCS quintile) record the highest proportion of students with academic tuition only (8.4%). This signals that some disadvantaged families may have to specifically target their educational expenditure on additional tuition in academic subjects, while wealthier families can afford both academic and extra-curricular tuition. Comparing the two countries, the percentage of students with tutoring only in academic subjects across each socio-economic quintile is higher in Germany than in Australia, particularly for the most disadvantaged German families (17.7%).

A further trend apparent in Table 1 is with the socio-economic background of families and the likelihood that their children only had additional extra-curricular tuition. More advantaged Australian and German families (highest ESCS quintile) procure additional tuition for their children in extra-curricular subjects, which hold less prestige in the competitive curriculum, compared with disadvantaged families. This is evident in over a quarter of students from the most socially and economically advantaged German families (27.2%) and Australian families (26.7%) undertaking extra-curricular tuition only. On the other hand, it is less likely for the most disadvantaged families to arrange for tutoring in subjects that have a creative or physical expression, which hold less relevance to success in terms of the academic curriculum which dominates both education systems. This affirms other research which has identified clear social class patterns concerning involvement in extra-curricular activities, where middle-class children undertake more extra-curricular activities compared with children from less advantaged families (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Vincent and Ball 2007).

There is a clear pattern apparent in Table 1 when looking at the family socio-economic profile for those students without any additional tuition outside of school. Many disadvantaged families (the lowest ESCS quintile) did not obtain any additional tuition for their children at all (43.3% in Germany and 41.9% in Australia). There are various explanatory factors behind this result. One key factor may be that disadvantaged families typically have less resources to make private investment into their children’s education. Or another factor may be that their children did not express a need for additional tuition or that there was no concern about academic progress at this point in their schooling.

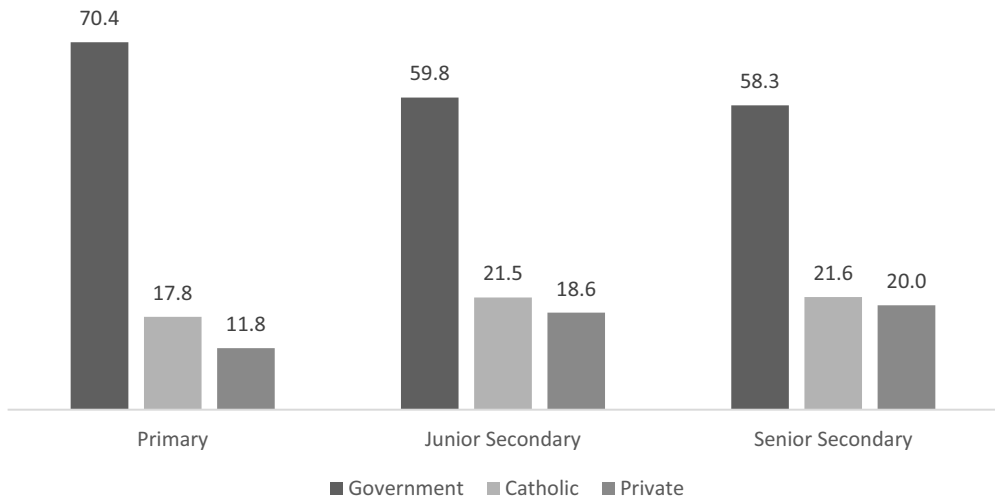
### ***Increasing demand for schools of choice that socially or academically select***

The primary school (‘Grundschule’) in Germany provides a four-year learning programme in most German states and there is no formal academic streaming during this time. Table 2 finds that only very few Germans choose to send their children to a private primary school (3.7% of students). School enrolments in most areas of Germany are ‘officially’ determined by student address, however there are ways for parents to negotiate choice and there is an expanding range of private schools (Breidenstein, Krüger, and Roch 2020). According to a recent study, a sense of primary schools as a ‘market’ is starting to develop in some German states (Breidenstein, Krüger, and Roch 2020). Similarly in Australia, the majority of children (70.4%) attend a public (Government)

**Table 2.** Proportion of German students in private schools by school type 2020 (%).

School type	% students
Primary school	3.7
Hauptschulen	5.9
School types with multiple learning pathways	7.7
Realschulen	12.1
Gymnasium	12.3
Integrated comprehensive schools	6.3

Source: German Federal Statistics Office (Destatis), Statistics of schools of general education. Fachserie 11 Reihe 1.1 <https://www.destatis.de/>.

**Figure 2.** Australian student enrolments by sector across grades, 2020 (%).

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools, Australia, 2020.

primary school (Figure 2). Australian families are also mostly happy to have their children within public primary schools which are restricted to only taking enrolments from their local neighbourhood. It appears that German and Australia families are similarly content with the common provision of primary schooling, where there is one curriculum, and consequentially less substantive differences between schools.

Despite Australia's notionally comprehensive system with one unified school-leaving certificate, families demand different school choices as children progress into lower and senior secondary. In Figure 2, over two in five (41.6%) families nationally choose to send their children to secondary school in the publicly subsidised non-government sector (private and Catholic schools) in the senior years (Grade 11 and Grade 12). From Grade 7 until Grade 10 (junior secondary), the proportion of families who choose a non-government school is 40.1%. Non-Government schools, receive public funding, but they are not subject to the same accountability as Government or public schools. This effectively means that many non-Government schools also demand that families contribute to their school through fee paying, which excludes certain families from enrolment (and makes them attractive to families who can afford the fees). Non-Government schools are able to engage in social selection by their school fees, amassing significant

cultural, economic and social resources. These schools become well-protected fortified sites within the education system, primarily because they are able to excise academic failure and export less-desirable students (Teese 2000).

In the German school system, the legislation supporting schools operating outside of the public system is different. German families do not have such an extensive system of publicly subsidised private schooling, which they can retreat into. Officially German private schools are unable to exclude families according to their ability to afford school fees. Therefore, German private schools theoretically do not practice social selection, like Australian non-Government schools do. However, research finds that German private schools are similarly catering to socially and economically advantaged families (Lohmann, Spieß, and Feldhaus 2009). Table 2 shows that over one in ten (12.3%) of German students nationally attend a *Gymnasium* regarded as a private school, which presumably represents the efforts of some families to secure the *Abitur* for their children within an exclusive learning environment. Schools which include pathways to the other school-leaving certificates have less enrolments, although 12.1% of students attend a private *Realschule*, which also selects students academically but does not offer direct access to the *Abitur*.

It is evident that the choices are set up differently by the structures. Australian families negotiate choice within a schools market, while German families have a set of structured choices which are negotiated – but they are nonetheless ‘choices’. Demand for socially or academically selective schools increases in both systems as students grow older. Schools in demand, which are different in both systems, share common characteristics that explains their desirability with families. Firstly, they protect the ‘integrity’ of student intake, which means that they cater for students with similar academic aptitude. This is important because this may mean in practice that teachers are working in classrooms with students of similar academic abilities, mutually invested in the promise of schooling and with a shared eagerness to learn. Secondly, these schools also provide exclusive social environments, not only because of school fees but also because of the association that family socio-economic background has with academic success. We might reasonably assume that many Australian and German families choose schools for their children with the academic and the social dimensions in mind.

It is relatively straightforward to pinpoint which schools are preferred by families in both systems, as they are more likely to attract socially and economically advantaged families. School choice functions as a very direct act of social closure, used by families in the interests of their children. Often in these schools, children will have minimal contact with peers from other socio-economic backgrounds nor will they come together to share common experiences. The lack of social mixing may mean that children and their families are less likely to appreciate or understand the perspective of someone from another socioeconomic background (Merkle and Wippermann 2008).

The highly selective schools in Germany and Australia can only exist because they function as part of a system constituted by other schools. The *Gymnasium* does not need to differentiate teaching and learning. It does not have to creatively consider ways to lift quality and strengthen achievement (although some *Gymnasiums* do). The *Gymnasium* operates with a template which is to prepare students for the cognitive demands inherent in the *Abitur*’s curriculum. The *Gymnasium* demands that students conform, performs well on assessment and holds onto its right to

demote or repeat students. The Gymnasium is only able to do this because the other schools in the system serve as its relegation basis. This is the very premise of 'elite sponsorship'. The other schools cater for the students who are unable to meet the academic requirements of the Abitur. This systemic operation may provide other schools and school-leaving certificates with the potential to deliver a more differentiated approach to teaching and learning, with curriculums that are more relevant to the lives of their students and families.

Certain schools in Australia are also able to limit their student intake because they can rely on other schools to cater for students who do not meet their requirements. Publicly subsidised non-Government schools effectively use fees to socially discriminate within a schools 'market', and in response, fully-Government funded public schools discriminate by academic selection. In both countries, schools which cannot academically or socially select (such as the Hauptschule in Germany, or the Government school in a poor community in Australia), assume the responsibility of taking in the other students with more diverse needs. The practices of selection are particularly galling in the Australian system which operates under the pretext of an education system which promises an 'open contest' and opportunity for all.

## Conclusion

The strategic intervention of families plays a significant role in how education systems function and their ability to be equitable and high performing. Although education systems change and evolve over time, it remains the case that family aspirations for their children's futures and dreams of upward mobility continues to be strongly interconnected with success at school.

This article has adopted Turner (1960) as a framework to analyse the Australian and German school systems to consider how families apply strategies of educational advantage. Turner's model revolves around the idea of a social contract existing between families and how education systems operate. Although there are significant subnational distinctions within each system and there is no 'one' education system, it can be said that generally Germany's system promises upward mobility through 'elite sponsorship', while the Australian system promises an 'open-contest'. Both systems simply set different terms of the game, neither system has eliminated or lessened the likelihood for families to use strategies of educational advantage.

However, both systems have recently undertaken significant reforms at the subnational level that have changed how their schools operate. Australia's system has become more selective and Germany (at least in some states) has embraced comprehensive reform principles. These changes will continue to produce interesting trends at a national and subnational level, with subsequent effects on families and their engagement with schools. A future comparative study that is able to take a closer look at these more localised effects is needed.

A new era of concern is evident amongst families. The current climate is one where families are being told on the one hand to distrust their school system and its ability to deliver for their children due to poor performance on international benchmarks, but at the same time the only way for their children to take up positions in the modern economy is through university qualifications predicated on success at school. It is not surprising

that families respond increasingly by using strategies that are an attempt to position their children at an advantage. In both countries, despite their respective system structures, families navigate conditions in schools which may be new for them, they also have various strategies to use that were not available in the past. More comparative research is needed into how and why families strategise, and to what effect.

Importantly what this article reveals is that the initial differences in the education system structures of Germany and Australia does not necessarily mean a similar difference in strategy. Families apply strategies in similar ways including intensifying strategies at high-stakes moments, increasing private investment in education and demanding access to socially or academically selective schools. The strong association with family social and economic advantage demonstrates how strategies impede the prospects of the system being able to fulfil its promise of upward mobility to the wider population. The strategies of educational advantage applied by families partly explain why Australia and Germany fail to achieve their aspirations for equity and excellence in education.

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to all reviewers for providing input and improving the article.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This work was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant [DP120104743] and a short-term German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) grant.

### ORCID

Esther Doecke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0896-021X>

### References

- Autorengruppen Bildungsberichterstattung. 2020. *Bildung in Deutschland 2020* [Education in Germany 2020]. Germany. doi:10.3278/6001820gw.
- Ball, S. J. 2003. *Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage*. London: Routledge/Falmer. doi:10.4324/9780203218952.
- Baumert, J., and M. Maaz. 2010. "Ziel und Anliegen der Studie. [Purpose and Concerns of the Study]." In *Der Übergang von der Grundschule in die weiterführende Schule* [The Transition from the Primary School to the Further School], edited by K. Maaz, J. Baumert, C. Gresch, and N. McElvany, 23–26. Berlin, Germany: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF).
- Bourdieu, P., and L. Boltanski. 1978. "Changes in the Social Structure and Changes in the Demand for Education." In *Contemporary Europe: Social Structures and Cultural Patterns*, edited by S. Giner and M. S. Archer, 197–227. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.



- Bray, M., and C. Lykins. 2012. "Shadow Education: Private Supplementary Tutoring and Its Implications for Policy Makers in Asia." Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) Monograph Series. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29777/shadow-education.pdf>
- Breidenstein, G., J. O. Krüger, and A. Roch. 2020. "Parents as 'Customers'? The Perspective of the 'Providers' of School Education. A Case Study from Germany." *Comparative Education* 56 (3): 409–422. doi:10.1080/03050068.2020.1724485.
- Broschek, J. 2021. "Boundary Control and Education Policy in Federal Systems: Explaining Sub-Federal Resilience in Canada and Germany." *Comparative Education* 57 (4): 452–473. doi:10.1080/03050068.2021.1958628.
- Ho, C. 2017. "Selective Schools Increasingly Cater to the Most Advantaged Students." *The Conversation*, March 9. <https://theconversation.com/selective-schools-increasingly-cater-to-the-most-advantaged-students-74151>
- Horvat, E. M., E. B. Weininger, and A. Lareau. 2003. "From Social Ties to Social Capital: Class Differences in the Relations Between Schools and Parent Networks." *American Educational Research Journal* 40 (2): 319–351. doi:10.3102/00028312040002319.
- Kerckhoff, A. C. 1995. "Institutional Arrangements and Stratification Processes in Industrial Societies." *Annual Review of Sociology* 21: 323–347. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083414>
- Kerckhoff, A. C. 2000. "Transition from School to Work in Comparative Perspective." In *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, edited by M. T. Hallinan, 453–474. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. doi:10.1007/0-387-36424-2\_21.
- Lamb, S., J. Jackson, A. Walstab, and S. Huo. 2015. *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015*. <https://www.everychildcq.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Educational-opportunity-in-Australia-2015.pdf>
- Lareau, A. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods. Class, Race, and Family Life, Second Edition with an Update a Decade Later*. Berkeley: University of California Press. doi:10.1525/9780520949904.
- Lohmann, H., K. C. Spieß, and C. Feldhaus. 2009. *Der Trend zur Privatschule geht an bildungsfernen Eltern vorbei* [The Trend for Private Schools is Missed by Parents with Low Education]. Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung. [https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw\\_01.c.339720.de/09-38-1.pdf](https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.339720.de/09-38-1.pdf)
- Merkle, T., and C. Wippermann. 2008. *Eltern unter druck: Selbstverständnisse, Befindlichkeiten und Bedürfnisse von Eltern in verschiedenen Lebenswelten* [Parents Under Pressure: Self-Perception, Sensitivities and Needs of Parents in Different Living Worlds]. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius. doi:10.1515/9783828260092.
- Mortimer, J. T., and H. Krüger. 2000. "Pathways from School to Work in Germany and the United States." In *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, edited by M. T. Hallinan, 475–497. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. doi:10.1007/0-387-36424-2\_22.
- Mountford-Zimdars, A. 2015. "Contest and Adjustment Sponsorship in the Selection of Elites: Re-Visiting Turner's Mobility Modes for England Through an Analysis of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Oxford." *Sociologie* 6 (2): 157–176. doi:10.3917/socio.062.0157.
- Müller, D. K. 1987. "The Process of Systematisation: The Case of German Secondary Education." In *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction, 1870-1920*, edited by D. K. Müller, F. Ringer, and B. Simon, 15–52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- OECD. 2019. *PISA 2018 Results Combined Executive Summaries. Volume I, II & III*. OECD Publishing. [https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined\\_Executive\\_Summaries\\_PISA\\_2018.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/pisa/Combined_Executive_Summaries_PISA_2018.pdf)
- Ringer, F. K. 1979. *Education and Society in Modern Europe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sherington, G., and C. Campbell. 2006. *The Comprehensive Public High School Historical Perspectives*. Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781403982919.
- Statistisches Bundesamt. 2018. *Schulen auf einen Blick* [Schools at a Glance]. Wiesbaden. [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Schulen/Publikationen/Downloads-Schulen/broschuere-schulen-blick-0110018189004.pdf;jsessionid=4EE0853A3561F197CCCB6F9E5CC1B8B7.live741?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Schulen/Publikationen/Downloads-Schulen/broschuere-schulen-blick-0110018189004.pdf;jsessionid=4EE0853A3561F197CCCB6F9E5CC1B8B7.live741?__blob=publicationFile)

- Teese, R. 2000. *Academic Success and Social Power*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Teese, R. 2011. "Vocational Education and Training in France and Germany - Friend or Foe of the Educationally Disadvantaged?" In *School Dropout and Completion*, edited by S. Lamb, E. Markussen, R. Teese, J. Polesel, and N. Sandberg, 343–356. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Trow, M. 1973. *Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*. Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. Berkeley: California. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED091983.pdf>
- Turner, R. 1960. "Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System." *American Sociological Review* 26 (6): 855–867. doi:10.2307/2089982.
- van Zanten, A. 2009. "Competitive Arenas and Schools' Logics of Action: A European Comparison." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative & International Education* 39 (1): 85–98. doi:10.1080/03057920802447867.
- Vincent, C., and S. Ball. 2007. "'Making Up' the Middle Class Child: Families, Activities and Class Dispositions." *Sociology* 41 (6): 1061–1077. doi:10.1177/0038038507082315.
- Wippermann, K., C. Wippermann, and A. Kirchner. 2013. *Eltern - Lehrer - Schulerfolg* [Parents – Teachers – School Success]. Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius. doi:10.1515/9783110512083.