

# On the relevance of Bernstein for German-speaking Switzerland

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## *Abstract*

*This article assesses the relevance of Basil Bernstein for German-speaking Switzerland. It argues that Bernstein is potentially relevant for German-speaking Switzerland in light of contemporary studies which highlight a connection between social background and differential school achievement. After contextualising Bernstein's theoretical outlook and critically reflecting upon his use of a static concept of social class, it explores past and present applications of Bernstein. The paper thereby shows that the uptake of Bernstein's outlook was and continues to be minimal for the Swiss German context and reasons for this conclusion are explored. In the final sections of the article connections between social background and differential school achievement are explored for contemporary German-speaking Switzerland. On the basis of this analysis, the paper concludes by arguing that while aspects of Basil Bernstein's theoretical outlook are potentially relevant for the Swiss German context, they need to be reassessed in light of the awareness of the variety of interdependent factors which can and do influence the performance of children and adolescents at school.*

*Keywords: German-speaking Switzerland, deficit, difference, code theory, social class*

## **1. Introduction**

Writing and working in a class-based Britain in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Basil Bernstein attempted to understand the connection between social class and unequal school performance through differences in *language use*, and later through differences in what he referred to as *codes*, described as differential communication in working-class and middle-class families that are the result of different socialisation styles.

Bernstein's ideas were largely a response to a growing awareness in Britain of the inequality faced by the working class in general, and their social disadvantage regarding educational possibilities in particular. Today, results of studies, such as PISA, also show a connection between social background and differential school achievement in German-speaking Switzerland (Vellacott & Wolter 2002). The question of Bernstein's relevance for contemporary German-speaking Switzerland is thus a valid one, and this article constitutes an attempt to address it in reference to both the uptake of Bernstein's theoretical outlook in the 1960s and 1970s and the relevance of aspects of his thinking for today.

The article begins by contextualising Bernstein's theoretical outlook and his use of social class as a regulator of socialisation practices; this provides a means of comparison with the more differentiated appreciation of social background put forward for the contemporary Swiss German context in this article. I then move to an outline of the linguistic situation in today's Switzerland, before turning to the past and present relevance of Bernstein's work. From this we can assess the uptake of his theory in German-speaking Switzerland and go on to explore possible reasons for the scant literature addressing connections between social background and school performance. For the contemporary Swiss German context, the question of who the socially disadvantaged children and adolescents are is addressed from both a theoretical and empirical standpoint.

The article ends by suggesting that Bernstein *is* potentially relevant for the present-day situation in Switzerland. However, without an appreciation of the complexities of the linguistic situation in Switzerland and a growing multi-culturalism and multilingualism, we cannot grasp the reasons why certain children and adolescents tend to achieve poorer results at school than others, and we cannot make good use of the language socialisation implications of Bernstein's theory.

## **2. The connection between social background and differential achievement at school: Britain and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s**

Understanding Bernstein's thoughts on educational transmission and cultural reproduction means appreciating the socio-temporal context framing his work. These contexts are addressed for both the USA and Britain, since both regions saw increasing awareness of social inequality as related to social class (particularly Britain) and cultural background (particularly the United States). In both the USA and Britain, this concern with inequality was especially raised in relation to the field of education.

### 2.1 *The United States*

In the United States migration from Europe to the US in the aftermath of World War II and internal migration within the US led to an increase in linguistic and ethnic diversity. According to Dittmar '[t]he ethnic mixture in the cities increased to such an extent that schools and authorities failed in the face of new challenges'; it is 'this failure that acts as a catalyst for detailed analyses of ethnically different cultural and linguistic behaviour' (Dittmar 1997: 44, my translation).

The heightened ethnic diversity, brought about for various reasons, made manifest a gap in educational achievement on the part of children from African-American and low-income families, as compared to children from white middle-class families. In 1964 and 1965 the Johnson administration presented its War on Poverty and the Great Society (Silver & Silver 1991: 2). As part of the War on Poverty, 1964 saw the launch of the Economic Opportunity Act; the same year as the introduction of the Civil Rights Act. The Economic Opportunity Act created Head Start, a programme designed to give children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds a 'head start' in education. Its most well-known product was the TV show *Sesame Street*, designed by linguists, educationalists and psychologists (Dittmar 1997: 52). Silver & Silver describe the Johnson administration as 'altering the nature of federal involvement in education' (1991: 2).

### 2.2 *Britain*

Britain also faced social problems in the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite the post-war Labour government's attempts to make England more egalitarian, English society 'remained a society still vividly divided by class and regional differences' (Goodson 1995: 360). As Goodson argues, '[t]o grow up in the Britain of the 1950s as a school student from a working-class community was to be reminded at every stage of one's origin and likely destination' (1995: 360).

Despite the public awareness of inequality in education, it was not until the late 1960s that a 'public and explicit' connection was made between poverty and educational policy (Silver & Silver 1991: 147). What Silver & Silver describe as '[t]he sequence of public events which in any way matches or relates to that in the United States' began in 1967, following the publication of the Plowden report, entitled *Children and their Primary Schools* (Silver & Silver 1991: 14). This report proposed raising the standard of education through 'positive discrimination' and argued for the role of schools as 'apply[ing] a compensating environment' (an extract from the Plowden Report, cited in Silver & Silver 1991: 238).

The idea of needing to compensate is related to the idea that there is a lack or a deficit in the family, which must be compensated for at school. This raised the critical question of the family as the major socialising agent in the lives of children and led to the idea, both in the United States and Britain, that governmental social intervention would bring about change in opportunity through programmes such as Head Start and the establishment of Educational Priority areas or EPAs. These programmes reflect the belief that some form of compensation was needed for children of working-class families in Britain and the USA, and children from African-American families in the USA.

### **3. Explaining the differential academic achievement between children of various social and cultural backgrounds: Deficit versus difference**

The nature of educational programmes and projects will depend, to a certain extent at least, on how the differential school performance of children and adolescents from different social and linguistic backgrounds is conceptualised. Two main explanations were put forward in both Britain and the USA: the *verbal deficit* versus the *verbal difference* view.

The deficit view is clearly related to the notion of ‘compensatory education’, criticised by Bernstein in his 1971 lecture as follows:

The concept ‘compensatory education’ serves to direct attention away from the internal organization and the educational context of the school, and focus our attention upon the families and children. The concept ‘compensatory education’ implies that something is lacking in the family, and so in the child. As a result the children are unable to benefit from schools. It follows then that the school has to ‘compensate’ for the something which is missing in the family and the children become little deficit systems. (Bernstein 1971: 192)

This quote highlights that underlying the notion of ‘compensatory education’ is the belief that it is the family and the children who are to blame for problems faced at school. The implication is that since the family is not able to provide the children with the means to succeed at school, the educational system needs to compensate for this lack through programmes of compensatory education. Thus, the remedy is not sought in a restructuring or reorganisation of the educational system as it is, but in the family of the child whose school performance is poor. As Bernstein (1971: 192) points out, ‘[o]nce the problem is seen even implicitly in this way, then it becomes appropriate to coin the terms “cultural deprivation”, “linguistic deprivation”, etc. And then these labels do their own sad work’.

While the verbal deficit view (associated with the notion of ‘linguistic deprivation’) sees the language of the child as deficient in some way and hence pinpoints the deficiency in the socialisation environment of the child, i.e. the family, the verbal difference view sees differences between the language and culture of the child and that of the school as the cause of the problems:

The cultural and linguistic differences argument focuses attention on what happens when children arrive at school, on the ways in which children’s experiences are recognized and valued, and on the limitations of the instruments that try to measure what children know and do. Differences become deficits only when these differences are perceived and treated as such by the schools. (Danzig 1995: 155)

According to Danzig, both the deficit view and the difference view are problematic. While the former assumes ‘an impoverished home environment’ and places the blame for the child’s or adolescent’s school performance with the family, the latter can lead to stereotyping and labelling on the basis of background information (Danzig 1995: 153–157).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, ‘the sociopolitical criticism of the concept of difference warns against a masking of the social dimension and a deflection from the necessary improvement of the social conditions’ (Neuland 1988: 1741, my translation).

As Bolander and Watts (this issue) argue, the deficit view tends to be associated with Bernstein and the difference view with Labov. However, Bernstein is not a deficit theorist (cf. Bolander & Watts this issue; Danzig 1995).<sup>2</sup> The misinterpretation of Bernstein as a deficit theorist may be the result of a set of facts: his choice of terminology is disadvantageous (i.e. *restricted*); he initially conceived of differences in language of various social classes as differences in surface features (cf. section 4.2); he often does not express himself clearly (as he admits himself in Bernstein 1971: 19); his early focus on the family may have falsely implied that he believed the locus of responsibility for change lay in the family alone. Finally, his conceptualisation of his work as work-in-progress and hence as dynamic, also sometimes makes it difficult to differentiate between interim thoughts and ideas that retain their prominence throughout his work (cf. Erickson, this issue).

#### **4. Bernstein’s outlook**

At the beginning of his introduction to the first volume of *Class, codes and control* Bernstein states that ‘each paper is an attempt to come to

terms with an obstinate idea in me which I could neither give up nor properly understand' (Bernstein 1971: 1). This 'obstinate idea' of Bernstein's is clearly related to his interest in a classical sociological question, on the one hand, and an awareness of the degree of difference in the achievement of children from various social classes, on the other hand:

Although the research had its origins in specific questions raised by demographic studies in Britain, which showed persistent patterns of differential achievement of MC (middle class) and WC (working class) ... pupils ... this issue was embedded in a more general theoretical question of classical sociology; how does the outside become the inside and how does the inside reveal itself and shape the outside?

(Bernstein 1987: 563)

Bernstein was primarily concerned with how structures inherent in the social world, particularly social class structures, are internalised by individuals during the process of socialisation (cultural reproduction), how these 'same' structures are then externalised throughout the individual's life, and how they are socially produced and reproduced in accordance with power and control.

Bernstein's theoretical outlook addresses two different, yet related strands, 'the research into socio-linguistic codes, and the research into education as an agency of social control' (Bernstein 1971: 237). The first is especially dealt with in his earlier work (as highlighted by the title of the first volume of *Class, codes and control: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language*), and the second is principally explored in his later work (as evidenced by the titles of the third and fourth volumes of *Class, codes and control, Towards a theory of educational transmission and The structuring of pedagogic discourse*). However, the two parts of the research are connected since the first part refers to '[h]ow class regulates the structure of communication within the family and so the initial sociolinguistic coding orientation of the children', and the second part to '[h]ow class regulates the institutionalising of elaborated codes in education, the forms of their transmission and therefore the forms of their realisation' (Bernstein 1977: 22). As the two previous papers in this issue (Erickson and Bolander & Watts) point out, Bernstein's theoretical ideas owed a great deal to the zeitgeist of the age and to the growing interest in bringing greater depth to sociological explanations from the newly developing areas of linguistics and later sociolinguistics, social psychology and psycholinguistics (the article by Good in this volume demonstrates).

4.1 *Overview of the main theoretical points: From speech modes, to public and formal language, to restricted and elaborated codes*

Language is central to Bernstein's outlook since it is used by two key 'transmission agencies' (Bernstein 1977: 22): the family and the school. Both the parents and the school rely on language to transmit values and resources. In the context of the family, language is the primary means by which parents socialise their children, and the primary medium through which children participate in and structure their social lives. At school, too, language is central as the main medium of instruction, and the main means the children have at their disposal when responding to and constructing their interpretations of that instruction. This dual role of language is underlined in the following quote, which makes manifest the close connection between the language transmitted to children (in the family) and the language children produce:

Different social structures may generate different speech systems or linguistic codes. The latter entail the individual specific principles of choice which regulate the selections he [sic] makes from the totality of options represented by a given language. The principles of choice originally elicit, progressively strengthen, and finally stabilize the planning procedures an individual uses in the preparation of his speech and guide his orientation to the speech of others. What he actually says, from a developmental perspective, transforms him in the act of saying. (Bernstein 1964: 56)

Inspired by his work at the City Day College in London (see Erickson this issue) Bernstein argues that 'the measurable interstatus differences in language faculty result from entirely different *modes* of speech found within the middle class and the lower working class' (1971: 61, emphasis in original). These different modes of speech were seen as connected to differential emphases placed on 'language potential' in families of different social classes, where language potential seems to refer to the importance of language and to cases 'where speech becomes an object of perceptual activity' (Bernstein 1971: 61). Whereas middle-class families placed more emphasis on 'language potential', working-class families placed less emphasis on 'language potential'. Bernstein thus clearly related the different speech modes to social class.

The speech modes were further characterised in terms of whether or not they encouraged the speaker to verbally elaborate her/his own intentions (i.e. 'verbal elaboration of subjective intent' [Bernstein 1971: 61]). This notion of verbal elaboration remains important throughout the evolution of Bernstein's understanding of the role played by language. It

surfaces again in connection with the concepts of *public* and *formal language*, introduced in around 1958. However, instead of referring to ‘verbal elaboration’, Bernstein uses the terms ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’, where *public language* is seen as ‘a language of implicit meaning’ (Bernstein 1971: 43), and *formal language* as an ‘explicit’ language (Bernstein 1971: 55). The notions of ‘implicitness’ and ‘explicitness’ refer to how speakers make meanings, i.e. the content of what they intend to say, more or less explicit when communicating with others.

In addition to the important distinction between implicit and explicit, Bernstein compiled an actual list of descriptive features, which served to differentiate *public* and *formal language*. These features are derivatives of the different orientations to meaning (Bernstein 1964) and relate to vocabulary and syntax, as well as to the frequency and use of certain types of word classes (Bernstein 1971). While Bernstein argues that *public language* as characterised by these features ‘will rarely be found in the pure state’ (1971: 51, emphasis in original), the implication is that someone listening to a person can determine, on the basis of the list of surface characteristics, whether s/he is using a *public* or *formal language*. Here, too, the different kinds of language are connected with different social classes. Bernstein links *public language* to the working class and *formal language* to the middle class. This link, however, is not entirely categorical, since he also maintains that ‘an individual may have at his disposal two linguistic usages, a *public* language and a *formal* language, or he may be limited to one, a *public* language, depending on his social group’ (1971: 43, emphasis in original). While Bernstein does not specify the referent of *his*, the implication is that middle-class children can have both a *public* and a *formal language*, while working-class children only have a *public language*. This has consequences for their educational achievement, since the school requires *formal language* (Bernstein 1971).

Bernstein’s characteristics of *public* and *formal language* are clearly problematic, especially on the basis of the lists of surface features,<sup>3</sup> and between 1961 and 1966 he modified his description of language. In his 1962 article entitled ‘Linguistic codes, hesitation phenomena and intelligence’ Bernstein proposes the notion of the *restricted* and *elaborated code* for the first time (Bernstein 1971). While his use of terminology, particularly his choice of the term ‘restricted’, is unfortunate, this modification sees him discard the surface features he used to characterise *public* and *formal language*. By introducing the term *code*, he attempts to move from surface descriptions to the significance of what underlies actual language performance. Rather than seeing the relevance of language in relation to manifest forms of speech and kinds of language, Bernstein addresses the regulative function of the code. As Atkinson (1985: 66,



emphasis in original) argues “‘codes’ are not in themselves descriptions of language varieties: *codes are principles of structuration* which underpin linguistic and social forms, their variation and their reproduction’. They are ‘realized through *different possibilities of selection and combination*’ (Atkinson 1985: 68, emphasis in original), specifically through the selection and combination of syntactic and lexical elements. Defined as ‘*a regulative principle, tacitly acquired, which integrates relevant meanings, the forms of their realization and their evoking contexts*’ (Bernstein 1977: 180, emphasis in original), codes regulate which meanings an individual sees as relevant, how these meanings are realised, i.e. produced, and the interactional practices which are thereby invoked (Bernstein 1996).

As regulative principles codes are more than surface manifestations of language. This means codes are more than *speech variants*, where a speech variant can be defined as ‘the patterning of speech evoked by specific social contexts’ (Bernstein 1971: 12). Whereas a speech variant is connected to actual speech, a code is ‘a regulative principle controlling speech realizations in diverse social contexts’ (Bernstein 1971: 12). While ‘[t]he relationship between “code” and the surface manifestations of linguistic variation is a tricky one in Bernstein’s writing, and gives rise to some terminological complexity and ambiguity’ (Atkinson 1985: 66), the implications of defining code as a regulative principle are, however, clear. This conceptualisation means that the different performances of working-class and middle-class children cannot be pinpointed in relation to different sentence lengths, or types, for example. Rather, ‘[t]he working-class child may be placed at a considerable disadvantage in relation to the *total* culture of the school. It is not made for him; he may not answer to it’ (Bernstein (1971: 197, emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup>

For Bernstein, these different codes are a function of different social structures, and middle-class families tend to transmit both *elaborated* and *restricted codes*, while working-class families tend to transmit *restricted codes* only. However, this does not mean that working-class children will never use ‘elaborated speech variants; only that the use of such variants will be infrequent in the socialization of the child in the family’ (Bernstein 1971: 183). The following example used by Bernstein underlines the implications of this argument. On the basis of a set of four pictures showing a sequence of events, Bernstein maintains that a middle-class child would tend to make verbally elaborate and explicit the story described by the pictures, while the working-class child would tend to leave much implicit. He thereby emphasises that ‘this does not mean that working-class children do *not* have access to such expressions, but that the eliciting speech did not provoke them’ (Bernstein 1971: 179, emphasis in original).

4.2 *Bernstein's social class concept*

More problematic and yet central to Bernstein's ideas is his reliance on a static occupation-based notion of 'social class', which differs from the differentiated understanding of social class put forward for the Swiss German context (cf. 7.2). However, despite the importance of social class for Bernstein's work he does not thoroughly address the concept from a theoretical viewpoint. According to Atkinson (1985: 45), '[i]t is a pervasive feature of this and his subsequent work that theories or measures of class are not discussed extensively, and this has long been a complaint on the part of some critics'. Nonetheless, Bernstein provides the reader with definitions of class relations, the working class and the middle class. In the introduction to the (second edition of the) third volume of *Class, codes and control*, Bernstein addresses criticism he received for not providing a formal definition of class and argues that he intends class relations to mean the following: 'Class relations constitute inequalities in the distribution of power between social groups, which are realized in the creation, organisation, distribution, legitimation and reproduction of material and symbolic values arising out of the social division of labour' (Bernstein 1977: viii). Hence, class is related to differences in power between the working class and the middle class.<sup>5</sup>

The working class and the middle class are defined in relation to both education and occupation. Despite this traditional understanding of class (Haslett 1990),<sup>6</sup> Bernstein does differ from his contemporaries in the 1950s by emphasising the role played by women in his definition of the middle class (Atkinson 1985: 45):

The basis requirements for the group termed 'middle-class and associative levels' will be a family where the father is more likely to have received grammar-school education, or some form of further education or certificated training for a skill, or one in which *the mother* is more likely to have received something more than elementary schooling, or before marriage to have followed an occupation superior to that of the father, or a non-manual occupation.

(Bernstein 1971: 25, emphasis added)

Here, the education of both the father and the mother are mentioned. And, while the mother is not directly mentioned in relation to the working class, it is implied that her background in working-class families will differ from her background in middle-class families. In his definition of the working class, Bernstein emphasises the criterion of occupation and defines the working class as 'all members of the semi-skilled and unskilled group except the type of family structure indicated as the base line

for the middle class and associative levels' (Bernstein 1971: 25). Other characteristics pertaining to the different classes are not mentioned in relation to the definition of class itself, but rather when describing the kinds of socialisation practices found in families of the different classes. Thus, Bernstein distinguishes, for example, between *personal* and *positional* family types, where the former is likely to be found in middle-class families and the latter in working-class families. He then suggests that these reflect different kinds of communication systems, open for middle-class families, and closed for working-class families (Bernstein 1971: 153). Yet, as Erickson describes in his paper, it is precisely such an alignment of dichotomous groupings and characteristics that led to the rejection of Bernstein's attempts to found a more dynamic perspective on socialisation that made use of language and communication phenomena, aspects which had previously been neglected by sociologists.

## **5. The linguistic situation in Switzerland today**

Now that Bernstein's theoretical outlook has been outlined, the stage has been set for an examination of the Swiss German context. Sections five through seven tackle different components of the connection between social background and performance at school in past and present German-speaking Switzerland. Section five begins by outlining the linguistic situation in contemporary Switzerland. These discussions will show that certain aspects of Bernstein's thinking, particularly the static relationships between social class and language, and social class and family types, need to be re-evaluated.

Switzerland is a country with four official languages: German, French, Italian and Rumantsch.<sup>7</sup> According to Lüdi & Werlen (2000: 7, my translation) '[t]his quadrilingualism has been a firm part of the Swiss self-image since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century'. Within this quadrilingual linguistic landscape, German is the dominant language, with almost two thirds of the population<sup>8</sup> in Switzerland claiming in the year 2000 that German is their main language (Lüdi & Werlen 2000: 7). Out of the 26 cantons in Switzerland, 17 are German-speaking. There are also three officially bilingual cantons: Bern, Fribourg and Wallis. In these three cantons German is one of the two official languages and French the other. Finally, there is one trilingual canton, Graubünden, where Rumantsch, German and Italian are the official languages. Out of the five remaining cantons, four are officially French and one is officially Italian (Lüdi & Werlen 2000).

However, as Watts (1999: 71) argues, '[o]fficially, German is spoken by around 65 percent of the total population. Unofficially, of course, the "mother tongue" of the majority of German speakers is one of over

30 mostly Alemannic dialects'. These dialects are used throughout the German-speaking and bilingual cantons in Switzerland and are generally mutually intelligible. Taken together, these dialects can be referred to as 'Swiss German', and Swiss German is thus used as an umbrella term to refer to the various dialects (Rash 2002: 47).<sup>9</sup>

The situation, then, in the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland is one of diglossia. Ferguson's (1959) classical definition of diglossia is based on the understanding that '[i]n many speech communities two or more varieties of the same language are used by some speakers under different conditions' (Ferguson 1959: 325). One of these varieties is 'superposed' and referred to as the H (or high) variety, while the regional dialects are referred to as the L (or low) varieties (Ferguson 1959: 327). However, as Watts argues, '[t]he neat distinction between a high and a low variety which Ferguson thought he saw in German-speaking Switzerland simply does not hold water. Dialects are in use in church services, in a number of cantonal parliaments, in the courts, on radio, and television' (1999: 72). Rash (2002) uses the term 'functional diglossia' to characterise the situation in German-speaking Switzerland. She argues that 'speakers alternate between the two varieties, depending on the situation and speech situation' (Rash 2002: 47, my translation). 'Functional diglossia' is thus a more fitting term than 'medial diglossia', which has been proposed on the basis of the argument that High German is written and Swiss German is spoken. Yet, considering the fact that there are books in Swiss German and courses taught in Swiss German (for example, Bärntütsch at the 'Volkshochschule' in Bern: cf. *Volkshochschule Bern*), Swiss German cannot be seen as a spoken language only.

Relevant for the context of this article in particular is the fact that 'a dialect is the first language of all German-Swiss, their "mother tongue", regardless of their social background or their level of education' (Rash 2002: 47, my translation). The importance of the dialect is also outlined by Watts in relation to what he calls the 'ideology of dialect' (1999) and by Ris (1973, 1979) in his assessment of three 'dialect movements' which furthered the importance of the dialect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Ris (1973, 1979) the significance of the dialects grew in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a variety of reasons: fear that the dialects may disappear (at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) (Ris 1979); the process of a Swiss German identity construction and aim to distance Switzerland from Germany in the context of National Socialism and Germany's defeat in the Second World War (Ris 1973); and an attempt to affirm what it meant to be Swiss in the face of wide-scale immigration from abroad (Ris 1979).

These dialect movements are important since they highlight aspects of the history behind the special status of dialect in German-speaking Switzerland. The situation in Switzerland is unique in relation to the

relative prestige of the dialect as opposed to its general status in many other regions, such as Germany, the USA and Britain. Evidently, in relation to the trends noted for Britain and the USA (cf. sections 2 and 4) this is particularly significant.

## **6. German-speaking Switzerland: From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the present**

The 1979 special edition of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* is entitled 'dialect and standard in highly industrialized societies' and addresses the relationship between dialect and standard in various European countries, including Switzerland, and in the United States. It also focuses on implications for education. In the introduction, Ammon (1979) highlights the lack of empirical and representative data addressing the issue. He argues that most authors who contributed 'pointed out the highly hypothetical character of some of their thoughts due to the lack of representative and valid empirical data' (1979: 8) and that certain scholars he wrote to had declined to submit a paper by virtue of the lack of data. Despite the presence of an article (Ris 1979) on the Swiss situation, there is also a lack of literature on connections between dialect, High German, social class and education for the Swiss German context. Indeed, as Ris argues:

Although the sociolinguistic situation in German-speaking Switzerland is so complicated that it should give rise to large pedagogical complications on the basis of all international experiences, there is almost no relevant pedagogical-didactic literature.

(Ris 1979: 56–57, my translation).

Yet early papers addressing such connections are hard to find and what is often called 'language barrier research' was hardly conducted in Switzerland, despite the fact that the advent of German-speaking sociolinguistics was identical with language-barrier research (Löffler 2005: 173).<sup>10</sup>

The same holds true for the reception of Bernstein's work in the Swiss German context. While there are scholars, such as Ris (1973, 1979), Werlen (1993), Barbour & Stevenson (1998) and Löffler (2005), who mention Bernstein in relation to the Swiss German context, the uptake of his work is not addressed in detail. Moreover, where language barriers in German-speaking Switzerland are explored, education is not focused on. This is, for example, evident in both Ris' 1979 article in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, as well as in an earlier article (Ris 1973), which explores the notion of the 'Sprachbarriere' or 'language barrier'.

There are various possible reasons for this lack of research on the connections between dialect, High German, social class and education in the Swiss German context. One of the reasons is outlined by Ris (1973: 31), who argues that many Swiss feel that the linguistic situation in Switzerland is so unique that it can only be addressed by people from Switzerland. In this context he states that ‘one can comfortably insulate oneself from the questions of international sociolinguistics’ (1973: 31, my translation). The shortage of literature may also be due to a further fact, namely that ‘the simple opposition dialect–standard is inadequate for a description of the German language spoken in Switzerland’ (Ris 1979: 52, my translation). While every linguistic situation is unique in one way or another, what sets the Swiss German situation apart from many others (e.g. the United States and Britain) is the fact that the dialects in Switzerland are not seen as less prestigious or less worthy than the High German required in official circles (cf. section 5). Indeed, Schenker even suggests that ‘[i]n German-speaking Switzerland no social language barriers would exist between Swiss German and High German’ because of the fact that dialect is not connected to social classes (Schenker 1972: 75, my translation). Instead, class-related differences would exist as differences within the dialect ‘[i]f there are differences in linguistic code between lower-class and middle-class children, [a topic] which has not yet been researched, then these differences would already exist within the dialect’ (Schenker 1972: 75, my translation). As he points out, however, research on this issue is lacking.

Despite the unique Swiss German linguistic landscape, Ris argues that there are connections between language and class. Looking at the Swiss German context he states that

[n]othing would be more wrong than to thus conclude that in Switzerland there are firstly no class- or group-specific stratifications in linguistic behaviour and secondly no language-barrier problem, by virtue of the fact that all German-Swiss use dialect in their daily spoken language. (Ris 1973: 44–45, my translation)

Furthermore, in Ris (1973, 1979) he suggests that there are connections between competence in High German, social class and place of abode, and he proposes both social and psychological reasons for these differences, notably class and attitude or perceptions towards High German. Children from lower social classes and who live in rural settings are described as less competent in High German (Ris 1979: 47) than children from the middle classes and from urban backgrounds. From this, one can deduce that children who live in the country and who have a lower-class background are at a double disadvantage. It is less likely that they

will reach the level of High German acquired by children who do not belong to either of these groups. What Ris (1973, 1979) does not tell us, however, is what he means by social class. Nor does he specify what he sees as the 'Milieueinflüsse', or 'environmental effects' (1979: 57), he mentions in connection with the acquisition of High German.<sup>11</sup>

He does, however, suggest that typical indicators of class (such as education and occupation) are not the sole reason behind the differential acquisition of High German:

So, it is shown that the level of proficiency of spoken High German in Switzerland is definitely class-specific to a certain<sup>12</sup> degree, yet the norms that regulate its use and the extent of deviation from the 'ideal' form, cannot be assigned to linear sociological parameters, such as the degree of education, occupation, etc. (Ris 1973: 49, my translation)

For Ris (1973, 1979) attitudes, or perceptions towards High German are also important for linguistic competence. In Ris (1979) he argues that one of the difficulties surrounding the acquisition of High German, and hence competence in High German, is the negative perception towards the language variety. Unfortunately, Ris does not address the issue further, nor does he comment on any possible connections between perceptions towards Standard German and social class. Furthermore, Ris does not investigate reasons for the connection between class and proficiency in High German. For example, the point is made that children who have stories read or told to them in High German may learn it better (Ris 1973: 47), but this argument is not explored in any detail, nor is it explicitly linked to social class. In other words, no comment is made that parents of the middle classes read and tell stories to their children in High German, for example. Similarly, while the role of television is also briefly mentioned (Ris 1979) no real conclusion can be drawn in relation to the acquisition of High German and the relative amount or nature of children's exposure to the language. Ris merely argues that '[c]hildren from higher social classes speak better High German, although they watch TV programs in spoken High German less often' (1979: 57, my translation).<sup>13</sup>

The facts that a) connections between social background and achievement at school were not explored in any depth for German-speaking Switzerland, and that b) dialect speakers cannot be assumed to be socially disadvantaged in relation to speakers of the Standard, or High German, in German-speaking Switzerland, make it difficult to assess the relevance of Bernstein's thoughts for the past Swiss German context. Nonetheless, the literature referred to in this section of the article seems to suggest a potential relevance of Bernstein's work in the Swiss German

context, despite the differences between the Swiss German context and others where Bernstein's theoretical outlook has been adopted or adapted (e.g. Germany, Britain and the USA). The next section of the article thus turns to address explicit references to Bernstein within the relevant literature.

### *6.1 The relevance of Bernstein for the past situation in German-speaking Switzerland*

In some of the early texts, we find references to Bernstein, e.g. Ris (1973, 1979) and Walter (1972). Ris (1973, 1979) mentions Bernstein twice. However, the references differ in terms of Ris' evaluation of Bernstein. While he is critical of Bernstein in the earlier article, in the later article he uses some of Bernstein's arguments to underline his own conclusions.

In the 1973 article Ris argues that 'wide-scale empirical research on German material' shows that Bernstein's thoughts need modification. Specifically, he criticises Bernstein's 'code theory', stating the following:

In particular, his code theory proved to be too vague, because it was often only confined to bringing linguistic and social facts in a surface correlation, without questioning the deeper reasons for this mutual dependency. The deficit hypothesis of BERNSTEIN especially concealed the view towards the actual linguistic constituents of the so-called 'restricted code', by attempting to grasp it from a starting point, whose societal determinism was not further penetrated ....

(1973: 32, my translation, emphasis in original)

According to his references, this evaluation is based on a 1972 publication by Oevermann and a 1973 publication by Dittmar. Both publications are German. While hardly surprising given the scant research available for the Swiss German situation, it must be mentioned that no studies from Switzerland or on the Swiss German situation are referenced. Moreover, Ris does not directly reference Bernstein, despite the fact that numerous publications of Bernstein's had been translated into German by 1973 (including his first volume of *Class, codes and control*). As Löffler argues, '[a]fter 1971 a flood of readers and collections of essays were introduced' (2005: 168, my translation). While Ris may well have read Bernstein, the lack of any primary references to Bernstein's work makes it impossible to know to what extent his interpretation is based on his own understanding, and to what extent on the analysis of the German authors. A look at Dittmar (1973), however, is helpful in that it shows that he clearly viewed Bernstein as a deficit theorist. Indeed, the chapter outlining various empirical studies which attempt to



test the validity of Bernstein is called '[e]mpirical verification of the *deficit hypothesis*: Normative studies on the connection between language and socialization' (Dittmar 1973: 34, my translation, emphasis added). Oevermann's study is one of those addressed in Dittmar's overview.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Ris also refers to Bernstein as a deficit theorist in his criticism of the code concept. However, Bernstein was not a deficit theorist (cf. section 3; Bolander & Watts this issue). Furthermore, even if we were to agree that Bernstein was a proponent of a deficit hypothesis, one could still disagree with Ris' argument that Bernstein focused on surface correlations between the linguistic and the social. While he did list surface manifestations of *public* and *formal language* (cf. 4.2), one of the biggest differences between Bernstein's earlier concepts (i.e. *speech modes* and *public* and *formal language*) and his later understanding of *code* is that codes are not surface manifestations of linguistic forms, but regulative principles. Hence, Ris' criticism seems to rest on a misinterpretation of the concept of code. Interestingly, the same goes for another author writing during roughly the same period: Schenker (1972). Schenker also mentions surface features when referring to the differences between the *restricted code* and the *elaborated code* and he, too, seems to rely on other scholars' interpretation of Bernstein (Niepold 1971 in his case) and not on primary texts written by Bernstein.

Ris' second mention of Bernstein is in relation to a test conducted by himself and others (whose names are unfortunately not mentioned), in Berne, Switzerland with students from different types of schools (Ris 1979).<sup>14</sup> The study attempted to see whether pupils from different schools produced varying amounts of High German relative to Swiss German, when approached by a German student speaking Standard German. 32 students from a grammar school ('Gymnasium') and 32 students from a vocational school ('Gewerbeschule') were tested and the results compared. The results showed that pupils from the vocational school tended to use more dialect when answering the German student. Ris (1979: 48) provides no numbers, but argues that approximately half of the vocational school students answered in dialect, whereas only approximately a third of the grammar school students used dialect when answering. The vocational school students also used significantly more dialect when they were approached as a group, (as opposed to individually), and the grammar school students code-switched more (Ris 1979: 48).

It is in his conclusion that he references Bernstein. He states that '[e]vidently the criteria drawn upon by Bernstein, larger *group solidarity* in the lower class, freer possibility of *code-switching* in the middle class, play an important role after all' (1979: 48, my translation, emphasis in original).<sup>15</sup> Yet Ris does not define what Bernstein meant by the term 'code', nor what he himself means by 'code'. However, the implication

here is that the dialects constitute one code and High German a different code, and that dialect is somehow analogous to *restricted code* and High German to *elaborated code*. This is also supported by the fact that Ris mentions the notion of group solidarity in relation to the lower classes and the ability to code-switch in relation to the middle classes. Bernstein also equated group solidarity with the lower classes, and public language, in particular (cf. Bernstein 1971). In addition, the middle class is seen to have both a restricted and an elaborated code, which gives its members the possibility of alternating between them depending on the context. Possibly Ris saw such an alternation as analogous to code-switching between the Standard and the dialects.

### 6.2 *Why was Bernstein not readily applied to the past Swiss German context?*

This section has made manifest that there is both a lack of research which addresses implications of linguistic differences for education in German-speaking Switzerland, and a lack of applications of Bernstein to linguistic research done in German-speaking Switzerland. However, this does not mean that class-related differences in languages are unimportant for the time period, as is pointed out in the discussion of Ris' 1973 and 1979 articles and summarised well by the following quote: '... the observation of the use of the German standard in the written and the spoken form has shown that class-specific differences are manifest and that these can sometimes become real "language barriers"' (Ris 1973: 49–50, my translation).

I would like to conclude this section by drawing together reasons for this relative lack of applications of Bernstein to the Swiss German context. Firstly, the unique situation regarding dialects in Switzerland constitutes a reason. Werlen (1993) argues that Swiss sociolinguists were critical of the application of Bernstein's model in Germany and particularly the attempt to connect his concept of the *restricted code* with dialect, since dialects in Switzerland were not bound to social class. This is reminiscent of Ris' argument that the straightforward opposition between dialect and standard does not hold for the Swiss German context (cf. 6). Secondly, this uniqueness may have led the Swiss to believe that only they were in a position to address the Swiss German context (cf. 6). Thirdly, the interpretation of Bernstein as a deficit theorist may also have played a role. Ris (1979: 58) argues that the Swiss were hesitant to adopt compensatory education, since it was felt it would make more sense to address the conditions under which the learning of High German can become a problem. Since compensatory education can be linked to a deficit view (cf. 3) and since Bernstein was seen as a deficit theorist

by many, this may well have hampered the adoption of his theories for German-speaking Switzerland.

Finally, a general lack of awareness of sociolinguistically relevant connections between class and education in Switzerland, relative to the awareness in other regions, such as the US and Britain, may also have influenced the extent to which Bernstein was applied to the Swiss German context. As Werlen points out

[s]ociologically seen, the hesitant reception of sociolinguistics in Switzerland is not primarily a question of university structures ... but primarily a question of the social and political context. One has to ask oneself what social needs sociolinguistics actually answers.

(Werlen 1993: 10, my translation).

In the US, the advent of sociolinguistics was clearly connected to the perception of the link between social inequality and linguistic differences,<sup>16</sup> and in Britain, too, 'the concern of sociologists and educationists with social class' was one factor leading to the systematic treatment of connections between education and poverty (Silver & Silver 1991: 147).<sup>17</sup> However, in Switzerland 'no such problem awareness existed, or at least not to the same extent' (Werlen 1993: 10, my translation).

The question then becomes whether such awareness exists in Switzerland today, especially with respect to the connection between social background and achievement at school highlighted by studies such as PISA (Vellacott & Wolter 2002). The next section of the article addresses this question.

## **7. The contemporary Swiss German situation**

The contemporary Swiss situation is similar to its past situation by virtue of the fact that there is not much literature that addresses the connections between language, social/cultural background and education. Yet this is not to say that there is no need for such literature. A glance at the results of PISA<sup>18</sup> and the salient relationship between socio-cultural background and the achievement of 15-year-olds in reading, science and arithmetic highlights that literature on the topic is indeed needed.

This section of the article explores the contemporary Swiss German situation concerning connections between socio-cultural background and achievement at school. It begins by reviewing key literature on the topic. It then turns to address which pupils can be described as 'socially disadvantaged' in German-speaking Switzerland, making use of interview data from four teachers to underline the theoretical material.

This leads to an exploration of the role played by language in discourse addressing connections between social background and performance at school.

### *7.1 Selected literature on the connection between social background and differential school performance*

The literature that addresses the connection between social background and academic achievement for German-speaking Switzerland is largely pedagogical in nature, and especially relates to the results of PISA. There seems to be a lack of research exploring this link from a sociolinguistic perspective. However, as the pedagogical literature on the topic grows, this situation may change.

There are numerous articles that somehow address the connection between social background and school performance in the context of German-speaking Switzerland. These include Vellacott & Wolter's (2002) text on 'Soziale Herkunft und Chancengleichheit' ['Social background and equal opportunities'], and Kassis & Schneider's piece on reading and writing socialisation (2004). Both articles are relevant for an understanding of what the term 'social background' stands for and (hence) who the socially disadvantaged children and adolescents in German-speaking Switzerland are. They also make manifest the wide range of factors that influence pupils' experience of literacy and performance at school. Other articles address different facets of the subject matter, especially in relation to (consequences and implications of) PISA. Ramseier & Brühwiler (2003), for example, address the link between social background and unequal school performance when the variable of basic skills is kept constant, and Schiefele *et al.* (2004), is a further set of papers addressing connections between family background and educational achievement in relation to the PISA results, although the focus here is on Germany, and not on Switzerland.

Many other papers mention the connection in passing, thereby implying that the link between social background and unequal school performance is somehow an established one. For example, in the context of addressing how reading and writing competence can be promoted, Schneider & Bertschi-Kaufmann refer to 'adolescents with unfavourable conditions of socialisation' in connection with 'weak readers' (2004: 6, my translation). Similarly, Rüesch (1999) highlights the significance of social background in the context of how the classroom demography affects learning, and in Moser (2002b) the connection between performance and social background is pointed out in relation to PISA, although the focus is on whether different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (by virtue of immigration from other countries) play a role.

On a practical level, this salient link between social background and differential school performance means a) that children with a certain socio-economic background are likely to be under-represented in higher education and b) that 'social background is still a strong predictor of school success' (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 90, my translation).

### *7.2 Socially disadvantaged children in (German-speaking) Switzerland*

If there is such a strong link between social background and success at school, one needs to question what is meant by 'social background'. Assessing what this phrase refers to is a precursor to making manifest which children and adolescents are socially disadvantaged in German-speaking Switzerland. This question is explored in relation to both theoretical material, i.e. articles and texts as referred to in the brief literature review (cf. 7.1) and interview data.

Before turning to the theoretical material, the nature of the interview data will briefly be outlined. In the context of a course I taught at the University of Berne in 2006 on 'Writing from a sociolinguistic perspective', which addressed connections between social background and performance at school, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with teachers; one of these was a group interview. The interviews were conducted with teachers from different educational levels. One interview was conducted with a kindergarten teacher, one with two primary school teachers and one with a secondary school teacher.<sup>19</sup> They all took between 40 and 60 minutes, and there were three parts to each interview. The first part was the most structured and centred around the same set of questions. I asked the teachers to describe the class they were responsible for, the textbooks and materials they work with and the size and heterogeneity of the class, where heterogeneity was defined in relation to gender distribution, the social backgrounds of the pupils and their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The second part of the interview was more open in structure. The teachers were asked to describe one challenge they faced in their classroom by virtue of either the social and/or cultural background of their students. Finally, I asked them how they faced that challenge. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into how teachers perceive the connection between social background and performance at school. The interview data support the results from the literature to the extent that all four teachers could describe a challenge relating to the social and/or cultural background of their students.

In their article 'Soziale Herkunft und Chancengleichheit' ['Social background and equal opportunity'], Vellacott & Wolter (2002) address the strength and nature of the relationship between social background and reading literacy for grade nine students in Switzerland, as highlighted by

PISA. Their results show that social background clearly plays an important role as a predictor of reading literacy, measured in relation to the adolescents' ability to a) find relevant information in a text, b) comprehend and interpret a text and c) reflect and evaluate the content of a text (Kjærnsli *et al.* 2006: 3).

In the article, social background is defined in relation to financial, social and cultural resources and not in relation to social class. The authors choose to focus on resources, expressed through different forms of 'capital' (cf. Bourdieu 1986 for an analysis of capital) instead of relying on the term 'social class'. They argue that 'the differentiated observation of inequalities ... makes it difficult to speak of classes – they are not clearly separable and not easy to put in a hierarchical order' (2002: 93, my translation).

Resources in the form of capital are addressed on two levels: the level of society and the level of the family (Vellacott & Wolter 2002). Economic capital, cultural capital and social capital are all relevant for the performance of children at school, and as concepts they highlight both what is meant by social background and who is socially disadvantaged. Economic capital refers to the financial resources of a family, their power and prestige, and is seen to indirectly influence the children's performance at school, by virtue of the possibility, for example, of providing the children with books, a computer and other resources which further their learning (Vellacott & Wolter 2002).

Cultural capital is divided into three kinds: institutionalised, objectified and incorporated cultural capital. Whilst institutionalised cultural capital is located at the level of social structure, objectified and incorporated cultural capital are situated at the level of the family. This means that institutionalised cultural capital, like economic capital, has an indirect effect on the performance of the child or adolescent, whilst objectified and incorporated cultural capital directly influence the competence of the child or adolescent by virtue of the role they play in socialisation.<sup>20</sup> Institutionalised cultural capital refers to the education of the mother and father. In relation to the reading results of ninth graders in PISA, 'pupils whose parents did not do a further degree after obligatory schooling had significantly fewer points in the tests on reading literacy' (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 101). The authors further argue that 'parents with higher educational degrees tend to possess more cultural goods (books, cultural objects) and introduce their children to the central cultural skills like, for example, linguistic expression, early on' (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 95, my translation). These cultural goods are gathered under the heading of objectified cultural capital and located at the level of the family.

Objectified cultural capital refers to the possession of books, cultural goods and educational resources (e.g. the Internet and computers). The possession of books in particular plays a significant role for the reading literacy of adolescents (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 104), and effects the level of scientific literacy and mathematical literacy, albeit to a smaller extent. This may be because the presence of books at home somehow signals to the children and adolescents that books are important, or because children who grow up with books generally are read to/read more, than children who grow up without books. Further, the exposure to books at home, especially where children/adolescents read or where children are read to a lot, is likely to have an effect on the size and nature of their vocabulary.

Language, and particularly the use of language in discussions on particular topics between parents and adolescents, can affect school performance. Adolescents from families who talk about political or social topics, or about books and movies more than the average family in Switzerland achieve better results in reading (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 106). The role played by incorporated cultural capital, which is located at the level of the family, can hence have direct results on reading literacy levels. As Vellacott & Wolter (2002: 107, my translation) argue: 'In (especially ... topic-related) discussions, differentiated communicating and the ability to understand complex argumentation are practised, which is decisive for the solving of reading and scientific tasks'. The implication is that adolescents who discuss topics with their parents, will have fewer problems applying the skills they have acquired through discussions at home to tasks at school which require similar skills.

These forms of cultural capital that are located at the level of socialisation in the family, i.e. objectified and incorporated cultural capital, are labelled as 'bildungsnah' (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 96), which can be translated literally as 'close to education'. Hence, adolescents who come from families with 'proximity to education' generally achieve better results than those from families who are 'distant from education' (or 'bildungsfern' in German). The authors further argue that the 'conformity of the decision-making and responsibility of the parents with the educational beliefs anchored in the educational system' plays a role (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 93, my translation). This is reminiscent of Bernstein's point (cf. 4.2) that differences in codes may place the working-class child in a disadvantageous position relative to the whole culture of the school. In other words, compatibility between the family and the school is likely to encourage positive results on the part of the child or adolescent and a lack of compatibility negative ones in comparison.

Finally, at the level of social structure, social capital plays a role for reading literacy. Defined in relation to the family's networks and rela-

tionships, the social capital of a family can be beneficial to a child (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 92). The effects of social capital are indirect and related to economic and cultural capital. For example, in very large families, there is less economic capital with which to buy cultural resources for each child.

Taken together, the differential distribution of capital at the levels of social structure and socialisation in the family are defined as the ‘inequality of social background’ (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 92), which plays a significant role for the performance of adolescents at school in various subjects, which are seen as necessary for their personal and professional lives and for their further education.<sup>21</sup> However, there is no unilateral relationship between social background and the performance of children at school. The notion of ‘literal resilience’ makes this manifest, since it refers to the fact that adolescents who come from families where the socialisation conditions are seen as unfavourable (i.e. where there is ‘distance from education’) can achieve positive results (cf., e.g., Häcki Buhofer, Schneider & Beckert 2007). A simple causal relationship between social background and performance at school should thus not be assumed: one should rather speak of tendencies. This implies the necessity for an appreciation of the complexity of the relationship between social background and differential school achievement, which is of a more mature nature than Bernstein’s comparatively static connection between class and performance.

By adopting a differentiated understanding of social background and hence rejecting the notion of ‘social class’, authors such as Vellacott & Wolter (2002) make manifest the range of interdependent factors that play a role in influencing educational outcomes. Section 4.3 showed Bernstein’s strong reliance on the concept of social class, and his weaknesses when addressing the notion. Even taking account of the fact that Bernstein also addressed social class indirectly in connection with the nature of socialisation in families of different social classes (cf. 4.3), his understanding of class is static and underdeveloped in comparison to Vellacott & Wolter, who clearly go beyond Bernstein in their understanding of social class. Similarly, they do not *equate* a certain social structure with a certain family, but allow for more flexibility in the relationship between social structure and socialisation in the family. Indeed, agreeing with Helmke & Weinert (1997), they argue for a ‘causal distance’ between ‘the indicators of structural inequality and performance at school’ (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 93, my translation), and hence for an appreciation of the difference between factors which indirectly (i.e. features at the level of social structure) and directly (i.e. features at the level of socialisation in the family) influence educational performance.



While Vellacott & Wolter (2002) go beyond Bernstein's understanding of 'class', Kassis & Schneider (2004) present a more differentiated understanding of the variable 'family'. Addressing reading and writing socialisation in the family, Kassis and Schneider argue that 'the variable *family* is, in reality, a conglomerate of various realities that includes factors such as socio-economic status, proximity to education, style of upbringing, family form, family dynamic and others' (2004: 219, my translation, emphasis in original). Bernstein (1971) also points to the complexity surrounding the notion of family by underlying differences in family composition, structures of control in the family, roles and relationships of hierarchy, as well as communication systems (Bernstein 1971). However, the link between family and social class is static, in the sense that he assumes the existence of *a* particular type of family for *a* corresponding social class. As with the variable of 'social class', Kassis & Schneider's depiction of the family allows for a more differentiated appreciation of the factors that can and do affect school performance in different ways.

Indeed, the field of 'reading and writing socialisation' attempts to focus on the role played by numerous factors related to socialisation. These include not only the family as a complex instance of primary socialisation, but also the school, peers, personal resources of the adolescents and gender (Kassis & Schneider 2004: 219). Studying the effects of all these variables, Kassis & Schneider's results show the importance of the family for the adolescents' experience of school (2004). However, they are careful to point out that the family is not *the* omnipotent force predicting reading competence:

Thereby the intra-family world of experience, operationalised through the parents' style of upbringing, acted as the basis of school experience. This thought of the 'basis', however, should not be misinterpreted to the effect that the family is stylized as the all-powerful instance in relation to the reading- and writing-socialisation of the adolescents. Family socialisation appears ... to constitute an important but by no means adequate condition for predicting reading literacy. (Kassis & Schneider 2004: 232, my translation)

Another factor relevant in the context of German-speaking Switzerland is the language spoken at home (Vellacott & Wolter 2002). Addressing the levels of reading literacy in relation to adolescents from immigrant families, Moser (2002b: 121–122) emphasises the importance of the cultural and linguistic background, and the significance of the variable 'proximity to education'. He points out that it is not necessarily multilingualism which is problematic in relation to reading literacy, but the fact that adolescents who are multilingual and speak a different language at

home, often come from families who can also be defined as ‘distant from education’:

Adolescents who speak a different language at home than the language spoken in class achieve a reading literacy mean score which is around 74 points lower than those adolescents who do speak the language spoken in class at home. If the effect of social background is neutralised, then the mean value rises by more than half. If the impact of the school type is also statistically eliminated, the difference is diminished again and amounts to just 40 points. With the same social background and within the same type of school the reading literacy lag of adolescents who usually do not speak the language of the classroom at home is only marginal. (Moser 2002b: 121, my translation)

Hence, Moser (2002b: 122) refers to the fact that these individuals are ‘doubly disadvantaged’. Not only do they use a different language at home than they do at school, but their social backgrounds also tend to influence their performance negatively.

The tendencies made manifest in the literature addressed thus far are supported by the interview data. In the context of the interviews all four teachers mention the challenges children face by virtue of their background. The kindergarten teacher described a young girl, who clearly comes from a family who can be described as ‘distant from education’. Although she watches a lot of television,<sup>22</sup> she has neither books nor toys, and when the class did painting at kindergarten, for example, it seemed as if the girl had never held a paint-brush in her hand. As the teacher pointed out, however, fine motor skills are the key to learning how to write at school. The girl also comes from a family whose native language is not Swiss German and who do not speak Swiss or High German at home. At the time of the interview she also had severe problems communicating in her mother tongue – which is not German – and in German. The combination here between the girl’s cultural background (made manifest in this example through her low level of Swiss German competence) and social background strongly influenced her performance in kindergarten and was a serious challenge for the teacher.

The two primary school teachers mentioned two pupils in particular when talking about the challenge of supporting children individually and having to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum. Both pupils are from families who are perceived as ‘distant from education’, and one of them is also from a family whose mother tongue is not Swiss German. Like the girl described by the kindergarten teacher, he watches a lot of TV<sup>23</sup> and has virtually no books or toys. The teachers also felt his parents did not perceive books or toys as particularly important; similarly, the par-

ents were not seen to place much emphasis on the importance of school. The other pupil, while also from a family who is 'distant from education', faces difficulties for different reasons. The parents have told the teacher they think that school is important. However, they are not in a position to provide the necessary support. The mother often calls the teacher when she has questions or wants to check the girl's homework.

The high school teacher also refers to the challenges a teacher faces when attempting to help adolescents individually. He points out that this difficulty is accentuated by the fact that the pupils have problems for different reasons. Referring to the heterogeneity of his class, the teacher points out that one of his students comes from a family 'distant from education'. He lives alone with his father and they have no newspapers or Internet, nor can he read fluently. While recognising the importance of social and cultural background for school performance, the teacher also emphasises the key role played by motivation and a positive attitude to work. Indeed, he argues that adolescents who are not motivated often have more problems than motivated adolescents from families who are 'distant from education'. In light of the importance of motivation for reading literacy, as shown by Frederking (2003), for example, this is an important point.

### *7.3 On the role played by language in discourse examining connections between social background and achievement at school*

The interview data from all of the interviews highlight the importance of language for the connection between social background and performance at school, as does much of the theoretical material. Thus, Vellacott & Wolter (2002), for example, point to the importance of books, other cultural resources and discussions at home in furthering the adolescents' performance at school (cf. section 7.2). The skills adolescents acquire in discussions of social and political topics, or topics that do not directly relate to daily life (Vellacott & Wolter 2002: 97), are skills they can utilise at school. They thus place pupils who come from families where such discussions are held at an advantage. While this by no means implies these adolescents use a different *code*, it does show that talking about certain topics in a certain way can be beneficial.

To what extent Bernstein's thoughts on the differences between 'universalistic' and 'particularistic' orders of meaning (where 'universalistic' and 'particularistic' have come to replace 'explicit' and 'implicit' respectively [Bernstein 1971]) and verbal elaboration through language can be seen as similar to the 'linguistic expression' referred to in relation to incorporated cultural capital (cf. 7.2) is not clear, since there is not enough information in relation to the Swiss German context. Hence,

while the notion of ‘distance from education’ is also partly defined in relation to different kinds of communication in the family, and access to books and cultural resources, not enough is known about how this is made manifest in the classroom.

Furthermore, literature that addresses connections between social background and performance at school also highlights the variety of other factors that influence a child’s or adolescent’s performance at school, and which are themselves connected to language in complex ways. Combined with the uniqueness of the dialect in the Swiss German context, this may be a reason language does not receive more attention than other factors, such as access to the Internet.

Assessing the social effects of variation in German in German-speaking countries besides Germany, i.e. in Austria and Switzerland, Barbour and Stevenson argue that ‘[w]hile there are language problems in German-speaking Switzerland ..., these are by no means problems of speakers who are only able to use a restricted code and thus be potentially limited by it’ (1998: 209, my translation). The wide range of factors influencing literacy are also emphasised by Vellacott & Wolter (2002), Kassis & Schneider (2004) and Häcki Buhofer (1995), who addresses how children express written literacy:

Thereby story time is neither the most frequent nor the most important means of childhood literacy experiences. There is a lot of printed material in every average household. When one cooks, eats, shops, archives memories, celebrates, literacy is very often involved, without it being the aim of the activity. (Häcki Buhofer 1995: 14–15)

## 8. Conclusion

This article constitutes a first step towards assessing the relevance of Bernstein for contemporary German-speaking Switzerland. It suggests that, despite its potential relevance, Bernstein’s theoretical outlook has aroused only minimal interest to date. My paper presents several reasons for this neglect:

1. the misinterpretation of Bernstein as a deficit theorist and the related misinterpretation of the code concept;
2. the unique status of dialect in Switzerland which made comparisons with countries such as Britain, the USA and Germany difficult and may have caused some to believe the Swiss situation could only be tackled from a Swiss perspective;
3. the lack of recognition of any connection between social background and school performance for German-speaking Switzerland during the early adoption of sociolinguistic perspectives in Switzerland.

The first of these reasons not only influenced the extent to which Bernstein's thoughts were adopted and adapted, but also how Bernstein's work was interpreted. Ris and Schenker's misinterpretation of the code concept, in particular, needs to be mentioned here. Since they seem to have confused Bernstein's concept of *code* with the surface features that Bernstein attributed to *public* and *formal language*, the relevance of the notion of *code* as a regulative concept cannot be determined for German-speaking Switzerland in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The contemporary situation differs from the past situation by virtue of the growing awareness that social background is closely connected with performance at school. While there is still a lack of literature assessing the situation from a sociolinguistic perspective, this may change as scholars continue to examine the nature of the ties between the home and the school. Using an understanding of social background and the family which transcends Bernstein's concept of social class and his rather static view of the connection between a kind of family and a particular social class, scholars in the Swiss German context today have managed to highlight the complexity surrounding the various factors which both indirectly and directly influence school performance.

However, by re-evaluating Bernstein's own static notion of language in light of what we now know about languages and dialects (and as the following paper in this issue shows, ethnolectal varieties of language), we can see how much more complex our contemporary notion of language practice is. We need to appreciate how language is manifest in everyday discourse and how the notion of social background is to be understood for a specific context before any further discussion of language socialisation can take place. In sum, then, Bernstein's work should neither be adopted in its original form for the contemporary situation in German-speaking Switzerland, nor should he be completely dismissed. Instead, the reconsideration of Bernstein in this article has shown the potential relevance of some of his ideas, and has served to clear away some of the obstacles to a serious discussion of differential educational achievement in a changing society such as contemporary German-speaking Switzerland.

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## Notes

1. Cf. Rosenthal & Jacobson (1992) for an understanding of how teacher expectations can shape the performance of pupils in the classroom.
2. See Danzig (1995) for an overview of Bernstein in relation to the deficit and difference view; Bernstein (1997) for the importance of the deficit and difference debate for the mobilisation of financial resources; Bernstein (1971, especially the introduction) for his own interpretation of how he was misinterpreted.

3. Some of the surface features of *public language*, in particular the description of *public language* as containing '[s]hort grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences, a poor syntactical construction, with a verbal form stressing active mood' (Bernstein 1971: 42), seem to have led to an identification of *public language* with dialect and *formal language* with standard (Bernstein 1971: 243). However, Bernstein did not intend this connection. Indeed, as he argues, '[n]one of the other characteristics in the list pointed towards "standard" or "non-standard" speech', where non-standard is seen as dialect (1971: 243). For a list of the features of *public language* see Bernstein (1971: 42) and for *formal language* Bernstein (1971: 55).
4. Atkinson points out, however, that numerous scholars, who have empirically studied classroom life, do not agree with Bernstein's descriptions of the 'school's moral and cognitive order' (1985: 78). For descriptions of these studies, see Atkinson (1985: 78–81).
5. Bernstein chose not to address the ruling class, although later he also focuses on the new and old middle class (cf. Bernstein 1977).
6. 'Social class ranks as one of the classic demographic variables in social science research. It is typically measured by income, education and occupation, although some studies rely only on economic indicators like income' (Haslett 1990: 329).
7. Rumantsch was made a semi-official language on the basis of a referendum held in 1996 (Watts 1999).
8. 'Population' refers to both Swiss and foreign citizens.
9. Throughout the article, the term 'Swiss German' is used in this way.
10. Löffler (2005: 14, my translation) defines the notion of 'language barrier' as follows: 'Following the two-code-theory of the Englishman Basil Bernstein ("restricted code" vs. "elaborated code"), "language barrier" meant a communicative barrier to success, which resulted from a different usage of socially standardized sign or symbol systems ...'. While Bernstein never used the term 'language barrier', it seems its introduction was based on the emphasis he placed on language.
11. One could, however, suppose that the 'environmental effects' include everything related to a child's social upbringing, i.e. number of siblings, size of house, income and occupation of parents, level of parents' education, etc.
12. Ris (1973: 49) uses the term *schön* here, which means 'fine' or 'beautiful'. In the context, he seems to suggest 'to a certain degree'.
13. The influence of television on the acquisition of language is, however, disputed (cf., for example, Häcki Buhofer *et al.* 1994).
14. Ris references the study as *Schlussbericht: 257–277* and states that it can be obtained from the German Seminar at the University of Berne. However, he provides no year, or the names of the other authors, and I have not been able to find the report at the University.
15. This quote suggests that Ris equates the lower classes with the vocational school and the middle classes with the grammar school. However, no justification or clarification of this equation is given in the article. However, it may be given in the *Schlussbericht* which I cannot locate.
16. Shuy & Fasold point out that one reason that sociolinguistics developed was to deal with 'urgent educational problems' (1971: 186). Linguists became involved in community projects relating to the problems encountered by children 'whose academic success and social mobility are severely restricted by the kind of English they use and by their difficulties in dealing with the written word' (Shuy & Fasold 1971: 187).
17. Cf. Goodson (1995) for a discussion of how Bernstein's work relates to the crisis in the field of the sociology of education in the 1950s.
18. PISA is an acronym and stands for 'Program for International Student Assessment'. Focusing on 15-year-olds, PISA tested for reading literacy, science literacy

and arithmetic literacy in 2000, 2003 and 2006. A large amount of data on the social backgrounds of the pupils, who were tested, was also obtained.

19. The secondary school teacher is a teacher at a 'Realschule'. 'Realschule' is a lower secondary school with basic requirements (*the Swiss Education server educa.ch*). For a diagrammatic overview of the Swiss education system see the *Erziehungsdir-  
ektion des Kantons Bern*.
20. Evidently, the role of individual disposition also plays a role (Vellacott & Wolter 2002). However, regardless of the variation between individuals on the basis of this factor, both social structure and socialisation influence performance at school. See Ramseier & Brühwiler (2003) for an assessment of how social background affects performance when the variable of basic cognitive skills is controlled.
21. Important in this context is the idea that what is being examined is competence in 'basic skills which prepare [individuals] for life' (Moser 2002a: 2, my translation). The title of the volume addressing the PISA results in Switzerland makes this manifest. It is called 'Für das Leben gerüstet: die Grundkompetenzen der Jugendlichen', which translates as 'Equipped for life: the basic competences of adolescents'.
22. See footnote 13.
23. See footnote 13.

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