

Christoph Haker/Lukas Otterspeer

Right-Wing Populism and Educational Research¹

Exploring theoretical and methodological perspectives

Abstract: Right-wing populist uses of educational research are the focus of this article. First, we ask how these uses can be grasped theoretically and methodologically. We are thus concerned with exploring appropriate perspectives, which we then apply to the right-wing populist use of the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2016* (PIRLS 2016) in Germany. Here we ask, secondly, which changes and continuities can be identified. By considering continuities, we reject perspectives that treat right-wing populism a priori as a problem outside academia. We conclude by identifying consequences (against technocratic and decisionistic strategies) for research.

Keywords: decisionism, educational research, methodology, participant objectivation, right-wing populism, utilization research

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag fokussiert rechtspopulistische Verwendungen empirischer Bildungsforschung. Erstens fragen wir danach, wie diese Verwendungen theoretisch und methodologisch gefasst werden können. Uns geht es hier um die Erkundung geeigneter Perspektiven. Diese sind leitend für unsere Analyse der rechtspopulistischen Verwendung der *Internationalen Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung 2016* (IGLU 2016) in Deutschland. Dabei fragen wir zweitens nach Veränderungen und Kontinuitäten in der Verwendung. Mit dem Fokus auf Kontinuitäten weisen wir Perspektiven zurück, die Rechtspopulismus a priori als ein Problem außerhalb der Wissenschaft verorten. In einer selbstkritischen Wendung schließen wir mit Konsequenzen (gegen technokratische und dezisionistische Strategien) für (sozial)wissenschaftliche Forschung.

Schlagwörter: Bildungsforschung, Dezisionismus, Methodologie, Rechtspopulismus teilnehmende Objektivierung, Verwendungsforschung

- 1 This paper is based on a presentation we gave at the 23rd DiscourseNet conference »Discourse, power and mind: between reason and emotion« in the panel »Legitimation Processes in discourse: New theoretical and empirical insights« in Bergamo 2019. Our thanks go to Laura Cunniff from the Translation and Editing Service at Europa-Universität Flensburg, who gave us a very helpful proof-reading, and Nele Kuhlmann as well as Leon Wolff, who read the manuscript at an early stage, gave important comments, and discussed controversial points.

1. Introduction

We take up the alleged paradox that internationalised educational and social research and governance serves as a basis to legitimise nationalist and anti-internationalist arguments. Using the case of the public reception of the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2016* (PIRLS 2016) in Germany, we show how even right-wing populist positions legitimise themselves using scientific results. Thus, this paper focuses on the problem of how this connection between internationalised social and educational science on the one hand and right-wing populism on the other can be grasped theoretically and methodologically. Here we propose a »zooming in«² on concrete communication acts in order to reconstruct how they are following up previous communication acts and how they open up a space of possibilities for further follow-up communications. In this process we observe, how content is transformed in the communication process, but also what continuities can be detected in the reference to previous communications. Thus, this paper is not concerned with discursive patterns in large data corpora, but with the fine-grained analysis of successive acts of communication, to which we want to make a methodological contribution. Beyond the case at hand, we are therefore working on a research programme that allows us to understand changes and continuities in the political uses of educational knowledge in general and the right-wing populist uses of educational knowledge in particular.

Given the current state of research, such a perspective seems relevant. In analysing the Scottish national curriculum, Gamal and Swanson point out that »an economically-driven global citizenship education discourse, and curricula informed by it, reinforce nationalistic identities and the ambitions of the nation state« (Gamal/Swanson 2017, S. 36). More generally, scholarship on the reception of the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) shows that the international comparison of pupil achievement in the public debate is strongly determined by the respective national stereotypes of other countries (Waldow/Takayama/Sung 2014).³ Our case of the right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016 shares with this studies that an internationally oriented research programme that wants to cross borders reinforces borders on the contrary (Otterspeer/Haker 2019; Haker/Otterspeer 2021).

Mede and Schäfer (2020) currently speak of a »science-related populism« and argue that the analysis of populism should not be limited to political populism but also to its manifestations in science and education (see also Harsin 2018; Ylä-Anttila 2018; for far right attempts in education and science see Mudde 2019). In the German context, Sabine Andresen (2018) elaborates how right-wing populism mobilizes along issues of childhood, family and education and therefore does in part pertain to educational professions. Werner Thole (2020) shows this for the context of social work. Using a specific case, Christiane Thompson (2020) identifies the conflict as to whether right-wing populist discourse and thinking should be confronted within the university setting or banned

2 See for practice-theoretic approaches in a similar way Davide Nicolini (2009).

3 Beside to its reception, national interests also shaped the genesis of PISA (Leibfried/Martens 2008).

from the universities altogether. The thesis (although we are not convinced by it) that constructivist or poststructuralist theories have contributed to the rise of right-wing actors (Williams 2017; Amlinger 2020; from a critical perspective, Angermüller 2018) also shows that a separation of science and right-wing populism is by no means that simple (see also Haker/Otterspeer 2020).

While Andresen (2018) describes her approach »as ›wild‹ investigation« the mentioned works of Thole, Thompson and Amlinger are more of programmatic nature. Against the background of these discourses we would like to contribute to a more concrete theoretical and methodological understanding of the relationship between educational and social science on the one hand and right-wing populism on the other. It seems important to us not to assume a priori a separation of these areas. As we outlined above, the boundaries are not always clear – in our case, educational research is used in a right-wing populist manner and is not rejected totally as being a project of corrupt academic elites. Our central research question, therefore, is how right-wing populist use of educational science can be grasped theoretically and methodologically (question 1). Then we apply these perspectives to our case. Here we ask, which changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016 can be identified (question 2). With this approach, we also pursue a self-critical concern that is marginalized in the systematization attempts of a »science-related populism« presented by Mede and Schäfer (2020). The examination of science-related populism must not ignore the fact – even if it is politically tempting – that there are continuities between educational and social science and right-wing populist uses (Otterspeer/Haker 2019; Haker/Otterspeer 2020).

With PIRLS we focus so-called large-scale assessments (Wagemaker/Mertens n.d.), which, together with studies such as PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) and TIMSS (*Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*), have strongly influenced educational science, governance and the educational system in the new millennium (Niemann/Martens/Teltemann 2017; Grek 2009). PIRLS is a representative test of the reading skills of fourth graders, which is carried out in various countries (see also for the following Hußmann et al. 2017; IEA n.d.). In addition, questionnaires are used to collect contextual data. Thus, achievement disparities can be analysed along categories of difference such as gender, social or migration background.⁴ PIRLS was conducted for the first time in 2001 and then repeated every five years, making it possible to compare

4 The migration background is taken into account in the German PIRLS survey and is not surveyed in an international comparison (the language spoken at home is, however, surveyed in the international comparison) (see also for the following Wendt/Schwippert 2017). Whether a migration background exists is determined by the parents' place of birth. In the context of PIRLS there are three options: I) both parents were born in Germany, II) one parent was born abroad and one parent was born in Germany, III) both parents were born abroad. In the case of options II) or III) the authors of PIRLS are diagnosing a migration background. PIRLS 2016 specifies 32 percent of the total amount of student as students with migration background. However, information is missing for 21 percent of the total amount of students, so the PIRLS data are not very reliable here. Several critical analyses are available on the category ›migration background‹ and its use in large-scale assessments (Scarvaglieri/Zech 2013; Sitter 2016; Horvath 2017; Stošić 2017).

reading skills over time and between participating countries. In PIRLS 2016, Germany ranks in the middle of the international field (Bos et al. 2017). Compared to the reading performance recorded in the first PIRLS survey, there is no significant change. However, other countries were able to improve during this period.

Due to its strong changes in reception immediately after the publication of PIRLS 2016 in Germany (Otterspeer/Haker 2019), the analysed case seems particularly suitable for us to investigate the changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of educational research. At the end of the analysed reception, YouTube-commentators see PIRLS 2016 as a confirmation of their demand for closed borders and deportations of all migrants. The comments refer to an interview with a researcher, which had been uploaded on a right-wing populist YouTube-channel. The interview is entitled »Prof. Hans Peter Klein: Migrant children pull school performance down (05.12.2017)«⁵ and was originally broadcasted on a public television station under the more rational title: »Prof. Hans Peter Klein about the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study on 05.12.17«. The reason for the interview is the release of PIRLS 2016 on the same day during a press conference. The process from the press conference to the YouTube-comments is our case to trace the changes but also continuities in the right-wing populist use of educational science and to work on theoretical and methodological perspectives.⁶

The present paper is organized as follows: In a first step (chapter 2), we outline the relationship between science and the public sphere, drawing on Habermas' (1971) problematization of the scientification of politics. Against the background of our case, we are looking for a position that neither retreats and leaves the use of scientific knowledge to arbitrariness nor claims in a technocratic manner to be able to make the better policy. Then, with regard to PIRLS 2016, we highlight characteristics of large-scale assessments that we see as conditions for the analysed legitimization process, and discuss the defining characteristics of right-wing populist argumentation. This is followed (chapter 3) by methodological considerations. Following the »knowledge utilization research« by Beck and Bonß (1985) we conceptualise the legitimization process and how we can grasp it empirically by »zooming in«. Hence, in chapters 2 and 3 we answer our first research question: how can scholars theoretically and methodologically grasp right-wing populist use of social and educational science? Subsequently (chapter 4) we present the results of our empirical analysis of educational research in the public sphere using the PIRLS 2016 case. To answer our second research question, we work out which changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016 can be identified. We conclude (chapter 5) by summarizing our remarks following the research questions and, in a self-critical turn, by asking about the implications for further research.

5 We translated sections from the analysed material on occasion of this article.

6 This paper is thus about theorising and methodologising our previous research on the relationship between education and social science and right-wing populism (Otterspeer/Haker 2019; Haker/Otterspeer 2021).

2. Relationship between (educational) science, politics and public

The case we analysed opposes a simple black and white theorization of science vs. right-wing populism or fact vs. fake, because there are continuities in the right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016. Such a polarized perspective sets a boundary between science and the public, which obscures the entanglement of science and society. We can see such boundary-work (Gieryn 1983) at the *March for Science*. For example the slogan »The good thing about science is that it's true whether you believe it or not« gives the impression that science is totally separated from its production conditions and usage in the public sphere. Mede and Schäfer (2020) also tend in their heuristic model of »science-related populism« in this direction. In this model of a populist set of ideas, they contrast the »academic elite« with the »ordinary people« and conceptualize »decision-making sovereignty« and »truth-speaking sovereignty« as characterized by the fundamental conflict between these groups.⁷ Scholars who follow this heuristic run the risk of having a blind spot about the continuities between science and right-wing populism.

In the following pages, we first draw on Habermas to systematize the relationship between science, politics and public opinion, with a particular focus on legitimation. The advantage of Habermas' recursive pragmatism is that it allows us to focus on the continuities between science, politics and public without blurring the differences between them. Second, we highlight four characteristics of large-scale assessments. Third, we clarify our understanding of right-wing populism. In doing so, it is already clear that we see immanent docking points for right-wing populist uses in the PIRLS design.

According to Habermas (1971), there are three normative concepts connecting science and politics. The first is »decisionism«, which separates political decision-making and the public debate from scientific research, because political decisions are always in the hands of political leaders and elites and are therefore by nature free of scientific rationality. The second is »technocracy«, which assumes that political decisions can be determined by scientific research. Both concepts become problematic in democratic societies due to a lack of democratic legitimacy (Koch/Weingart 2016), not to mention that (social) science cannot offer the unambiguous knowledge that both concepts require. The third normative concept – preferred by Habermas – is »pragmatism«. In this case, the connection between scientific research and politics lies in public opinion. The idea is that scientific results are presented and discussed in public and thus legitimize political decisions. At the same time, scientific research should reflect and anticipate public opinions and values. Although Habermas argued that this normative concept is far from being empirically implemented, Weingart (2013) points out that, in keeping with the research to date, the links between science and politics should be regarded as recursive⁸ (pragmatism) in contrast to the linearity of de-

7 The heuristic model of Mede and Schäfer (2020) does not take into account the populists' attempts to be scientific and educational (see Haker/Otterspeer 2020, 2021).

8 In our reflections in this paper, such a recursion is demonstrated. For us, the right-wing populist use of educational science in public is an occasion to reflect on whether we need to do research differently.

cisionism and technocracy. When analysing legitimization processes, therefore, we focus on the links between scientific research and public opinion.

In this paper, we are interested in how knowledge from educational research is used in the public debate to legitimise right-wing populist positions. Focusing on legitimization processes, we are not interested in intentional legitimization strategies from political elites. In the process, the use of scientific knowledge is neither necessarily intentional nor exclusive to actors in official political positions. It is rather part of a process in which something becomes acceptable and normative to a group. From our perspective, it is the »taken-for-grantedness« (Grek 2009; Shields 2013) and therefore the symbolic power of scientific knowledge (Bourdieu 1985), in particular, that makes such knowledge valuable to legitimization processes. This symbolic power operates as a kind of meta-capital (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992) when it crosses the boundaries separating the scientific field from the public sphere and can be specified as source of scientific authority (Neidhardt 2002).

Because of the border-crossing process, scientific knowledge can be used to disguise political positions as scientifically proven necessities. This means that scientific knowledge can be used to try to legitimise judgments, attributions of causes, and/or solutions in a technocratic way. In opposition to this technocratization of knowledge, educational researchers tend to promote a decisionistic position, in which they argue that they cannot be made responsible for how their results are used politically (e.g. Reinders/Gräsel/Ditton 2011, S. 231; Baumert 2016, S. 223 f.). Despite the consensus that the decisionistic model cannot offer a convincing empirical description of interactions between science and politics, »this model seems to fit best with ›mainstream‹ self-descriptions of science« (Peters 2008, S. 133; see also Gieryn 1983). Using Habermas' normative conceptualization, we seek to criticize the technocratic use of scientific knowledge without falling into such a decisionistic position. In questioning the link between decisionistic self-descriptions and (self)legitimations of science in society (Kaldewey 2016), we want to open a space for reflection on the boundary-work (Gieryn 1983, 1999) of science, especially with regard to how research is used by right-wing populists.

We sustain that the character of large-scale assessments like PIRLS has the effect of promoting the analysed legitimization process.⁹ Four characteristics of large-scale assessments in educational science, we suggest, are important to the connection between this type of scientific research, politics, and public opinion. These characteristics are presented in the following section.

Due to their focus on competing national education systems, these large-scale assessments are grounded in a methodological nationalism (Beck/Grande 2010; Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002). Ranking each nation on the basis its average values, these studies can produce a »fear of being left behind« (Biesta 2016, S. 351). Against the background

9 It is clear that our analysis is not generalizable to educational science as a whole. Different subdisciplinary approaches seem to be adaptable in different ways to far-right considerations (Haker/Otterspeer 2019). Nevertheless, large-scale assessments address approaches in educational science that have shaped disciplinary and public ways of problematizing in Germany (Aljets 2015; Tillmann et al. 2008), Europe and further countries (Grek 2009; Martens/Niemann 2010; Waldow/Takayama/Sung 2014).

that reading literacy is seen as a key to social growth and economic prosperity (Mullis et al. 2007) and the idea of a knowledge economy (Robertson 2005), this fear becomes vital to the existence of the nation state as well as to individuals. Furthermore large-scale assessments identify risk-groups (Klemm 2016) in that they focus on categories of difference such as ›migration background‹ (Scarvaglieri/Zech 2013; Sitter 2016). In addition to testing student performance, large-scale assessments use questionnaires to record student characteristics in order to evaluate the measured performance, differentiating the results by gender, social origin or migration background. In this way, educational research participates in debates about society and identity and thus gives scientific weight to arguments that actively divide the people of a nation into different groups, such as so-called ›regular citizens‹ and people with an so called ›migration background‹ (regardless of their citizenship and in disregard of hybrid subjectivities). Last but not least, large-scale assessments claim scientific positivism and political relevance at the same time (Biesta 2016). Ylä-Anttila (2018) shows for the Finnish discourse that a radical scientism, i.e. the reference to seemingly unambiguous statistics, is characteristic for right-wing populist references to science. The claim to unambiguity associated with large-scale assessments can therefore be seen as a condition for decisionistic and/or technocratic self-conceptions and uses of science. The press conference that took place on the occasion of the publication of PIRLS 2016 in Germany, which was attended by both scientists and politicians, can be seen as an example of this relationship between scientific positivism and politics. This event is the starting point of our analysis, because it illustrates how the scientific authority linked to PIRLS 2016 has an impact that extends beyond the boundaries of science into politics and the public sphere, and thus functions as a kind of meta-capital.

In our empirical research (Otterspeer/Haker 2019), we analysed a specific legitimization process that shows how PIRLS 2016 is woven into right-wing populist argumentation. Although our critical analysis does not focus on the right-wing populist position itself, but on the described legitimization process from the presentation of PIRLS 2016 to the comments generated by its dissemination on YouTube, we see the necessity to give a rough definition of right-wing populism. Populism is described »as a (thin) ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people« (Mudde 2019, S. 7 f.; see also Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). This minimal definition (Berbair/Lewandowsky/Siri 2015) needs to be specified with regard to right-wing populism. The described logic of populism is filled out nativistically here.

»It is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native (or ›alien‹) elements, whether persons or ideas, are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state.« (Mudde 2019, S. 27).

In this sense, right-wing populism is directed against elites and minorities who are constructed as non-native (Pelinka 2013; Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017). It

claims to represent the general will of the people through this demarcation from elites and minorities. However, the critique of elites in right-wing populism is ambivalent: while the so-called establishment is rejected, there is no essential problem with elites in right-wing populism (Müller 2017). One can even observe a right-wing populist promotion of elites, carried by the double character of this thin ideology in which the widespread authoritarian personality (Sanford et al. 1973; Altemeyer 2004) is accompanied by the socially dominant orientation (Pratto et al. 1994; Altemeyer 2004) of those who seek to be the leaders of right-wing populist movements.

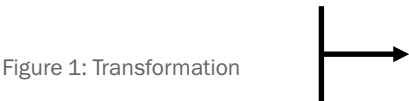
To summarize our remarks in this chapter: we are working to develop a perspective that opposes a decisionistic withdrawal of science without becoming technocratic. We are interested in boundary-work analysis that looks at how scientific knowledge outside science develops symbolic power. In its usage, scientific knowledge thus serves to disguise political positions – in our case right-wing populist positions – as scientifically proven necessities. When discussing the design of PIRLS and our understanding of right-wing populism, we have already suggested that there are certain points of connection here – for example, between the methodological nationalism of the study and the hypostasis of the people in right-wing populism – that make right-wing populist uses possible.

3. Methodology

Against the background of our theoretical reflections on the relationship between science, politics and the public, we face certain methodological challenges. This is because the debate on changes and continuities between science, politics and the public quickly runs the risk of becoming either decisionist (»we scientists cannot be held responsible for the use of our results«) or technocratic (»we can derive the right political action from our research results«). In our view, knowledge utilization research approach (Beck/Bonß 1985; Neun 2016) presented below is a promising way to avoid these risks. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the political and public use of scientific results is always an active transformation of these results and thus cannot be determined by the scientific process. On the other hand, it aims to reflect the use of scientific results in politics and public, because it takes responsibility for the effects of scientific results in these fields.

We understand legitimization processes as series of communication acts in which judgments, attributions of causes and/or solutions are legitimised. This view enables us to divide the legitimization process into sequences of utterances that follow each other chronologically. In this process, one sequence creates a space of possibilities by making certain judgments, attributing specific causes and/or proposing certain solutions, and the subsequent sequence puts some of these possibilities into practice. Seen the other way: the subsequent sequence fills a space of possibilities that was opened by the preceding sequence. Drawing on the framing approach (Entman 1993; Matthes 2007), we assume that certain judgments, attributions of causes and/or solutions create a certain space for connecting communication acts – which makes it clear that the presentation of research results is always also a political act.

To reconstruct and represent legitimation processes, we ›zoom in‹ on two different points of view that we take in the analysis (Beck/Bonß 1985). From the perspective of the sequence, which creates a space of possibilities that is actively used by the following sequence, this process is seen as a *transformation*. Transformations are illustrated by the following icon, in which the vertical line represents the point of view and the arrow represents the focused legitimation process.

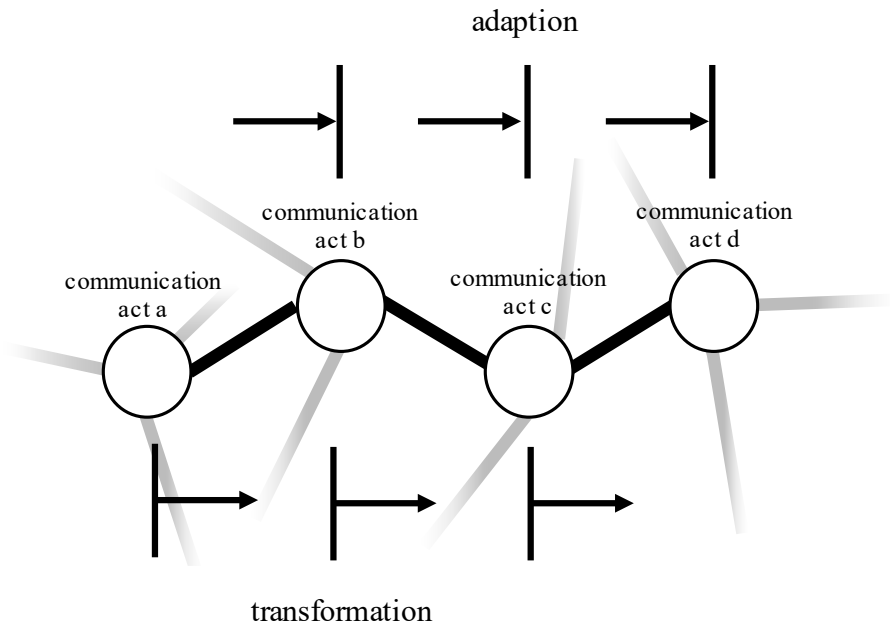


From the perspective of the following sequence, the process has to be analysed as an *adaption*. Adaptions are illustrated by a slightly different icon, in which the vertical line is also the point of view and the arrow the focused legitimation process.



Of course, this is a theoretical-analytical distinction. In practice, each sequence can be analysed both as the point at which adaption takes place and as the starting point of a transformation process. Combining the icons for transformation and adaption, the sequences of the legitimation process can be illustrated as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Legitimation as a process of adaption and transformation



Thus, the *adaption*, which we understand as an active use of the opened space of possibility in each new sequence, is strongly connected to *transformation*, which we understand as a combination of changes and continuities in a series of communication acts. We therefore regard legitimation as a process of transformations and adaptations (Beck/Bonß 1985). As the grayed-out connecting lines to further acts of communication show, we understand this processes as embedded in a net of communication acts. Consequently, by ›zooming in‹ on a particular legitimation process, we are considering a limited set of data. We think, however, that it is precisely in this way that it is possible to understand how acts of communication connect to each other – a perspective that is lost when there is too much ›zooming out‹. In the possibility of tracing legitimation processes in a zooming in, we see the methodological benefit of our approach for further research on discursive practices.¹⁰

For the process we are analysing, both perspectives – adaption and transformation – are analytically valuable. From the transformation perspective, the question can be addressed of how research results change in non-scientific use, but also which continuities remain. Thus, in a sense, the transformation perspective resists the decisionist withdrawal: as scientists, we are interested in what happens to scientific knowledge outside of science. The adaption perspective recognizes that in the use of scientific knowledge, this knowledge is processed or co-produced in a way that follows the at a time dominant rationalities. Thus, this perspective of analysis resists a technocratic attitude. We will now apply the perspective on legitimation as a process of adaption and transformation developed along knowledge utilization research (Beck/Bonß 1989) to our case. Our aim is to identify the transformations and adaptations that are evident in the right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016. In the concluding chapter, we then ask, in a self-critical turn, what consequences for research can be derived from our analysis.

4. Right-wing populist use of PIRLS 2016 – our analysis

As we have mentioned, our analysis focuses on four sequences. In chronological order, they can be presented in the following way¹¹: First the presentation of PIRLS 2016 at the press conference (Bundespressekonferenz) of December 5, 2017. The Material of our analysis is a television report (Phoenix 2017a) with excerpts from the press conference, which we have

10 From a more distanced perspective, for example, it seems coherent to separate right-wing populist YouTube comments from educational research (as more generally Mede and Schäfer (2020) do with the concept of »science-related populism«). However, if one focuses the perspective on the particular acts of communication and the subsequent acts of communication, continuities (might) emerge – as we will show in the next chapter.

11 In our research process and reconstruction, we went the other way around. The YouTube comments were our starting point, because we have been irritated by their references to academia. After that, we took a closer look at HELLO WORLD and the television interview. Because this interview refers directly to the press conference, we then also made the press conference a subject of our analysis. We mention this, because the reverse chronological order of our research process is crucial for the data selection. In our mode of ›zooming-in‹ we only considered the one previous communication act, that has the strongest references in the current utterance.

transcribed. Second, the television interview (Phoenix 2017b) that same day with Professor Hans Peter Klein becomes the focus of our analysis. We have transcribed this interview for the purpose of analysis. Third, the YouTube version of the interview, which was uploaded onto the right-wing populist YouTube channel HELLO WORLD (2017), moves into the focus of our interest. Here, the right-wing-populist intensified title of the interview and the context of the YouTube channel is the subject of our analysis. Fourth and finally, we analyse the YouTube comments on this video.¹² We considered all YouTube comments, 45 in total, posted in the days after the video was uploaded. As these events take place within a few days of each other, our analysis covers part of the immediate reception of PIRLS 2016.

When presenting and interpreting our research results in the following, we limit our focus to the issue of ›migration‹ in the analysed legitimization process, which is a central point of reference in our case (for a more detailed analysis of the material see Otterspeer/Haker 2019). In doing so, we want to answer the question formulated above: which changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of educational science can be identified?

4.1 Presentation of PIRLS 2016 at Bundespressekonferenz

The starting point of our legitimization process is the PIRLS 2016 press conference on December 5, 2017. Both representatives of PIRLS 2016 and politicians, who rate the results of PIRLS negatively, presented at the conference. Wilfried Bos, the PIRLS 2016 coordinator for Germany, said:

»In 2001 only four other countries were better than us, and now there are twenty countries that have become better than us. [...] That is why we do not have to carry sackcloth and ashes [Sack und Asche tragen]¹³. But still: twenty countries have passed us by. That is a lot.« (Phoenix 2017a)¹⁴

Susanne Eisenmann, former President of the German Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, also stressed her dissatisfaction with this result during the press conference:

»It can be said that Germany has maintained [...] its level, but the others have become better. And against that background, stagnation is of course regression.« (Phoenix 2017a)

Since our analysis starts with that press conference, for this sequence we do not analyse how a previously opened space of possibilities is filled in a certain way. However, fol-

12 Meanwhile the YouTube-channel HELLO WORLD and therefore the uploaded interview as well as the comments are no longer available. In case of interest, a copy of the video and the comments can be requested.

13 A German phrase, that expresses, that no repentance needs to be done.

14 We translated the quoted sections from the analyzed material on occasion of this article.

lowing the statements by Bos and Eisenmann we want to point out that a dramatized perspective on the German school system becomes visible – a perspective not necessarily implied by the study's results.¹⁵ The problematisation by Bos and Eisenmann stresses the search for causes and solutions, underlined by their authority. It becomes visible, how a study on the reading literacy of fourth-graders becomes a competition of nations. This interpretation of the results of PIRLS 2016 continues the methodological nationalism of the study. The statements exemplify the relevance of the comparison with other countries in the classification of PIRLS 2016, setting a national we in opposition to the competing others (the countries, that have passed by). Thus, the first sequence of our analysis opens up a scientifically legitimated space of possibilities for further communication acts, which enables to ask: »What are causes and what solutions?«

4.2 Television Interview with Professor Hans Peter Klein

On the same day that the press conference took place, a professor for didactics of biology – Hans Peter Klein – entered the opened space. As part of an afternoon television program from a German public broadcaster (Phoenix), he was interviewed about the release of PIRLS 2016 as an expert in educational research. Klein puts the »share of immigrants« as causal explanation for the study's results and therefore fills the opened space.

»Yes, I mean that there is imminent danger. You would not have needed a study for this. Just ask the elementary school teachers. For example, those in Hessen have complained massively that in many cases normal education is practically no longer possible with migrant populations here in the city of 70, 80, 90 percent and that they are left alone with all this.« (Phoenix 2017b)

These causal attribution as well as the specified percentages cannot be derived from PIRLS 2016 (Otterspeer/Haker 2019). Here the change in the transformation process becomes visible. So-called fourth graders with migration background represents 32 percent of the tested population in Germany, according to the representative study (Bos et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the culprits are found with migrants – a few hours after publication. The category of difference »migration background« thus enables the clear identification of a risk group. The constituted national »we« is thus distinguished from the »others« in two ways – other countries and people with a migration background. Klein also links the operationalized perspective of PIRLS with teacher complaints, although it is unclear whom those refer-

15 As already highlighted in the introduction, fourth graders in Germany reached an average achievement value in the lower midfield in comparison to the other participating states and regions (Bos et al. 2017). In the logic of PIRLS, this is certainly not a top position. However, the dramatic classification by Eisenmann and Bos does not result from the average value achieved, but from the comparison with other states that were able to improve. Therefore, it depends here on whether one focuses on the measured reading skills in Germany or on the comparison with other countries how dramatic the results of the study appear in the German context.

enced would see as migrants and why a so-called migrant per se is a problem in educational settings. The phrase »You would not have needed a study for that« shows that Klein combines findings of a representative study (PIRLS) and the alleged common sense among teachers. At the same time due to his status as professor and his presented role as an expert in educational research, the scientific authority of PIRLS 2016 remains. Here, the continuity in the transformation process becomes visible. In result, PIRLS legitimates a problem description – share of immigrants – that does not follow from the study itself.

4.3 Right-wing populist YouTube channel

The reference point »share of immigrants« and thus the possibility space opened on the previous sequence, allows a right-wing YouTube channel named HELLO WORLD (2017) to upload a recording of the interview under the title »Prof. Hans Peter Klein: Migrant children pull school performance down (05.12.2017)«. PIRLS 2016 is now embedded in a right-wing context that can be seen in the uploaded videos of the channel, the visual language and in the interview title itself, which intensifies the causal attribution to immigrants. Here the change in the transformation process becomes visible. By referring to Professor Hans Peter Klein in the title of the video, the scientific authority retains, which indicates the continuity in the transformation.

4.4 YouTube Comments

On the fourth and final level of the legitimization process we are analysing, YouTube comments take up the space opened up by the right-wing populist contextualization of the video in its uploaded form. In the following, we pick up four exemplary YouTube comments from our case, which includes a total of 45 comments that were written promptly after the upload.

Freya Lupus: »Thanks, Prof. Hans Peter Klein, you are expressing what I have been criticizing for years at our local school. Because of my children, I have been confused with this school system for about 20 years and the downward spiral is turning to the bottomless. Unfortunately, our German children are no longer being supported, because there are not enough teachers for remedial education at the schools; but for whole refugee classes. Now, my son was told by the German teacher not to write sentences so long, but short, concise sentences. Mentally poor Germany and the teachers are the executioners of our children.«

bröla nola: »Germany becomes stupid thanks to Merkel's flood of foreigners.«

Max Mustermann: »Deport everything without alternatives and secure borders immediately.«

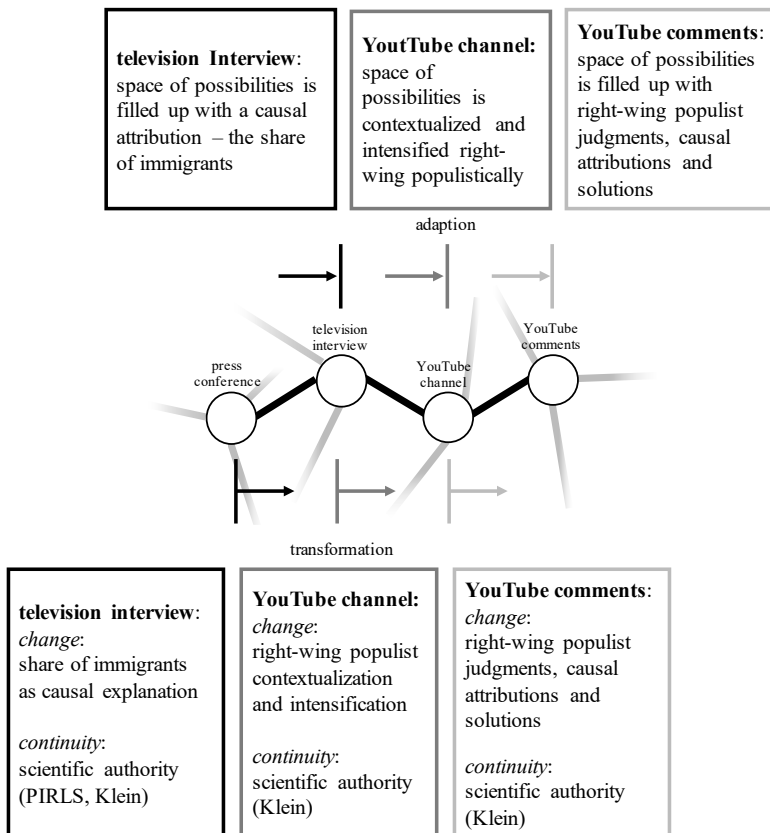
ulius jui: »Another preacher in the desert at work ...

It is so sad where this left-wing delusion has brought us in all parts of our life today.«

In the comments, the attribution of migrants as a cause of deficits in schools is repeated in various different ways, such as *Freya Lupus*' remark that migrants are to blame for the dearth of teachers and declining standards in German schools. Following the logic of right-wing populist argumentation, elites such as Angela Merkel are blamed (*brola nola*). Deportations and secure borders are demanded as a solution (*Max Mustermann*). Other comments contain racist arguments that biologise or culturalise differences in the performance of pupils. Beside these changes in comparison to the preceding sequences, continuities in the scientific legitimation of the statements can also be identified. Professor Klein, »a preacher in the desert«, is believed to finally speak the truth – a figure that authorizes the right-wing populist positions (*ulius jui*). *Freya Lupus* also mentions Klein's professorial status in her comment. At the end of the analysed legitimation process PIRLS thus legitimizes right-wing populist judgments, attribution of causes and solutions, which are considered incontestable due to the scientific authority of PIRLS 2016.

Taking up and supplementing Figure 3, our analysis of the legitimation chain can be summarized as follows:

Figure 4: Legitimation process from the presentation of PIRLS 2016 to right-wing populist positions



The legitimation process we have analysed starts with the presentation of PIRLS 2016 at a press conference. At the temporary end of the process, there are right-wing populist positions legitimised with reference to PIRLS 2016.

We have identified **three adaption steps**: (I) the dramatized perspective on the school system during the press conference opens a space of possibilities for the search for causes and solutions. Hans Peter Klein adapts this space with the causal attribution »share of immigrants«. (II) The space of possibilities opened up by that attribution is adapted by the YouTube channel HELLO WORLD. By re-uploading the interview, Hans Peter Klein's explanation is embedded in a right-wing populist context and intensified with the new title. (III) The contextualization and intensification have now opened a space in which right-wing populist judgments, causal attributions, and solutions can be put forth.

These adaption steps are accompanied by a **transformation process** that includes changes and continuities. (I) The television interview changes PIRLS with regard to the share of immigrants as a causal explanation – a statement, that follows neither from the study nor from the press conference. The scientific authority continues by referring on PIRLS and to the academic status of a Professor. (II) Because of the upload through the YouTube channel HELLO WORLD, PIRLS continues to change as the causal attribution share of immigrants is contextualized and intensified in a right-wing-populist manner. By referring on *Prof. Klein* in the videos title, the scientific authority perpetuates. (III) The YouTube comments continue the process of chance, adding right-wing populist judgments, causal attributions, and solutions. By referring to the »preacher« Hans Peter Klein, the scientific authority is also established in this sequence.

5. Conclusion

Two questions are in the focus of this paper: how the right-wing populist use of educational science can be grasped theoretically and methodologically (question 1) and which changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of educational science can be identified (question 2)? We conclude our remarks by summarizing our responses to these questions and discussing what follows for educational research. As announced, we are concerned with a self-critical turn that takes a look at our own scientific practice on the basis of the continuities that have been worked out.

Question 1: In order to gain a theoretical understanding of the relationship between (educational) science, politics and the public sphere, we have referred in a first step to Habermas' (1971) remarks on »The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion«. Based on the normative conceptions he distinguishes – »decisionism«, »technocracy« and »pragmatism« – we have highlighted that challenges and problems that arise when thinking about the relationship between science, politics and public. Specifically with regard to the case at hand, it is clear that the »decisionist position« is both theoretically and empirically inadequate. Such a stance ignores the continuities that become apparent in the political use of the research results – for example, when right-wing populist positions legitimize themselves via a study (PIRLS 2016) that is dedicated to a methodological na-

tionalism.¹⁶ Research with its problem descriptions and its construction opens up certain spaces of possibility for connecting communication (and hides others) and for that very reason is not detached from the political uses that follow it.¹⁷ The confrontation with »science-related populism« must, therefore, always include a self-critical questioning of one's own practices and self-evident facts, a point that is underexposed in Mede's and Schäfer's (2020) conceptualisation mentioned above. The »technocratic position« can also be criticized theoretically and empirically on the basis of our case at hand. While here official political actors (see on this topic Tillmann et al. 2008) do primarily not use the PIRLS 2016 results technocratically, the YouTube comments we analysed nevertheless took them this way (for right-wing populist uses of science in a technocratic way in Finland, see Ylä-Anttila 2018). Science is not an occasion here to weigh arguments in a democratic decision-making process and to irritate one's own self-evident facts. Rather, science is taken up as if it is now unambiguously clear what is to be done: closed borders and deportations. The problem of a decisionist withdrawal becomes all the more apparent against the background of these distorting uses. The »concept of pragmatism« seems to us normatively the most convincing.¹⁸ The idea here is that research results are discussed in public and in this way legitimize political decisions. Although Habermas argued that this normative concept is far from being empirically implemented, Weingart (2013) points out that, in keeping with the research to date, the links between science and politics should be regarded as recursive (pragmatism) in contrast to the linearity of decisionism and technocracy. From the discussion of Habermas's recursive pragmatism we thus take away that a perspective is needed that allows us to focus on the continuities between science, politics and public, without blurring the differences.

However, Habermas does not help us when it comes to a more precise theoretical conception of these continuities and the methodological implications of that conception.

16 Our discussion of PIRLS 2016 characteristics has shown that, in addition to methodological nationalism, rankings and the »fear of being left behind« associated with them, categories of difference such as migration background, and the claim of scientific positivism and political relevance are particularly adaptable to right-wing populist uses. These characteristics of PIRLS can be linked to right-wing populist logic, as we have shown in our analysis.

17 Therefore, it is necessary to overcome the decisionistic withdrawal. This withdrawal can be seen in educational researchers claim (e.g. Reinders/Gräsel/Ditton 2011, S. 231; Baumert 2016, S. 223 f.) that there is a clear distribution of tasks between science and politics, according to which science is in charge of the production of rational knowledge and politics handles decision-making based on an act of will. In this self-description, scientists legitimate their own position by highlighting a certain function in society (Habermas 1971; Gieryn 1983; Kaldewey 2016). On the other hand, they reject responsibility for how knowledge that has been produced is actually used, stressing their scientific neutrality and autonomy.

18 From our perspective, the concept of pragmatism is normatively most convincing in three ways: First, the recursivity underlines that science itself is normatively constituted – e.g., via the problems and research questions that are (not) pursued. Second, it emphasizes the relevance of democratic decision-making processes that are constituted by the public sphere and politically institutionalized. Third, the model supports an engaged and interceding science that nevertheless acknowledges its limitations.

For this, we found the knowledge utilization research approach (Beck/Bonß 1985, 1989) fruitful. On the one hand, this approach acknowledges that the political and public use of scientific results is always a transformation and active adaption of these results and therefore cannot be determined by the scientific process. On the other hand, it aims to reflect the use of scientific results in politics and public, because it takes responsibility for the effects of scientific results in these fields.

Following knowledge utilization research (Beck/Bonß 1985, 1989), we distinguished two perspectives, *transformation* and *adaption*. While we understand *transformation* as a combination of changes and continuities in a series of communication acts, we understand *adaption* as an active use of the opened space of possibility during that process, for example through the presentation of research results. In view of this conceptualization, it becomes clear that the use of scientific knowledge cannot be understood as a predicted transfer. Rather, it is an active process of interpreting and co-producing knowledge. However, this process is not arbitrary, as our analysis has shown. Certain spaces of possibility are opened up, which make certain follow-up communication more likely. This brings us to our second research question.

Question 2: What changes and continuities in the right-wing populist use of educational science can be identified? We answered this question by applying the elaborated perspective on transformation and adaption to our case. Our analysis shows how the content of PIRLS 2016 changes dramatically in the analysed legitimization process while its scientific authority remains and gives authority to normative political positions. This combination of change and continuity makes it possible that right-wing populist positions can claim to be without alternatives, by referring to scientific results. Our argument is that the possibility of this alleged technocratic legitimacy lies among other things in the methodological and epistemological features outlined, as well as in the social embeddedness of educational research and the symbolic power of scientific authority across the boundaries of the scientific field. This is precisely why, in our view, it is too short-sighted to draw an a priori boundary between science and right-wing populism. Educational research must therefore reflect on its social conditions and must use this reflection to reconsider its methodological and epistemological postulations – such as methodological nationalism, the ranking of results, the focus on categories of difference (such as ›migration background‹) and the claim of scientific positivity and political relevance at the same time. This conclusion is especially relevant to educational research that follows the paradigm of large-scale assessments or is arranged around the »cognitive core« (Aljets 2015) of these studies.

We conclude our remarks by suggesting such reflection with Bourdieu. Bourdieu's critical sociology can be very helpful in this regard, because the reflection and self-critique of the scientific field, especially the social science, is one of its core elements (Bourdieu 2004a). By applying Bourdieu's insights to recursive pragmatism and knowledge utilization research our goal is to develop a self-critical research program that looks at both the production and reception conditions of science – and, in this way, enables to do better research. Bourdieu's (1998) normative proposals aim to preserve the relative autonomy of scientific research and, equally, to develop a collective capacity for resist-

ance against the instrumentalisation of research in social conflicts. In general, science as a particular field has a high degree of autonomy when the rules of the scientific game and the capital used and acquired during the game emerge from itself. However, if the scientific authority of empirical educational research, acting as a form of meta-capital (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992), can develop symbolic power in other fields and promote the marginalization of other positions, then the impact of this research can reach a level that will threaten its autonomy.

With Bourdieu (2004b), we argue that self-reflection and self-critique that crosses the borders of science is needed to restore them. According to our empirical insights and theoretical conceptualisation, that self-critique must be at least two-dimensional. First, it must focus on scientific authority, which aligns with the positivism of large-scale assessment studies and tends to present scientific knowledge and the results of the studies as universal truths. This is the danger of falling into technocracy and thus in epistemologies that are compatible with right-wing populist uses (Ylä-Anttila 2018). Second, that self-critique has to retain a cognizance of the strong ties between scientific research, politics and public opinion. It must resist the temptation to dismiss and devaluate the (mis-)use of scientific knowledge as a symptom of the post-truth era – this would ignore continuities between scientific and public or political uses. Such a self-critique could use some of the insights offered by the critical sociology outlined by Bourdieu. We want to promote a form of self-reflection Bourdieu called »participant objectivation« (Bourdieu 2004a; Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992), which enables a comprehensive, reflexive self-criticism of science.

One focus of such a reflection is social science's work on the construction of scientific objects. This construction work is deeply involved in the social hierarchy of its objects and, as such, it must be questioned. So one could ask if it is scientifically appropriate to identify a category such as »migration background«, when the people to which this category refers are widely discriminated against and held responsible for undesirable developments, and thus represent easily targets as a risk-group. Transnational or postmigrant theories make it clear that quite different perspectives on migration are possible, from which other objectivizations, subjectivations and questions follow. It is also necessary to examine more closely how the so-called internationalisation of educational research based on the outlined methodological nationalism resonates with nationalist positions. Especially against the background that pedagogical topics lend themselves to a usage that mobilizes right-wing populist interests (Andresen 2018; Baader 2019), a critical examination of our own epistemology and constructions during the course of our research seems vital. On the other hand, the reflection focuses on the relational position of researchers within the scientific field as well as in society as a whole. Scientists are in possession of scientific authority, which is effective as a form of meta-capital (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992). Accordingly, one should be aware of the risks and goods, when presenting scientific results together with political and administrative agents. In promoting such reflection, we do not seek to support populist anti-scientific anti-academic views. On the contrary: we believe that our critical approach is vitally important to making educational science an active, rather than a passive force for social change.

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Anschriften

Dr. Christoph Haker
Heinrich-Hertz-Schule Hamburg
Grasweg 72-76
22303 Hamburg
christoph.haker@gmail.com

Dr. Lukas Otterspeer
Institut für Allgemeine Didaktik und Schulpädagogik an der Technischen Universität Dortmund
Emil-Figge-Straße 50
44227 Dortmund
lukas.otterspeer@tu-dortmund.de