PhD project Carmen Zurbriggen (University of Fribourg)

Relevance of the social learning environment for pupils with low school achievement
A contrasting juxtaposition of comparative and normative effects of the academic reference group on scholastic achievement, academic self-concept, and occupational aspirations

The characteristics of classmates are often hypothesized to influence the educational outcomes of a student. For example, the class composition regarding the level of achievement was shown to have an impact on individual scholastic development. As students are assigned to different academic tracks at lower secondary levels, the Swiss education system may even magnify such peer effects. However, the state of research does not yet allow final conclusions on these questions, in particular regarding the impact of the social learning environment on students with low academic achievement and the mechanisms underlying the influences. Therefore, the aim of this PhD project is to elucidate the mechanisms of these peer effects. On the one hand, the hypotheses of the comparative group effect – known as the big-fish-little-pond effect – are to be tested. On the other hand, normative and possible differential effects of the social learning environment are investigated.

To address these research questions, data from a research project (which was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and by the Education Departments of five German speaking cantons) and its follow-up project are analysed. The sample of the first measurement point consists of around 600 pupils from 40 classes at the end of elementary education. At the end of lower secondary level, approximately 300 could be surveyed and tested again. The analyses are conducted mainly by structural equation modelling, taking into account the nested data structure.