

Thematic Working Papers

Access and Education: Inequality and Diversity

Executive Summary

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ACCESS AND EDUCATION - INEQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Facilitating Young People's Educational Trajectories

In the current context of lifelong learning in European knowledge societies, access to education is not only related to securing and improving competitiveness, but it is to a greater degree an issue of social inclusion, participation and justice. However, most often the topic of access is one-sidedly related to access to higher levels of education (e.g., ISCED 3-6) or to lifelong learning, where it is concerned with debates around widening access to particular (disadvantaged) groups, especially in relation to gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity. Access is thus closely related to the structural and institutional arrangements in the provision and delivery of education, to organisational arrangements within schools and other educational institutions such as entrance and progression regulations, selection by ability, etc. but also to sectoral policies (school choice, policies targeting particular groups, etc.).

“Access to education” has to be expanded by “accessibility of education”

Obviously the existence of formal rights such as normative provisions (e.g. the right to “education for all” irrespective of origin, abilities or orientation) and of access structures (e.g. compulsory education/schooling regulations) are necessary but insufficient preconditions to participation in education. As long as there are complex barriers to obtaining effective access such as those we have referred to as “institutional and structural discrimination”, to which dominant discourses and complex interactions belong within and around institutions, with their often discouraging and excluding effects, the issue of access to education cannot be said to be tackled, let alone solved. One important insight from our quantitative and qualitative investigation was that the apparently ‘simple technical’ issue of access must be enlarged by an understanding of ‘accessibility’ in order to bring to the fore the complexity of ‘getting’ access.

Accessibility – an integrative perspective on how educational trajectories are governed

The notion of *accessibility* aims *first* at highlighting young people's subjective experiences during their educational trajectories, e.g. experiences of social disregard which lead to negative self-descriptions and corresponding defensive coping strategies. These perpetuating effects of disregard can be observed especially among students from lower secondary schools and their families. *Second*, access is not to be seen as a simple resource that can be “tapped into and transferred”, but obviously needs more complex efforts and processes – both in policy and practice – in order to be effectively installed. Importantly, it attracts much more attention for the existing discrimination taking place in educational settings, for the social orders of exclusion and selective inclusion which structure the experiences of those young people who are classified as being ‘disadvantaged’ and their parents, and not least for the specific use professionals make of discretionary power at their disposal. *Third*, accessibility operates on a similar level of theorising as the discourses on capabilities, by emphasizing the complex preconditions necessary for people *to make use of them*, in order *to realise* access to basic needs such as education. *Fourth*, the interacting dimension of ‘doing access’ is highlighted by the term accessibility, which also points to the scope, or the discretionary power, of educational professionals. Accessibility, *fifth*, is a concept deployed in a critical perspective with regard to powerful social orders and hegemonic discourses. *Finally*, there is also a normative layer in the use of accessibility, as far as it points to a common responsibility of all actors involved to actively create access to education, and also to gainful employment (which are both being increasingly decoupled in the current economic crisis). Instead of being a merely descriptive-

analytic category it is a category which refers to (a lack of) social justice and to the (mal-) distribution of social recognition.

Implications for Methodology: How to do Research on Accessibility of Education?

The complex and multi-layered issue of access and accessibility to education called for a methodology that takes into account these different levels on which *accessibility* can be created (or hindered), and their interrelations. We therefore applied, as far as possible, a multilevel analysis that relates the empirical findings of the GOETE sub-studies at three different levels: the (micro) level of individuals, the meso-level of institutions and professional interactions as well as the macro level of society. Related to this approach our research strategy also drew from insights into the *intersectionality of social differentiation* to discuss and analyse issues of interrelatedness and reciprocities of gender, race/ethnic origin and class as well as other social categories, which are set as being 'relevant' in a specific context.

With regard to sampling in the GOETE project, the various sub-studies made use of several qualitative and quantitative methods and involved actors and stake-holders in and out of school settings. The chapters in this report draw from the empirical data and evidence provided in the following sub-studies of the project:

- eight national country reports containing contextual information on the institutional structures of, and the procedures within, the respective national education systems in GOETE produced on the basis of secondary analysis of the institutional descriptions, existing scholarly literature and statistical data, and policy programme;
- quantitative surveys with students at the end of lower secondary education (N=6366) and parents (N=3408) about transitions and experiences at the individual level;
- quantitative survey with school principals on how they perceive student trajectories and how they contribute to their regulation (N=984);
- comparative analysis of forms and contents of teacher training through expert interviews (N=65) and document analysis;
- Case studies into 24 local school spaces through expert interviews (N=355), individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (N=504);
- High-level governance analysis through expert interviews (N=90) and document and critical discourse analysis.

Multilevel Analysis and Intersectionality in Comparative Perspective – Towards an Approach to Grasp the Complex Issue of Accessibility of Education

From a comparative perspective distinguishing among different types of education systems – in terms of their structural and institutional dimensions – is a useful way of highlighting our findings:

- In *high-level-standardized and comprehensive* systems (FI, SI) organisational differentiation and degree of selectivity is low and no transitions in compulsory education exist. Thus the degree to which students are selected and grouped according to individual or group characteristics (e.g., level of achievement, language proficiency, etc.) is by definition (and also in practice) substantially lower. This type of system has the most potential for effectively providing access to education and mitigating inequalities;
- In *low-level-standardized and differentiated* systems (UK, IT, PL) there is a medium degree of organisational differentiation, a low degree of selectivity and the existing transi-

tions are ‘smoother’. This, however, has to be seen in the context of the level of support pupils receive to cope with transitions: all three countries provide only little institutionalised (state) support. While pupils consequently have to count predominantly on the support of the family (often reproducing social inequalities), they also experience less ‘cooling out’ processes;

- In *high-level-standardized and differentiated systems* (FR, DE, NL) there is a substantial organisational differentiation, a medium to high degree of selectivity and transitions exist which represent a medium to high threshold from one education level to the next. The systems have inherent highly selective ‘bottlenecks’ and decision-making points that have the potential to reinforce social and educational inequalities and disadvantage, thus offering less potential for providing effective access and mitigating inequalities.

These macro frameworks of institutional and organisational regulation exert influence and structure the educational trajectories of young people. Yet at the same time these frameworks do not completely determine individual trajectories, but rather provide varying levels of accessibility at the individual-subjective dimension. These different levels of accessibility are reflected, for instance, in parents’ estimations with regard to access to education, pointing to how systemic issues, every-day experience and consequently also the estimations of individuals correspond with each other.

Accessibility as an Outcome of Interrelated Levels of the Governance of Educational Trajectories

In terms of the interrelation of the *societal level* and the *individual level*, one finding according to our survey data, which also confirms existing research, is that those who face most difficulties in education are clearly those from lower educational backgrounds; pointing to the fact that educational systems reproduce social inequalities through the interaction of structural as well as the ‘softer’ aspects of accessibility. Here we find an relationship between institutional practices and the accounts from the local case studies, which refer to subjective experiences and strategies. Accessibility of education for children and young people results from institutional and organisational frameworks, which both reflect and reproduce deeply-seated cultural, social and political assumptions and arrangements that regulate access to education at national level, *and* their concrete experiences with potential gatekeepers. Thus the different ways educational trajectories are governed, directly and indirectly, affects access to education and its perceived accessibility. Distinguishing among three different types of education systems that provide varying levels of access (and accessibility) and display differing degrees of selectivity – *high-level comprehensive systems* (FI, SD); *low-level-differentiated systems* (UK, IT, PL); and *high-level differentiated systems* (FR, DE, NL) – offers the possibility of differentiating between different degrees of selectivity in the education systems and of highlighting systems with more inbuilt transition points which, at least in principle, carry some frictions related to accessibility.

The relationship between the *institutional level* and the *level of interaction* may be best illustrated by means of the analysis of the discretionary power of professional staff charged with decision-making at the local level. There is no simple homology between educational structures and the practices of educational professionals; for example discretion has been identified as a fundamental part of social work and the educational professions. Furthermore, technical control mechanisms based on “rational choice” aimed at reducing idiosyncrasies, show that they are part of a more complex policy implementation process in which actual regulations are influenced by individual practices, for instance, the French and the Finnish allocation software . However the structuring of the macro institutional frame proved highly influential on how discretion is deployed. While we can find all the types of discretion in every system,

though at differing degrees, we can state that those with an effective rule of the law, clear legitimacy and a clear division and coordination of labour are more likely to have an effective *intra legem* discretion; whereas systems with an excess of rigidity in the shape of bureaucratization and juridification open space to less accountable forms of discretions (especially *inter leges*); and systems with poor institutionalization and high fragmentation are more likely to see an *extra legem* or *contra legem* discretion, the latter probably representing a much more exhausting or risky endeavour.

A further finding with regard to interlinked institutional and interactive levels is the severe problem of recognition and of communication between parents and teachers. As regards parents' experience, GOETE case studies highlight that they are rarely recognized by experts and teachers as competent partners in the education process, and they are less so, when a migrant background is assumed or if they are known to be living from social benefits. In some cases parents from working-class or socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds delegate educational responsibility to teachers and experts, while some complain not only that schools have little knowledge about parental efforts but also about frustrating communication with professionals and about a lack of respect. In other cases parents try to challenge institutionalized views and judgments. There are clear hints of *mutual misrecognition*, contributing to rendering the relationships between working-class families and schools continuously weaker and more problematic.

Findings which show the link between the *individual level of practices* and the *overall societal discourses* stem from interview analysis with teachers, principals, social workers and also students themselves. They showed that the core idea with respect to 'problem groups' is that the latter have to cope with cumulating problems for which the metaphor of a 'back-pack' is used. Often, this 'back-pack', which is full of complex problems, is turned into properties of the people themselves. This is the moment in the interviews where gendering as well as ethnicizing ascriptions are activated, often together with the blaming of disengaged parents living from benefits. Countries differ as to the extent to which access structures are also doing gender and ethnicity at the same time – i.e., to the extent to which gender and ethnicity as categories of social hierarchies are interlinked. In some GOETE countries (with selective system), access to secondary education is already segregated according to ethnic ascriptions (as in Germany), and interlinked mechanisms of doing gender and doing ethnicity can be found, resulting in, for instance, girls from migrant background having the least chance of getting an apprenticeship place appropriate to their school qualifications. . In other countries such as the Netherlands or the United Kingdom the participation in, and access of, ethnic minority young people to education is high, but still this – as with regard to gender – does not translate into accessibility to (training and) work.

Spatial orders also have to be considered. The analysis of our interviews has clearly shown that processes of doing difference go along with school choices within and outside of neighbourhoods, and the stigmatization effects this spatial segregation has for those who are still living in deprived areas. This local-spatial segregation is based on doing ethnicity in extremely sharp ways in the Netherlands ("white flight") or in Poland and Slovenia, with racialised spacing or even ghettoisation (Roma), interwoven with social class as the other core line of discrimination.

In systems in which secondary education is differentiated into tracks with different social strata (i.e., socially hierarchical, such as Hauptschule in Germany, or vocational education in the Netherlands), a *normalizing* discourse of stigmatisation can be found among all groups of interviewees, including the students themselves. Ascribing additional problems and individual deficits to those students coming from the lower secondary school as compared to those other types of school was revealed as a ubiquitous practice. Here, there is a clear reference of indi-

viduals' practices and orientations to discriminating discourses – and of course also to discriminating structures.

Creating accessibility in educational trajectories?

It has been helpful to use the concept of discretion as being *per se* neither positive nor negative, but which, according to its *use in context*, can have beneficial effects or detrimental effects both for users and educational organizations. This *use in context* of street-level-bureaucracy again points to the fact that accounts of teachers and social workers either represent instances of intersecting “doing difference”, or have to be read as critical statements and/or attempts to explicitly enlarge accessibility for specific cases – against the institutional logics.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice: Against the Pedagogisation of Social Problems

Accessibility has to be *created on a structural level* of national policies and educational systems, it has to be *enabled on the level of interaction in educational institutions*, and it has to be facilitated by empowering experiences, which point to real participation. Rendering education more accessible always therefore has a structural dimension, but at the same time has to be broken down to the professional self-descriptions and practices of all those involved in education, be they principals, teachers, school social workers, youth workers, school psychologists or educational counsellors, etc.

Strengthening the comprehensive approach in school development: GOETE research showed, at several points, that selective education systems create bottlenecks and problems with regard to accessibility. The simple rule: there is ‘no differentiation without hierarchisation’, shapes the way institutions and their representatives (have to) function. Currently, however, there are numerous reforms taking place, which have started to undermine the perceived accessibility within a comprehensive system and within a universalistic regime context, such as in Finland (e.g., free school choice).

Schools have to face the reality of diversity: Schools are conspicuously characterised by a national ‘monoculturalism’ reflected in the obsession of schools with homogeneous groups, in terms of performance, of curricula and teaching material, of language proficiency, etc. while the reality on the ground shows a very different picture. This ‘monoculturalism’ is reflected in teacher training, which does not sufficiently and adequately prepare teachers to handle issues of inequality and disadvantage, but who are then allocated to work in schools where problems cumulate. Concepts are needed for creating a school system which is open for the diversity of people.

Participation of stake-holders: it is important that the *representation* of different groups is organised in a better way, this points to the question as to who has a voice in local school spaces, whether students and parents have a say in school development, etc.

Providing adequate funding: schools and professionals in and around them are all too often ‘left in the rain’ with insufficient resources to manage and cope with this situation. This is above all the resource of time: teachers and social workers need many more (flexible) hours according to the demands of students’ trajectories.

Training of educational professionals: there is an urgent need of interdisciplinary skills and of interpersonal and organizational skills to (net)work with other professionals (also in order to prevent discretionary power from being biased, or from turning it into a defensive strategy of delegating problems to the “stronger partners”). Teachers and other education professionals need a better preparation to interact with different parents in a climate of social recognition

and to enact their role as important social actors in the (political) field of the governance of educational trajectories.

Preventing a pedagogisation of social problems also means taking into account that widespread institutional discrimination takes place in (vocational) training and amidst recruitment policies of training firms with regard to heterogeneous groups of young people.

In conclusion, *creating accessibility* – in analogy to capability – means that all relevant actors mentioned above (including social scientists as critical observers of the field) have to be enabled to fulfil their functions by allocating the adequate resources to effectively provide access to education and mitigate social inequalities in and through education. And this does not only mean financial resources – although this is the most crucial aspect – but also new pedagogical orientations and concepts. This would imply that discourses which are sensitive towards diversity in how they consider the complex issue of discrimination and of doing difference should inform not only teacher training but also further training for teachers. The implications of such discourses impact on further training concepts for teachers and all other pedagogical staff in and around schools including methods and competences for these professionals to transfer their situated knowledge about the needs in and around schools into the arena of social and educational policy.