European Education, 47: 77–92, 2015

ISSN: 1056-4934 print/1944-7086 online
DOI: 10.1080/10564934.2015.1001267

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Access to Higher Education at the End of Lower Secondary for "Disadvantaged" Students: The Interplay of Structural, Institutional Frameworks and Student Agency

Isabelle Danic

The University Rennes 2

Drawing from quantitative and qualitative data collected by the European research project GOETE in eight European countries, the article focuses on the experiences of so-called "disadvantaged students" at the end of lower secondary and analyzes how access to higher education is negotiated in the interaction of structural/institutional frameworks and student agency. After elaborating an intersectional framework on disadvantage, the article showcases that access to higher education is defined by national schooling regulations, but also by educational professionals' discourses and by students' attitudes. Through professional discourses, representations, and normative expectations, students are differentiated and hierarchized according to class, ethnicity, and gender. In the schools investigated, located in deprived areas, students experience these differentiations through stigmatization or discrimination, and build different types of agency in their life contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the new millennium, education has been one of the five headline targets of the Europe 2020 Agenda and has been considered as a crucial element in increasing employment rates and reducing risks of social exclusion. At the European level, educational policy and governance have been oriented by the will to create a European space of education that is based on common objectives (Hingel, 2001) and which will inform national and sub-national education policy and reform. In the ideal model of lifelong learning in European knowledge societies, access to education has not only been related to securing and improving competitiveness, but it is to a greater degree an issue of social inclusion, participation and justice. Whereas "around 50% (of all pupils in Europe) reach medium qualifications level, (but) this often fails to match labor market needs. Less than one person in three aged 25–34 (in Europe) has a university degree compared to 40% in the United States and over 50% in Japan," the "EU's growth strategy" defines as its main goals to reduce school dropout rates to below 10% (from the current 15%) and to attain at least 40% of 30–34–year-olds completing third-level education (from the current 31%) (European Commission, 2010). Thus, public and policy discourses often stress the need to increase access to education, and the discursive primacy given to education

Address correspondence to Isabelle Danic, Département de Sociologie, The University Rennes 2, CS 24307, 35043 Rennes Cedex, France. E-mail: isabelle.danic@univ-rennes2.fr

underscores the importance of enlarging access especially for social groups underrepresented in higher levels of education. These groups have been defined and tackled differently across Europe—youth with low educational qualifications and not in education, training, and employment (NEETs), early school leavers (ESL), girls in terms of labor market participation as well as in terms of high risk of youth unemployment and youth "from migrant backgrounds"—were all defined as "disadvantaged" (ibid.).

This article focuses on the experiences of so-called "disadvantaged" students at the end of lower secondary education, and discusses how access to and accessibility of higher secondary education is negotiated in the interaction of structural/institutional frameworks and individual agency:[1] how students experiment and deal with the transition in interaction with educational professionals and their parents. In their national and local contexts, how do they contribute to the decision to stop or to continue studying in general education or in vocational training? This influences the overall level of access to and accessibility of education, thus impacting on social inequality. Against the background that access to and accessibility of education are shaped in the interaction among different levels, dimensions, and actors, what are the interactive and iterative processes in which access to and accessibility of education are constructed? What is the role of professional discourses and representations of students in creating and/or improving access for "disadvantaged" pupils?

The first section discusses some of the conceptual issues related to access to education and "disadvantage" and reviews the current literature on the topic. Inference is taken from the concept of intersectionality, which allows issues of access and accessibility to be conceived as multidimensional while also taking into account their interrelated, multiple, and layered nature. In the second section, drawing from empirical data collected by the European research project GOETE[2] in eight European countries, students' transitions from lower secondary education are shown to be substantially shaped not only by national regulations, but also significantly by processes of social differentiation. At the institutional level, the article highlights how educational professionals' discourses and representations shape both issues of access to education and the expectations of society related to class, ethnicity, and gender, and then how this frames young people's perspectives. The third section examines students' experience of differentiation at a micro-level and highlights young people's subjectivity and agency. Selected transitions of "disadvantaged students" at the end of lower secondary education enables further discussion on the interplay of professionals' discourses and students' agency in the transition process. This section aims at highlighting that young people in all the countries covered by our research experience social differentiation in the transition processes,[3] but it also shows that they still have scope for agency to tackle this situation. Finally, the interaction between the institutional level of the discourses and the individual level is analyzed, taking into account national and local schooling contexts, which can temper or reinforce this social differentiation.[4]

[1]See Stauber and Parreira do Amaral (2015) for a discussion of conceptual issues related to the different levels or dimensions at which access to education may be discussed.

[2]For further information, see also Parreira do Amaral, Stauber, and Barberis, 2015.

[3]Differences among countries, and especially about young people's perspectives, are presented and analyzed in Biggart, Järvinen, and Parreira do Amaral, 2015.

[4]In doing so, the approach of analytical dualism is followed, which Archer proposed (1995) in arguing that the interdependent structure and agency operate in a temporal ordering: structures (T1) frame actions and interactions (T2) which in turn produce or reproduce structures (these interactions reproduce or transform their initial context) (T3).

The analysis is based on the GOETE project, which studied students' experience by both quantitative and qualitative surveys in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. These countries cover a range of different European educational systems, which can be more or less selective. As Biggart, Järvinen, and Parreira do Amaral (2015) lay out, Finland and Slovenia have high-level comprehensive systems "where organizational differentiation and degree of selectivity are low and no transitions in compulsory education exist" (p. 34). The United Kingdom, Italy, and Poland have low-level differentiated systems "where there is a medium degree of organizational differentiation, a low degree of selectivity, and the existing transitions are smoother" (p. 34); France, Germany, and the Netherlands have high-level differentiated systems "where there is a substantial organizational differentiation, a medium to high degree of selectivity and transitions that represent a medium to high threshold from one education level to the next" (p. 34). For this chapter, our analysis is based in particular on a student survey and on fieldwork conducted in local school spaces (i.e., specific schools and their institutional and social environment) located in socially deprived areas, while few data come from GOETE institutional survey. The student survey has been carried out in three cities, with different socioeconomic characteristics, in each country and questionnaires have been filled by pupils at the end of lower secondary education ($N = 6{,}389$, usually aged 14-16). A sampling statistical design weights has been used to adjust imbalances in national samples. The institutional survey has been carried out in different areas of the eight countries under investigation, and addressed school principals' opinions on educational governance, access, relevance, and support ($N = 984$). The fieldwork has been founded in a local deprived school space in the three cities in each country ($N = 24$), with direct observation, and interviews with pupils during lower secondary school ($N = 195$), and after lower secondary school ($N = 109$), parents ($N = 109$), as well as teachers, principals, counselors, other school staff members, external experts ($N = 208$). All interviews have been treated in a deductive strand (content analysis) and an inductive strand (grounded analysis). If all the data underpin our analysis, only a few tables, quotes, and exemplary cases are reported in this article.[5]

"DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS" AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Since first statistics on educational trajectories of student cohorts have proved a correlation between access to education and socioeconomic backgrounds, social inequality in education is and remains a major topic of education research in developed countries. Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) showed that inequality persists in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, as well as in Italy, Germany, and Japan, despite much being done to expand educational opportunities; only in the Netherlands and Sweden were inequalities reduced.[6]

With the same aim of explaining these inequalities, three stages in education research can be distinguished: First, research has developed macro-analysis based on statistical findings and

[5]See the Parreira do Amaral, Stauber, and Barberis (2015) for a presentation of the whole methodology of the project and a more detailed discussion of sampling. See also Biggart et al.'s article for the quantitative survey.

[6]Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) did not take France into account despite a national quantitative research tradition on this question. However, if France is considered, it leads to the same conclusion of persistent inequalities.

provided baselines of two substantive paradigms: the "reproduction theory" and the "inequality of chances" theory. For the "reproduction theory" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the different social classes do not have similar access to education as their social, cultural and economic capitals differ. With this in mind, children from low socio-economic families internalize the ways of thinking, feeling, acting (habitus) which are not those required in school and this fact, in this way, transforms social inequalities in educational inequalities and legitimise the social hierarchy. The "inequality of chances" theory (Boudon, 1974; Jencks et al., 1972; Parsons, 1999) argues that the rational choices of students with different backgrounds generate macro-social inequalities: those with lower resources will not see long valued training as beneficial for them. Seen as determined or as rational action according to the paradigmatic frame used, "self-exclusion" of deprived students is the main explanation of social inequality in educational trajectories. With the British "new sociology of education" at the end of the 1970s, these macro-analyses were criticized as assumptions based on statistics that would need to be proven with fieldwork. Young, Woods, and Bernstein inaugurate a second stage of explanation of unequal access to education in entering the school "black box" and investigating the micro-level mechanisms, focusing on processes instead of outcomes. Using micro-level methodologies (observation, interview), this perspective pointed out that school and teaching cultures (institutional structures and processes) create different types of communicative practices and learning opportunities, in which certain forms of communication and identity are legitimized and others not, thus inequality self-perpetuates (Bernstein, 1977, 1990; see also Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1972; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Some scholars continue these two traditions and refine theories and findings, but others, considering the limitations of the monolevel approach, started a third strand of research combining micro- and macro-levels, and investigating both family background and school mechanisms to explain educational inequalities based on social status. In particular, linked to the configuration of actors in the family and in the school, and to local contexts, differential levels, and types of resources (social, cultural, and economic) that affect individual and group aspirations and investments in education are used to explain inequality (Lahire, 1995; see also Savage, 2000).

In the willingness to encompass practices and representations of actors contributing to defining access to education, children are the last to be highlighted after professionals and parents (Montandon, 1997; Woods, 1990). According to this theoretical perspective, scholars ascribe to young people more or less ability to act strategically when confronted with structural constraints. Research on transition choices at the end of lower secondary studied mainly middle or upper class students (Ball, 2003; van Zanten, 2009) as if lower-class students had no choice. Nevertheless, some scholars pointed out that processes of "self-exclusion" decrease for low socioeconomic background students (Chamboredon & Bonvin, 1973) and is no longer spontaneous but connected with school failure (Poullaouec, 2010): students (and parents) revise their ambitions with their school attainment and, when results are good, aspire to tertiary education (Poullaouec, 2010; Chauvel, 2012). However, research underlines also that working-class families are less resistant to school verdicts (Chamboredon & Bonvin, 1973; Terrail, 2004).

Given this starting point, GOETE research and this article adopt the concept of intersectionality of socially defined categories as an analytical perspective to access to education and inequality (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2015; see also Winker & Degele, 2011). Social classes are not sufficient in explaining inequalities; other categorizations also must be taken into

account. The intersectional approach has been widely discussed in gender, queer, and postcolonial studies since the 1990s, to analyze issues of interrelatedness and reciprocities of gender, ethnic origin, and class as well as other socially established categories. In addition to taking into account interwoven lines of social differentiation and their respective interplay, we should also relate to intersectionality and institutional contexts of action in a multilevel perspective, since social differentiations and contexts of regulation may have reciprocal effects. Stauber and Parreira do Amaral (2015) distinguish four levels for the regulation and negotiation of access: *structural, institutional, discourses/representations, and the dimension of individual agency.* In this perspective, "disadvantaged students"—a category we explore below—is understood as socially constructed (Fenstermaker & West, 1995; Simon, 1997).

In this respect, we have to keep an eye on the difference between processes of social differentiation and their outcomes, i.e., differences that become socially relevant. So, rather than using "disadvantaged" as a heuristic concept, we place our focus on how differentiation and hierarchization are shaped in socially situated contexts, and how students experience these processes. Therefore, it is maintained that access to and accessibility of education are shaped in the interaction between different levels and dimensions; that access is neither a simple characteristic of an educational system, nor that "having access" is a property of individuals —rather it is produced in interactive and iterative processes in which young people are involved with other actors.

STUDENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCES AT STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVELS

The overall public discourse on the need for higher educational credentials in the "knowledge society" reinforces students' orientation toward longer educational trajectories, as seen in the percentage of students who reported wanting to proceed onto higher education in the GOETE student survey (McDowell et al., 2012). It shows that teenagers have high ambitions on average, but with significant differences across countries; student access to education is framed by national regulations and academic organization (see Biggart et al., 2015).[7] Moreover, young people's perspectives are framed through gender and parental level of education (Biggart et al., 2015).[8] These findings reveal how structures shape educational trajectories and, at the same time, inform on what is seen as a normal transition in each national context, depending on gender and family background.

Within the national average aspiration levels, this survey shows the influence of the school context on students' ambition: there are substantial differences in attitudes toward attending university between students in disadvantaged and affluent schools, as shown in Table 1.

[7]The rates of tertiary education (ISCED 5 and 6) certified among 30-34-year-olds are for the United Kingdom (47%), Finland (46%), France (44%), the Netherlands (42%), Poland (39%), Slovenia (39%), Germany (33%), and Italy (22%) (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013, p. 36). These statistics are reported to have in mind tendencies but rigorous comparisons would need to take in account their methodologies and high precautions to reduce biases.

[8]Biggart et al. (2015) explain that ethnicity could not be taken into account in statistics (small numbers; different definition of ethnicity across countries).

TABLE 1
Students Who Want to Go on to University by School Context (From McDowell et al., 2012)

School context[a]		% *Within disadvantaged*	% *Within average*	% *Within affluent*	*Total %*
Does not want to go to university	63	53	39	52	
Wants to go to university	37	47	61	48	
(N)	(2057)	(2045)	(2063)	(6165)	

[a]Schools were classified using socio-economic criteria as "disadvantaged", "average" or "affluent"; $p = < .001$; Cramer's V .193.

This table shows that students in disadvantaged school contexts are much less likely to aspire to a university education: nearly two-thirds of them do not want to go to university (63%), compared to a little more than a third of those from affluent contexts (39%). These findings are in line with many studies, which point out that the lower-class school context worsens educational trajectories of all children, even those from higher-class families, due to reduced social and cultural resources provided by the other families and to lower expectations of teachers. The differences in students' aspiration are related to local norms about desirable educational attainment, shared between peers and constructed in the interactions with professionals and parents.

At this institutional level, we aim to show, furthermore, how discourses, practices of naming, representing, and categorizing affect access to and accessibility of education for students from low secondary education. In line with Foucault (1972) and Fairclough (1992), we point out that social phenomena are influenced by discourses inherent in dynamic power relations. In accordance with this view, discourse may be defined "as the set of meanings, rules and practices manifest in language use that orient the social construction of the political and social relations and institutions as well as cultural identities, which has practical consequences for the social world" (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). Based on social representations, discourses both steer professional practices and influence students' representations. Therefore, it is argued that the experience of so-called "disadvantaged" students is shaped also by professional discourses—including ones from school staff and other educational experts.

In the GOETE survey with school principals, school heads were asked which factors affected pupils' transitions from one school level to the next. As shown in Figure 1, they reported behavioural problems, mental health problems, and family disinterest as the main factors. Institutional factors such as the lack of places in the next educational level or the neighbourhood were not considered very important (see Aro et al., 2012, 68f.).

These results hint at a particular perspective that emphasizes individual or group factors as sources of problems. Also, in our qualitative interviews with experts, school principals, teachers, and social workers in deprived schoolplaces, individual factors were cited as the main source of difficulties for "disadvantaged" students, often with a general reference to "family background". In light of research on intersectionality and social differentiation, it becomes visible how experts and professionals resort to socially defined categories such as socioeconomic conditions of poverty, unemployment, family problems, ethnic origin, cultural background as well as gender relations to explain the difficulties that young people have at school, but also

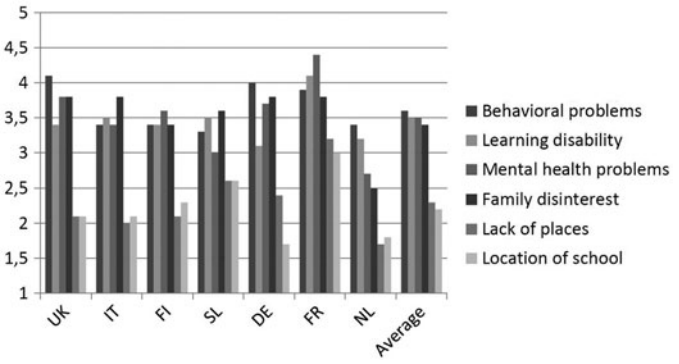

FIGURE 1 Responses to question: "according to your experience, to what extent do the following factors affect problems concerning coping and learning in school?" (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).[9]

to predict young people's typical behavior and professional orientations. The following quotes may illustrate these discursive practices and the interrelation of the categories referred to:

> In Turkish families, the father isn't there because he's on a building site, he works. The mother says to us: 'Mr. B., we don't scold a son.' So the mother is helpless because of their culture. The father is absent so the son, as soon as their father is gone, is the man of the house, the oldest son. (Principal, France)
>
> Girls do have a difficulty inasfar as they still concentrate on the five classic professions. Which means: hairdresser, shop assistant, what else? Medical assistant, there are five professions. There is still a lot of work to be done to get girls into technical professions. We therefore are carrying out this campaign 'My style my profession,' in order to show, with the help of female role models, that there are also other professions. You can also be a landscape gardener, or a school social worker, if you add something and get a higher education. Simply because girls do focus so much on a limited number of professions, which do not even offer a good salary and are overcrowded. In this regard, girls do have difficulties. (Expert, Germany)
>
> I think you have to specify. We have a lot of girls from a migration background, and they easily risk not having vocational training, but doing whatever job and then have children, a family. I think they get on with this pretty well. (Teacher, Germany).
>
> Boys, in their culture, are kings at home, and then, they don't see why they should work in school because the situation is comfortable enough. Mothers are at their disposal, sisters are at their disposal, and so they are little bosses. (Principal, France).
>
> In any case, first they are limited in their professional choice by their cultural background, then they have—because they only have a lower secondary certificate—unfortunately it is still like that —and the lower secondary certificate is with bad marks, …—they are not silly, but simply did go through all their educational levels. When they are presenting themselves in an interview, I think, this is a horror vision of every employer, imagining them at a doctor's reception desk … . OK. Nursery school teachers aren't allowed to wear a headscarf, depending on the institution. Therefore no free professional choice from the start, because employers won't take them but also because parents won't allow them to take on specific professions. [...] It is such a mixture of everything: I come from lower secondary, I cannot speak German properly, maybe in addition to that I am wearing a headscarf, and—yes, a mixture like that somehow. (Expert, Germany)

[9]No data was available for Poland.

As we see in the quotes above, the expert or professional discursive practices attribute particular behaviors and a more or less predetermined destiny to "disadvantaged" youth based on their ethnic origin ("from migrant background"), socioeconomic status ("working-class") and gender ("Turkish boys," "Muslim girls") in essentialist terms, (re)producing an intrinsic otherness as "justification" for their disadvantaged position.[10] These seemingly ordinary language practices function as categorizing and hierarchizing devices, which derive from different but interrelated discourses. In the GOETE research base, three main individualizing discursive practices were identified. School principals, teachers, experts, and social workers use them to refer to "disadvantaged students," and give explanations or legitimation for transition problems (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2013). First, a *discourse of normalcy* was used to create and to legitimize hierarchies in terms of achievement but also of orientations. It consisted in a split between the "normal" expectations of students in higher tracks and those diverging from it. Experts often referred to it to justify why particular groups of students are allocated to lower educational tracks or why achievement levels are low. Second, a discourse of *blaming the victim*, ascribing students attributes like laziness, shyness, and indolence. Third, a discourse of *becoming reasonable,* which traced transition problems to students' high-flying aspirations and their lack of employability. Here, students were generally portrayed as having problems during the transition from lower secondary education due to their unrealistic professional orientations, which could be only solved by "cooling out" (Goffman, 1952) and adapting to lower tracks.

These discourses reflect an understanding of educational trajectory as an individual reality that is the sole responsibility of the young people themselves, irrespective of school and social dynamics, thus making invisible the mechanisms of social differentiation and hierarchization. These categorizations were seen to frame and prestructure professional assumptions of "typical" or "expected" scenarios of transition from lower secondary education for "disadvantaged" students, depending on social and ethnic origin, on gender; that is, they shaped the way principals, teachers, and career advisers, among others, view and interact with students. In a way, these discursive practices build an informal set of interpretive patterns that influence problem definitions and logics and mechanisms of intervention for transition issues.

While keeping these institutional factors in mind, we aim at highlighting these processes from the student's point of view: how students' experience of schooling impact on their perception of education as accessible, thus framing their educational decisions.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE AT MICRO LEVEL

In this section, our fieldwork is "scaled down" to students' experience of disadvantage at the micro level of school relations, by thematizing how they perceive schooling in their transition from lower secondary school, as complementary to institutional and professional discourses.

In the interactions of daily school life, young people are well aware of processes of social differentiation. This takes place by the assumptions and social recognition of educational tracks

[10]It is noteworthy to recall Spivak's phrasing of this form of representation as *othering* (Spivak, 1985; see also Hall, 1997).

they are in. For instance, in particular in educational systems with a high stratification (Germany, France, and the Netherlands), vocational education tracks and lower-status general tracks (such as the German *Hauptschule*) were reported as being stigmatized as training for students from lower socioeconomic strata. Another reason for the perception of student disadvantage was seen in their relationships with the teachers. Several students from working-class families reported feeling inferior because of their treatment from teachers. This interview is a good example:

> I hate how some teachers treat us like. Because we don't know what they're talking about, we must automatically be thick. … It does sometimes happen because with some people it takes them a wee bit longer to learn and the teacher just might not have the patience. … We do get the work done but we don't go as fast as they [the teachers] want us to do the work. (Bill in Glasgow, United Kingdom)

Bill speaks clearly about the gap in academic content ("we don't know what they're talking about"), the differentiation made by the staff ("we must automatically be thick") and the inappropriateness of the teaching approach ("we don't go as fast as they want") that some students experience; the same idea is expressed by Christopher: "They [the teachers] prefer those who work, which is normal but they neglect too much those who want to work but aren't managing" (Christopher in Montpellier, France). Also echoing the categorizing discourses mentioned above, many students in most case countries reported different treatment based on ethnic categories at school: "Some teachers are rude to us. They behave in a different manner to others than to us (Roma students). And concerning school marks too" (Rihanna, Slovenia).

One interesting insight from our analyses is how students cope with these forms of discrimination, that is, how they position themselves. These experiences of disadvantage in daily school interactions are often redeemed by an internalized belief of personal responsibility by students. One student from Bristol, UK, put it in these terms when asked about the impact of social and/or ethnic origin on school success:

> It depends on your own background—whether you've come from a family that's been living in England for a long time or from a family that's immigrated to England. … It depends on your drive.… It depends on where you come from and if you have to become successful rather than just if you want to become successful—that's the question I think—what's the person's drive and determination? (Aziz, United Kingdom)

Exemplary Students' Cases

To illustrate how students cope within such structural and institutional frames, three cases of students in their transition from lower secondary education are presented, to illustrate the impact that could be called an "expected normal transition" for those students seen as "disadvantaged" in an intersectional differentiation process. Cuconato and Walther distinguish four constellations of the decision-making process: "Family convoy," "Step by step," "Fighting for dreams," "Too weak to follow one's own plans" (Cuconato & Walther, 2012, p. 129). When focusing on students considered as disadvantaged (lower socioeconomic class, migrant background), we can point out that these cases are more often in the "Too weak to follow one's own plans" scheme

and that contexts do difference (with hindered mobility in selective systems like those in Germany or France; more educational and guidance support in some countries, like Finland and the United Kingdom).

These cases are not meant to be representative, but they show general features of transitions we met in our research, in most national and local contexts. The first one reflects the most common experience encountered in our research: the young person complies with expected transitions. The two other cases present students who struggle to achieve a transition different from the one they are expected to fit, one in a comprehensive system (UK) and one in a selective system (France). Although this happened less often, focus on discourses in those cases allows the analysis to be refined.

Simon's transition. Simon, a French student of Portuguese origin, lives with his parents in France. His father is an unemployed mason, and his mother a cleaner; neither of them can read French. When it comes to studies, they let him choose: "in any case, it's your choice, do what you like. It's up to you." In primary school, he received free homework help at home, and then in lower secondary he was supported at school. To decide what to do next, he met the career adviser at school, who suggested an apprenticeship: "we had a meeting to see the career adviser. And so I went and she asked me what I wanted to do and all that, and then she told me to do an apprenticeship, and she told me to go to school K. She advised me to go there, and then I went to apply and that's it."

Here we see how discourses produce self-concept (a student just good enough for apprenticeship[11]): Simon accepted the career adviser's suggestion. When asked why he wanted to be a mechanic, Simon answered: "I don't know, since I was small, that's it, I like cars and all that, and then, well, I wanted to work in that line and that's it, I just got the idea." When the interviewer mentioned his friends who had chosen a general education track, he said that he would not have succeeded had he done that: "No, I don't feel like it and I think I'd struggle, I wouldn't manage." He had also applied to vocational upper secondary, but was turned down: "And then also, at the end of lower secondary, I'd asked to go to school J., to do vocational training, and then I wasn't accepted, and so I sent my letter of application to my company and they replied in June so …, that's it, afterward, I was pleased, as I had … it was the only opportunity to do what I wanted to do. So that's it, I took it and now I'm doing it." Without parental guidance, and with weak self-confidence, Simon followed the scenario proposed by the career adviser. He realigned his aspirations with the training in which he was accepted, and said he was satisfied with the situation.

Discourses on students combining gender, social, and ethnic origins contain scenarios of their educational trajectories that appear as natural, normal paths that the students have to follow to act appropriately in relation to their social attribution. The students "do difference" when they accept, whether consciously or not, these scripts (Goffman, 1976) provided for them according to their identity of "girl," "boy," "disadvantaged," or "migrant". These actions and reactions on a micro-level contribute to the reproduction of the social structure, leading girls from working-class backgrounds toward predominantly "female" paths as housewives, secretaries, nurses, or child caregivers, and boys to predominantly "male" vocational training for

[11]Unlike other countries like Germany, apprenticeship is seen as a devalued training in France, which values high academic tracks.

trades in the building industry, mechanics, or electricity. Discourses contain and transmit transition scripts, which combined structural relations and have real effects; they are performative and function as self-fulfilling prophecies.[12] However, these processes are more powerful in a selective system: as Simon noticed himself "it (apprenticeship) was the only opportunity"; the other paths were closed for him because of the selection.

However, some students do not accept these given scenarios and venture into unexpected transitions. This reveals the leeway of young people who can play out their script or try to change it to their advantage, or even to define new scenarios. The two cases presented below illustrate such unexpected transitions. At the end of lower secondary education, both Derya and Aziz struggled to achieve a general upper secondary education, one in the French selective system and one in the comprehensive system of the UK.

Derya's transition. Derya, a 16-year-old, was born and lives in France with her two sisters and her parents from Turkey—her father being a builder, and her mother a housewife. With her parents' agreement, Derya chose to repeat her last year of lower secondary education because she wanted to go to a general upper secondary education to become a doctor or a nurse—she does not want to be in a lower position, such as nursing auxiliary. The previous year, as she had really poor results and behavior problems, the guidance counselor and her headteacher warned her that general upper secondary would not be possible without changing, so she was sent to vocational training. Her mother filed an appeal against this decision, but it was rejected. According to Derya, "the headteacher didn't want me to enroll in the general secondary school. In fact, she was always looking for vocational training for me: 'That's interesting …,' she said. But I don't like it. Afterward I said: 'no, I want to go into general.'" So she refused to enter a vocational path and chose to repeat her last year in lower secondary school in order to improve her academic level. She thinks the trouble began in the two last years of primary school when she made many friends with whom she had fun. When she went to lower secondary school, she found the same friends, it was a fun atmosphere and she was no longer a well-behaved and serious student.

She esteems that this year will be really beneficial to her, that she will have a better standard as she is more motivated and is making an effort in several subjects, doing her homework, listening in class, improving her behavior. She hopes that she will be accepted next year in general upper secondary education, thanks to her efforts. As a girl from a migrant working-class family, Derya was exposed to a devaluated scenario for transition. Contrary to Simon, her self-concept does not match this scenario (she does not want to be "in a lower position"). With support of her parents, and thanks to a valued self-definition (she thinks she can become a doctor or a nurse), she tries to reach the general upper secondary.

In our fieldwork, some students, such as Derya, pursue a profession or an academic level that will ensure a recognized social position and they are clearly determined to succeed. Previously, they often faced difficult situations like migration, economic restrictions, or family conflicts, in

[12]In the field of education, this was shown for first time by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1972) as the "Pygmalion effect," in the case of primary schools: when the teachers consider that the pupils are going to progress, they do effectively progress. The negative corollary, the "Golem effect," is less studied but some scholars, such as Babad, Inbar, and Rosenthal (1982) demonstrate that teachers' lower expectations lead to poorer student performance.

which they develop the ability to adapt and resist, and the feeling of being responsible for their own life. The next case is that of Aziz, who differs essentially from Derya by the fact that he felt responsible for his educational trajectory earlier, since primary school, and that he is included in a comprehensive educational system.

Aziz's transition. Aziz was born in the Netherlands to Somali parents and arrived with his family in Bristol, UK, in the final year of primary school. He says that he worked very hard in order to adjust to using English and was able to pass his SAT[13] exams at the end of primary school, and make a successful transition to secondary school.

> The first couple of months are difficult because you don't have the language. I managed to learn it quite quickly and I was able to take and pass my SATs. The SATs were actually quite a crucial part because the consistent examinations that you have to go through are a stepping-stone as well. For example, if I hadn't done my SATs, I would have probably ended up in bottom sets here, struggling with no ambition to go higher. But, because I passed those SATs and I was able to go into the position I was in, I progressed more easily because I had confidence and self-esteem.

His family is supportive and the lower secondary school he chose despite the distance from home offered him various supports. For example, "The school does run self-esteem classes. I remember in year 8 that there was a programme that they put students like myself on. We did these activities and got a certificate—it got students to be more motivated and more engaged in subjects—make them realise the sort of future they would face if they didn't have education in their lives." He chose his subject at A-level on the basis of their instrumental value in terms of his chosen career path as a corporate lawyer. He sees education as a crucial means to "avoid people like me being bottom of the social hierarchy." Aziz has already negotiated access to upper secondary education that will enable him to realize his next goal—obtaining a degree—which he hopes will provide access to a university he is very determined to attend. Although Aziz, as a boy from migrant background, has a potential disadvantaged transition, he benefits from parental and institutional support (self-esteem classes), maintains his self-confidence, and builds a positive self-concept to succeed at school. He is the only interviewee who referred to self-esteem schoolwork.

In our local school spaces in deprived areas, many cases such as that of Aziz have an enduring school engagement and develop a long-term strategy to reach the general upper secondary track. His school was supportive and the comprehensive system allowed him to move up gradually.

In the GOETE research, most cases of students with a low socioeconomic background comply with institutional expectations, such as Simon's case. However, a minority of them mobilize to ascend educational levels, like Derya, thanks to their parents (see de Luigi & Martelli, 2015), to professionals' discretion (see Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015), and/or their personal self-concept. This type of case is more likely to appear and to succeed in the comprehensive system, where students see mobility as possible (as shown in Aziz's case) and where educational levels are more permeable.

[13]Standard Assessment Tests, used to divide pupils by ability in UK secondary schools.

The Interplay Between Institutional, Discourse, and Individual Levels, Embedded in National Contexts

Using a multilevel approach to explore access to and accessibility of education, and using an intersectional approach to social differentiation, transition after lower secondary education appear to be influenced in the interaction between the institutional level of discourse and the individual level. At the school level, students are differentiated and hierarchized, through professionals' discourse, representation, and normative expectations of both their scholastic capacity and the appropriate career for them according—among other factors—to gender and social and ethnic origins. This "accountability structure"—as Fenstermaker and West (1995) call these societal expectations—is encountered at the micro-level by young people through interactional processes, which is often a "cooling out" process for working-class and/or migrant background youth. Thus, it is important to understand not only how gender, ethnicity, or social background are perpetuated in discourses and practices, or how they are internalized by the students, but how these combined differences are constructed in their interplay. When the institution projects a definition of the student as unfit for general education, he or she often adjusts his/her self-definition as appropriate to pursue vocational training, as in Simon's case. Our findings corroborate previous research pointing out that working-class families accept school advice more readily (Chamboredon & Bonvin, 1973; Terrail, 2004). Here we witness the reproduction of social structures when a majority of students from a disadvantaged background—based on sets of interpretive patterns created in and by the discourses—is advised to follow vocational training instead of general/academic paths, and which additionally are typically seen as feminine or masculine domains. GOETE reveals that usually, in the eight countries under research, young people do not give up their aspirations on their own but under "cooling out" professional discourses and practices. What is called "self-exclusion" is rather a constructed exclusion.

GOETE research allows the analysis to go further in taking into account local and national contexts, which can strengthen or alleviate the process of differentiation. A disadvantaged school context reinforces this process; a middle or affluent context reduces it. Aspirations of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds increase with the rate of middle-upper socioeconomic students in the school: they maintain higher aspirations when they attend middle school, and even more in affluent schools in the eight countries (taking into account the mother's status). Students build desirable school attainment in interactions with teachers, who have expectations and provide support depending on school contexts (see Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015), and in interactions with parents (see de Luigi & Martelli, 2015), and with peers. In comparing the three types of education systems, both quantitative and qualitative research reveals that in high-level comprehensive systems (Finland, Slovenia), the differentiation and the hierarchization is weaker than in low-level differentiated systems (UK, Italy, Poland), which in turn is weaker than in high-level differentiated systems (France, Germany, the Netherlands).

However, in different proportions according to the type of local school context and the type of education system, some working-class and/or migrant background students have and maintain a valued self-definition as capable for general education thanks to parental and/or professional discursive and practical support (as Aziz). As recent research also shows (Chauvel, 2012; Poullaouec, 2010), a correct academic level helps "disadvantaged" young people to remain ambitious. A statistical minority of students struggle against "cooling out" professional discourses and keep an objective for a valued profession or educational level. For students from

working-class and/or migrant families, and for girls, maintaining a good self-concept in spite of inferiorizing discourses and practices in the school environment requires a counterdiscourse that may come from peers/friends, from parents, or from other social networks (see also de Luigi & Martelli, 2015).

Through these interactions, young people "understand" that certain careers are suitable for them and others are inaccessible. Yet our cases showed that young people from deprived schoolplaces can be active in the construction of their own transition: they appropriate the path that is offered to them, or sometimes attempt to open another one when they consider that they have other opportunities. In order to account for the role of students' subjectivity and agency in the transition they make after lower secondary, the interplay between the institutional level of discourse and the individual level of self-concept and agency have been explored.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that "disadvantage" in transition from lower secondary school is not a natural attribute of students or groups, but is rather an outcome of everyday processes of social differentiation and hierarchization. It is produced in and by discourses and practices that categorize and legitimize these hierarchies in the intersection of social class, gender, and ethnic origins. Differentiation and hierarchy operate simultaneously: the hierarchical organization of the educational system appropriates and manipulates differences that are socially defined as relevant, and at the same time, even produce new differences that legitimize hierarchical organization. On top of that, these processes are embedded in local and national contexts. What young people want to do after compulsory schooling is influenced by local school spaces (gendered and ethnicized attributions; local norms; places in local educational offer; place of the youth in the local job market) and by the wider social and cultural environment (school organization and regulations, national transition habits, the labor market, and the youth unemployment rate). In a selective education system, students seen as unfit for high academic tracks encounter "cooling out" discourses and stronger institutional barriers that prevent them from moving upward; differentiation is more probable and stricter and students are channeled into different paths without a gateway. In the comprehensive education system, students have fewer objective and subjective barriers and consequently more room for agency. This does not result in longer and higher educational tracks in the comprehensive system, as we could expect, but in reducing social inequality: working-class and/or migrant background students have more equal access to education.[14]

AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Isabelle Danic is a lecturer at the Department of Sociology and researcher at the Laboratory CNRS Spaces and Societies (ESO) at the University Rennes 2, France. Her research focuses on childhood and adolescent educational trajectories, and school and family in different social and spatial contexts.

[14]According to PISA, the French and German highly differentiated education systems reproduce more social inequality through education than the British and Italian low-level differentiated system, which is still more unequal than the Finnish high-level comprehensive system.

FUNDING

The research project *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe*, GOETE, was funded by the European Commission under the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme for Research—Contract No. SSH-CT-2009-243868. The following partners were involved: the universities of Helsinki and Turku in Finland, the École des Hautes Études de la Santé Publique and the University of Rennes, Rennes 2 in France, the universities of Bologna and Urbino in Italy, the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, the Warsaw School of Economics in Poland, the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, the universities of Bristol and Queen's Belfast in the United Kingdom, the Institute for Regional Innovation and Social Research as well as the universities of Tübingen and Frankfurt am Main in Germany. The project coordination was based at the University of Frankfurt, Germany (for details please refer to the project website: www.goete.eu).

REFERENCES

Archer, M. (1995) *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aro, M., Järvinen, T., Rinne, R., Tikkanen, J., Buchowicz, I., Fedorczuk, M., … Walther, A. (2012). *The view from the principal's office: Comparative analysis institutional survey*. Turku: University of Turku. http://goete.eu/backissues/doc_download/27-wp5-comparative-analysis-institutional-survey.

Babad, E. Y., Inbar, J., & Rosenthal, R. (1982). Pygmalion, Galatea, and the Golem: Investigations of biased and unbiased teachers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *74*, 459–474.

Ball, S. J. (2003). *Class strategies and the education market: The middle classes and social advantage*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Barberis, E., & Buchowicz, I. (2015). Creating accessibility to education: The role of school staff's discretionary practices. *European Education*, *47*(1), 61–76.

Bernstein, B. (1977). *Class, codes, and control*. 2 Vols. London: Routledge.

Bernstein, B. (1990). *The structuring of pedagogical discourse*. London: Routledge.

Biggart, A., Järvinen, T., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2015). Institutional frameworks and structural factors relating to educational access across Europe. *European Education*, *47*(1), 26–45.

Boudon, R. (1974). *Education, opportunity and social inequality*. New York: Wiley.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). Reproduction in education, society and culture (Theory, Culture and Society Series), Sage (1st ed. 1970: *La Reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Editions de Minuit).

Chamboredon, J.-C., & Bonvin, F. (1973). *Transmission culturelle et utilisation des instances de diffusion culturelle*. Paris: Centre de sociologie européen.

Chauvel, S. (2012). *Des politiques aux pratiques d'orientation. Enquête ethnographique dans deux collèges de banlieue parisienne*. Thèse de doctorat de sociologie. École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.) (1995). *Critical race theory*. New York: New Press.

Cuconato, M., & Walther, A. (Eds.) (2012). *Education and the life course*. GOETE Thematic Report. University of Frankfurt—University of Bologna.

De Luigi, N., & Martelli, A. (2015). Attitudes and practices of parents: Disadvantage and access to education. *European Education*, *47*(1), 46–60.

European Commission. (2010). *Communication from the commission. Europe 2020*. Brussels. http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF.

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2013). *Education and training in Europe 2020. Eurydice Report*. Brussels: Eurydice.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fenstermaker, S., & West, C. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, *9*, 8–37.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse on language*. New York: Pantheon.
Goffman, E. (1952). On cooling the mark out: Some aspects of adaptation to Failure. *Psychiatry*, *15*(4), 451–63.
Goffman, E. (1976). Gender display. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, *3*, 69–77.
Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
Hingel, A. J. (2001). Education policies and European governance. Contribution to the interservice groups on European governance. *European Journal for Educational Law and Policy*, *5*, 7–16.
Jencks, C., Smith, M., Acland, H., Bane, M. J., Cohen, D., Gintis, H., . . . Michelson, S. (1972). *Inequality: A reassessment of effects of family and schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books.
Lahire, B. (1995). *Tableaux de familles. Heurs et malheurs scolaires en milieux populaires*. Paris, Gallimard/Seuil.
McDowell, J., Biggart, A., Živoder, A., Ule, M., Martelli, A., De Luigi, N., & Litau, J. (2012). *Governance of educational trajectories in Europe: Comparative analysis individual survey*. GOETE Working Paper. Belfast: Queens University of Belfast.
Montandon, C. (1997). *L'éducation du point de vue des enfants*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
Parsons, C. (1999). *Education, exclusion and citizenship*. London: Routledge.
Poullaouec, T. (2010). Les habits neufs de l'auto-exclusion. Les souhaits d'orientation scolaire des familles ouvrières en fin de 3e. *Diversité ville école intégration*, no 163, 1–8.
Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1992). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. New York: Irvington.
Savage, M. (2000). *Class analysis and social transformation*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Shavit, Y., & Blossfeld, H. P. (Eds.) (1993). *Persistent inequality: Changing educational attainment in thirteen countries*. Boulder: Westview.
Simon, P. J. (1997). Différenciation et hiérarchisation sociales. *Les cahiers du Ceriem* (2), 27.
Spivak, G. C. (1985). The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives. *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, *24*(3), 247–272.
Stauber, B., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (Eds.) (2013). *Access and education: Inequality and diversity*, GOETE Thematic Working Paper, University of Frankfurt.
Stauber, B., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2015). Access to and accessibility of education: An analytic and conceptual approach to a multidimensional issue. *European Education*, *47*(1), 11–25.
Terrail, J.-P. (2004). *École, l'enjeu démocratique*. Paris: La Dispute.
Van Zanten, A. (2009). *Choisir son école. Stratégies parentales et médiations locales*. Paris: PUF.
Winker, G., & Degele, N. (2011). Intersectionality as multi-level analysis. Dealing with social inequality. *International Journal of Women's studies*, *18*(1), 51–66.
Woods, P. (1990). *The happiest days*? *How pupils cope with school*. London: Routledge-Falmer.