ARTICLES

Access to and Accessibility of Education: An Analytic and Conceptual Approach to a Multidimensional Issue

Barbara Stauber

University of Tuebingen

Marcelo Parreira do Amaral

University of Muenster

This article presents analytical considerations for the discussion of issues of access to education and inequality. It first sharpens the concept of access and inequality by pointing to the interplay of structure and agency as well as to processes of social differentiation in which differences are constructed. This implies a critical view on "access" not as something that is simply given in educational systems or as something students "have." Referring to interactional and intersectional considerations, the more comprehensive concept of "accessibility" is suggested, which points to the process of making education accessible. Second, the chapter distinguishes and discusses four levels of analysis to be considered, while providing a review of the existing research and putting into context the research findings of the European research project GOETE. In the concluding section, accessibility is discussed as requiring a multidimensional and multidisciplinary theoretical approach.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY—THE STANDARD APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS, ITS LIMITATIONS, AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

Educational access is a crucial theme in current educational research. In this article we criticize a too narrow concept of access and suggest a more comprehensive idea of accessibility, which—against the background of our empirical findings—appears more appropriate. We draw from a European research project in which issues of access to education have figured central: the GOETE project—*Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe. Access,*

Address correspondence to Barbara Stauber, University of Tuebingen, Muenzgasse 22–30, 72070 Tuebingen Germany. E-mail: barbara.stauber@uni-tuebingen.de

coping, and relevance of education for young people in European knowledge societies in comparative perspective. The project's research design with its different methodological approaches and steps is outlined in the editorial; we focus here on more conceptual aspects. The background of the project is that in the framework of the knowledge society access is most often associated with access to postsecondary and higher education or to lifelong learning. Related debates around educational access thus, focus on policies and measures to widen and improve access for specific groups (e.g., girls or boys, children from ethnic minorities or from a migrant background), and by doing so implicitly redefine access problems as issues specific to these target groups or to individuals. However, one strand of the debate sees social inequalities and disadvantage as either reproduced or mitigated by educational institutions, in great part through specific regulations of access (Fenstermaker & West, 1995; Gomolla, 2006). This strand also draws attention to structures and policies and to how they represent particular groups. Furthermore, educational access also touches upon issues of participation, and intrinsic to this is an active and decisive role for social actors. Here our attention is drawn to how individuals deal with situations of disadvantage and reduced access and what practices and strategies they develop to position themselves within this field. These two dimensions of educational access refer to the *interplay of societal structures and individual agency* (Giddens, 1984) in processes of reproduction of social inequality. In this article we argue that the provision of access (and its research praxis) must pay attention to the structural and institutional barriers and solutions at the level of policy and program (also within educational organizations); to the subjectively realized accessibility of educational pathways on the side of students and their parents; and the ways these two dimensions interact—through discursive practices and representations as well as to individual strategies, practices, and positioning.

When reflecting on the relationship between access and social inequality, an immediate difficulty is distinguishing between causes and consequences: What are processes and what are outcomes of processes of social differentiation? A closer look informed by insights from different fields of study—regarding gender, migration, postcolonialism, racism—reveals that it is not only meaningful but indeed essential to insist on an analytical distinction between the processes of social *differentiation* and their outcomes, which are *differences*, or inequalities (see Gildemeister, 2004). It is in these processes that education is made accessible—or not—for individuals or groups.

Approaching this issue requires first a theoretical perspective critical of the reification of social phenomena as something given or "natural" (Honneth, 2007; Pryzborski & Slunecko, 2009); second it is guided by the analytical interest to explore and make visible *how* social processes at different levels and their interplay (re)produce social inequalities; third, it derives from a self-understanding of critical social science that aims at "making visible" such mechanisms in order to clarify (political) responsibilities of the actors involved with regard to providing access to education for all young people. The concept of accessibility is informed by Amartya Sen's capability approach (1985) in that it includes the notion of equity in terms of the accessibility of education: while equal access does not necessarily consider the unequal prerequisites for effectively having access to education, and can indeed reproduce inequality in and by the educational system, the notion of accessibility comprises a more profound critique by *addressing mechanisms of doing difference within the ways educational trajectories are governed.*

The distinction between outcomes and processes of social differentiation is indeed crucial in order not to fall into the trap of (most) current discourses, which equate the results of processes of social differentiation in education to properties of the individual learners. We could even argue that the process of assigning individual students as "learners" decontextualizes their situation: being "learner" represents only one facet of young people's lives, and even within the schoolyard students have to perform a lot of other roles than only that of learner. Instead, the complex range of roles, topics, and transitions in which they concurrently find themselves have to be considered, because it is exactly amid this multitude of transitions that educational trajectories are framed (see Walther, du Bois-Reymond, & Biggart, 2006). At the same time, social inequality cannot be regarded as a simple and automatic outcome of "unjust structures." Instead, there is always a whole set of institutions and actors involved either reinforcing or mitigating the effects of structures. In attempting to explain these processes theoretically, it is therefore also important to focus on the scope for individual agency because this reveals *how* teachers, parents, and students themselves struggle with educational systems, and *how* (*how far*) they try to shape this crucial social arena.

It is our argument that these basic conceptual considerations on educational access and inequality are crucial for better understanding access and accessibility, which we regard as resulting from the interplay of different levels of analysis, examined below. The article addresses two main questions: First, at what levels are issues of access regulated and negotiated, and what is their interrelation? In order to discuss this issue, we distinguish four levels or dimensions that impinge on access and present and discuss extant research, including selected findings from GOETE. Second, what educational processes construct social distinctions in the educational trajectories of students? In raising this question, we aim at addressing the interactive and intersectional dimension of educational access and social inequality. Here, we develop further the concept of *accessibility of education* as resulting from the interplay of these four different levels of analysis.

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ISSUE OF EDUCATIONAL ACCESS: STRUCTURES, INSTITUTIONS, DISCOURSES/REPRESENTATIONS AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

The issue of educational access is sensibly addressed only as a multidimensional one. This section sets out to differentiate and discuss four levels—at least—at which access is regulated and negotiated. As mentioned in the introduction to this issue, we draw from two related research strands, multilevel qualitative analysis (Helsper, Hummrich, & Kramer, 2010) and intersectionality (Riegel, 2012; Winker & Degele, 2011), which allows us both to theoretically conceive of our research object as a complex one that has to be scrutinized at various levels and to come up with ways of making visible the interrelationships and reciprocities of different analytical categories reflexive of empirical research.

We first discuss *structural/socioeconomic and institutional dimensions, discourses/representations,* and the *dimension of individual agency,* and step by step explore the interrelation of these levels, which might reproduce social inequalities with regard to access and accessibility to the educational system. It is important to note that these four dimensions represent analytical distinctions that in reality cannot be precisely separated from one another. On the contrary, it is by focusing on their overlap and interaction that they prove useful, allowing for deeper insights.

The Socioeconomic Dimension

Education is seen as a crucial factor producing, reproducing, or mitigating inequality among social groups defined by class, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories; education thus functions as stabilizing or transforming given social structures. Inequality in access to education may be viewed as the result of differential access across social groups, but also be based on spatial categories. These differences at a sociostructural level point to concrete relations of power that can be statistically and historically observed. The categories examined in research on educational disadvantage and inequalities have concentrated on different aspects since the 1960s: social class, gender, region, migrant status, and religion. While there has been a shift from a focus on girls (usually in rural areas) to boys (usually in urban settings and of migrant origin), most research places its focus on individual and/or collective sociostructural characteristics as well as on the life conditions of the concerned groups. Also, studies informed by socialisation theory explain educational inequalities by referring to different language codes (Bernstein, 1971). In a similar vein, the concept of types of capital (cultural, economic, social) provided a useful explanation for the reproduction of unequal life/educational chances based on sociospatial differences; this research strand produced robust evidence that education is a key factor in reproducing structures of social inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). While until the 1970s this meant that working-class children "inherited" the working-class jobs of their parents (cf. Willis, 1977), more recently there is awareness that low attainment implies risks of social exclusion (see Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007; Vanttaja & Järvinen, 2006). Moreover, some studies refer to social class-based decisions taken by parents concerning investment in the education of their children as a crucial "social mechanism" in explaining educational inequality (see Becker, 2000). This latter strand of research distinguishes between *primary* effects (e.g., the varying levels of resources (financial and other) parents have for supporting their children) and *secondary* effects (e.g., different educational aspirations of parents) (see Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Grundmann et al., 2008). Parental expectations seem to permit predictions of educational pathways even when controlling for students' grades and performance. In agreement with research evidence from Germany (Baumert & Schümer, 2001), the findings of this strand indicate that the social milieu of the family influences both short-term transfer decisions and medium-term trajectories in upper secondary schools. However, as an evaluation by Gomolla and Rotter (2012) of German data has shown that the educational aspirations of parents from Turkish or Russian backgrounds for their offspring turned out to be much higher than those of native German parents.

Attention to this structural dimension is useful in pointing to inequalities based on differential access to education arising from social categories; it is, however, by attending to processes of (social) differentiation at the level of interaction that we might achieve interesting insights into the way accessibility is produced. Although findings from our survey with students as well as in individual and focus-group interview data point to highly supportive parents, educational professionals affirmed disengagement of parents to be an important problem (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012), pointing to the importance of interaction among different actors in this process. For instance, the GOETE case-study analyses showed that the interaction between parents and educational professionals was characterized by ascriptions and self-concepts that negatively affected access to education. One common topos among all professions was their blaming of so-called "disengaged" parents who did not support their children. From the interviews with

parents, however, a clear complaint was that they did not feel taken seriously, or were not addressed as equally responsible, by the educational system. Even when accounting for sample bias that is, perhaps only the more engaged parents were reached—this insight sheds light into how at the level of interaction family origin becomes relevant for access issues. Accessibility thus seems crucially impacted by professionals' ascriptions toward supposedly disengaged (often migrant) parents and by parents' experience of disregard in their interaction with the educational system.

The effect of class and gender on educational attainment has also been studied from a long-term perspective for seven European countries (for males: Breen et al., 2009; for females: Breen et al., 2010). The authors documented that "class-based educational inequality declined in all of the countries" (Breen et al., 2010, p. 45f.). Currently, gender-based differences in educational attainment are also declining (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Breen et al., 2010). According to several studies girls now outperform boys in almost all OECD countries, both in secondary and tertiary education (OECD, 2009).

On the other hand, and this could be one explanation for the fact that girls cannot transfer their winning margin into their vocational or professional career, there are still perceptions of (and ascriptions to) girls that dismiss their professional aspirations. This is most prominently put in the following quote from the German case study:

> I think you have to specify. We have a lot of girls from migration background, and I think, they won't put it so narrowly, they far [more] easily could compromise in not having vocational training, but doing a job elsewhere and then have children, a family. I think, they get on with this pretty good." (D-Teacher2: 25–32)

Such practices of differentiation are hints that the categories used to research educational inequality cannot be dealt as givens, but rather as socially constructed in complex processes of *social differentiation* (Gildemeister, 2004).

Another important aspect is that heterogeneity is found only among students; the teacher population is still very homogeneous and dominated by the autochthonous white middle class. GOETE compared teacher training and confirmed extant research that the teaching profession is predominantly female (the ratio seems to be even higher among those teaching in early grades). In addition, most countries have no statistical data on ethnic or social background of (future) teachers (see Cramer, Bohl, & du Bois-Reymond, 2012, p. 79f.). This imbalance documents the structure and "normality" of teaching as a profession and the interplay of an ever-lower social status of teachers and an increasing feminisation of the profession, while still biased by middle-class origin and difficult to enter for those from migrant backgrounds.

The Institutional Dimension

The institutional dimension concerns two related aspects. First, at the macro-level of society legislative and policy contexts, especially education, social and immigration policies may produce disadvantaging and discriminating effects and have to be carefully considered. This legal-institutional dimension provides the context and framework within which educational systems function, and are also partly reflected in them. One example from the GOETE Institutional Survey (Aro et al., 2012) illustrates this well. Free school-choice policies—which are deemed to

improve the responsiveness of schools to students' and parents' needs and raise quality and performance standards—may be seen to increase the sociospatial segregation in the educational sector. Middle-class parents select the school for their children based on reputation (and location), producing inequitable effects such as "white flight," as has been documented in our case-study analysis for the Netherlands, Germany, and France. However, in a framework of social inequalities, schools are also increasingly starting to develop their own regulations for selecting students and entering the competition for "promising" students. The introduction of new governance forms into the educational system in some instances pushes schools to act like market-oriented firms; this process increases selectivity in schools, and also shifts the relevance of education to what is needed in the "knowledge economy," which may have an impact on subjective accessibility. Further examples could be presented such as policies and programs focusing on particular groups (e.g., children from migrant backgrounds) or on specific school levels and types (e.g., the depreciation of *Hauptschule* in Germany or vocational schools in most of our case studies) and the effects they produce for these groups in terms of access to further education levels and training.

Thus, access and accessibility of education are issues concerning (welfare) policies broadly defined, raising questions of the equality of opportunities, coverage, and flexibility (especially to cover multiproblematic cases and cases not belonging to "standard" mainstream welfare user categories). From this point of view, the issue of access is related to institutional *responsiveness* (capacity to read, meet, and answer potential clients' needs) and *effectiveness* (capacity to achieve goals, taking up potential clients), and points to the principle of *universality* (limiting distortion due to implicit or explicit, intended or unintended discriminatory profiling of potential clients).

A second important aspect at the institutional dimension is located at the meso- or organizational level of educational institutions. Here the focus lies on the "logics," "structures," and "operations" of educational institutions and how their decision-making processes affect different groups and regulate access(ibility) to education. Regarding the *organization of their education systems,* GOETE countries differences relate to levels of differentiation or tracking, degrees of standardization and stratification, patterns of participation according to different socially constituted groups, transition points along the educational trajectories, their links between education and welfare systems, and their foci on transition policies (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011; see also Biggart, Järvinen, & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). All these features have a direct impact on how access is organized and how accessibility is negotiated. Findings from our survey with parents showed that in comprehensive systems, parental expectations with regard to the accessibility of education for their children is higher than in selective systems, and this could shape their support practices considerably. In our local case studies, it became evident that students' limited access is seen as an outcome of processes, structures, mechanisms, and/or relationships within an unequal structural framework of accessibility; this is more prominent in selective systems than in comprehensive ones. One recurrent issue among the selective systems is the power structures that regulate accessibility, up to the point where it comes to labor market entry. In this sense, Germany stood out in its very close relationship between educational system and economic interests, which is not surprising as the dual apprenticeship system depends on companies. However, this "marketization" is a new effect, with highly ambivalent outcomes including the picking out of the best fitting students along highly specified single-firm needs.

A further important line of research at the institutional dimension has recently adopted the concept of "institutional racism" or "institutional discrimination" from debates over the Civil Rights movement in North America (Gomolla, 2006). Institutional discrimination is of a more complex nature as regards its emergence due to its originating more from organizational features inherent to the system and less from discriminatory single actions. This is why it is so pervasive in the daily routine of professional culture of educational institutions and staff and why "it is hardly recognized by individual professionals or even by the persons it disadvantages" (Gomolla, 2006, p. 48). It is also important to note that institutional discrimination often emerges when individuals are treated equally despite uneven or unequal prerequisites, respectively when specific prerequisites such as supporting the children's homework by using "basic knowledge" of the dominant society are taken for granted and other sources of knowledge are not taken into account.

The concept of institutional discrimination has been applied in a particularly productive way to research on educational systems' respective regional landscapes of school, where the disadvantaging and exclusion of children from migrant families could be reframed as a result of a complex interplay between various forms of direct and indirect discrimination embedded in the daily routines of schooling (see Feagin & Feagin, 1986; Gomolla, 2006). This research attempted to account for the unequal participation and performance levels of particular groups of students within the education system by examining its organizational and operational aspects. Although research on this strand is rather sparse, several works corroborate the usefulness of this research perspective. For instance, unequal treatment may arise from a bias in the interaction of the school with persons from a particular social class, cultural, or language background.

GOETE pointed to the necessity of including macro-level institutional arrangements (for instance, policies and programs for specific target groups) as well as intraorganizational aspects (such as institutional structures, decision-making mechanisms and logics) center stage in the analysis of access and inequality issues in the education system instead of solely focusing of students and their individual and sociostructural attributes.

Regarding the first aspect, a number of policies in the GOETE countries were identified that have specific effects on particular groups. As discussed above, free school-choice policies have been demonstrated to have negative effects such as raising sociospatial segregation in the Netherlands. Institutional discrimination is a complex issue when looking at the subtle processes within institutions. When looking carefully at the recruiting strategies of schools it appears quite basic. As documented in the GOETE institutional survey of school principals, there is a tendency toward open enrollment giving way to higher student selection (England, Wales, and the Netherlands top the table of institutional autonomy). School principals across the GOETE countries intend to increase their scope to select students according to achievement (Aro et al., 2012, p. 50). The differentiating effect of how schools organize their recruitment has also become stronger: "Education both qualifies and disqualifies individuals and thus functions as an instrument for both social inclusion and exclusion. This dual nature of educational systems has strengthened" (Aro et al., 2012, p. 1). Wherever schools increase their scope for choosing students this can easily lead to more selection and social exclusion. An example for the second (intraorganizational) aspect is the computerized system of vocational orientation at schools in France, which steers students into the different vocational routes in a depersonalized way—possibly limiting chances for individualized intervention. This together with a missing culture of cooperation among professionals (teachers and other professions) could cause severe

problems of accessibility (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012). In contrast, in Germany there are new network policies within the transition system, which may be interpreted as a kind of self-legitimation for those responsible for creating such networks, but which at the same time has created a new culture of shared responsibility among different professionals.

From interviews with parents, insights into their experiences with educational institutions were gained. In lower secondary schools it is common for parents to find themselves in a double-bind situation: on the one hand parents are addressed as those responsible for the education of their children, on the other hand they are regarded as incompetent in fulfilling exactly this task. In all country cases (except Finland), this lack of recognition has been reported by parents regarding their contribution to the common challenge of education. This is experienced institutional discrimination, by which ascriptions to social origin, social status (living on benefits or not), and ethnicity intersect.

The Dimension of Discourses and Representation

At the dimension of discourses and representation, we view the issue of access and accessibility to education as social phenomena influenced by dynamic power relations. In the social sciences, several scholars pointed out that social phenomena are influenced by language use, for instance practices of naming and representing. Departing from this, numerous attempts at analyzing the relation of language use and social phenomena were undertaken (Fairclough, 1992). Against this background, we see (inequality of) access and accessibility as shaped by different discourses—political, academic, "scientific,"—and include these discursive and representational aspects in this research field. While there is no unified definition of discourse, we approach it as the set of meanings, rules, and practices manifest in language use that orient the social construction of our political and social relations and institutions as well as cultural identities, which has practical consequences for the social world. In this we follow Norman Fairclough when he writes that discourse is a mode of action as well as a mode of representation and points out that discourse is a "practice not just a representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning." (1992, p. 63f.) By way of illustration, the discourse on "ethnicity" or on "at risk children and youth" comprises, for example, various theoretical and practical positions and perspectives that have practical relevance for how particular groups of students are represented and addressed by within- and out-of-school professionals. "Ethnicity," for instance, can be conceived of in an essentialist or in a constructivist sense; or it can be considered in isolation or as one element of intersecting other social categories such as class, gender, sexual preference, and age. The assumption of this perspective is that categories are not to be studied in isolation but as parts of a related network. Moreover, the position taken in a discourse may be examined as reflecting particular interests.

In GOETE, we analyzed discourses on early school leaving, on lifelong learning, on key competences, on accountability and excellence among others as impacting issues of access and accessibility in education. These powerful discourses are all relevant for a better understanding of differently attributed relevance of education, for access(ibility) problems as well as for support and coping with difficulties for specific groups. Through discourses particular norms and values are "set" and institutionalized in the mainstream society in general and in the education system in particular, and consequently impact on what is viewed as a "normal"

life course and educational trajectory, on what is seen as a relevant and useful education, on whom is seen as in need of support. Therefore, discourses affect the social representation of particular groups, providing a frame of reference for individual positioning (see next).

Discourses identified in reference to access and accessibility were related to "normality," "self-responsibility," "blaming the victim," and "othering" (see du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012). They have been worked out during case-study analysis:

Frequent references to a *discourse on competences* could be identified in the interviews with all groups of professionals (principals, teachers, and even social workers) in and around schools. This idea of competence building is stuck in the logic of individual achievement of relevant social competences and on their capitalization (see Riegel, 2012), and is far from understanding the reproduction of social inequalities in the context of asymmetries of power and how the cycle of this reproduction could be broken. This again is a way of "invisibilization" of the mechanisms of "doing difference".

This discourse refers to an *individualization, personalization,* and also *psychologization* of transition problems. A common example of this given by teachers was: if motivation is seen as a key element then unmotivated students are regarded as being disadvantaged. Indeed, systemic risks and organizational inadequacies are transformed into individual risks and failures, which are in turn transferred to the learners and their families. One trend that responds to this change from social and educational responsibility to individual responsibility is the increase in the number of private schools, private homework classes, and the marketization of education in combination with a vigorously developing *discourse of excellence.*

There is at the same time a *generalization* of problems, for instance with regard to ethnicity. In several countries GOETE research identified a widespread discourse on children and youth from migrant backgrounds (Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom) which very often and quickly pointed to issues of ethnicity and culture *as explaining variables* for their failure and/or difficulties in the education and labor systems, which points to essentialist thinking. The fact that migrant students show more difficulties in their educational trajectories is automatically interpreted in terms of cultural difference and reduced to language problems. And the fact that they are often performing much better in school is simply ignored.

There is also a strong *discourse of normalcy* to be found, that is, assumptions about normal/average learning attainments and acceptable behavior, mostly based on an unspoken white middle-class assumption of normalcy. This is linked to practices of *othering*, by which, with Spivak (1985), we mean the hierarchical and generalizing ways of speaking about others, which can turn into a strategy of explaining difference and "doing difference" (Fenstermaker & West, 1995). Such othering legitimates the tracking and sorting out of students and tends to be stronger in the more strictly selective systems as in Germany, with its dual system. This is combined with the phenomenon that firms use the education system to pick out the best students ("creaming off"). The fact that so many social problems are not solved by social policy but have to be handled in schools, is one reason why "othering" could turn out as a (short-cut) problem analysis and coping strategy; an example of this is when experts, asked to explain the effects and problems of selection, tend to stick to the same ideology on which selection is based: that some students are different from others, that some families are "other" types of family with completely different habits and value systems, and so forth. Here, it becomes clear that we need to pay attention to how discourses impact the way professionals adopt (causal or near causal) explanations from such discourses.

Ascriptions do not usually come alone: ascriptions regarding the local area frequently *intersect* with stigmatizing ascriptions regarding low school level (of parents), gender, and ethnicity. So the notion of discourse has to be articulated with other critical perspectives on how inclusion and exclusion processes take place within wider social orders, on how processes of "othering" (Spivak, 1985) within such orders develop, on the way critical voices are made silent by the powers of integration and the benefits of taking part in discourse practices (Ploesser & Mecheril, 2012; see also Riegel, 2012).

On this discursive level, the representation of different groups is also important in terms of the question as to who has a voice in local school spaces, whether students and parents have a say in school development, etc.

The linked discourses of normalcy, individualization, competence, and excellence are one reason that the assessment of students' competencies has become such a strong discourse, and why in most of our interviews questions asking whether students are either overrated/supervalued (often by parents) or underrated/undervalued (often by teachers) are dominant. Instead, one could turn the topic upside down and try to assess schools or local networks in how far they are able to regulate educational trajectories in a way that is beneficial for the students.

The Dimension of Individual Agency

In the perspective of subjective/individual strategies, practices and positioning, access cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of educational systems but as constantly being processed, constructed, and negotiated. This dimension focuses on agency and individual engagement; it also places its emphasis on *how* these processes work. The different strategies, practices, and positions of individuals involved in these processes are of interest because it is from here that one can study the construction and negotiation processes of access, which is pointed to by the concept of accessibility. Furthermore, the interactions among the different actors involved need attention. Educational trajectories unfold and are regulated in institutional contexts and within structural and discursive frames; yet the individuals involved still have some scope for agency. Therefore, professionals in the educational system such as teachers, school principals; and representatives of employment agencies and firms do have some scope of agency regarding the interpretation of their function (see Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015). However, the way they interpret their role differs according to different professional self-concepts and to different attitudes toward the educational system, both critical and affirmative, while prioritizing their tasks within the system.[1] One important aspect here is the relation between "positioning" and the discourses to which this agency refers (or between the intermediate level of discourses and the micro-level of individual positioning). As an example, students point to particular discourses to justify their decisions or to express their positions. Discourses only become empirically relevant through the practices of positioning. In this context, it is also important to ask about the functions of these strategies. For instance, when students refer to an individualizing discourse this could be read as a way to delegate problems that seem too big to handle. Strategies of "explaining" the problem

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[1]These differences have to be understood against the background of different national, regional, or local socioeconomic, institutional/organizational, and cultural arrangements and discourses. Here the concepts of life course and of youth transition regimes prove useful in helping us account for and interpret these variations (Walther, 2006).

by attributing it to specific groups came out in focus-group discussions among students interviewed in the GOETE case studies—for example, classmates were blamed for their lack of success.

While the existing research literature provides few insights into these aspects, GOETE findings offer plenty of illustrations of these processes pointing to the innovative potential of the analytical tools adopted here. For instance, in our local case studies we found evidence of different professional conceptions among pedagogical professionals. Among these professionals were those who have the explicit task of improving access, for example, who actively work with the issue of accessibility, either as head teachers in schools, school psychologists, school social workers, or out-of-school social workers. These experts understood their role as communicators and bridge-builders for young people and educational institutions with their own different area of expertise. Here we need to critically discuss whether these professionals really increase access in a meaningful way or are simply fulfilling a mission within a systemic ideology. Taking into account the evidence of selectivity/exclusive effects of support regulations in selective systems, which have contradictory effects, the latter is not innocent. Professionals often reported having to bring youth "back to reality," which in most cases meant lowering students' aspirations and *cooling them out*. Cooling out (see Goffman, 1952) can take place either through restrictive, harsh, and impermeable structures or by the intervention of experts from firms, employment agencies, social workers, or career counselors who give (discouraging) feedback on a student's achievement and advise lower educational tracks, thus making students develop "realistic views." Examples of students from Finland and from Italy made visible "that the extent to which cooling-out mechanisms are inbuilt institutionally makes a difference from a biographical view inasmuch as they imply aspects of alienation and disrespect while informal (family) influences in similar directions can (but need not …) be perceived as care and recognition" (Cuconato et al., 2013, p. 153).

Systems that are explicitly built on (early) selection and competition are more prone to cooling-out effects. Also, students and parents have different interpretations and values of education (and of specific trajectories), which result from their specific experiences with the educational system and derive different strategies and practices from them. There are two broader interconnections to be stated: first, the connection between social structure (inequality) and expectation level. The different amounts of cultural, economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) these may embody provide one explanation for the different levels of investment in education, and thus for the strategies and practices developed toward education (see previously mentioned). The second is the interrelation between the educational system and the expectation level. According to our individual survey and in line with existing research, parental expectations with regard to the accessibility of education for their offspring vary considerably with the educational system, and are highest in comprehensive systems. Parents play an important role in compensating for problems of access in transition points, although they may also exacerbate problems. One example of students' strategies to increase their level of access to higher levels of education can be found in Germany, where leavers of *Hauptschule* (as the lowest status track, see Wellgraf, 2012) postponed their decision for vocational training. While some experts assess this as lack of orientation, one may also view this as an individual strategy of improving access and professional chances.

For parents having access to a desired school correlated strongly with high satisfaction with access to secondary schools and with less inbuilt transitions between educational levels

(i.e., low level of stratification, for instance in Finland) (Ule & Živoder, 2013, p. 163). The analysis of interview data many references were made either to unjust structures, unjust treatment, pressures within school, uneven and insufficient access to resources, or discriminatory discourses. At the same time, individuals (have to) position themselves within this complex system either in a reluctant/resistant way or by accepting the demands of an individual progress within the educational system. The contribution of Barberis and Buchowicz (2015) points to the scope of agency implicit in *all* these professions within the social and educational sector.

ACCESSIBILITY AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY THEORETICAL APPROACH

The relationship between structural preconditions, the processes taking place within them—taking up structural preconditions, struggling with them, sometimes having the capability to rework them—and the results of these complex processes has most often been downplayed and neglected in public, professional, and scholarly debates. The result of this neglect is an individualizing perspective on students from an institutional point of view, which goes along with a delegation of responsibility and guilt; even worse, this view is often internalized and reproduced by students themselves, as evidenced most strongly in our focus group discussions. The current trend to marketization and societal demands toward employability and competitiveness seems to reinforce this individualization.

In an attempt to counter this tendency in research, this article suggested focusing on *access to* as well as on the *accessibility of education* by pointing to different analytical levels—structural, institutional, discourse/representation, and individual agency. Educational trajectories unfold and are shaped in the interplay of different dimensions: Access to and accessibility of education results from the interaction of subjective experiences of structures within and outside the education system; of individual agency such as entailed in interpretations of institutional regulations by professionals (discretion power) or by choices made by students themselves; of macro-level structures of the education system; and of discourses on the normalities of a "successful educational trajectory." Accessibility, thus, is best understood as a dialectical relationship of these levels, while it is at the local level that these issues become effective.

This article strongly underlines that access is not a given, but results from processes of social differentiation in which structures cannot be simply regarded as determining but as something that is constantly challenged and negotiated by individuals. This line of argument is informed by a recognition of the role of the interaction of structures and agency, but also by interactionist theory of social differentiation, and not least by a consideration on how discourses are enacted by individuals. It strongly contradicts an essentialist perspective: education is not accessible per se, but has to be made accessible. In this process, educational policies, educational institutions, but also the individual actors do play a role and have responsibility. Making education accessible is—in the broadest sense of the word—a political process.

The article has also proposed a *multilevel approach toward social disadvantage*. With the endeavor of operationalizing such an approach we see ourselves struggling with a challenge of managing complexity, which currently is a hot spot of various scientific strands, whether comparative educational research, transcultural or transmigration studies, diversity studies, to name a few. GOETE has found a rather pragmatic answer to the challenge of multilevel designs,

by applying different methodical approaches for the respective levels in separated working steps. However, having these different levels available for theorizing the findings proved to be highly relevant for illuminating some of the relations between the levels. This could indicate a direction in which the high aspiration of multilevel analysis could be at least approached. Also, by bringing multilevel analysis together with the considerations on *intersectionality* (Riegel, 2012) can be seen as a promising direction. These two approaches complement each other: as soon as we try to analyze for example, how ascriptions regarding gender and regarding ethnicity interrelate, we need to draw on different levels of analysis, such as the level of individual positioning and the level of discourse, in order to point to broader structural framings of the issue. In this sense, intersectional analysis is not possible without multilevel analysis.

A second important insight: It becomes obvious that such a multidimensional and multilevel methodology needs to draw from a *multidisciplinary approach toward disadvantage, including sociology, social policy, psychology, as well as educational research.* Moreover, the *transdisciplinary* relevance of the concepts and methodological approaches became obvious. Finally, the issue of accessibility has to be understood as a complex structural problem, which has to be dealt with actively. This is not a purely theoretical consideration, but also has a practical and a normative implication, because it considers *the organizing of access* as a core task for all actors involved.

AUTHOR BIOS

Dr. Barbara Stauber is professor of social pedagogy at the University of Tuebingen, Germany. She has been co-coordinator and partner in several research projects of the European Group for Integrated Social Research (EGRIS). Her research focuses on biographical transitions, youth culture, gender and diversity.

Dr. Marcelo Parreira do Amaral is professor of comparative and international education at the University of Münster, Germany. His research interests are education policy and educational governance as well as a range of issues in comparative and international education such as convergence and divergence in education policies around the globe.

FUNDING

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