
EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Access to and Accessibility of Education Throughout the Educational Trajectories of Youth in Europe

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This special issue of *European Education* presents and discusses some overarching questions related to access to education in the context of inequality and diversity. All articles included in this volume share a common perspective and were developed in the same research context. In this brief introduction we present the context and perspective of the research project, the research questions, and our overall methodology. In the following, we first present the concept of access and accessibility of education and the conceptual and methodological perspective it entailed for our work. By doing this, we set out the overall research perspective and point out that the issue of access is not a “simple technical” question of increasing the number of pupils included in education and thus must be enlarged by an understanding of “accessibility of education” in order to bring to the fore the complexity of “getting” access to education. The integrative concept of “accessibility of education” required us to attend to different levels at which access is (re)produced and negotiated. Related to this multilevel approach, attention was paid to the interrelations and overlapping of the issues at stake when discussing access to education in the context of inequality and diversity. Drawing from insights into the *intersectionality of social differentiation* we discuss and analyze these issues of interrelatedness and reciprocities of, among others, gender, ethnicity, and class. Second, we briefly discuss the research questions that build the common framework for the articles in this issue and present our methodological approach to these questions developed in the course of research. An overview of the articles included in this issue of *European Education* rounds out the introduction.

ACCESS AND ACCESSIBILITY: THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The contributions included in this volume are the outcome of our work developed in a European research project, *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe. Access, coping and relevance of education for young people in European knowledge societies in comparative perspective* (GOETE). It was concerned with understanding how education systems deal with the changing relationship between education and social integration in the knowledge society. It analyzed young people's educational trajectories through school life in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK. Among several other issues, GOETE asked how young people's *access* to different stages of education is regulated. In particular, it inquired into the key relevance of *constellations of actors*, especially local ones, for expanding or hindering access to education for young people viewed as "disadvantaged," while also focusing on the interaction of *structural/institutional and subjective dimensions*. Our approach to these issues combined a life course with a governance perspective. While a *life course perspective* (Kohli, 1985; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003; Walther, 2006) draws our attention to issues of access in the organization of educational trajectories (for instance whether an education system is structured as a selective or comprehensive system), a *governance perspective* (Dale, Parreira do Amaral, Amos, Treptow, Barberis, & Kazepov, 2012; Le Galès, 2004) calls attention to the diverse actors involved in decision-making processes as well as to the interactive nature thereof. This includes the analysis of mechanisms of governance with regard to the actors and administrative levels involved; their communication and cooperation; the voices of the individual students and their parents as well as current discourses and reforms. The relationship between these two perspectives has been operationalized along three key dimensions: access to, coping with, and relevance of education. The complex interactions between social structure and individual agency in relation to access, coping, and relevance of education were analyzed by a mix-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods (Parreira do Amaral, Walther, & Litau, 2013), that involved a number of actors and stakeholders in and out of school settings. The articles in this issue draw from the empirical data and evidence provided in the following substudies of the project:

- *comparative analysis of teacher training* through document analysis of teacher training curricula ($N=118$) and expert interviews ($N=65$) in selected higher education institutions (Cramer, Bohl, & du Bois-Reymond, 2012);
- *individual survey of students* in their last year of lower secondary education ($N=6,390$) and their *parents* ($N=3,290$) on the progression through education, problems and support, teaching and individual learning, future plans for education, training and employment (Aro et al., 2012);
- *institutional survey* with headmasters on key challenges, social contexts of schools, living conditions and future life chances of pupils and students, problems and available support, curricula and standards, links with other actors ($N=984$) (McDowell et al., 2012);
- *qualitative local case studies* on "local school spaces" in socially deprived areas (3 cases per country, $N=24$) including views of students during ($N=195$) and after lower secondary school ($N=109$), parents ($N=109$) as well as professionals and experts (teachers, headmasters, counsellors, external experts, $N=208$) on interactions

at the transition from lower to upper secondary education and training (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012);

- *expert interviews* with high-level policy makers and stakeholders ($N=95$) and *critical discourse analysis* at national level on current policy reforms and discourses (Dale et al., 2012).

The sampling for empirical fieldwork research in GOETE covered three different regions and cities in each of the eight countries. Selecting the sample for study was based on careful consideration of geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural criteria representing different economic, cultural, and social realities within each country. The regions or cities chosen for the empirical fieldwork represent different levels of affluence and/or economic/industrial and socio-political contexts, particularly with regard to rates of economic development, employment, and wealth. Furthermore, consideration was given to the level of centralization or decentralization in the organization of education governance (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011; Parreira do Amaral et al., 2013).

The articles in this issue focus on *access to* and *accessibility of* education. Departing from a life course perspective called our attention to the concept of educational access (and consequently, to unequal access and disadvantage) as a central aspect of educational trajectories. From here we asked how (unequal) access to education is systematically structured by the different educational systems researched, and which mediating processes could be identified when looking at the local school spaces, that is, the procedures and interactions within and between institutions; but also between institutions, parents, and/or students. Our guiding idea was that it is within these specific constellations of regulations in local school spaces where potentials for, and barriers to, social integration and mobility are created. It is there that access to education is (re)produced and negotiated, and thus where educational inequality in principle can be tackled.

In the context of the knowledge society the topic of access is most often related to access to higher levels of education (e.g., ISCED 3-6) or to lifelong learning, where it tends to be concerned with debates around widening access to particular groups, especially in relation to gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Access relates closely to the *structural and institutional* arrangements in the provision and delivery of education. Thus, access to education is impacted by the different types of organization of education systems (e.g., selective, comprehensive, multitiered), by the specific organizational arrangements within schools and other educational institutions such as entrance and progression regulations selection by ability, and so on and by sectoral policies (e.g., school choice, policies targeting particular groups). One crucial aspect in discussing access to education is, therefore, a consideration of social inequalities and disadvantages, which are reproduced *or* mitigated by the education system.

The research perspective adopted points to the need to attend to the more *subjective experiences* with regard to access, since the provision of access depends also on the accessibility of educational pathways as experienced by students and their parents. The term “accessibility” as understood in the articles in this issue points to the importance of how students and parents subjectively perceive and realize educational offerings and opportunities as accessible, which consequently has an impact on the actual level of access to education. The point we wish to underline is that while access to education might in theory be open for all and even where it

is affordable in terms of costs, financial and otherwise, there still exists a social segmentation among those who really seize the opportunity to proceed to higher levels of education—and this exactly indicates the problem of accessibility. Conversely, experiences with regard to accessibility mirror the ways educational trajectories are governed. Access and accessibility thus emphasize the interlinkages of structural/institutional and subjective aspects of the issue of access and inequality in education. It focuses on the iterative and interactive nature of “doing” or “making” access, pointing to the fact that access to education is a social and political issue related to social recognition.

By framing access and accessibility in this way, we emphasize the aspect of stakeholder participation, implying an active and even decisive role for social actors. The theoretical framework adopted in the research project—life course and governance—aimed at accounting for this interaction between structural/institutional and subjective dimensions, also paying attention to discursive elements that exert influence on how structural and/or institutional/organizational arrangements are framed, and to how individuals perceive access(ibility) to education and position themselves in the educational field.

Focusing on the accessibility of education in the context of inequality and diversity leads us to attend to processes of social differentiation. The term “disadvantaged youth” is used in the following to refer to a social construct that itself is used to regulate access; for instance by entitling particular groups to support measures or individualized (or segregated) support, while hindering access to general education and to labor market prospects. Thus, we regard social inequalities as the uneven distribution of social resources, which enters educational systems but partly is also a result of them. The concept of *intersectionality of social differentiation* points to the need to attend to and analyze issues of interrelatedness and reciprocities between categories of gender, ethnicity, and class as well as other social categories, which are set as being “relevant” in a specific context. Here, it is important to distinguish between processes of social differentiation and their outcomes, which are *differences*, or inequalities (see Gildemeister, 2004; Riegel, 2010; Simon, 1997).

In sum, the perspective on access common to all the articles in this issue highlights institutional/structural aspects such as the degree of differentiation of education systems as well as the entrance prerequisites of different educational courses or tracks; further, it focuses on more subjective-individual characteristics related to the perceived accessibility of education; and emphasizes the interactive—and intersectional—nature of processes of social differentiation that impinge on access and accessibility of education in contexts of inequality and diversity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Against this background, the articles in this special issue address, from different angles and with different strategies, common research questions: *To what extent are structures of access a linear reflection of the structures of national education systems or dependent on local constellations of actors? Is there a correspondence between structural and subjectively experienced accessibility and are these relationships stable or increasingly contested through human capital building policies on the one hand and individuals’ struggle for equal opportunities on the other?*

These questions emphasize the key relevance of *local constellations of actors* for creating or hindering accessibility, and assume that even if there is a *correspondence between structural*

and subjectively experienced accessibility, this correspondence in principle can be loosened (even if not fully interrupted) by policies as well as by strategies developed by individuals in their specific context. The articles in this volume address these overarching questions by focusing on different dimensions of the issue of access and accessibility to education. The next section presents the research strategy adopted and is followed by a brief overview of the articles.

The complex and multilayered issue of access and accessibility of education called for a methodology that takes into account these different levels on which accessibility can be created (or hindered), and their interrelations. The strategy adopted was inspired by two approaches that have been widely discussed in qualitative research: the approach to *qualitative multilevel analysis*, and the framework of *intersectionality of social differentiation*.

The concept of qualitative multilevel analysis (Helsper, Hummrich, & Kramer, 2010) builds on the idea of the integration of different perspectives, methods and data (Denzin, 1970; Hantrais, 2009), but explores in more detail the *relationships* between the different levels under research—in the GOETE-context the (micro-) level of individuals, the meso-level of institutions and professional interactions as well as the macro-level of society. Qualitative multilevel analysis presupposes the systematic involvement of different levels of meaning and of aggregation of the *social* as well as the integration of the results obtained for each level in order to, first, conceptualize the research object in its complexity and establish a study that differentiates the various levels and aspects of a phenomenon and relate them to each other. It aims, second, at ensuring that data collection and protocols are as open as possible for each of the targeted levels. Third, it aims to collect data and protocols that are typical and meaningful for the respective level of meaning. For instance: for the level of individual social meaning, biographical or episodic narratives, interpretations, and explanations or reasoning; and for the level of institutional social meaning, legal/policy documents, and statistical data. Fourth, it aims at reconstructing the meaning and analyzing the material (for each independent level) with qualitative, interpretive methods for each of the included levels of an item. In this process, both the typical feature levels as well as the “connection points” for other meaning levels need to be reconstructed; by this the independently reconstructed patterns of level-specific meaning have to be related to each other and the “bridges” or “connection points” to the other meaning levels have to be identified.

The original approach, as suggested by Helsper et al. (2010), has been used for the integration of different *qualitative* data sets with an emphasis on interaction, and the interrelation of different levels. GOETE, however, includes both qualitative and quantitative data sets; one task of the project was to extend the approach to integrate quantitative data as well as to extend the original interactive perspective to different levels and to the interaction between different institutional actors rather than simply triangulating data sets and methods. The major expected contribution was the development of a much more differentiated and fine-grained theoretical understanding of issues of access to and inequality in education. Figure 1 illustrates the adaptation of the original approach to GOETE.

Figure 1 distinguishes different levels included in our research. To avoid an overly simplistic understanding of the model it should be noted that these different levels can only be distinguished analytically. Empirically, we may find elements of agency on the level of the individual, which would otherwise be ascribed to “the national” or “the global.” The arrows point to the mutual interdependence of the levels, which are not thought of in hierarchical

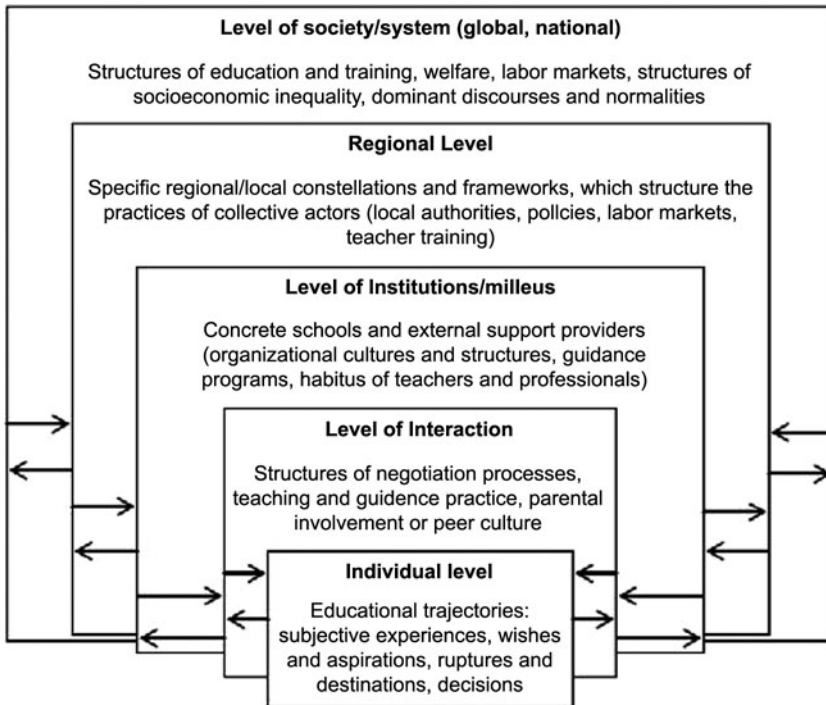


FIGURE 1 Model for multilevel analysis (adapted from Helsper et al., 2010)

but rather in systematic relationships. It is precisely in these relationships that we have been interested when inquiring into the governance of educational trajectories.

Related to and corroborating this approach, our research strategy also draws from research informed by theoretic-analytical considerations from the framework of *intersectionality of social differentiation* (Riegel, 2010; Winker & Degele, 2011). This approach has been widely discussed in gender, queer, and postcolonial studies since the 1990s to discuss and analyze issues of interrelatedness and reciprocities of gender, ethnicity, and class as well as other socially established categories. In addition to taking into account *interwoven* lines of social differentiation and their respective interplay, the approach of intersectionality virtually requires multilevel analyses inasmuch as it considers that, for example, the intersection of gender and ethnicity may have different implications on different levels. For instance, on the level of identity construction in youth cultures it may have different implications than on the level of social institutions such as schools, training schemes, or the employment agency. However, this “doing difference” might occur between the levels; for this reason, complex interplays and reciprocal effects have to be taken into account. One merit of intersectionality is its methodological approach to linking the different levels through the social practices of individuals, making it accessible to empirical research. The main idea is that the different levels constitute a framework for social practice and, thus, offer a starting point for analysis (Winker & Degele, 2011, p. 56). Here, we look specifically into forms of doing and speaking through which

individuals position themselves in the social field, into how they construct identities and strategically handle symbolic representations as well as reproduce or challenge structures in society. The argument for this methodological approach is that access to education is best addressed and studied not only as multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon, but also as a highly dynamic, iterative, and interactive process.

In summary, a combination of these approaches has been applied. Their main characteristic is the attention to the different levels a particular phenomenon may be linked with and the attention to the interrelationships they maintain. We see the issue of access to education and social inequality as being shaped at the *institutional/structural level*; at the *intersubjective—or discursive—level*; at the *level of the individual*, and at the *level of interactions* between the levels. One merit of a multilevel approach is its prerequisite to conceptualize the research object as a complex one through distinguishing the different levels with which a phenomenon may be linked and accentuating the relationships among these different aspects and interrelations. At the same time, drawing from the concept of the intersectionality of social differentiation helps us attend to the interrelatedness and reciprocities of gender, ethnicity, and class and their impact on access to education. In doing so, we aim to do justice to the complex structures, processes, and mechanisms involved in issues relating to access/accessibility and inequality in education.

OVERVIEW

The conceptual and methodological issues indicated above are further elaborated in the first contribution, by Barbara Stauber and Marcelo Parreira do Amaral. The article prepares the analytical ground for a discussion of the questions addressed in this introduction and lays down a theoretical framing and analytic approach to the study of issues of access and inequality. First, it sharpens the concept of access and inequality/disadvantage, pointing to the interplay of structure and agency as well as to processes of social differentiation in which differences are also constructed. By this, the authors point to the need to attend to the interactional and intersectional dimensions of the topic at hand. The assumption is that even if there is a *correlation between structural and subjectively experienced accessibility*, this correlation in principle can be loosened (even if not fully interrupted) by policies as well as by strategies developed by individuals in their specific context. Second, the article distinguishes four different dimensions or levels to be considered. At the same time, the authors provide a review of the existing research on each dimension, thus putting the research in the context of the extant literature.

The second contribution, by Andy Biggart, Tero Järvinen, and Marcelo Parreira do Amaral, discusses institutional frameworks and structural factors relating to access to education in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. In the first part of the article, the macro frameworks of institutional and organizational regulation that exert influence on the educational trajectories of young people are reviewed and three different types of education systems providing varying levels of access/accessibility and varying degrees of selectivity are distinguished. Against the background of that discussion and in light of the typology suggested, the second part of the article discusses structural factors relating to educational access. In this section, the authors draw on data from a quantitative survey among young people and their parents conducted for the GOETE project, focusing on the structural determinants of young people's educational aspirations across the above-mentioned countries.

It becomes visible that while aspiration levels are generally high for all regardless of family background, students from wealthier families are overrepresented among those aspiring to higher education, and those from less well-off backgrounds more often aspire to early labor market entry or vocational qualification. The article also discusses the overall high level of stress and anxiety of failing in education.

The article by Nicola De Luigi and Alessandro Martelli focuses on the different ways in which socially disadvantaged parents engage with their children's educational experiences, and provides evidence of the role they play in opening or narrowing their children's access to education. Disadvantaged parents are usually associated with weak or difficult educational trajectories for their children, because of their lower level of economic, cultural, and social capital. Nevertheless, this association does not operate as an automatic mechanism. Indeed, against a backdrop of persisting inequalities, research data show a plurality of intraclass and intragroup dynamics, with disadvantaged parents having diverse ways of avoiding blaming processes, of saving dignity, and of acting as proactive agents for their children's educational career.

The next article in this issue is by Eduardo Barberis and Izabela Buchowicz. It explores the relationship between the sociology of education and organization studies by making use of Michael Lipsky's *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (2010), where education is one of the most mentioned policy areas. The authors show the fruitfulness of this concept, which has an inbuilt double-layer of looking at structures—institutions on the one hand and scopes for individual (professional) agency on the other. The contribution identifies issues and perspectives emerging within this approach and applies it to exemplary individual trajectories from local case studies to show the role played by the interplay of discretion and institutional constraints in steering the helping relationships between professionals and pupils; and in increasing or reducing access to education, and thus to life chances and social mobility.

The last contribution to this issue, by Isabelle Danic, focuses on the experiences of so-called "disadvantaged students" at the end of lower secondary school and analyzes how access to higher education is negotiated in the interaction of structural/institutional frameworks and student agency. Danic highlights that access to higher education is defined by national schooling regulations, as well as 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. Danic argues that in the schools investigated, students experience these differentiations through stigmatization or discrimination, and build different types of agency in their life contexts.

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