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Institutional Frameworks and Structural Factors Relating to Educational Access Across Europe

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In this article institutional and structural factors relating to access to education are assessed. First, the macro frameworks of institutional regulation that exert influence on the educational trajectories of young Europeans are demonstrated. Based on different aspects of these frameworks and drawing from extant research, the article presents a typology of education systems that provide varying levels of access to and accessibility of education in Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. Second, using survey data ($N = 6{,}366$) it analyzes the impact of gender and parental education on young people's educational aspirations and early labor-market entry across the countries.

INTRODUCTION

At the European level, education has been seen as an essential force in promoting economic competitiveness in an increasingly global context where educational credentials have been defined as one of the most salient factors in the development of the contemporary European labor market. As policies strive to promote knowledge-based economies, access to educational opportunities have expanded across all national contexts and participation in postcompulsory education has increased among young people from all social backgrounds. However, there is clearly a tension between the policy ambitions outlined in the Lisbon Treaty between the promotion of international competitiveness and the upskilling of the European workforce, on the one hand, and the joint aspiration of promoting social cohesion, on the other. While the main focus has tended to be on the former this is underlined by concerns that the knowledge economy will produce new structural divisions between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor (Power, 2007).

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In the current economic recession youth unemployment has affected all young people regardless of their educational attainment; it is most pronounced in Southern Europe (Eurofound, 2012). Although young people, as new labor market entrants, have always faced higher risks of labor market exclusion in times of recession there is clearly a risk that many young people may become disillusioned with the "academic bargain" promoted through policy as young people's increasing investments in education fail to pay off. Despite the process of qualification inflation that has occurred across Europe with successive generations obtaining higher qualifications than their parents, educational outcomes remain highly stratified according to social class, location, gender, and ethnicity. Research on stratification has been concerned with social mobility from one generation to another and educational outcomes have been shown to be important predictors of future life chances and the reproduction of inequalities. Education is often perceived as an essential means by which social inequalities can be reduced, but the extent to which European and national policies have achieved this is less clear. Also, an understanding of how education functions as a means of mitigating existing inequalities or, alternatively, reproducing or even reinforcing them seems crucial for both policymaking and research.

Against this background, this article discusses institutional/organizational frameworks and structural factors relating to access to and accessibility of education. In the current discourse on lifelong learning in European knowledge societies, educational access is usually related to structural, institutional, and organizational arrangements in the provision and delivery of education. While in these perspectives the individual agency is missing, the idea of accessibility of education highlights the subjective dimension of access. The concept of accessibility is discussed in detail in Stauber and Parreira do Amaral (2015), here it might suffice to point out that the existence of formal rights and equal educational opportunities are necessary but not sufficient preconditions for successful participation in education. It also requires that individuals perceive and interpret education—and this means its institutional and organizational frameworks—as accessible for them (Parreira do Amaral, Walther, & Litau, 2013).

Contemporary educational institutions across Europe are the result of long historical processes of institutionalization of cultural, social, and political assumptions, values and norms of a particular society. As such they are often taken for granted and become "invisible" as frameworks that regulate trajectories and, in consequence, access to social positions and participation. Access to education is crucially regulated by institutional and organizational frameworks that diverge substantially across countries. This contribution aims at making these institutional and organizational frameworks "visible" and, against the background of the conceptual discussion in Stauber and Parreira do Amaral (2015), it addresses issues that impact on how access is institutionally and organizationally regulated along educational trajectories across the eight countries studied in the Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE) project. The overall aim of the GOETE project was to analyze how educational trajectories of young people are regulated and how educational decisions are made at individual, school, and policy level in countries with different educational systems. By combining a life course approach with a governance perspective the complex interactions between structure and agency were analyzed by a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods (for a thorough discussion of the research questions, design, and methodology

see the introduction to this issue). In this article we first focus on the legal-institutional frameworks regulating entry, progression, and the transition of pupils throughout their school careers. Second, we look into the impact of structural factors, here gender and social background,[1] on young people's educational aspirations and early labor market entry across the countries at a time of significant economic crisis, where unemployed young people are perceived by some as at risk of becoming a lost generation (Eurofound, 2012).

EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS, ACCESS, AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

A range of different theoretical perspectives have been put forward to account for the differential outcomes of education in the academic literature. Those coming from a *cultural reproduction perspective* have frequently utilized the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu to understand the way in which access to educational opportunities are differentiated among different social classes, in particular through some of his key concepts such as *cultural capital, habitus*, and *field*. The concept of *habitus* is used to attempt to overcome the dualism of structure and agency, and can be considered as a form of socialized subjectivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). *Habitus* here is not seen as all determining, but predisposing individuals from different classes toward certain actions and contributing to the reproduction of class differences.

Theories relying on *rational choice* offer an alternative explanation from the cultural reproduction theories for the increase in educational expansion that has occurred over the past few decades. Goldthorpe (1998), drawing upon Rational Action Theory (RAT), argues that in terms of both continuity and change patterns of attainment can be explained through the relative assessment of the costs and benefits of education. Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) developed this rational choice perspective further, arguing that educational inequality can be understood through the concept of "*relative risk aversion"* whereby all social classes are seen as being equally concerned with avoiding downward social mobility.

Other *micro-sociological* approaches have highlighted how educational aspirations are influenced through social origin. Here relationships with significant others (peers, family, and teachers) are seen as one of the most important factors that shape educational ambitions. Evidence from national birth cohorts in the UK suggests that teenage aspirations are "a long term protective factor moderating the impact of early socio-economic adversity on consequent attainments" (Schoon, 2006, p. 123). Buchmann and Dalton (2002) in a comparative study of significant others in the development of educational aspirations concluded that not only structural but also institutional factors were important determinants in the role of significant others. They found the strong influence of peers and parents' evident in the United States context was as applicable to other countries with open, undifferentiated systems, but less so in highly stratified systems.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) have utilized the idea of context-related rational-decision making, according to which educational aspirations and decisions can be rational but are limited to an extent bounded by local contexts. According to them educational decisions can be understood only in terms of the life histories of those who make them,

[1]While "race" or ethnicity are other important dimension of differentiation in educational outcomes, given both the small numbers of students from a minority ethnic background in the national samples and the complexities of defining ethnicity in a consistent way across all countries with very different historical patterns of immigration, these issues will not be considered here.

wherein identity has evolved through the interaction with significant others and with the culture in which they have lived and are living. They speak of *horizons of action*, which both limit and enable our view of the world and the choices we can make in it. These are segmented, in that no one considers the whole range of possible opportunities in education or the labor market. Within their horizons, people make *pragmatically* rational decisions.

Moreover, comparative analyses of stratification and social mobility have highlighted variations across countries in terms of educational outcomes (attainment, length of schooling, etc.) and occupation and educational linkages (initial labor market transitions), also linking this to the organization of educational systems. The results of this research pointed to a remarkable stability of inequalities in educational opportunity among students from different social and economic strata over time (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). More recent research suggested that there has been a general decline in class inequality in educational attainment for both men and women; and although class and gender inequalities have declined, gender differentials in class inequalities have remained constant (Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2010).

INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS OF INEQUALITY AND ACCESS

In comparative research, educational systems have been clustered in various ways. At the level of lower secondary education an initial basic distinction can be made between selective and comprehensive educational systems.

One of the best-known theoretical models for comparing educational systems is the typology by Allmendinger (1989), in which countries are clustered on the basis of the levels of stratification and standardisation of their educational systems. The level of *stratification* is determined by the degree of tracking within given educational levels and by the proportion of a cohort that attains the maximum number of school years provided by the educational system, whereas *standardization* refers to the degree to which the quality and contents of education, such as teacher training, school budgets, curricula, and school-leaving examinations, meet the same standards nationwide. The larger the proportion of a cohort attaining the maximum number of school years and the lower the degree of differentiation within educational levels, the lower is the system's level of stratification. The more central government is involved in regulating the workings of schools, the more standardized the system (Allmendinger, 1989; Horn, 2009). The position of

TABLE 1
Categorization of GOETE Countries; Based on Allmendinger (1989)

		Stratification	
		Low	*High*
Standardization	High	High-level comprehensive *Finland* *Slovenia*	High-level differentiated *France* *Germany* *Netherlands*
	Low	Low-level comprehensive *United Kingdom* *Italy* *Poland*	Low-level differentiated —

the eight GOETE-countries in the fourfold table formed by the dimensions of stratification and standardization is presented in Table 1.

This classification of the countries should not be misunderstood as descriptive, but merely as an illustration of the relative positions of the countries according to these two dimensions. This typology and particularly its stratification dimension have been utilized subsequently in educational inequality research (e.g., Kerckhoff, 2001; Shavit & Müller, 2000). Most recently, Horn (2009), drawing on PISA data, analyzed the effects of educational institutions and the organization of education on the inequality of opportunity and effectiveness of national education systems, indicating that educational stratification increases inequality of educational opportunity, while in general, standardization enhances equality. The early age of selection, which is the key indicator of educational stratification, was especially closely limited with high inequality of opportunity. Centralization, as a key feature of standardization, was associated positively with increased equality of opportunity, while school autonomy and school-level decision making were positively associated with inequality of opportunity (Horn, 2009). Moreover, it is also important to attend to further regulatory frameworks organizing schooling in the different countries.

Organization of Schooling: Regulations of Entry, Progression, and Further Destinations

This section examines the regulatory processes of admission, progression, and further destinations of pupils in the eight GOETE countries, highlighting the different frameworks at primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. For reasons of comprehensibility and space, the information is presented in tables that provide synoptic views of the regulatory frameworks in the countries under study.

At the *primary education* level, the age span of compulsory education is similar in all GOETE countries. Table 2 below juxtaposes information on the duration of compulsory education, the age at which the first transition takes place and the existence of transitions to lower secondary education. Also presented is the degree of selectivity intensity/severity of transition to lower secondary education; it refers to the type of transition (e.g., whether there is a formal transition with change of school or school type or whether there is formal selection such as recommendation/referral by the school/teacher or grade point average regulating entrance) as well as to how the transition is perceived as reported by students in the qualitative interviews.

The end of the primary level is more differentiated and how pupils move to secondary schools is regulated differently across countries. The role of school grades and reports varies in the transition from primary to secondary school: while France, Finland, the Netherlands, and the UK[2] have no certification, the other countries do, but organize it differently. In Italy, there is a periodical and a final assessment. In the Netherlands, the most common method of assessment is for pupils to undergo academic testing in their final year of primary school, via tests developed mainly to assess level of knowledge and understanding. In Poland, there is a final obligatory test with no selection function. In Slovenia, there is continuous assessment and a yearly report and pupils are granted a school-leaving certificate when they have

[2]This is generally true in the UK, although in Northern Ireland and some English regions an 11 plus system operates with tests for entry into grammar school.

TABLE 2
Age of Compulsory Schooling, Age of First Transition, and Existence and Intensity of Transitions to Lower Secondary Education

	Age of entry to compulsory schooling	*Age of first transition to lower secondary*	*Transition to lower secondary degree of selectivity intensity/severity of transition*	*Type of education system*
Finland	7/16	No transition	No formal transition Low selectivity Low intensity/severity	High-level comprehensive system
France	6/16	11	Transition after 5 years Medium to high selectivity Medium intensity/severity	High-level differentiated system
Germany	6/16	10/12	Transition after 4 or 6 years High selectivity High intensity/severity	High-level differentiated system (different school types in general and vocational)
Italy	6/16	11	Transition after 5 years Low to medium selectivity Medium intensity/severity	Low-level differentiated system
Poland	6/16	12	Low selectivity	Low-level differentiated system
Slovenia	6/15	No transition	No formal transition Low selectivity Low intensity/severity	High-level comprehensive system
Netherlands	5/17	12	Transition after 7 years High selectivity High intensity/severity	High-level differentiated system (different types of general vocational secondary depending on test results)
United Kingdom	England: 5/16 Scotland: 5/16 Northern Ireland: 4/16	11	Transition after 6 years (England), after 7 years (Scotland, Northern Ireland) Medium selectivity Low (England, Scotland), medium (Northern Ireland) intensity/severity	Low-level differentiated system

completed the entire comprehensive school syllabus. In Germany, there are a number of regional differences. For example, in Baden Württemberg a "recommendation" is issued by the school and the parents may decide on which type of secondary school their child will attend, whereas in North Rhine Westphalia a binding decision is made by the schools; in cases where the parents do not agree with the decision a diagnostic/prognostic test of the child is conducted. In Saxony, there is also a "recommendation" by the school, but recommendation to a Gymnasium is based on student grades.[3]

[3]GOETE research was conducted in three regions within each country, carefully chosen according to considerations of geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural criteria accounting for different economic, cultural, and social realities

TABLE 3
Admission Requirements, Duration, Certification, and the Transition to Lower Secondary Level

	Admission requirements/ allocation form	*Duration/certification*	*Possible transition with certificate*
Finland	No formal transition, age Catchment area/free choice	9 years comprehensive Basic Education Certificate	General or vocational upper secondary schools
France	Successful completion of primary education	4 years National Diploma Certificate (Brevet)	General and professional upper secondary school Vocational course Apprenticeship
Germany	Successful completion of primary education Some Länder issue a binding recommendation to one school path	6 or 7 years Leaving certification	General Gymnasium Professional Gymnasium Vocational training Apprenticeship
Italy	Successful completion of primary education	3 years Final state examination certificate	Upper secondary education Vocational training Apprenticeship
Poland	Certificate of primary school completion Catchment area/free choice	3 years Final examination and certificate	General upper secondary education Technical upper secondary education Vocational education
Slovenia	No formal transition, age Catchment area/free choice	9 years comprehensive External final assessment	General upper secondary education Technical and specialized upper secondary education Vocational education
Netherlands	All pupils who have completed primary education	4, 5, or 6 years A two-part leaving examination: school and national examination	Upper preuniversity education Upper senior general secondary education Secondary vocational education
United Kingdom	Automatic progression from primary school based on age Free school choice dependent on places Grammar school tests in Northern Ireland and parts of England	5 years Final state examinations – GCSE (England and Northern Ireland); Standard Grades Scotland	General upper secondary education college of further education/sixth form college general/academic education, vocational training/Modern Apprenticeship

At the end of primary school, pupils usually move to *lower secondary education*, and the beginning of *lower secondary level* coincides with a more or less marked transition in the educational trajectories of pupils. Table 3 summarizes the admission requirements, duration, and certification, and possible transitions in lower secondary level.

In most countries, the end of compulsory full-time education often coincides with the transition from lower to *upper secondary education* or to other vocational routes. However, in some countries (France and the Netherlands), the transition between lower and upper

secondary education takes place one or two years before the end of full-time compulsory schooling.

In upper secondary education there are different educational programs within each of the countries: *general education* prepares pupils for tertiary education, and *vocational education* prepares pupils for further studies and working life. In some of the countries these different options are organized in separate programs and students must opt for one or the other, while in others general education and vocational programs are offered within the same structure and sometimes even in the same establishment.

Usually, entrance to upper secondary education represents the first transition point and is regulated by achievement level in all GOETE countries. There is formal regulation in all countries except for France and Italy, where upper secondary schools do not have official selection criteria; however, there is an invisible process of selection. Interestingly, in all countries there is a common trend according to which students with higher academic achievement levels and grades go on to general upper secondary schools, while those with lower achievement records tend to enter vocational education and training, which has created a considerable stigmatization and depreciation of vocational schools (see Cuconato & Walther, 2013). Vocational education is either school-based (Italy, Slovenia, Finland, France, Poland), or in dual or mixed systems (Germany, the UK, and the Netherlands respectively) which combine vocational education in schools/colleges and apprenticeship training within a company. All the systems have a national examination that provides certificates at the end of upper secondary education catering for access to higher or further education institutions, universities, or vocational education and training systems, or alternatively young people may leave education and enter the labor market at this stage.

Table 4 summarizes the admission requirements and the intensity of transitions to tertiary level. Transition intensity refers to the type of transition and level of selection as well as to how the transition is perceived as reported by students in the qualitative interviews.

Table 4 also shows the admission requirements for *tertiary education* entrance in the eight countries. In all countries, the common access requirement to tertiary education is a certificate or its equivalent of upper secondary education, while additional admission procedures may also be required, such as entrance examinations, personal records of achievement, or an interview with the desired higher education institution. There are three main levels of regulation of access to tertiary education: central or regional *numerus clausus*, institutional regulation, and free access—different combinations of all may be used. In addition, not all countries provide graduates of vocational education and training access to higher education institutions; for instance, in Germany direct access to higher education is not possible.

In summary, two main features of the different frameworks presented above deserve particular attention, since they seem to impact heavily on access and accessibility: the early age of transition and the highly differentiated and stratified lower secondary level in some countries. In particular, this applies to Germany and in the Netherlands, but to a lesser degree also to other countries. In the Netherlands, even once decisions are made they have a high degree of reversibility, unlike in Germany where horizontal mobility across the different school pathways tends to have serious implications for access to higher levels of education. In both Germany and the Netherlands some school paths were viewed by interviewees, especially by pupils, as "dead-end tracks" as they offer the least possibilities for choosing further destinations (e.g., Hauptschule in Germany and vocational schools in the Netherlands).

TABLE 4
Upper Secondary and Tertiary Education in GOETE Countries

	Upper secondary education possible transitions from lower secondary level with certificate	*Tertiary education admission requirements*	*Transition intensity*
Finland	General upper secondary or vocational upper secondary school	The Matriculation examination or equivalent, previous study record and an entrance examination	Low
France	General and professional upper secondary school, vocational courses or apprenticeship	The Baccalauréat, no selection for universities, selection based on grades for other tertiary education	Medium
Germany	General or professional gymnasium or vocational training	Abitur or equivalent qualification for polytechnics	High
Italy	General upper secondary education, vocational training or apprenticeship	Upper secondary school leaving certificate	Medium
Poland	General upper secondary, technical upper secondary or vocational education	Matura (a general and technical upper secondary examination)	Medium
Slovenia	General upper secondary, technical and specialized upper secondary or vocational education	Matura (higher vocational colleges and higher academic studies)	Low
The Netherlands	Upper pre-university, upper senior general secondary or vocational secondary education	Variety of different entrance procedures	High
United Kingdom	General upper secondary education, vocational training or modern apprenticeship	A/AS level point scores/Highers in Scotland, and various alternative general vocational qualifications	Medium

One step further in the level of abstraction, this detail-rich description of regulations and institutional/organizational frameworks may be used to distinguish different clusters of education systems in GOETE countries. Drawing from Allmendinger's (1989) typology of education systems and on Walther's (2006) typology of transition regimes the description presented above may be organized to distinguish among three different types of education systems that provide varying levels of access (and accessibility) and display differing degrees of selectivity:

- *high-level comprehensive* systems (Finland, Slovenia) where organizational differentiation and degree of selectivity are low and no transitions in compulsory education exist;
- *low-level-differentiated systems* (United Kingdom, Italy, Poland), where there is a medium degree of organizational differentiation, a low degree of selectivity, and the existing transitions are smoother compared to those in:
- *high-level differentiated systems* (France, Denmark, Netherlands), 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.

Although this classification does not hold for, or explain, all characteristics of GOETE education systems, it does serve as a useful heuristic device that helps us differentiate between

different degrees of selectivity in the education systems and to highlight systems with more inbuilt transition points, which, at least in principle, bear the potential to produce frictions related to access and inequality issues.

Institutional and organizational frameworks clearly influence and structure the educational trajectories of young people to different extents in the GOETE countries. At the same time, these frameworks do not completely determine individual trajectories. Rather, there is a substantial degree to which the bottlenecks that some may represent can be overcome and access improved. On the one hand this depends of the level of discretionary power at the local level (see Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015) and on the other, access is mediated by structural factors.

Structural Factors Relating to Educational Access: The GOETE Student Survey

In light of the preceding discussion, the following section presents selected findings from the GOETE survey and considers some structural determinants of young people's educational aspirations across the countries, which are seen as affecting access to, and the accessibility, of education.

The GOETE student questionnaire was designed in an interdisciplinary perspective to consider a range of factors that related to the main key concepts of the project (access, coping and support, relevance and governance) to enhance and support the qualitative case study work of the project. Questionnaire design was done through a comparative team approach drawing on the expertise from national teams to try and ensure applicability and relevance of the questions across a diverse range of contexts, prior to piloting and revision. Self-completion structured questionnaires were administered within classrooms with pupils aged 15-16[4] years in three cities at the end of lower secondary education in each of the countries. The aim was to achieve a sample of schools representative of the schools in each city ensuring equal coverage of the most disadvantaged, average, and affluent schools in each context (based on national school criteria). Questions relating to education levels were collected according to national qualifications and subsequently coded according to the *International Standard Classification of Education* (UNESCO, 1997).

It is important to highlight that the studied contexts cannot be considered as representative of the broader national contexts from which they are drawn. By necessity they were drawn from three specific regions/cities in each country that were selected based on careful consideration of geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural criteria representing different economic, cultural, and social realities within each country.

The regions and cities chosen for the empirical fieldwork represent different levels of affluence and/or economic/industrial and sociopolitical contexts, particularly with regard to rates of economic development, employment, and wealth. Despite this limitation the achieved sample represents a relatively large European sample of young people ($N = 6{,}366$) at the end of lower secondary education across eight countries and the application of sampling statistical design

[4]In Italy the last relevant transition in our age range happens when pupils are 13-14. It is the transition between lower (*scuola secondaria di primo grado*) and upper secondary school (*scuola secondaria di secondo grado*), and were therefore a year younger than in the other national contexts.

TABLE 5
Weighted N Values of Achieved Sample by Country and School Context

Country	*Disadvantaged*	*Average*	*Affluent*	*Total*
Italy	266	270	269	805
Finland	263	263	269	795
France	264	265	269	798
Germany	267	271	263	801
Netherlands	267	268	263	798
Poland	264	266	269	799
Slovenia	267	266	263	796
UK	269	269	268	806
Total	2,127	2,138	2,133	6,398

weights was used to help adjust for any observed imbalances in the national samples according to school context and country (Table 5).

The following section considers some of the findings from the student survey related to students' aspirations, the highest level of education they expect to achieve, and their subjective perceptions of school.

Students' educational aspirations and perspectives in relation to school. Table 6 presents students' educational aspirations in terms of the highest level of education they said they expect to achieve for both males and females. Educational aspirations were classified by using International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). In Table 5, ISCED 0–2 levels refer to lower secondary education at the most, ISCED 3–4 refer to upper secondary and postsecondary nontertiary education and ISCED 5 + means tertiary education. The students in the sample displayed very high levels of educational aspirations despite having been selected to include an equal representation of disadvantaged, average and affluent schools contexts in each of the countries. Very few students expected to achieve below ISCED level 3, and those who did were more likely to be located in the stratified and standardized educational systems (Germany and Netherlands), but also in the Italian and Polish contexts. Although low attainment and early school leaving is more often associated with young males, gender gaps were not apparent at this level in the German and Dutch samples, although it was more apparent in the Polish case where low educational aspirations were more common among males.

TABLE 6
Students' Educational Aspirations by Gender

	ISCED 0–2		*ISCED 3–4*		*ISCED 5+*		
	Male %	*Female %*	*Male %*	*Female %*	*Male %*	*Female %*	*N*
Italy	9	11	41	28	50	61	*786*
UK	2	1	52	47	46	51	*743*
Poland	7	4	36	25	56	70	*764*
Finland	2	–	64	63	35	37	*748*
Slovenia	2	2	39	20	59	79	*766*
Germany	7	7	46	45	47	48	*797*
Netherlands	4	4	26	21	68	74	*784*
France	2	4	60	64	38	32	*763*

When considering the higher two levels of education (ISCED 3–4 and 5+) clearer gender gaps emerged in some national contexts. The widest gender gaps were in the two former socialist countries (Slovenia and Poland) and in Italy where girls were much more likely to aspire toward a third-level qualification than the boys. The same pattern is also evident in the UK and Dutch contexts, although to a lesser extent. It is only in France where more boys aspire to achieve a third-level qualification compared to the respective group of French girls.

In considering the overall picture in relation to gender across the different educational levels, the highly stratified German system, as well as the standardized comprehensive system in the Finnish case, show remarkably few differences in terms of the levels of education aspired to between the boys and girls. In the German case a lack of gender differences may be explained by the stratified pathways that young people of both sexes follow, although a comparison of levels does not take account of horizontal stratification whereby young people are likely to be following highly gender specific courses. In this respect, aspirations may be more fixed and less flexible in strongly stratified systems as young people have already been sorted into clear educational and career pathways earlier in their educational careers. In the Finnish case, as with other Nordic countries, the success of longstanding policies to promote equal opportunities among the sexes would appear to have minimized gender differentials in aspirations. Here young people's aspirations may be framed more in relation to perceptions over likely academic attainment than separate gender based orientations to education. Despite this, the educational choices of young people are also gender based in Finland. While general upper secondary school is a popular choice among girls, boys are overrepresented in vocational schools. In addition, in vocational education many fields of education are either male- or female-dominated, with technology and transport being the most male-dominated and social and health services the most female-dominated fields (Rinne & Järvinen, 2010).

In order to examine the influence of family background on educational aspirations, Figure 1 shows the proportion of students aspiring to a tertiary-level education by the highest level of parental education of either mother or father. In virtually all national contexts, a clear linear relationship with each level of parental education is apparent and underlines the strong influence of parental education on young people's educational plans for the future. In all

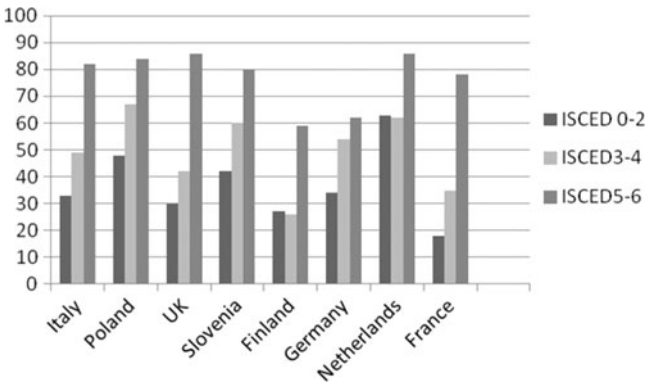

FIGURE 1 Proportion of students aspiring to tertiary-level education by highest level of parental education (%).

contexts having one or more parents with a tertiary-level education strongly influences young people's educational aspiration to pursue a third-level qualification.

Inequalities in this respect appear widest in the UK and French contexts, whereas high aspirations for upward mobility were more evident in the case of Poland, Slovenia, and the Netherlands. While Finland is the country with the most explicit educational objectives of the education system promoting equality of opportunity, the influence of having at least one highly educated parent remains apparent, when compared to those with parents educated to ISCED 4 or below. Despite the high levels of inequality in the attainment outcomes of German students noted in the PISA studies, the level of those with the highest-educated parents who aspire toward tertiary-level education is comparatively low. In the German context, however, with the relative availability of alternative high status vocational routes, associated with the dual system, and a restricted expansion of tertiary education the influence of family background factors appears less apparent. In this case educational aspirations may, therefore, be less fluid as young people have already been largely sorted into more or less predetermined tracks whereby the prior influence of family background in the sorting process seems to disadvantage young people with less-educated parents in comparison to the two other parental educational levels.

The importance of educational attainment and its influence on future life courses in the contemporary European context may place considerable pressure on young people to achieve. Figure 2 compares the proportions of students who said they always or frequently worried about doing badly at school. Gender differences were clearly apparent where across all national contexts girls worried significantly more compared to the boys. The differences between the sexes were widest in the samples drawn from the UK, Finnish, and Dutch national contexts. While a significant proportion of boys in many of the national contexts also stated they always or frequently worried about doing well, the results suggest that young people in schools in Europe feel under considerable pressure to succeed in their educational attainments.

Across all countries, except in the UK, Germany and France, it is those with the least well-educated parents who worry most about educational failure (Figure 3). The differences according to parental education were most evident in Finland, Slovenia, and Poland. In the more open comprehensive systems young people from less-educated family backgrounds following a common curriculum within the same schools appeared to feel the consequences of potential educational failure more acutely than countries with highly differentiated tracks. In this respect

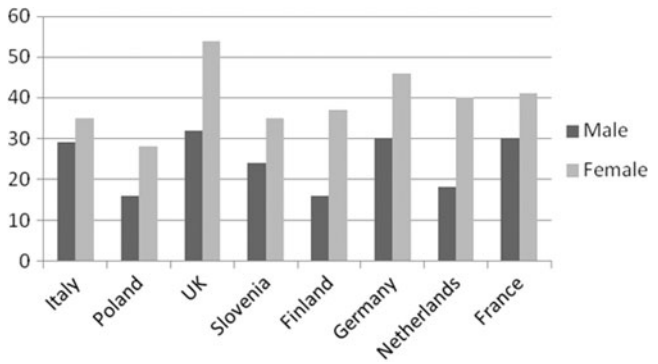

FIGURE 2 Proportion of students who "always" or "frequently" worry about doing badly at school, by gender (%).

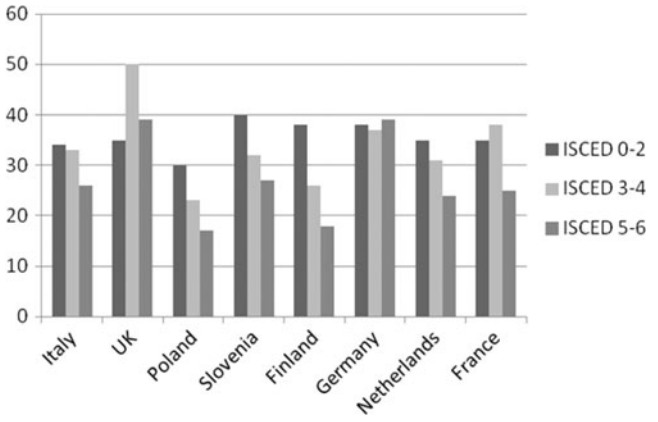

FIGURE 3 Proportion that "always" or "frequently" worry about doing badly at school, by highest level of parental education (%).

the German context appeared an outlier, and although levels of worry were generally high there were no large differences according to parental educational levels. Therefore concerns about educational failure may be formed by young people's relative position within stratified tracks.

Early labor market entry and confidence in accessing ideal jobs. In order to develop a proxy for early labor market entrants we considered what young people said they would like to be doing in 12 months' time as well as taking into account their intended educational qualifications. Early labor market entrants were defined as those who wished to enter employment, work experience, become a full-time parent or thought they would be unemployed at the end of compulsory school and had educational aspirations at or below ISCED 3 (upper secondary; Figure 4).

Overall across the GOETE country contexts the level of young people who wished to leave school at the end of compulsory education and not pursue education beyond ISCED 3 was

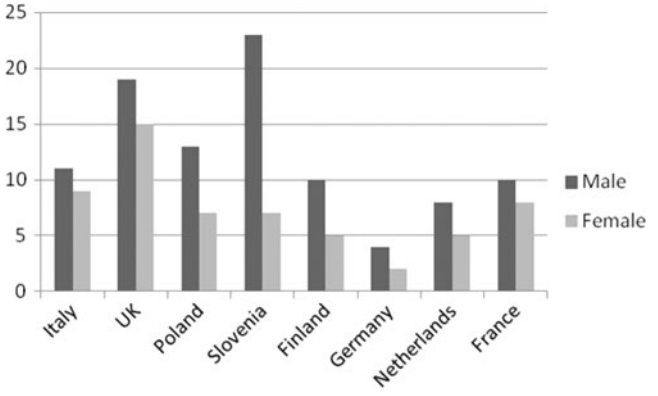

FIGURE 4 Early labor market entrants by gender (%).

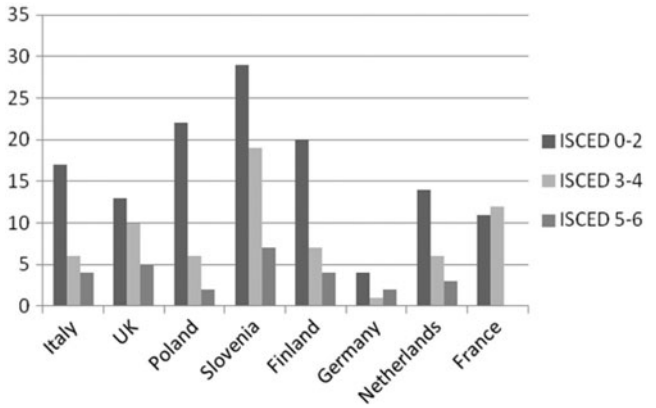

FIGURE 5 Early labor market entrants by highest level of parental education (%).

relatively low. While in all contexts early labor market entry was a more preferred option among males in comparison to females, there were particularly wide differentials between the sexes in the Slovenian context (Figure 5). The UK, in turn, showed high levels of early labor market entrants among both sexes. Considering parental education in relation to early labor market entry, it is more common among young people with parents who have the least education (ISCED 0–2). Very small proportions of young people in all national contexts with at least one parent educated above ISCED 5 intend to leave school at the minimum age and pursue a qualification below upper secondary.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of early labor market entrants who were confident, or very confident, they would attain their ideal job. Despite the high risk of labor market exclusion among young people leaving school at this stage there was a very high degree of confidence that they would attain their ideal job, although skepticism was higher in the Finnish and French contexts. Given the varying opportunity structures across the different national contexts this suggests a high degree of optimism among the young people in our sample, or perhaps even a lack of realism. Overall, both boys and girls leaving school at the minimum age were found

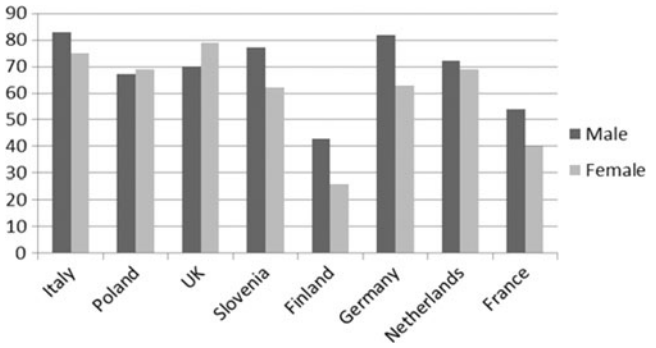

FIGURE 6 Early labor market entrants who are confident or very confident they will achieve their ideal job, by gender (%).

to be relatively confident in attaining their occupational goals. Females were slightly more confident in the UK, while they were less confident in the Slovenian, Finnish, German, and French contexts in comparison to the males.

Among early labor market entrants in Finland and France, in particular the former, early labor market entrants were more skeptical about achieving their ideal job. In these contexts, female early labor market entrants seemed least confident in achieving their ideal job. Why these two national contexts stand out is less clear, although in both of these national contexts rates of early labor market entry are considerably lower. In this respect, those who feel they will leave education at an early stage may be aware of how they are departing from the norm of their peers and be more acutely aware of the risks that this entails.

DISCUSSION

Before considering the differences that may relate to the organizational features of education systems, let us examine a number of general points, or common features, that emerge from the results presented above. First, in the current European context with a strong emphasis placed on the knowledge-based economy and the importance of education for future life courses, young people across all national contexts at the end of lower secondary have aspirations that appear largely attuned with these policy ambitions. The results suggest that young people's aspirations across Europe are generally high, with few aspiring to low-level qualifications or early labor market entry.

Considering young people's social background, a number of salient points emerge. Overall, across all contexts clear patterns emerge in terms of aspirations for tertiary-level education where those with parents with the highest education are overrepresented. Among those with less-educated parents, although aspirations appear relatively high, they are more likely to be aspiring to early labor market entry or qualification levels represented by vocational routes. Expectations for continuing education appear to be a normal part of the expectations for the vast majority of young people regardless of family background. The importance of education in the perceptions of young people from all family backgrounds is reflected in the extent to which young people expressed concerns about educational failure. The picture that the GOETE student data presents is one that underlines a differentiated picture according to family background, but one of relatively high aspirations overall combined with significant levels of stress to succeed in education.

This opens up the question as to whether young people are overambitious in terms of both the accessibility of future educational pathways and their later employment prospects. Certainly, given the high degree of optimism that early labor entrants express in relation to obtaining their ideal job, this suggests a lack of realism in an EU educational context, where qualification inflation has led to a situation in which education has become a necessary, although not automatically sufficient, requirement for entering the labor market.

However, as Dwyer and Wyn (2001) have argued, the reason why young people have become so ambitious is that their parents, teachers, policymakers, and others have told them they need to be, but have failed to tell them how the imagery surrounding the knowledge-based economy does not fit with the realities of the labor market. The high levels of optimism among the current generation at this age may be seen as a necessary prerequisite to maintain motivation

toward the continuing investment in education, but also suggests that many of these ambitions may be thwarted as they fail to reach the required levels of attainment to follow subsequent routes, find they have gone down dead end pathways or face other 'cooling out' processes in relation to their subsequent futures. The GOETE case studies of disadvantaged students highlighted that while many were ambitious, occupational futures seemed distant and they were mainly concerned with immediate educational choices and often lacked a critical awareness of the longer-term implications of current decisions (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012).

While the uncertainties and risks characteristic of the modern youth context in education and life course transitions may lead policy to frame disadvantage in terms of individual deficits associated with a lack of educational ambition, young people from all backgrounds appear all too aware of the need to try and keep ahead in the game, which, in turn, increases competitiveness in the field of education.

In considering some of the more consistent gender differences among the results, higher educational aspirations were found among girls, who were less likely to aspire to early labor market entry. This may be a reflection of the higher overall levels of achievements among girls across Europe that has been noted through comparative research. Girls also appear to feel the pressure of educational success more acutely than boys: in all contexts they were more likely to express greater anxieties about doing badly at school.

Early school leaving and achieving qualifications below ISCED 3 is a significant concern of EU policy, but these results suggest that the problem of early school leaving would again appear to have less to do with young people's lack of educational ambitions. Few among the GOETE sample aspired below ISCED level 3. This suggests that few young people have rejected education credentials completely in terms of their future plans, and that failing to realize these may be more due to national opportunity structures, such as the availability of education or training places, dead end routes, or subsequent dropout. These would appear to be more salient factors than an initial lack of ambition among young people.

Considering cross-national variation and the institutional features of education, clear consistent patterns did not emerge in relation to young people's subjectivities and the organization of education systems, for example, between stratified and comprehensive systems. However, more so than any another context, the Finnish system stood out in several respects. Although differences were observed in relation to higher educational aspirations among young people with the highest-educated parents, the lack of differentiation according to gender and parental education was more apparent than in other contexts. While there were a smaller number of early labor market entrants in the Finnish context, the few who aspired to early labor market entry appeared aware of the risks that faced them. Whether the more equal patterns that have been underlined here, and noted elsewhere, can be attributed directly to specific aspects of the Finnish educational system is less clear. Some commentators have suggested the higher rates of mobility among the Nordic countries may be more attributed to a broader set of social policy reforms ensuring more equal access to "levels of living" in general (incomes, housing, health), whereby young people start the game from a much more equal position than that observed in other contexts (Goldthorpe & Mills, 2008).

Aside from the Finnish case, specific national differences emerged more clearly across nation-state samples than the differences between broad-brush educational features—for example, through tracked or comprehensive educational systems as in the typology suggested above. However, the highly stratified German system stood out in some respects but also

appeared to differ from other stratified systems (e.g., the Netherlands). In the German context, there was a surprising but notable lack of differentiation according to parental education. While the reasons remain unclear, it may be a feature associated with the earlier influence of parental education in determining educational tracks or the greater equality in status between vocational and academic tracks. The latter interpretation gets support from the recent comparative study on educational attainment in Central and Eastern European countries, in which it was noticed that vocational education had maintained its attractiveness especially in those countries where vocational training was organized based on some form of apprenticeship system similar to that of Germany (Kogan, Gebel, & Noelke, 2012).

While the Allmendinger classification separates the Polish and Slovenian contexts according to standardization, some common similarities between the two former socialist nations were observed. While parental education had a strong linear relationship with educational aspirations, young people from the least-educated family backgrounds were more likely to aspire to higher levels of education than is the case in most other national contexts. However, the highest differentials in these two contexts was in relation to gender, whereby young girls were much more likely to aspire for a tertiary-level education, while the males particularly from less well-educated backgrounds have aspirations toward early labor market entry.

The discussion in this article has clear implications for policymaking, which although we cannot discuss in detail here, are worth briefly pointing out. First, it seems necessary to reduce the number of (selective) transitions within education paths and maintain and reinforce comprehensive structures of education and training. Second, this is associated with postponing differentiation and decision making. Taking decisions regarding future educational or occupational careers appears to be a very important challenge for all students. Students are "forced" to change at a very young age, which leads in many cases to frustrations, disappointment, and multiple transitions to "correct" earlier decisions. Last, it is worth pointing out that access to and accessibility of education has to be *created on a structural level* of national policies and educational systems, implemented on the level of *interaction in educational institutions*, and facilitated by empowering practice. The aim of this article was to bring the institutional and structural dimensions into the discussion and start a conversation on their relevance for research and policy on access to education.

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