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ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY – RETHINKING EUROPEAN UNION POLICIES IN TERMS OF THE ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION

Abstract

In the knowledge society, the topic of access to education is most often related to accessing higher levels of education or lifelong learning, where it tends to be concerned with debates around widening the access for particular groups, especially in relation to gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity. The current focus on education in the framework of Horizon 2020, which closely links economic and social aims as policy objectives, may illustrate this approach well. One important insight from current research is that the apparently “simple technical” issue of increasing access must be expanded by an understanding of “accessibility” in order to bring to the fore the complexity of “getting” access, i.e. structural/societal dimensions need to be connected to individual/subjective aspects when tackling issues of access to education. This paper first sharpens the concept of access and inequality by pointing to the interplay of structure and agency, as well as to the processes of social differentiation in which differences are constructed. Referring to interactional and intersectional considerations, the more comprehensive concept of “accessibility” is suggested. Examples from a European research project (GOETE) are discussed and some recommendations are made which bear relevance both for those planning and implementing the policy.

Keywords: Europe; Education policy; access to education; inequality; multidimensional research

Introduction

This paper takes up one issue that is at the centre of attention of EU policies in the field of education. Namely, access to education as a proven method of both meeting the challenges of creating and improving economic growth and, at the same time, tackling social inequality and guaranteeing social inclusion. Therefore, I’ll start by pointing out some aspects of this relationship, to second, address the issue by suggesting that

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the concept of accessibility calls our attention to some shortcomings of scholarly and policy discussions. Third, I'd like to spend a few minutes elaborating on some challenges for education policies designed and implemented in the European overall strategies to creating growth and securing social inclusion. I will conclude with a few remarks on important conceptual issues both for scholars researching and some concrete recommendations for policymakers tackling these issues. Now let me turn to the relationship between education and social inequality.

1. Education and Social Inequality

Educational access is as crucial a theme in current educational research as it is in European policy discussions. In the context of knowledge society, the topic of access to education is most often related to the access to higher levels of education or to lifelong learning, where it tends to be concerned with debates around widening the access for particular groups, sometimes called “vulnerable” or “at risk”. The current focus on education in the framework of Horizon 2020, which closely links economic and social aims as policy objectives, may illustrate this “more-education-equals-more-growth-and-inclusion” approach well.

However, this correlation is not a linear one. Obviously the existence of formal rights, normative provisions and access structures are necessary but not sufficient preconditions to full participation in education. As long as there are complex barriers to effectively obtaining access, the issue cannot be considered to be tackled, let alone solved.

This calls our attention to the fact that the apparently “simple” issue of increasing access must be enlarged by a more comprehensible understanding of “providing and getting access” in order to bring to the fore the complexity of these processes. My argument¹ here is that the extent to which education is realized as a public good in a given country depends first of all on its level of accessibility. When discussing the relationship, however, one has to keep in mind that education has a double role: social inequalities and disadvantage are both mitigated and reproduced by educational institutions. When designing and implementing educational policies, we need to be attentive to potential side effects that may exacerbate social divisions and inequalities.

¹ This argument has been developed in collaborative work during a research project funded by the European Commission under the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme for Research – Contract No. SSH-CT-2009-243868. For details, please refer to the project website: <http://www.goete.eu>. See the articles in Parreira do Amaral et al. (2015).

2. Access to Education – Accessibility of Education

The concept of accessibility of education is meant as a critique of the concept of access being too narrow and suggests a more comprehensive idea of access to education. Access to education cannot be viewed as a “simple technical” question of increasing the number of youths included in education. The integrative concept of “accessibility of education” requires us to attend to different levels at which access is produced, reproduced, and negotiated and be attentive to the interrelations and overlapping of the issues at stake when discussing access to education in the context of inequality and diversity. The underlying assumption is that there are complex relationships between structures of access to education and the subjectively experienced accessibility of education, and it is exactly at this point where policies often fail by focusing too narrowly only on one or the other dimension of the issue.

The provision of access (and its research practice) must pay attention to the structural and institutional barriers and solutions at the level of policy and programme (also within educational organisations); to the subjectively realised accessibility of educational pathways on the side of students and their parents; and the ways these two dimensions interact, namely through discursive practices and representations, as well as to the individual strategies, practices and positioning. From this perspective, the issue of educational access is sensibly addressed only as a multi-dimensional one. According to Stauber and Parreira do Amaral (2015), at least four dimensions may be discerned.

The socio-economic or structural 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 may also be based on spatial categories. These differences at the socio-structural level point to concrete relations of power that can be statistically and historically observed. 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 yield interesting insights into the way accessibility is produced.

The institutional dimension: the dimension concerns two related aspects. First, at the macro-level of society’s 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. 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 multi-problematic 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 (the capacity to read, meet, and answer potential clients’ needs) and effectiveness (the capacity to achieve goals, taking up potential clients), and points to the principle of universality (limiting the distortion due to implicit or explicit, intended or unintended discriminatory profiling of potential clients). The second important aspect in the institutional dimension is found at the meso- or organisational level of educational institutions. Here, the focus lies on the “logic”, “structures” and “operations” of educational institutions and how their decisionmaking processes affect different groups and regulate access(ibility) to education. These two aspects point to the necessity to include macro-level institutional arrangements (for instance, policies and programmes for specific target groups), as well as intra-organisational aspects (such as institutional structures, decisionmaking mechanisms and logic) centre stage in the analysis of access and inequality issues in the education system instead of solely focusing on students and their individual and socio-structural attributes.

The dimension of discourses and representation: in the dimension of discourses and representation, the issue of access and accessibility to education has to be viewed as social phenomena influenced by dynamic power relations. In social sciences, several scholars pointed out that social phenomena are influenced by language use, for instance the practices of naming and representing. Ascriptions do not usually come alone: ascriptions regarding the local area frequently intersect with stigmatizing ascriptions regarding low schooling level (of parents), gender, and ethnicity.

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 being constantly 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.

Accessibility, thus, is best understood as a dialectical relationship of these levels, while it is at the local level that these issues become effective, since structures, institutions, discourses and practices conflate at this level, giving rise to specific and concrete situations, i.e. decisionmaking during transition points between educational levels.

3. Rethinking the European Union Education Policies

Departing from the fact that most current European education policies have been designed and implemented in the framework of overall strategies to meet the challenges of creating and improving economic growth and, at the same time, guaranteeing social inclusion, there is a need to inquire into the potentially competing (and possibly ambivalent) orientations and objectives of education policies and to analyse their implications as well as the intended and unintended effects on young people. In terms of thinking together about the different dimensions of the issue of access as I argued, we need to understand the relationship and suitability of the policies in terms of orientations and objectives to their specific target groups, thus assessing the compatibility and potentials of policies that aim both at creating and improving economic growth and at guaranteeing social inclusion for young people, as expressed in the current European policy strategies.

Related to this, by pointing out that current EU education policies are more often than not designed for adult needs, from an individual's perspective important questions arise that are related to the effects of policies on young adults as target groups, for instance, in how far do policies themselves shape their life courses or even create new target groups? For instance, the various definitions and profiles under which policymakers categorise target groups may produce self-fulfilling prophecies and narrow down aspirational horizons. An exemplary case of this may be seen in the target group called NEETs, that is youth not in employment, education nor training, who more and more often are described as “a problem”, and by following such a discursive and representational practice we risk exacerbating the problems of exclusion. The focus on groups said to be “inactive” and/or “at risk”, oftentimes also has significant implications as to the degree of awareness about their potentialities both at the policy and at the individual level. These representations pose serious obstacles to achieving policy objectives, since they simplify heterogeneous and constantly changing groups and regard them as homogenous. By assuming a simplified vision on target groups that are contrastingly complex, policies might miss their targets due to being ill-suited and/or yielding unintended outcomes. My argument is that not only they become ineffective, but they also generate interpretive frameworks that portray the addressees as passive, preventing a deeper understanding of the individual perceptions and choices that cause the passive behaviours which such policies intend to modify in the first place.

The key message here is that context matters, and that in the European regions there are highly diverse contexts not only across Member States, but also within

countries and regions. Against this background, the challenge for policies to bring about growth and inclusion at the same time becomes even more daunting.

4. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In conclusion, my point of departure was a critique of a “more-education-equals-more-growth-and-inclusion” approach, common in current education policies. The paper strongly underlined that access is not a given, but results from processes of social differentiation, in which the structures cannot be simply regarded as determining but as something constantly challenged and negotiated by individuals, these two being mediated by institutional and discursive elements.

The relationships between structural, institutional, discursive and individual dimensions of access to education have been most often downplayed and neglected in policy and scholarly debates. The result of this neglect is an individualising perspective on students from a societal point of view, which goes along with devolvement of responsibility and guilt, and can become even worse when this view is internalised and reproduced by young people themselves.

This argument strongly challenges the essentialist perspective: education is not accessible per se, but has to be made accessible. In this process, educational policies, educational institutions, but also individuals do play a role and have responsibility. Making education accessible is – in the broadest sense of the word – a political process.

4.1. Broadening Education and Providing Experience Beyond Formal Learning

The current emphasis of education lies on preparing young people for the labour market (“employability”) and developing their human capital. Other meanings and outcomes of school education are being devalued. This contributes to the alienation of children and young people from their individual learning processes, which lack tangible user value. Both individual development and collective socio-cultural benefits of education are addressed by political rhetoric, but not systematically addressed by educational practice at school. This is especially problematic in the case of socially disadvantaged young people for whom school may represent the only way to avert social exclusion, and to access full benefits of citizenship.

Education needs to take into account the subjective needs of individual students. This includes acknowledging informal learning and life experiences. Students need

environments and (learning) conditions where they feel a sense of belonging and communality with peers;

Schools should be encouraged to provide students with non-formal learning opportunities and out-of-school activities, also by cooperation with other actors in the wider community, such as youth work. This may include companies in order to provide insight into different areas and activities of social and economic life, as well as into different careers. Yet, work practice must not be reduced to channel students into specific career pathways.

4.2. Re-structuring School Pathways

Although social reproduction through education pertains to all modern societies – structures of education and training systems make a difference with regard to subjective experiences, trajectories and outcomes of education. Differentiated education systems create bottlenecks and problems with regard to accessibility. The simple rule: there is “no differentiation without hierarchisation” shapes the way institutions and their representatives (have to) function. Selective transitions even weaken the potential of support measures that may aim at compensating for the effects of disadvantage.

Reduce the number of (selective) transitions: the number of transitions in school pathways needs to be reduced and comprehensive structures of education and training maintained and reinforced;

Postponing differentiation and decisionmaking: decisionmaking regarding future educational or occupational careers appears to be a very important challenge for all students. Students are “forced” to make choices at a very young age, which leads in many cases to frustrations, disappointment, and multiple transitions to “correct” earlier decisions. This can be viewed as a waste of much time and effort. This demands attention of policymakers to review early selection systems and high differentiation, and to consider the postponement of critical selection moments;

Accessibility 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 structural dimension of making education more accessible therefore has to be broken down to self-concepts and practices of professionals, be they principals, teachers, school social workers, youth workers, school psychologists or educational counsellors, etc.

References

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