

Editorial: Creating Capabilities for Socially Vulnerable Youth in Europe

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Point of departure: The problem

Political, economic and social transformations in Europe have affected harshly a growing number of young people, who are currently experiencing social disqualification and disaffiliation, particularly so during the critical transition from school to work.

In the diverse European educational systems, this crucial problem has however not yet adequately been addressed, nor have current educational and labour market policies proved to be effective, especially where the most vulnerable groups are concerned, such as those with a migration background or suffering from a socio-economic disadvantage. The decisive indicator of this condition is a continuous lack both of access to the common good and of participation in social life and the productive economy, as can be underlined by recent Eurostat data on youth unemployment: at the end of 2013 an average of 23.8% of all young people in Europe was unemployed, a figure twice as high as that for the same countries' older generations. Growing rates of unemployment in Spain (54.9%), Greece (57.3%) and Italy (41.8%) demonstrate that more than every 2nd young person is affected by unemployment (Eurostat data August 2014¹), while people in jobs are constantly confronted with precarious working conditions.

Moreover, judging by the agenda of nearly all European countries, the current transitional systems fail to provide reasonable chances and perspectives for the group of early school leavers and dropouts. All these facts are central indicators of the dire state of current youth employment: without being offered substantial perspectives, these youths are in risk of becoming a 'lost generation'.

The strikingly insufficient results of the current dominant human capital and employability approaches – which are mainly focused on preventing and trying to repair the worst socio-economic consequences affecting young people – require the investigation and proposal of crucial alternatives, i.e. an approach that offers a paradigmatic, structural change in the transitional system as well as the labour market as a whole. Consequently, a sustainable and forwardlooking solution has to relate the challenges facing the current educational systems to the potentials that welfare – understood as human development – could have for promoting the enablement, qualification and social integration of socially vulnerable young people (Otto 2015, forthcoming).

¹ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

The European training network and the present research

The EU-funded Marie Curie² Initial Training Network “Education as Welfare - Enhancing opportunities for socially vulnerable youth in Europe” (EduWel, 2010-2014) has investigated transition pathways of socially vulnerable youth after compulsory schooling.

Fifteen doctoral fellows and one postdoc researcher – who either worked at different European universities or at international stakeholders in the field³ – explored vulnerabilities and potential opportunities of young people and the role education and welfare can play in enhancing those opportunities.

This special issue gives an account of the results of the Marie Curie ITN EduWel⁴. It provides robust research on education and welfare by evaluating capacities to tackle the multiple challenges and pressures that a large proportion of young people in Europe faces today. The main scientific focus of EduWel was to deliver interdisciplinary knowledge to fill the ‘capability gap’ by extending the opportunities for young people facing multiple economic, social and personal barriers.

The objectives of the individual PhD research projects were to investigate what factors could enhance young people’s agency and opportunities – their capacity to work, be autonomous and participate in society as agents and socially aware citizens. In the analysis of the education–welfare relation, EduWel examined how existing empirical knowledge can be utilised, identified what additional data and methods are needed and what policy implications can be drawn. The overall project did this by conceptualising young people’s well-being *empirically*. The researchers were all committed to the analysis of existing datasets and complementary qualitative research on socially vulnerable young people. Looking at different contexts in different European countries, the projects evaluated how inequality and social

² The Marie Curie Initial Training Networks (in Horizon 2020: “Marie Skłodowska-Curie”) are international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary research and training networks bringing together universities, research centres and intersectoral stakeholders from countries worldwide to train young researchers. The funding aims at supporting scientific excellence, enhancing researchers’ career prospects and transnational mobility within the European knowledge society.

³ The consortium of the EU Marie Curie Initial Training network: **Network Coordinator:** Hans-Uwe Otto, **Project Coordinator:** Susanne Gottuck, *Bielefeld University*; **Full partner Bielefeld University, PhD fellows Maria Ron Balsera, Davina Gateley & Pinar Burcu Güner;** Senior Researchers (SRs) Hans-Uwe Otto, Holger Ziegler, Isabell Diehm, Sabine Andresen;; *Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*;; **PhD fellows Ana Sofia Ribeiro, Petya Illieva-Trichkova,** SRs Marek Kwiek, Piotr W. Juchacz; *University of Florence*;; **PhD fellow Annica Brännlund,** SR Mario Biggeri; *University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland, Lausanne*;; **PhD fellows Virva Leppänen& Stephan Dahmen,** SR; Jean-Michel Bonvin; *Education International*;; **PhD fellow Krystian Szadowski,** SR Guntars Catlaks; *European Trade Union Institute*;; **PhD fellow Margherita Bussi,** SRs Maria Jepsen & Janine Leske; *Institute of Education/London*;; **PhD fellow Lukas Ertl,** SR Elaine Unterhalter; *IUSS Pavia*;; **PhD fellow Alberta Spreafico,** SR Enrica Chiappero; *Umeå University*;; **PhD fellow Sara Bonfanti,** SR Matthias Strandh; *Gothenburg University*;; **PhD fellow Agnese Peruzzi,** SR Björn Halleröd; *University of Nottingham*;; **PhD fellow Aurora López- Fogúes,** SR Monica McLean, **Associated partners:** *Universitat Politècnica de València*;; SRs Alejandra Boni Aristazábal & Felix Lozano; *OCED/ ELSA*;; SR Alessandro Goglio; *Bertelsmann Foundation*;; SR Ulrich Kober; *University of the Free State Bloemfontain,* South Africa: SR Melanie Walker; *BBJ*;; SR Regine Schröer; *ORSEU*;; SR Nicolas Farvaque.

⁴ This Special Issue presents a selection of articles based on papers presented during the EduWel final conference in Valencia in June 2013. Following a peer review process and given other publication commitments, four EduWel fellows have not contributed to the Special Issue, but took part in the general EduWel Collected Volume which was submitted to the European Commission in August 2013. The quantitative research perspectives are thus underrepresented in this special issue.

vulnerability based on e.g. gender, class, or an ethnic/migration background curtailed the development of young people's opportunities and impeded their growth.

In doing so, the projects have thrown empirical light on educational processes and vulnerabilities of different target groups in a remarkably broad range of institutional settings:

- students and doctoral fellows in higher education in Portugal, Poland and Sweden;
- pupils with a migration background in secondary school education in Spain and Germany;
- young refugees in third sector organizations in the UK;
- young women in further education in the UK, and
- unemployed young people of low formal qualifications in vocational training: juvenile detention centres and active labour market policy (ALMP) measures in Spain, Switzerland and Belgium.

The multitude of insights into the vulnerabilities of young people that were analysed and contextualized within current educational discourses and policy measures allows perspectives to emerge that until now have been generally neglected in most research projects on education. More specifically, the projects reveal capability gaps and potential fields of action and areas of opportunities.

The added value of the Capability Approach

The Capability Approach provides a conceptually innovative foundation for analysing the complex processes through which policies create or thwart opportunities for young people facing multiple barriers in the transitional phase after compulsory schooling (between the ages of 15 and the late 20s).

The broad analytical framework of the Capability Approach (CA) that the research project established offers an evaluative space for the revision of the human capital and employability paradigms. The CA was initially developed by Amartya Sen and was further advanced by Martha Nussbaum (2007, 2011). It primarily endeavours to promote social justice and equity in order to build societies that empower individuals to "choose to live the life they have the reason to value" (Sen 1999:291). Another of its aims is the assessment of social progress not only in terms of economic productivity, but more broadly as human development, i.e. in terms of beings and doings that people are able to realize. When used for the interpretation of real human conditions or in the evaluation of policies, the CA makes it possible to have a deeper and more comprehensive perspective on the obstacles that hinder the matching of personal choice with structural opportunities in the context of social justice. The CA, therefore, provides a multi-dimensional foundation for analysing constraints on and opportunities for full societal participation that can be used to generate a transversal strategy that will integrate central economic, educational and social issues, which in turn will facilitate the enablement and social integration of young people after compulsory schooling.

The articles in this special issue provide and discuss the application of the CA to different educational settings and social problems. They do this by combining the CA with other theories into a comprehensive approach, thus illustrating convincingly the added value of this

perspective in overcoming current dominant human capital or utilitarian research approaches. For the first time, these projects have integrated welfare and educational perspectives into a coherent approach for theoretical analysis as well as public policies that aim at the human development and agency of their target groups.

The Special Issue chapters

The aim of the articles of the **first chapter ‘A capability response to educational reforms in times of economic dominance’** by Ana Sofia Ribeiro dos Santos, Krystian Szadowski and Aurora López-Fogúes is to provide a critical view on the consequences of the current economic crisis for different educational sectors (undergraduate and postgraduate education and VET) by presenting three contributions from three different countries, Portugal, Poland and Spain. While the Iberian cases illustrate how financial cuts and austerity measures negatively impact the prospects of young people, the Polish paper shows how even in one of the few European countries immune to the crisis precarious work and social status are a daily occurrence among PhD candidates, a population usually unexposed to such contextual dangers. All projects provide comprehensive approaches to the situation of the young people researched through conceptualizing vulnerable states and potential opportunities. They thus combine the perspective of the CA with theories such as the parity of participation as a conception of justice (Fraser 2007), vulnerable subject visions (Finemann 2008), the account of oppression developed by Young (1990, 2006) or by applying Bonvin’s (2008) concept of the capability for voice.

The articles of the **second chapter ‘A capability perspective on Active Labour Market Policy measures and young people in transition’** by Margherita Bussi, Virva Leppänen and Stephan Dahmen assemble research contributions on the CA as an analytical tool to evaluate active labour market policy measures (ALMP) and give empirical qualitative insights into transition policies. Bussi discusses the added value of the CA for developing a new analytical tool to investigate the quality of employability policies.

The qualitative research work presented by Leppänen and Dahmen discuss the trajectories of low qualified unemployed young adults within different ALMP measures in Switzerland.

Both papers by Leppänen and Dahmen analyse – each using their own specific theoretical approach – how institutional settings influence young people’s biographical perspectives as well as their aspirations, preferences and self-interpretations. Leppänen illuminates the impact of activation discourses on the young adults’ capabilities, Dahmen argues for bringing together “sociological conceptions of human agency” with the CA to sharpen the CA’s explanatory power on constraints in young people’s agency. The papers shed light on the institutional and educational discourses and practices that structure social mobility and transitions into work. They give a critical analysis of patterns of social inequality in relation to how young people cope with and negotiate their integration trajectories.

The **third chapter ‘Migration, aspirations and autonomy: Young migrant people in different educational settings in Europe’** by Sara Bonfanti, Davina Gateley-Said and Maria Ron Balsera proposes the CA as framework for the analysis of migratory processes and the educational pathways of migrants. Sara Bonfanti explores “migration as a fundamental capability” and the “interconnection between structural phenomena and migrants’ agency.” Gateley and Ron Balsera provide insights into the subjective perspectives of young migrant people (refugees and immigrant youth) in the UK and Spain, combining different strands of qualitative research. Gateley takes a critical look at the potential of third sector organizations

in supporting young refugees “to become actors of their life”. Ron Balsera discusses biographical insights of young Ecuadorians in different institutional settings in Spain from the perspective of capability deprivation. The papers shed light not only on educational dynamics, intersectionality and patterns of inclusion and exclusion within different communities of mobile populations, they also analyse educational aspirations as a main biographical pathway.

The theoretical and methodological approaches adopted in chapter four ‘**The Capability Approach and quantitative perspectives on young people in transition**’ intend to provide further empirical results for tackling the topical challenges inherent in youth’s school-to-work transitions through focusing on higher education graduates in Sweden and Bulgaria. Based on an eight-year longitudinal national survey in Sweden, Annica Brännlund throws light on the level of education and its effects on non-market outcomes, more specifically on capabilities such as agency and voice in Sweden. Based on data from the European Social Survey, Petya Illieva-Trichkova focuses on the current developments in the relationship between higher education and the labour market in Bulgaria. She suggests following a social justice perspective on the “qualitative side of employability”, rather than trusting in high employment rates among higher education graduates. Last but not least, the EduWel postdoc fellow Vincenzo Mauro describes and discusses the design and implementation of the EduWel pilot survey project which was tested in upper secondary Education in four different European countries. This survey aimed at discovering and studying certain variables to be analysed in a CA framework and provided the EduWel PhD fellows with intensive training at the various stages of a field survey. His article provides reflections on conceptual, methodological and empirical issues related to the operationalization of the CA and on the specificity of such an intensive training process.

Results and Perspectives

Looking back, the international PhD Network EduWel with 17 different research departments and international stakeholders in 10 countries, and offering a structured research and doctoral training in a common research topic, requested from its members a high level of transnational mobility within the network. On the thematic level it provided an extraordinary intellectual space for international and interdisciplinary discourse and an excellent opportunity for critical reflection on current societal problems. Its declared aim was to create a ‘critical mass’ of PhD fellows and future experts who would navigate and influence the complex and closely intertwined educational and welfare systems in different European countries, overcoming the incongruities and limitations in scope that still arise from national institutional boundaries in the provision of education and welfare.

Having conceptualized specific contexts, resources and their potential opportunities for socially vulnerable youth, the research results of the EduWel project convincingly demand for social policies an alternative framework which is grounded in the idea of social justice and equality of opportunity, and combines this with a call for capability-friendly policies.

To sum up, the analysis of human services from a perspective in which well-being and agency are central components, the perspective developed here, will – in the long term – provide new social indicators and an innovative paradigm in policy making and practice aimed at sustainable human development beyond human capital approaches.

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