

Project A5**The Welfare State and Education: An International Comparison of Educational Poverty**

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The concept of educational poverty: Theoretical and empirical implications

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The current debate about welfare state change, in particular the discussion on the “social investment state” strengthens the perspective that education is an integral part of social policy. In this discussion which focuses on intersections between social and educational policy, the concept of educational poverty – introduced in the German sociological discourse more than ten years ago – plays a decisive role. Despite the increasing popularity of the concept in the political and scientific discourse, neither the theoretical and normative implications of the concept have been discussed in detail, nor has a broad consensus on the definition and operationalization of educational poverty been reached. With regard to these open questions, the presented paper focuses on theoretical and normative implications of the concept, suggests a general definition of educational poverty and empirically compares the outcomes of these different approaches using indicators such as measured competences, educational certificates and years of education. The empirical analyses are restricted to the case of Germany. However, it is envisaged to expand the analyses to cross-country comparisons. Therefore, a crucial question is if the discussed concepts and measures of educational poverty are applicable in a comparative – international as well as intertemporal – perspective.

We start off from a discussion of a potential definition of educational poverty in a social policy perspective. Regarding education in the (narrow) sense of social policy implies a functionalist definition: education has to be understood as a means to reach certain social policy objectives (welfare). Nevertheless, we reject narrow economic approaches which see education only as a means to reach inclusion into the labor market. Instead social and political inclusion must be considered as well. Empirical research shows unarguably that low education is negatively correlated with many other aspects of welfare: health, chances of marriage, democratic participation etc. The social policy perspective suggests that a certain, individual level of education is inadequate to reach those objectives. In line with a general understanding of poverty as an undesirable outcome in a welfare state, poverty reduction through state intervention is required. This perspective on education is thus dependent upon a poverty line in order to differentiate between the poor and the non-poor. The dichotomous understanding of educational poverty calls for an outcome based understanding of educational justice.

Hence, the use of the term educational poverty implies a perspective which differs from the notion of educational inequality, most often understood as inequality of opportunity. While the latter focuses on the causes of educational inequality and regards some causes (e.g., social background) as unjust and others as acceptable and necessary (e.g., ability), the educational poverty perspective labels a given low level of education (defined by a poverty threshold) as socially unacceptable – regardless the causes. Building on these considerations and in accordance with the capability approach in the sense of Amartya Sen, we develop a definition of educational poverty. This definition is in consequence relative (with an absolutist core): To reach some absolutely defined goals (like being able to participate in the process of democratic decision-making or to reach minimal inclusion into the labor market) a certain level of education is necessary. This level of course, depends upon social standards and circumstances which differ from one region to the other and between historical periods.

The paper combines a discussion and theoretical clarification of the concept of educational poverty with an empirical analysis where different approaches towards educational poverty are compared. We regard these considerations as a first step towards comparative and longitudinal analyses on the causes and the consequences of educational poverty which we will briefly discuss at the end of the paper.