Multi-country comparisons of the transition from school to working life of young people with disabilities: identifying methodological problems and desiderata

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The need for evidence

It is, without a doubt, a legitimate undertaking to collect evidence on the success of various different national educational and social systems in maximizing learning opportunities and life chances of people with disabilities and minimizing barriers to their inclusion in adult life. In 2007, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education made detailed and comprehensive recommendations regarding the development of accountability mechanisms to monitor the exclusion, segregation, and educational outcomes of people with disabilities (Muñoz 2007). In view of these recommendations and of the development and claims of national and supranational legislation, the category “disability” should by now have the same importance as, e.g., the category “gender”, and research into this field should be just as common and be undertaken with the same degree of intensity. This, however, is not the case – at least not in the German-speaking countries, which we have examined more closely. In fact, quite the contrary is true: People with disabilities are excluded explicitly or implicitly, in any case by unclear and varying standards, from most cross-sectional and longitudinal studies in relevant research fields (see, e.g., Hoermann 2007; Pfahl and Powell 2005). One consequence of the strongly differing identification and exclusion rates of people with disabilities are negative effects on the validity and cross-national comparability of the results of such studies (OECD 2007, 223). A further consequence of the exclusion of people with disabilities from research is an astonishing lack of comparable data on educational outcomes in students with disabilities.

The most recent and, according to a large part of the disability research community, most momentous legal basis for efforts to enhance the knowledge base for answering the above mentioned question is the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml). The Convention came into force in 2008 (for details cf. Hendriks 2007, Schulze 2009). Article 31 of the Convention explicitly requires State Parties to “undertake to collect appropriate information, including statistical and
research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the present Convention”.

To specify the scope of the term “disability”, we will briefly address the disability concept which is outlined in the above mentioned UN Convention. This disability concept is not specifically targeted at educational systems but represents the most recent results of an international political consensus building process and, moreover, points out a number of issues that have to be addressed within disability research. According to the UN Convention, “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (Article 1).

According to this definition, a “disability” is preceded by “impairments” and “barriers”. Hence, a “disability” is not a characteristic of an individual, but a possible outcome of social processes. Disability constitutes a certain situation in which persons “who have an impairment” can find themselves when barriers hinder their participation. In fact, the Convention aims to prevent such undesirable situations – i.e. disabilities – as far as possible. This disability concept is the result of long and intense debates that have led to the abandonment of a “medical model” in favour of a “social model” of disability. However, it is obvious that in fact both models continue to be used, a “medical model of impairment” on the one hand and a “social model of disability” on the other. If empirical research is to investigate “disability” as a situation including the barriers influencing this situation, such an investigation would require an examination of the situation of all “persons who have an impairment”, since, according to this definition of the UN, other persons cannot get into the situation of being disabled. This addresses a number of crucial questions for empirical disability research, which are not only relevant for the field of research targeting school-to-work transitions: Who experiences disability? And what does this entail – nationally and internationally – for measuring disability? (cf. Altmann and Barnartt 2006 eds.)

Below we will try to identify some methodological challenges that we are confronted with when examining the particularly critical and institutionally complex life phase which is characterized by the transition from school to working life. For this purpose, we mainly draw on relevant data sources available in the German-speaking countries which we have reviewed in the framework of a cross-national policy study (Fasching and Felkendorff 2008, Felkendorff 2008). Our focus is on data that are gathered on a regular basis and that can be used for monitoring or have already been used in national “Education Reports” (e.g. Feyerer 2009, SKBF 2007), “Reports on the Situation of Disabled People and their Participation” (e.g. BMSK 2008, BMGS 2004), international reports and studies on the prevalence of special educational needs (OECD 2007, Ebersold and Evans 2008), and surveys on the social situation of university students (e.g. Unger and Wroblewski 2007, Wroblewski et al. 2007).

**Available Data**

**Resources-based data**

Due to mostly resources-based national disability classification and reporting systems, people who, in certain age groups, are typically considered “people with disabilities” are usually those who have been assigned to at least one out of a variety of specific services and programmes provided within education systems and beyond. Depending on the age of a person and on the life domain or policy system concerned, different disability and benefit statuses are available. These are awarded independently, have their own objectives and may have quite differing consequences for the people
concerned. Consequences reach from exclusion from “general” learning environments and curricula over admission to assisted living or application of special rules during exams up to eligibility for integration subsidies or quota systems on the training and employment market.

Almost all numerical data used for establishing a statistical population in the participation monitoring of people with disabilities in the transition from school to working life undertaken so far are based on process-generated aggregate data regarding the following groups of legal disability statuses from the areas of education law, labour law, social law and vocational training law:

- **For compulsory schooling** we find aggregate data on students classified as having “special educational needs” (SEN) according to the (educational) legal frameworks, resources and allocation practices. Definitions and allocation practices vary considerably between and within countries; furthermore, male adolescents and adolescents from certain migrant backgrounds are strongly overrepresented especially in the strongly used special educational needs categories in compulsory schools (e.g. Haeberlin 2009 for Germany, Feyerer 2009 for Austria). Even Austria, which, other than Switzerland and Germany, has a uniform nationwide legislation concerning all types of special educational needs, shows strong regional disparities: overall classification rates of special educational needs vary between 2.58% (Styria) and 4.34% (Vienna) (Feyerer 2009, 77). With a special educational needs classification rate of 7.5%, students from a Turkish migrant background are strongly overrepresented in relation to their share of the total population (Feyerer 2009, 81). Compared to the lower school grades, at a nationwide rate of 2.46% the ninth grade shows a considerably lower share of students with special educational needs (Feyerer 2007, 77). The author names the increase in the number of students entering private schooling which takes place in ninth grade as one possible explanation for this decrease (Feyerer 2009, 78) – an explanation which also sheds light on one of the inherent problems of “public resources based” data: students who switch to a private school lose their SEN status and are therefore no longer regarded as students with special educational needs, thus disappearing from any resources-based data collection.

- **In vocational education and training systems** we also find aggregate statistics on support programmes; however, these are structured differently and are based on definitions of categories other than the ones applied on compulsory school level. In general, it is not possible to deduce earlier SEN categories from these data. In many cases, the categories are open for other groups of disadvantaged persons as well, such as young people excluded from the dual system of vocational education due to a lack of apprenticeship positions in the region or due to ethnic discrimination on the labour markets. In this respect, the number of disability ‘benefits’ awarded does not only show differences based on gender and migration status, but they are also an indicator of regional disparities. This can be observed especially in the case of Germany, where in regions with an extremely high unemployment rate the percentage of apprenticeships with benefits based on special administrative or disability statuses is much higher than in regions with low unemployment rates (Felkendorff 2008). In terms of regions, classification rates vary even more than those of special educational needs in secondary education. Data on so-called “integrative vocational training” in Austria show similar results (Pinetz 2008, Pinetz and Prammer 2008, Dörflinger et al. 2008): in 2007, 2.6% of all apprentices in the dual system were trained within a so-called “integrative vocational training programme”. Also in this case, regional disparities can be identified, which cannot be reasonably explained by a factor such as “impairment”: almost a third (27%) of integrative training places are offered in Styria, more than a fifth in Upper Austria (22%), and 13% in Vienna. Furthermore, differences in training places show disparities...
based on economic structure. In Vienna, 77% of the apprentices who are enrolled in an “integrative vocational training programme” receive their training in subsidiary training institutions, while in Carinthia, Lower Austria, Vorarlberg and Salzburg integrative apprenticeship places are most commonly found in companies. The high number of apprentices trained in institutions can be explained by a tight apprenticeship market in urban areas as well as by an unwillingness of the companies to employ young people with a disability. On the other hand, this situation gave rise to the establishment of numerous institutions in Vienna which dispose of the necessary resources, so that, even before the regulations regarding the integrative vocational training came into effect, these institutions already offered qualification programmes to young people with special placement difficulties and are now able to offer an integrative vocational training to their clientele. The target group of the integrative vocational training programme includes not only former SEN students but also young people without a compulsory secondary school diploma, persons with a disability in terms of social law as well as other persons for whom no regular apprenticeship place can be found for “reasons lying within the person him/herself” (Dörflinger et al. 2009, 163).

Persons with disabilities and/or previous SEN status who either pass the training system without the special support provided according to these criteria, or who drop out before or after accessing vocational education programmes are not considered in any of the resources-based categories and are thus excluded from relevant data collections. In Austria the dropout rate among 15-16 year-olds was 5.9% in 2002 (Steiner 2005, 11). An analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of this group shows a significant overrepresentation of people from a migrant background as well as a slight overrepresentation of women (Steiner 2005, 13ff.). Other variables for the composition of this group are also evaluated in the mentioned study – but not the categories “SEN” or “disability”.

• **Social law disability statistics**: Additionally, there are data collections which are divided into age groups and concern “protected disabled people” (Austria) or “severely disabled” (Germany); these data sources inform about the number of persons registered in the respective social law category. The percentages of disabled people in the relevant age brackets are considerably lower than the rates registered on a compulsory schooling or vocational training level; the eligibility criteria differ significantly from those of educational systems, and related resources are – except for a few benefits that are linked to a “legal disability certificate”, for instance for persons with limited mobility – usually targeted at persons of working age with a broad variety of impairments and chronic illnesses; moving between these and the above-mentioned categories is not possible. Most of the “severely disabled” (DE), the “protected disabled” (AT) or “invalid” (CH) persons of working age are only registered as disabled persons of working age due to the consequences of illness or accident. It would hence be misleading to use data regarding the participation of these groups in the examination of outcomes of school-to-work transitions.

All of these categories have one thing in common: they are not used for purposes of social scientific research or, even less, for purposes of comparative international disability research, nor do the criteria used for awarding these statuses correspond to the disability concept propagated by, e.g., the UN. These statuses – Hollenweger (2008, 15) speaks of “a posteriori categories” which describe a problem as a result of the interaction between a person and his or her environment – can be applied for, denied, cancelled, extended and shortened or, such as the status of “special educational needs”, end more or less automatically when the person concerned leaves the special educational needs system or compulsory school. Depending on the status it can be applied for and be accepted or
denied by different stakeholders or professionals with different specific powers, interests and personal dispositions (e.g. Kottmann 2006). When a legal disability status is not claimed or not (no longer) granted for whatever reasons, then these data collections do not (no longer) register this person as a “disabled person”, a “person with a disability” or a “young person with special educational needs” in the sense of the education law or other legal areas.

For the assessment of resources-based data, a statement by the German federal government is especially revealing, which declared in 2004 that in its reports “disabled persons” who “do not (or: no longer) depend on such a terminological definition as they do not require any help specifically targeted at the disabled” (BMGS 2004, 19) were not considered disabled persons. In other words: nothing is known about people who are in fact considered “disabled persons” by the government but who are not allocated resources specifically attributed to a certain disability category.

**Data based on self-reports**

Available surveys from the field of higher education are the only more or less regularly submitted data source on the participation of disabled persons in the educational systems that is not based on resources but on self-reports by interviewees (DSW 2008, Hollenweger et al. 2005, Unger and Wroblewski 2007, Wroblewski et al. 2007). These data provide perhaps the most obvious evidence for the shortcomings of present definitions and statistics concerning disability in childhood and youth.

While in the German-speaking countries a vanishingly small number of young people with special educational needs obtain a Higher Education Entrance Qualification (e.g. KMK 2005), in Austria for instance, according to the “Student social survey 2006” (representative survey of 9,000 students at public universities and universities of applied sciences), 0.9% of the students define themselves as “disabled”, a further 12.1% as “chronically ill” and approximately 8% as “otherwise health impaired”. In total, one out of five higher education students indicates some kind of disability, health problem or impairment; 40% of these students (or 8% of all students) feel restricted in their studies; this is twice as many as in the previous survey of 2002. It can be assumed that many of these impairments could be recognized as disabilities according to the common concepts of disability prevalent in social or antidiscrimination law; an accurate estimate, however, is not possible. The number of men with a disability is slightly higher than that of women; the older the students, the higher the percentage of those who indicate disability: up to 20 years of age the share is 0.8%, over 20 years of age it is 1.5%. Most of the students with disabilities grew up in Lower Austria (1/3), followed by Vorarlberg and Salzburg. The percentage of students with disabilities is especially low in Carinthia, Styria and Tyrol. These regional disparities are likely to be influenced by the regional school systems as well as by the infrastructure of the closest institutions of higher education, which can be either suitable or unsuitable for specific forms of disability (Wroblewski et al. 2007, 14ff.).

The health impairments mentioned most frequently in the Austrian student social survey of 2006 are allergies and respiratory diseases (12%); approximately 5% mention other impairments and visual impairments, approximately 3% suffer from mental illnesses or disorders and another 3% indicate chronic diseases. About 1% of the students indicate limited mobility or physical disablement, 0.7% hearing impairments and 0.1% language or speech disorders. Young people under 20 years of age are most frequently affected by visual impairments (7%). Mental disorders become more common with an increase in age; and chronic diseases especially affect students over the age of 30. There are no relevant differences in terms of social class. 1/3 of the students concerned name more than one form of impairment. Due to these multiple impairments it is difficult to statistically capture and
describe this group; also, on the basis of quantitative data it is not possible to identify the primary and secondary disorders (Wroblewski et al. 2007, 19ff.).

The number of health impaired students in Austria had risen considerably since the previous survey. In the student social survey of 2002 a total of 11.9% of the students was affected by a health impairment; in 2006 the number of students indicating such an impairment had risen to 20.6%. In 2002, a further 7.6% declared having a chronic disease and 3.3% indicated a health impairment other than the ones mentioned. Nevertheless, both in 2002 and in 2006 1% of the students considered themselves as being disabled. The rise in the number of indicated disability in the social survey of 2006 as compared to the social survey of 2002 can probably be traced back to a change in the survey method. The social survey of 2002 was done on paper and the students concerned were asked to fill in a four-page supplementary sheet with additional questions. The type of questions aimed at severe health impairments and the way they affected the participant's studies. The social survey of 2006, on the other hand, was published online; the majority of the questions was not visible immediately, which probably increased the students’ willingness to participate. Depending on the impairment, filling in a survey on paper or online poses different kinds of difficulties or is not possible at all without aids. Persons with visual impairments, e.g., have the option to enlarge the letters on a computer screen, which is not possible on paper (Wroblewski et al. 2007, 19).

According to a social survey published in 2007 (data for 2006) in Germany, the share of students with health impairments in Germany is 19%. This number has increased considerably also in Germany since the last survey in 2000; at that time it was at 15% (Wroblewski et al. 2007, 19).

It is obvious that the aforementioned participation rates in higher education systems cannot be used as output indicators for the effects of special needs education. Also, due to differing survey designs, these rates do not allow for any statements regarding whether the share of disabled people who take part in higher education corresponds to their share in the population of the same age. However, the mentioned participation rates allow for at least one conclusion: young adults whose impairments or chronic illnesses were of little direct relevance for educational structures and teaching processes have attained higher education entrance qualifications in large numbers in all three countries. It is solely this group’s access to higher education that can account for the apparently high participation rates of disabled and chronically ill persons in higher education.

Discussion

The available data are by no means uninteresting or in themselves entirely misleading. What we have at hand are data that offer insights into different systems-specific constructions of disability with specific purposes, specific criteria and specific consequences. An analysis of these data, their formation and their institutional embedding can provide a great deal of information on the existing conceptual divergencies between educational, health, and welfare systems or on the functionalities, histories and constitutional mindsets of educational systems (e.g. Hollenweger 2008, Powell 2006 and forthcoming).

A further argument that could be presented against existing disability statistics is that most of these reflect a “medical model” of disability, that is, that they focus on impairments and that context information on barriers etc. is missing. However, in the field that we examined, the contrary seems to be true: the idea that adolescents and young adults who have been institutionally identified as persons with disabilities can be regarded as a group of persons characterized by “impairments” whose participation in education and the employment market can be examined independently and be used as proof for the success or failure of inclusion policies is unsustainable. The available data
and their inconsistencies are much rather a direct expression of contextual factors – from the availability of resources and the attitudes of gatekeepers towards people from a migrant background up to regional or gender-related economic disparities –, and of prevailing participation restrictions. If, for instance, within the upper-secondary age group, there is a much greater rate of people “with disabilities” in the sense of the social, labour and/or vocational training law in an Eastern German region than in the most economically prospering Swiss cantons or German and Austrian regions, then this is not surprising and corresponds to disability models which, e.g., assume employment market conditions as highly relevant context factors. However, where domain specific participation restrictions are a mandatory precondition for the access to a domain specific disability status, a statement such as “The participation of disabled persons in the domain of … is restricted” becomes in fact tautological if it refers to persons with a domain-specific disability status only.

It is much rather decisive that such highly embedded categorical data do not allow for intra- or internationally valid statements on the transition from school to working life of young people with disabilities, their life courses and the quality and effects of provided support programmes and policies. Also the existing large-scale social scientific data collection efforts such as general social surveys or household panels ask questions relating to disability that must be regarded as inappropriate for monitoring educational pathways of people with disabilities. For example, none of the existing instruments we found contains appropriate questions concerning a former SEN status.

Conclusions

Several perspectives for future research can be identified which address the aforementioned shortcomings and knowledge gaps. First of all, as Haebelín (2009, 243) notes, the institutional micro-processes that ‘shape’ current disability statuses, statistics and learning environments for the children concerned need to be analyzed in detail by means of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches on national and state levels. Another possible way forward will be in-depth longitudinal studies on the transitions of specific groups of persons with disabilities. An ongoing research project at the Department of Education and Human Development of the University of Vienna funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) over a period of three years (2008-2011) attempts to gather data on the participation experiences of people with an intellectual impairment diagnosis who are undergoing the transition from school to working life or who are already participating in working life. The aim of the research project is to reconstruct objectively identifiable as well as subjectively experienced participation in the life history of people with intellectual disability undergoing this transition process as well as their participation experiences on the labour market under special consideration of institutional preconditions in Austria.

For this purpose, a nationwide full-population survey is undertaken in 2009 which is targeted especially at the transition from school to working life on the level of objectively identifiable participation; this survey includes two specifically designed interviewing rounds with school district superintendents and parents at two different points in time. These interviews will gather personal data on the school situation, the educational and transition process as well as the support needs of an entire age group (n=3000) which has been taught either according to the syllabus for severely disabled students or according to the syllabus for general special schools and who will graduate from school at the end of the academic year 2009. In addition, personal data such as data regarding the educational and transition process, information on support needs as well as detailed data on the process of professional integration of persons who have received support by service institutions in the reference year 2008 will be collected by means of a nationwide survey of institutions offering employment market support (such as “Clearing”, a counselling service offered to school leavers
with special needs, “Work integration assistance”, aimed at supporting people with disabilities in their integration into the labour market, “Vocational training assistance”, etc.) The focus of the research project, however, is on capturing the subjective perspective of the persons concerned by using methods of participative research with intellectually impaired people and by working with reference groups in the process of validating qualitative research data. For this purpose 20 persons with intellectual impairment will be observed during their transition phase from school to working life in the framework of an explorative two-year qualitative longitudinal study. It is to be expected that the knowledge gain from this research project will be drawn from the first survey of the objectively existing structures of its kind and from the subjectively experienced aspects of participation and exclusion processes of people with intellectual impairments in the transition from school to working life (Biewer, Fasching, Koenig 2009).

Further longitudinal and retrospective studies focusing on category-based samples of students with disabilities or (former) SEN statuses are perhaps the most realistic perspective for research in this field. However, the full inclusion of people with disabilities in representative educational panel studies such as the German NEPS (Leuze 2008) would offer by far the greatest potential, mainly because such studies are not grounded in the existing institutionalized diagnostic or intervention-related categories.

References


