Data limitations in researching transitions to adulthood of people with disabilities in Austria, Germany & Switzerland

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1. **Missing key indicators:** Reliable key indicators related to transitions of “people with disabilities” (PwD) through upper secondary and on to post-secondary education are missing in regular national reporting on the participation rates of PwD in education generally as well as in vocational training and higher education systems specifically (e.g., national “Education Reports” (CHE, DEU), “Reports on Vocational Training” (CHE, DEU), “Reports on the Situation of Disabled People and their Participation” (AUT, DEU), or “Report on the Situation of Disabled People in the Vocational Training Market” (DEU)).

2. **Educational segregation, cumulative disadvantage, and exclusion from research:** For the vast majority of students diagnosed as “having special educational needs” (SEN) at the end of lower secondary education, full participation in upper secondary vocational training—the only track formally open to them—is not secured at all. Thus, political efforts to provide “education for all” still focus on certain fields of upper secondary vocational education. This seems to be a key reason why former SEN students’ low participation rates in post-secondary or “higher” vocational education and training is neither a political nor a scientific issue at present. Segregation localizes the problems outside of general education, further marginalizing a group whose exclusion from policy, science, and public discourse continues despite the “PISA shock”.

3. **Research on career patterns for certain impairment groups fails to include post-secondary education:** For certain groups, defined on the basis of diagnosed impairments, prototypical career patterns can be identified. Some non-representative, small-scale studies on these groups do exist, but even those do not cover transitions to post-secondary education. In large measure, this is due to the fact that the (negative) selectivity prior to post-secondary education is nearly complete (see above).

4. **Lack of reliable longitudinal (micro) data on PwD in transition:** Data on transitions to post-secondary education is lacking due to such factors as (1) political and scholarly neglect, (2) lack of awareness and cooperation among the scientific communities carrying out disability-related research, and (3) federalism that reduces central government responsibility for providing and monitoring education (no standardized reporting). As a consequence, most 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 wholly inadequate or inappropriate, at least for monitoring educational pathways of PwD. No existing instrument we found contains appropriate questions concerning former SEN status(es) or those likely to provide data on factors responsible
for diverging trajectories of (non)disabled individuals. Further, the highly stigmatized official categories also hinder such self-reporting even when interviews are anonymous.

5. **Misleading participation measures:** When transition-related participation measures are reported, they are often misleading, for they fail to account for the dynamics, contextuality, and contingency of disability itself, nor reflect sufficiently on the social construction of the contrasting legal disability statuses, from “SEN” (which ceases at the end of ISCED 2) and “invalidity” (CHE) to “(severe) disability” (AUT, DEU). For example,

- when high quotas of persons with self-reported impairments or disabilities among higher education students are regarded as outcome measures of (special) education systems or when these participation rates of PwD in higher education are taken to allow a valid comparison with commonly measured disability rates among the general population;

- when data concerning levels of qualification and labour market participation among the adult population of persons registered as “disabled” are treated as outcome measures of educational and vocational training systems;

- when, generally speaking, only people holding a legal disability certificate are counted as “disabled” in the working age population.

6. By contrast, our **findings for the German-speaking countries**, indicate that:

- The vast majority (up to 90%) of persons registered as “disabled” among the working age population acquires a disability or invalidity status only during working age. Furthermore, the quota regulations for employers to employ PwD produce incentives to reclassify workers or to increase these individuals’ quantitatively-set “disability percentage” to avoid paying monthly penalties);

- The group of students diagnosed as having SEN is not congruent at all with the group of people of the same age group registered as “disabled” with welfare authorities (cross-walks between those groups seem nearly impossible);

- The administrative category of “SEN”—with very few exceptions—ceases to be relevant at the end of lower secondary level (ISCED 2). Some of the largest groups of the lower secondary SEN population, however, such as students diagnosed as having “learning disabilities”, “behavioural problems”, and most forms of “language impairments”, have no access to the benefits provided with full legal disability status after leaving lower secondary education programs, except in some cases in which Federal Employment offices (DEU) continue to offer specific programs for special school leavers, of limited duration;
Many persons who actually have access to a full legal disability status do not register for it, because they (1) do not realize their eligibility, or (2) do not need to register to access the resources they receive, or (3) because they believe a registration would entail more negative effects than positive ones (this seems to be especially true for persons with mental health problems or addiction).

6. **Too many relevant categories in education and social policies:** A resource-based approach to monitor careers of former SEN-students by analyzing aggregate data on resource allocation is hampered by the fact that resources for former SEN students entering vocational training systems are provided under a plethora of administrative categories, in an expanding “transition system”. In many cases, these categories are open for other groups of disadvantaged persons as well, such as youth excluded from the dual system of vocational education due to lack of apprenticeship positions in the region or due to ethnic discrimination in labour markets.

**Interregional disparities** in the rates of students receiving special resources under those schemes are even higher than those in the rates of students with SEN, pointing to the fact that not only administrative terms like “disadvantaged youth”, but also categories such as “youth with learning problems” or “youth lacking basic training-related skills” contain more information about the barrier-filled contexts youth face than about individual (dis-)abilities. Here, a catalog of barriers and opportunities, rather than individual characteristics alone, promises to provide satisfactory explanations. For example, in some regions of Eastern Germany, over 30% of all apprenticeships are subsidized, making use of the mentioned categories, whereas in regions with a thriving labour market, the respective rates are as low as 2-3%. Thus, as in many other education or social policy arenas, spatial disparities in economic activities crucially impact such classification rates.

7. **Selection bias:** Former SEN B and C students who successfully manage to enter regular vocational training schemes and perhaps, later on, further vocational training, are no longer registered under any administrative category that indicates the provision of (additional) resources. The same holds true for all SEN students who, for whatever reason, exit formal training and succeed to find work. Thus, ironically enough, both the group with the “highest” and the one with the “lowest” degree of participation in the domains in question simply disappear from any resource-based data collections.

This short summary of some data limitations we face in the German-speaking countries underscores the importance of future data collections to identify how education and social welfare institutions (1) define relevant problems and needs and (2) which resources they provide to solve or meet those. On the one hand, the lack of data on such a significant and complex stage of the life course is startling, such that nearly any serious effort would likely provide some useful information. On the other hand, the briefly sketched problems above indicate that researchers must be exceedingly careful in constructing their instruments and interpreting their results on this treacherous terrain. Furthermore, the signal importance of vocational education and training in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland requires considerable attention if cross-national comparisons on the basis of ISCED are to bear fruit.