Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1177/0958928717728712

Education as social policy: An introduction — Source link

Valentina Di Stasio, Heike Solga

Institutions: University of Oxford, Free University of Berlin

Published on: 11 Oct 2017 - Journal of European Social Policy (London: Sage)

Topics: Education policy, Social science education, Social policy, Social change and Social stratification

Di Stasio, Valentina; Solga, Heike

Article — Published Version

Education as social policy: An introduction

Journal of European Social Policy

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Di Stasio, Valentina; Solga, Heike (2017) : Education as social policy: An introduction, Journal of European Social Policy, ISSN 1461-7269, Sage, London, Vol. 27, Iss. 4, pp. 313-319,
https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928717728712

This Version is available at:
http://hdl.handle.net/10419/182563

Journal Of European Social Policy

Journal of European Social Policy
2017, Vol. 27(4) 313–319

DOI: 10.1177/0958928717728712
journals.sagepub.com/home/esp
SAGE

Education as social policy: An introduction

Valentina Di Stasio
University of Oxford, UK

Heike Solga
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

Abstract
This Special Issue considers education as a social policy in its own right, from a life-course perspective and in relation to other policy areas. It recognizes the complexity of education systems and their multi-stage architecture. The volume broadens our understanding of the role of 'education as social policy' by addressing four different aspects: the importance of education providers, education as a means of social stratification, education as an interconnected regime component and public opinion on education as an important foundation of welfare state policies and a prerequisite for their sustainability in the long run. From a theoretical perspective, all authors critically engage with the social investment state approach that sees in education and training investment the lynchpin of a pre-distribution agenda protecting individuals from the new social risks of a competitive, knowledge-driven economy. The examples provided in this Special Issue expose the multifaceted role of education as social policy, drawing attention to both its formative and stratifying function across a number of European welfare states.

Keywords
Education, life course, public opinion, social investment state, social policy

Current examples of education as social policy include the expansion of early education to improve female labour force participation as well as children's competence development, the implementation of the European Union (EU) apprenticeship initiative to combat youth unemployment, or the support for lifelong learning as an investment strategy to enhance employability over the work lifespan, sometimes accompanied with the intention to postpone transition into retirement to older ages. Education systems and education policy, however, have been largely neglected in the social policy literature (Busemeyer and Nikolai, 2010).

For a long time, the topic of education has drawn the attention of both sociologists (Hallinan, 2006; Mayer and Solga, 2008) and political scientists (Busemeyer, 2015; Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012). Sociologists (e.g. those affiliated with the research committee RC28 of the International Sociological Association or with the European Consortium for Sociological Research) have

Corresponding author:
Valentina Di Stasio, Nuffield College, University of Oxford, 1 New Road, OX1 1NF, Oxford, UK.
Email: valentina.distasio@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

extensively studied individual transitions through education systems (Hillmert and Jacob, 2010; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993), social inequality in educational attainment in terms of educational degrees or competences (Breen et al., 2010; Breen and Jonsson, 2005; Jackson, 2013; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs, 2010), school-to-work transitions (Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Brzinsky-Fay and Solga, 2016; Levels et al., 2014; Müller and Gangl, 2003; Shavit and Müller, 1998) and labour market returns to education, such as employment opportunities, career mobility and earnings (Allmendinger, 1989; Bills, 2004; Bol and van de Werfhorst, 2011; Hout, 2012; Kerckhoff et al., 2001; Park and Shavit, 2016; Triventi, 2013). This body of work is largely comparative and emphasizes how educational institutions shape individual educational decisions and attainments, and thus returns to education. However, these studies 'have not conceived of education as an integral part of the welfare state' (West and Nikolai, 2013: 474; for a similar observation, see also Busemeyer and Jensen, 2012).

Political scientists, for their part, have studied the evolution of educational institutions (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012; Thelen, 2004), compared education politics and policies at the macro level (Busemeyer, 2015; Busemeyer and Iversen, 2014; Estevez-Abe et al., 2001) and analysed trends in public and private spending on education (Boix, 1997; Castles, 1989; Wolf and Zohlnhöfer, 2009). The relationship between individual preferences for education policies at the micro level and the broader institutional context has also been investigated (e.g. Busemeyer and Jensen, 2012). This literature has been largely influenced by the Varieties of Capitalism paradigm (Hall and Soskice, 2011) and centred on the role of firms in the skill formation process. Thus, in political science too, studies on education have been, at best, tangential to scholarly debates concerning the welfare state, with a few notable exceptions (like Iversen and Soskice, 2001).

Over the past years, both disciplines have shown a growing interest in the interaction between education and social policy or welfare state regimes (e.g. Allmendinger and Leibfried, 2003; Allmendinger and Nikolai, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Busemeyer, 2015; Busemeyer and Nikolai, 2010; Crouch et al., 1999; Mosher, 2015; Solga, 2014; West and Nikolai, 2013). This development is important and long overdue. Existing studies in this area have tried to map the performance of countries in terms of education spending, with the aim to test whether countries can be clustered according to a typology of education regimes that resemble what we know from the welfare state literature (Busemeyer and Nikolai, 2010; West and Nikolai, 2013; Willemse and De Beer, 2012). Most of this research is either inspired by or critically reacts to the 'social investment' paradigm in welfare state policy (European Commission, 2013; Giddens, 2000: 73; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1997). Proponents of this approach assume that *actively* investing in individuals' education from early childhood – as a means of combating unemployment, boosting employment and reducing poverty – at least partly, substitutes for *passive* social transfers.

As this volume will demonstrate, the social investment perspective is too narrow to grasp the wide range of issues that should be considered when education is viewed from a social policy lens. Even more nuanced analyses emphasizing the complementarity (rather than substitutability) between social investment and more traditional social protection arrangements (Bonoli, 2013; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Hemerijck, 2013, 2015; Morel et al., 2012) do not spell out clearly how the enhancement of human capital should be achieved or how the expected private and social returns to education are going to be generated. Often, research tends to refer to educational attainment or spending in rather general terms, without distinguishing between (pre)primary, general, vocational and adult education and training (see, for example, Nikolai, 2012). This is unfortunate as it neglects important interdependencies between the different educational sectors, for instance, with regard to the distribution of educational opportunities across social groups, the cumulative process of competence development over the life course and the different mix of public and private resources and actors involved. Concerning the role of the institutional context, hypotheses are typically formulated for the population at large and often tested with aggregate data. It therefore remains largely unclear how the national context affects the

different constituencies that are exposed to specific institutional arrangements and policy investment.

To fill these gaps, this Special Issue considers education through a social policy lens, from a life-course perspective and in relation to other policy areas. With this goal in mind, the volume responds to the call for 'future research in social policy [that] needs to clarify the relationships between educational investment, educational institutions, and the distribution of life chances in different welfare state and education regimes' (Busemeyer and Nikolai, 2010: 508, addition by the authors). Taking up this challenge, we propose a research agenda that integrates the study of education in the social policy literature and recognizes the complexity of education systems and their multi-stage architecture.

It can be argued that the social investment state perspective includes three alternative approaches to conceptualize 'education as social policy'. One approach is to consider country differences in education systems and policies as the results of social investment strategies – in other words, education policies are the dependent variable of the analysis. Another approach stresses how social problems, usually dealt with by welfare policies (such as unemployment, low incomes and future pensions), are addressed or prevented by education policies. Here, education is the independent variable and protects people from social risks. A third approach suggests that education policies themselves may generate social problems that are to be solved by 'traditional' welfare state policies. This would occur if, for instance, a child-centred investment strategy is achieved through precarious or low-paid employment relationships in the delivery of educational services due to insufficient government support (e.g. Adamson and Brennan, 2014). Also from this standpoint, education policies constitute the independent variable. However, in this case, education does not protect, but rather expose, people to social risks.

The papers of this Special Issue provide examples for each of these three perspectives. Moreover, they take into account different sectors of the education system – from pre-primary education (Gambaro), secondary and higher education (Borgna) to vocational education and training (VET; Brzinsky-Fay; Di Stasio; Protsch and Solga) – and even examine the sectors in relation to one another (Busemeyer and Garritzmann). These different sectors not only characterize the process of skill formation during consecutive stages over the life course but are also interdependent, in terms of stratification of educational opportunities (Borgna), diversion of students from one sector to the other (Di Stasio) and allocation of resources, requiring a potential shifting of public spending from more 'traditional' welfare state policies (Busemeyer and Garritzmann).

This volume broadens our understanding of the role of 'education as social policy' by addressing four different issues, the first two relating to the actors involved in the delivery of education (providers and beneficiaries of education) and the other two relating to the context of human capital investments (the structure of education systems and their financing and sustainability).

The role of education providers

The different sectors of national education systems not only provide education but also constitute important labour market segments. Connected with the social policy shift towards the social investment state, these sectors employ a growing and large number of workers in advanced societies. The paper by Gambaro in this volume demonstrates that the expansion of the early childcare sector is associated with two challenges: improving the quality of early education for children and ensuring good working conditions for early childcare workers. Both dimensions are directly connected to our proposal of considering education as social policy: the former with the promise to reduce later life-course risks (education policies as problem solvers) and the latter with the social risks faced by workers employed in the education sector, such as low earnings and limited opportunities for training, further career development and future pensions (education policies as problem generators). Moreover, the paper by Protsch and Solga emphasizes that in VET – unlike in the school sector and partly also the higher education sector – employers are pivotal actors when it comes to the provision and quality of education and training. Thus, education policies (as problem solvers)

geared towards combating unemployment are dependent, for their success, on employer behaviour and a country's quantity and quality of skill formation options. For these reasons, studies limited to education spending – the main focus of much of the social policy literature – overlook the fact that education providers are an important constitutive element for the role of education as social policy.

Education beneficiaries and the stratification of educational opportunities

Educational attainment is both a cumulative skill formation process that unfolds over the life course and a means of status attainment and intergenerational reproduction. The papers in this volume critically engage with the view that investment in individuals' education leads automatically to a reduction in social risks, for example, by supplying individuals with the basic skills that are perceived as necessary to compete in the 'knowledge-based society' (see, for example, Murnane and Levy, 1996). According to the social investment state perspective, education is a problem solver – namely, an individual risk management strategy, on the one hand, and a societal protection against social risks, such as unemployment, poverty, illness and social exclusion (e.g. Green et al., 2008), on the other. Yet, the life-course process of competence development and skill formation, as well as the distribution of education and training opportunities, are stratified by socioeconomic background. This stratification is an important source of inequality. Even though education is considered *the* legitimate means of social reproduction and status attainment (Ansell 2008; Brown et al., 2011; Solga, 2015), it is not in and of itself an 'equalizer'. In contrast, education might rather stabilize social inequalities across the life course and across generations to the extent that it benefits those already better off – as the papers by Borgna and, in terms of public opinions, Di Stasio reveal. The two papers, however, also demonstrate that institutional configurations matter in this respect, confirming the relevance of analyses that focus on micro–macro relationships.

Education as an interconnected regime component

Education systems and policies are the result of different, country-specific strategies to protect people from social risks (see the first perspective, above) and may have spill-over effects on other social policy areas. Welfare state research has focused primarily on family policy (de-familiarization) and employment policy (de-commodification), whereas the social investment perspective has stressed the link between education and employment policies. Interdependencies between education and other areas of social policy, such as family, migration, health, and pension policy, have so far been overlooked. Papers in this volume exemplify the broader implications that result from the design of education policies and reveal the interconnectedness between education systems and, respectively, childcare and family policies (Gambaro) and labour market institutions (Gambaro, Brzinsky-Fay). This interconnectedness reflects the regime character of welfare states and the trade-offs involved when allocating public resources to various areas of social spending (Busemeyer and Garritzmann).

Public opinion on education policies as a prerequisite for the political sustainability of welfare states

Education policies have to be financed through general taxation. As such, taxpayers as voters need to recognize the benefits of the different sectors of the education system and be willing to support their financing and/or expansion. This is especially important in times of welfare state retrenchment, when different policy areas compete with each other for the limited resources available. Although comparative welfare state research has greatly enhanced our understanding of individual preferences towards redistribution and public spending (e.g. Arts and Gelissen, 2002; Gingrich and Ansell, 2012; Iversen and Soskice, 2001; Leibfried and Mau, 2007; Svallfors, 2012), education has been largely neglected by this literature. To fill this gap, the last two contributions investigate public perceptions of

the education system (Di Stasio) and public support for public spending in the different education sectors, also in comparison with 'traditional' social policy areas such as old age pensions and unemployment benefits (Busemeyer and Garritzmann). The complementary papers by Brzinsky-Fay and Di Stasio are interesting in this respect as the former studies whether VET systems are indeed successful in combating youth unemployment, while the latter analyses whether this safety net function of VET is also recognized by voters; both papers point to the importance of the institutional context.

The papers in this Special Issue apply different methodological approaches, ranging from fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Borgna, Brzinsky-Fay) to (multilevel) regression analysis (Busemeyer and Garritzmann, Di Stasio, Gambaro, Protsch and Solga). Two contributions are based on original data collections: a factorial survey experiment conducted in Germany (Protsch and Solga) and a harmonized survey administered in eight European countries (Busemeyer and Garritzmann). Moreover, the Special Issue includes single-country analyses (Gambaro; Protsch and Solga) as well as comparative cross-national analyses (all others).

The volume builds on, and extends, several lines of research that have been discussed in the *Journal of Social European Policy*, such as the interconnectedness between education systems and social policy (e.g. Allmendinger and Leibfried, 2003), the relevance of education policies for comparative welfare state analysis (e.g. Willemse and De Beer, 2012) and the analysis of public opinion towards education policies at the micro level (e.g. Busemeyer et al., 2011). We hope to contribute to this literature and to stimulate further research on education as social policy.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Traute Meyer (editor of *Journal of European Social Policy* (JESP)), the JESP editorial board members and numerous external reviewers for providing very constructive comments to improve the Special Issue.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The preparation of the Special Issue was supported by the "College for Interdisciplinary Educational Research. A Joint Initiative of the BMBF, the Jacobs Foundation and the Leibniz Association" (CIDER: www.ciderweb.org). CIDER has been the breeding ground for the collaboration of the authors who contributed to this Special Issue.

References

Adamson, E. and Brennan, D. (2014) 'Social Investment or Private Profit? Diverging Notions of "Investment" in Early Childhood Education and Care', *International Journal of Early Childhood* 46(1): 47–61.

Allmendinger, J. (1989) 'Educational Systems and Labor Market Outcomes', *European Sociological Review* 5(3): 231–50.

Allmendinger, J. and Leibfried, S. (2003) 'Education and the Welfare State', *Journal of European Social Policy* 13(1): 63–81.

Allmendinger, J. and Nikolai, R. (2010) 'Bildungs- und Sozialpolitik', *Soziale Welt* 6: 105–19.

Ansell, B. (2008) 'University Challenges: Expanding Institutional Change in Higher Education', *World Politics* 60: 189–230.

Arts, W. and Gelissen, J. (2002) 'Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism or More?', *Journal of European Social Policy* 12(2): 137–58.

Bills, D. (2004) *The Sociology of Education and Work*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Boix, C. (1997) 'Political Parties and the Supply Side of the Economy', *American Journal of Political Science* 41(3): 814–45.

Bol, T. and van de Werfhorst, H.G. (2011) 'Signals and Closure by Degrees: The Education Effect across 15 European Countries', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 29: 119–32.

Bonoli, G. (2013) *The Origins of Active Social Policy: Labour Market and Childcare Policies in a Comparative Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Breen, R. and Jonsson, J.O. (2005) 'Inequality of Opportunity in Comparative Perspective', *Annual Review of Sociology* 31: 223–43.

Breen, R., Luijkx, R., Müller, W. and Pollak, R. (2010) 'Long Term Trends in Educational Inequality in Europe', *European Sociological Review* 26(1): 31–48.

Brown, P., Lauder, H. and Ashton, D. (2011) *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brzinsky-Fay, C. (2007) 'Lost in Transition? Labour Market Entry Sequences of School Leavers in

Europe', *European Sociological Review* 23(4): 409–22.

Brzinsky-Fay, C. and Solga, H. (2016) 'Compressed, Postponed, or Disadvantaged? School-to-work-transition Patterns and Early Occupational Attainment in West Germany', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 46: 21–36.

Busemeyer, M.R. (2015) *Skills and Inequality: Partisan Politics and the Political Economy of Education Reforms in Western Welfare States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Busemeyer, M.R. and Iversen, T. (eds) (2014) 'The Political Economy of Skills and Inequality', *Socio-Economic Review* 12(2): 241–462.

Busemeyer, M.R. and Jensen, C. (2012) 'The Impact of Economic Coordination and Educational Institutions on Individual-level Preferences for Academic and Vocational Education', *Socio-Economic Review* 10: 525–47.

Busemeyer, M.R. and Nikolai, R. (2010) 'Education', in F.G. Castles, S. Leibfried, J. Lewis, H. Obinger and C. Pierson (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, pp. 494–508. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Busemeyer, M.R. and Trampusch, C. (2012) *The Political Economy of Collective Skill Formation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Busemeyer, M.R., Cattaneo, M.A. and Wolter, S.C. (2011) 'Individual Policy Preferences for Vocational versus Academic Education', *Journal of European Social Policy* 21(3): 253–73.

Castles, F.G. (1989) 'Explaining Public Education Expenditure in OECD Nations', *European Journal of Political Research* 17: 431–48.

Crouch, C., Finegold, D. and Sako, M. (1999) *Are Skills the Answer?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Esping-Andersen, G., Gallie, D., Hemerijck, A. and Myles, J. (2002) *Why We Need a New Welfare State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Estevez-Abe, M., Iversen, T. and Soskice, D. (2001) 'Social Protection and the Formation of Skills', in P.A. Hall and D. Soskice (eds) *Varieties of Capitalism*, pp. 145–83. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

European Commission (2013) 'Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion: Including Implementing the European Social Fund 2014–2020', COM(2013)83 final, 20 February, Brussels.

Giddens, A. (2000) *The Third Way and Its Critics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gingrich, J. and Ansell, B. (2012) 'Preferences in Context: Micro Preferences, Macro Contexts, and the Demand for Social Policy', *Comparative Political Studies* 45(12): 1624–54.

Green, A., Preston, J. and Janmaat, J.G. (2008) 'Education, Equality and Social Cohesion', Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hall, P.A. and Soskice, D. (eds) (2011) *Varieties of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hallinan, M.T. (ed.) (2006) *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*. New York: Springer Science+Business Media.

Hemerijck, A. (2013) *Changing Welfare States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hemerijck, A. (2015) 'The Quiet Paradigm Revolution of Social Investment', *Social Politics* 22: 242–56.

Hillmert, S. and Jacob, M. (2010) 'Selections and Social Selectivity on the Academic Track', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28: 59–76.

Hout, M. (2012) 'Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States', *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 379–400.

Iversen, T. and Soskice, M. (2001) 'An Asset Theory of Social Policy Preferences', *American Political Science Review* 95(4): 875–94.

Jackson, M. (ed.) (2013) *Determined to Succeed? Performance versus Choice in Educational Attainment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kerckhoff, A.C., Raudenbush, S.W. and Glennie, E. (2001) 'Education, Cognitive Skill, and Labor Force Outcomes', *Sociology of Education* 74(1): 1–24.

Leibfried, S. and Mau, S. (2007) *Welfare States: Construction, Deconstruction, Reconstruction*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Levels, M., van der Velden, R. and Di Stasio, V. (2014) 'From School to Fitting Work', *Acta Sociologica* 57(4): 341–61.

Mayer, K.U. and Solga, H. (eds) (2008) *Skill Formation: Interdisciplinary and Cross-national Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Morel, N., Palier, B. and Palme, J. (eds) (2012) *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges*. Chicago, IL: Policy Press.

Mosher, J.S. (2015) 'Education State, Welfare Capitalism Regimes, and Politics', *Comparative European Politics* 13(2): 240–62.

Müller, W. and Gangl, M. (eds) (2003) *Transitions from Education to Work in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Murnane, R. and Levy, F. (1996) *Teaching the New Basic Skills*. New York: Free Press.

Nikolai, R. (2012) 'Towards Social Investment? Patterns of Public Policy in the OECD World', in N. Morel, B. Palier and J. Palme (eds) *Towards a Social Investment Welfare State? Ideas, Policies and Challenges*, pp. 91–116. Chicago, IL: Policy Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1997) *Societal Cohesion and the Globalising Economy*. Paris: OECD.

Park, H. and Shavit, Y. (eds) (2016) 'Education as a Positional Good', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 43: 1–70.

Shavit, Y. and Blossfeld, H.P. (eds) (1993) *Persistent Inequality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shavit, Y. and Müller, W. (eds) (1998) *From School to Work: A Comparative Study of Educational Qualifications and Occupational Destinations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Solga, H. (2014) 'Education, Economic Inequality, and the Promises of the Social Investment State', *Socio-Economic Review* 12(2): 269–97.

Solga, H. (2015) 'The Social Investment State and the Myth of Meritocracy', in A. Gallas, H. Herr, F. Hoffer and C. Scherrer (eds) *Combating Inequality The Global North and South*, pp. 199–211. London: Routledge.

Svallfors, S. (ed.) (2012) *Contested Welfare States: Welfare Attitudes in Europe and beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Thelen, K. (2004) *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Triventi, M. (2013) 'The Role of Higher Education Stratification in the Reproduction of Social Inequality in the Labor Market', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 32: 45–63.

Van De Werfhorst, H.G. and Mijs, J.J.B. (2010) 'Achievement Inequality and the Institutional Structure of Educational Systems', *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 407–28.

West, A. and Nikolai, R. (2013) 'Welfare Regimes and Education Regimes', *Journal of Social Policy* 42(3): 469–93.

Willemse, N. and De Beer, P. (2012) 'Three Worlds of Educational Welfare States?', *Journal of European Social Policy* 22(2): 105–17.

Wolf, F. and Zohlnhöfer, R. (2009) 'Investing in Human Capital? The Determinants of Private Education Expenditure in 26 OECD Countries', *Journal of European Social Policy* 19(3): 230–44.