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## Repositioning Policy Making: The Clash Between Policy Makers and the Field<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores new types of disadvantage which are produced by global scale dynamics, and adopts the phenomenology approach to propose a new kind of metrics. The paper builds its theoretical argument on the latest sociological approaches of disadvantage understanding it as effective functioning and positioning in spatiotemporal terms within a space of appearance. The paper translates the above working hypothesis into a methodological protocol using visual methodologies and elicitation interviews, and conducts a mixed methods qualitative research taking 222 vocational education students, aged 14-19 years old, from Italy, France and Greece as a case study. The results reveal a new type of disadvantage that moves beyond the concept of educational inequality and brings into scene the notion of dispossession as a form of clustering relational disadvantage preventing students' effective functioning across the educational, social and political sphere. The paper concludes with addressing the gap between policy discourse and the field and stresses the need for policy directives to match their context.

### Keywords

vocational education; dispossession; time; space; imagination

### 1 Introduction

*Homo sapiens, homo sociologicus, homo oeconomicus, homo strategicus* are only some of the homo-profiles used to map the direction of society in a given period of time. Within the last two decades a triple turn is taking place, in the way that anticipated versions of society and individuals are profiled in the economic and policy making discourse. First of all, there is an unprecedented strong coupling between education, economy and social exclusion as low skills are explicitly associated with unemployability and accordingly with social exclusion. The OECD (2012, p.10) in the document *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives* underlined that “people with poor skills face a much greater risk of experiencing economic disadvantage, and a higher likelihood of unemployment and dependency on social benefits”, whereas the EU has, in the *New Skills Agenda* (2016), but also in almost every EU education policy document since 2001, equally clearly stated that “low skills are associated with higher risk of unemployment,

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poverty and social exclusion”. Secondly, on the individual level, character qualities and resilience come progressively to complete previous profiles that focused predominantly on cognitive competences and work related skills (World Bank, 2015, p. 1, p. 15; World Bank, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 3). Finally, there is a growing interest for a new kind of metrics and a new paradigm of thinking. In the Beyond GDP approach (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009; Wesselink, Bakkes, Best, Hintergerger, & ten Brink, 2007) the EU has acknowledged the need to make differentiate between growth and development, to move to a different direction and to look for better metrics that could produce different outcomes. Given the fluidity of the context Cedefop (2018a) resumed under the profile of homo adaptus both the fluidity of the current context and the need for high-skilled and resilient people able to adapt to the ongoing changes of the context.

This paper argues that all of the above approaches are actually one-dimensional as they only incorporate what profiles the individuals have to develop in order to avoid social exclusion and to contribute to the building of sustainable, secure and well-functioning globalised societies. But in this process they don't explore the ways the individuals position themselves and are developing in these global scale dynamics. This one-dimensional focus becomes apparent in the New Skills Agenda of Europe (2016) which highlights that policies need to a) improve the quality and relevance of skills formation; b) make skills and qualifications more visible and comparable; and c) improve skills intelligence and information for better career choices. Moreover, the Riga Presidency conclusions (2015) also express this top-down approach, underlining the need for a learning outcomes approach with the aim to a) promote work-based learning in all its forms; b) further develop quality assurance mechanisms in VET in line with the EQAVET recommendation and [...] to establish continuous information and feedback loops in I-VET and C-VET systems based on learning outcomes; c) to enhance access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems, notably by offering efficient and integrated guidance services and making available validation of non-formal and informal learning; d) to further strengthen key competences in VET curricula and provide more effective opportunities to acquire or develop those skills through I-VET and C-VET and e) introduce systematic approaches to, and opportunities for, initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors in both school and work-based settings (Council of the European Union, 2015).

This paper takes a different stance and argues that any policy discourse on skills, competencies and learning outcomes is doomed to fail unless the perceived realities and ways of positioning oneself in the world of the people in question are taken into consideration. In order to theoretically back up this argument, the paper draws on sociological approaches of disadvantage and capability (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1995; Wolf & de Shalit, 2007, 2013), on Arendt's (1958, p. 199) notion of the “space of appearance” and on Butler's theorization of performativity and dispossession (2015). In order to methodologically back up this argument, the paper proposes the coupling of visual methodologies and elicitation interviews as an early warning system able to capture emergent and invisible lines of demarcation that go unattended by the existing analytical categories focusing on skills and learning outcomes. In order to prove the above working hypothesis, the paper presents a mixed methods research on 222 vocational education students in Italy, France and Greece. The research results revealed the existence of a new type of disadvantage that transcends the educational, social and political sphere and has the same phenomenology in all three population groups.

In the first part, the paper presents the main pillars of the theoretical positioning, in the second part, it presents the methodological approach and a summary of the main research findings, and in the third part, the paper underlines the social and political significance of the results. Finally, the paper concludes by focusing on the clash between policy making and evidence from the field and the need for a different type of metrics.

## 2 Changes in the Nature of Disadvantage

This paper argues that the mainstream academic positions on educational disadvantage and inequality cannot fully capture how global scale dynamics impact students' educational pathways, since in the majority of cases, the relevant literature is focusing on students' micro-scale characteristics. More specifically, the mainstream has diachronically focused on two dimensions: the notion of relation from a micro-scale perspective, developed from either a psychological (Bruner, 2008; Wallon, 1997) or under a sociological approach (Charlot, 1999; Dubet, 1997; Durkheim, 1963), and the notion of the context, also considered at a micro-scale. Students' characteristics such as school engagement (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008), self-regulation (Shunk & Zimmermann, 1997), self-beliefs (Bandura, 1997), expectations (Morgan, 2005), ethnic minority background and socio-economic disadvantage (Bouhia, Garrouste, Lebrere, de Saint Pol, & Ricroch, 2011), peer-influence (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998), as well as school characteristics such as ethnic and socioeconomic composition (Van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010), teachers' expectations (Brophy, 1983), type of school and duration of compulsory education (Wenger, 2002), are repeatedly among the strongest determinants of educational disadvantage and low performance.

Given the up-scaling and the complexification of the globalised environment, this paper underlines the limitations of previous theorizations of educational inclusion and argues that the global scale dynamics are so powerful that they alter the previous conditions of disadvantage and create new forms of disadvantage that transcend the educational sphere. Based on this positioning, the paper chooses three theoretical pillars. First, it argues that disadvantage should not only be viewed from the perspective of skills and learning outcomes, but given the latest approaches of resilience and character qualities, should be conceptualized under the more dynamic and dialectic perspective of *functioning* as proposed by Wolf & de Shalit (2007, 2013). Second, it argues that the change of scale on the social, economic and political level calls to revisit Arendt's (1958, p. 199) notion of "the space of appearance" and to explore how students "make their appearance explicitly". Third, it draws on the invisible lines of demarcation drawn by global dynamics and argues that since "the act of demarcation operates both a discursive and a performative act" (Butler, 2015, p. 6), educational research should aim to locate and make visible the lines of demarcation that affect students' appearance in the educational, social and political setting.

## 3 Research Methodology

Our sample consists of 222 vocational education students in Italy, France and Greece. For the choice of our sample, we took into consideration two parameters related to the choice of countries and the choice of students. First, France, Italy and Greece were chosen because for the last ten years all three countries had to face, to a different degree and extent, a form of economic, security and migration crisis. Besides the differences related to the socio-economic and cultural profile of the country, France, Italy and Greece also show different profiles in educational terms and more specifically: a) in terms of public expenditure for education as a proportion of GDP (Eurostat, 2019a), b) in terms of student-teacher ratio and number of students per class (OECD, 2018a, p. 350-355), and c) in terms of modernization of vocational education and training (Education and Training Monitor, 2018, pp. 98, 131, 164). However, if we explore the attainment of ESL (Early School Leaving) rates (Education and Training Monitor, 2018, pp. 102, 125, 158) and the PISA results (OECD, 2018b, p. 5), we notice important similarities across them but not in a way that would allow us to establish common trends.

Second, in order to explore our working hypothesis, we made two further choices regarding the choice of students for our sample in terms of age and educational structure. In terms of

educational structure, we chose to have vocational education students, since the vocational education has due to its nature more direct links with all three spheres of education, economy and society affected by globalization. According to the Cedefop Report (2018b, p. 15) “VET is more differentiated and complex than other education sectors. It is interlinked, and needs to interact, within a pedagogical framework, with industry, employment and social policy”. In terms of age, we chose the age group of 14-15 years old, because this age is a critical stage given that it marks in all three educational systems both the transition from the lower to upper secondary education and the most common risk of dropping out of school. This choice provided us with a sample of 222 students that had two common socio-demographic characteristics: low-educated parents, working either both in low-paid jobs or with one of them getting recently unemployed.

For the design of the research methodology we adopted the phenomenology approach and a mixed methods qualitative research using a) visual methodologies (reflexive cartographies) (Caravero, 2000; Casti, 2015) and b) semi-structured elicitation interviews to explore, to understand and to capture the meanings emerging in visual productions given that the meanings of visual productions, may vary from the one viewer to the other. Our aim was to create a metric that goes “beyond the standardization of statistics and language” (Banks, 2007, p. 119) and that “is theoretically consistent, politically relevant and empirically measurable, able to ensure compatibility between countries and regions” (European Parliament, 2011).

The variables of the reflexive cartographies were coded and elicitation interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed with the MAXQDA 18 software. Our research results revealed a highly common discourse around the students of the three countries revealing a clash between students discourse and policy makers which was resumed under a triple phenomenology of absence of speech – expressed either through the visual discourse or through the elicitation interviews. More specifically, research results showed highly similar percentages across the three countries of students expressing inability a) to dream, b) to position oneself in space, and c) to position oneself in time.

#### **4 A Phenomenology of Absence**

If we consider the importance of imagination (Castoriadis, 1997; Jung, 1997; Rawls, 1971), space (Augé, 1995; Bachelard, 1994; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977) and time (Rosa, 2013; Weick, 1979; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) as the sustaining conditions for the construction of identity, we must realize that this triple phenomenological absence actually represents the absence of the conditions of possibility as “none of us acts without the conditions to act” (Butler, 2015, p. 16). The absence of the above sustaining conditions creates a new form of invisible vulnerability which can be qualified as dispossession. More specifically Butler and Athanasiadou (2013, p. 4) arguing on the concept of dispossession underlined that “we are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment”. If we read Butler’s positioning in relation to our findings, we see that the students’ discourse reveals in fact a dispossession of the ability to build a relationship with space, time and the Self, and therefore a dispossession of the ability to build a meaningful relation with the world.

These results are important for three main reasons. First, this type of dispossession is alarming on the social level, because it represents an invisible form of exclusion in regards to socio-demographic characteristics since students’ educational structure, and parents’ education and working status are the only common elements in our sample. Although our research sample is limited because of the qualitative nature of the research, research findings are in line with larger statistical data showing that socioeconomic origins are still important. According to the Education and Training Monitor (2017, p. 10) “in PISA 2015, the difference in the shares of low achievers in PISA between pupils from the bottom and top 25 % segment of the PISA index

of socio-economic and cultural status (ESCS) is striking”. Moreover, in the same report, it is recognized that “not only inequality remains a challenge for Europe but it also is intergenerational and that school do not play its role in the fight against inequality” (ibid, p. 21). Furthermore, the above takes a different significance if we consider the size of population coming from vulnerable socioeconomic environments. “In 2017, an estimated 24.9 % of children in the EU-28 were AROPE (At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate) compared with 23.0 % of adults (18–64) and 18.2 % of the elderly (65 or over)” (Eurostat, 2019b), whereas in the Joint Employment Report, it is underlined that although “the share of people at-risk-of poverty or social exclusion decreased markedly in 2017 [...] the risk of poverty or social exclusion remains a challenge for groups, such as children” (EC, 2019, p. 8).

Second, these results are important because of their political implications. The visible manifestation of the above mentioned phenomenology of absence comes to remind that “the visible is a representation of a certain absence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 132), and in our case is the absence of a space of appearance. Arendt (1958, p. 242) argued that in a political space of appearance “each individual in his unique distinctness appears and confirms himself in speech and action” (1958, p. 241). The absence of this space of appearance, meaning the absence of speech and of the correlated action in students’ discourse is fundamental if we consider that “without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt” (ibid, p. 242).

Third, these results are important because they bring into scene the question of social justice. The absence from the world expressed as absence of time, space and dream, reminds on the one hand Ryan’s (2012) argument that “for a world to be possible, it must be linked to the actual world by a relation of accessibility” and on the other hand, that students are “also produced by the conditions of possibility of their appearance” (Butler, 2015, p. 19). This double relation of accessibility and appearance is related to Wolf and de Shalit’s (2007, p. 72) conception of disadvantage as functioning and on their statement that “one central way of being disadvantaged is when one’s functionings are or become insecure involuntarily, or when, in order to secure certain functionings, one is forced to make other functionings insecure, in a way that other people do not have to do”. In other words, the problem of social justice in our findings is related to the fact that different (either perceived or real) conditions of possibility and appearance are related to different functionings and these seem to be population specific.

Finally, the above results reveal the clash between policy discourse and evidence from the field as on the one hand they reveal a different kind of disadvantage that is not addressed by discourses focusing in skills and learning outcomes and on the other hand they reveal a phenomenology of absence which needs different compensatory measures, and calls for different metrics reminding that “we are almost blind when the metrics on which action is based are ill-designed” (Siglitz et al., 2009, p. 9). This clash could explain the long lasting difficulty of the EU to tackle educational inequality and underperformance. The EU benchmarks concerning the reduction of early school leavers and of low educational attainment were not attained by all Member-States during the ET 2010 program and are repeated in the Horizon 2020 agenda. Still, according to the latest results, in 2017, an average of 10.6 % of young people (aged 18-24), in the EU-28, were early leavers from education and training, and 13 Member States had not met the relevant benchmark. Furthermore, according to the latest PISA 2015 results, not only the EU as a whole is seriously lagging behind in all three domains of basic literacies and has taken a step backward, but also results have deteriorated in relation to PISA 2012. The turning point in the policy making therefore in regards to the need for better metrics is that on the one hand, “many exclusions are made without the knowledge that they are being made” (Butler, 2015, p. 4) and on the other hand, the process of policy convergence itself is

undermined, if we do not possess the analytical categories and the respective metrics to render visible the invisible lines of demarcation across different population groups.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has argued that we need a new set of transversal categories to complete the existing ones in order to capture the way global dynamics affect students' perceived conditions of possibility, accessibility and functioning. Research results revealed a new form of disadvantage resumed under the concept of dispossession of the ability to dream and to position oneself in space and time in highly similar percentages and phenomenology across the three population groups of our sample. The paper has concluded that the clash between policy discourses and evidence from the field should be further explored as it undermines the effectiveness of education policies and ignores emergent forms of exclusion.

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### Biographical notes

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