Session 2, Track 5 | Paper Session: (Global) Education Policies

Time: Friday, 25th Sept. 2026
2:00pm - 4:00pm

Chair: Ece Cihan Ertem, University of Vienna

A Multidimensional and Processual Framework for Understanding Access to Secondary Education: Evidence from Bogotá (Colombia)

Carlos Bueno Martinez, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Following the universalisation of primary education, many lower-middle and middle-income countries are prioritising access to lower secondary education as part of the global commitment to achieve universal secondary completion under SDG4 by 2030, recognising it as a key pathway to social participation and educational opportunities. While significant improvements have been achieved, progress remains insufficient to meet this target, and its expansion has not consistently been accompanied by improved equitable opportunities. In education, a key challenge towards universalisation has been the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the spatial and non-spatial dimensions and processes that shape access patterns. As such, policies towards expanding access have not always addressed the interrelated barriers that prevent students from fully benefiting at this level of education.

To address this, the paper turns to conceptual and methodological developments around the notion of access to services. Originated within the healthcare scholarship, but progressively expanding to other domains, this body of work challenges the understanding of access as a static property, conceptualising it instead as the "degree of fit" between users and systems. Building on this, subsequent research has advanced two key insights. First, that access is a multidimensional phenomenon in which various dimensions (i.e., availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability, and acceptability) interact to produce distinct access patterns. Second, that access is processual, shaped by how these dimensions influence individuals' ability to perceive, seek, reach, and utilise a service. Despite advances in these disciplines, the field of education has yet to fully incorporate these novel conceptualisations of access into research and policy.

As such, this paper addresses this gap by developing a comprehensive theoretical framework that 'unpacks' the notion of access to education as a multidimensional, processual and relational concept. Drawing on literature from diverse disciplines, and integrating it with the Capabilities Approach, it conceptualises access as students' potential opportunities to achieve valued educational access outcomes. Specifically, it distinguishes how different resources (6As dimensions of access), conversion factors (e.g., individual characteristics), and capabilities (processes of value formation, navigation, and participation) interact to shape access patterns (functionings). Furthermore, this paper provides an empirical application of this framework by examining in a middle-income context (Bogotá, Colombia) how different geographical dimensions of access (availability, accessibility and acceptability) are socio-spatially structured in the city. Finally, from an equity lens, it analyses how these socio-spatial configurations translate into differentiated educational opportunities, offering insights for more integrated educational planning practices in the city to enhance access to lower secondary education.

What Works to Improve Access and Completion in Primary and Secondary Education? Evidence from a Global Meta-analysis

Linjie Zhang, University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

Despite global progress in school enrolment, access to and completion of primary and secondary education remain uneven, particularly for children facing overlapping economic, structural, political, and cultural barriers. This presentation reports the meta-analysis component of a global mixed-methods systematic review on policies and interventions designed to improve educational access and completion. Drawing on a broader review of 426 studies published between 2000 and 2025, the meta-analysis included 21 studies that provided sufficient quantitative information to estimate the effects of policies or interventions on dichotomous access or completion outcomes. Effect sizes were converted into odds ratios and analysed using random-effects models due to substantial between-study heterogeneity.

The overall pooled effect was not statistically significant, indicating that education policies and interventions do not produce uniform effects across contexts. This finding highlights the strong context-dependence of policy impact. Subgroup analyses show that interventions addressing structural barriers—such as inadequate school provision, distance, infrastructure, or institutional arrangements—were more likely to generate positive effects. By contrast, no significant overall difference was found between compensatory and transformative approaches, suggesting that both can be effective when aligned with local barriers, implementation capacity, and target populations. The analysis also found gendered differences in measured effects, with boys appearing more likely to benefit from some interventions than girls.

The findings caution against universal claims about "what works" in education access and completion. Instead, they suggest that effective policy design requires careful diagnosis of the specific barriers children face and attention to how interventions interact with local institutional, social, and economic conditions. The presentation concludes by discussing the methodological limits of the evidence base, including the small number of studies suitable for meta-analysis and the need for more comparable impact evaluations on completion, equity, and long-term outcomes.

Challenges for improving educational equity – the complex and contradictory Austrian case

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Abstract

The topic of challenges and strategies for Austria concerning improvement/hindrances with access and equity in education is addressed. Austria as an example of open small-state corporatism in the EU might be a case for learning in both directions, inward from the international debates, and maybe also outward for other countries. Austria is extraordinary ambivalent and contradictory case of educational inequality with a combination of welfare universalism and deep political conflict about education. The education structure includes a unique mixture of elements with opposing effects for inequality, some apparently increasing inequality (i.e. early-tracking school structure), and others more indirectly alleviating inequality (i.e. dualistic early vocational education including strong dual apprenticeship and open pathways to higher education). Governance and politics show similar

contradictory tendencies that include much good intentions; however, in effect lead to stagnation and a high degree of heredity of educational goods and status. Austria is not the only country showing such contradictory patterns, as the quite new approach of redistributive political economy (Ben Ansell) has shown; that framework is applied here for the analysis of the Austrian case.

Main political elements highlighted are:

- first, a constitutional imperative for the provision of equity in education combined with a lack of enforcement mechanisms for this imperative (in combination leading to paradoxical effects in policy);
- second, a complex fiscal-federalist governance structure of educational financing with mixed financial flows being not transparent for involved stakeholders and lacking comprehensive control (high average per-capita expenditure coexists with lack of resources in certain areas, without effective redistributive mechanisms);
- third, the systems of educational expenditure and (universalist) social and family expenditure are politically separate, and thus make the mechanisms and effects of financing for alleviating inequality invisible and obscure, and thus politically contested (i.e., children's rights are particularly affected);
- fourth, with respect to international debates around the consideration of adult education in SDG4 policies (Katarina Popovic), Austria shows very special political experience by its monumental lifelong learning strategy from 2011, which has paradoxically left out adult education – so the positive view that lifelong learning must consider the overall learning span was combined with a neglect of adult education development.

The presentation will show how these (and some other) institutional and political elements work together to hinder effective policies towards educational equity and reflect on practices and strategies potentially leading to improvement. A main point is that (desirable) universalist welfare financing might impede specific policies effective against inequality.