

Editorial

Hans-Peter Blossfeld · Hans-Günther Roßbach · Jutta von Maurice

Like other modern industrialized societies, Germany has evolved into a knowledge-based economy in which the role of education and educational institutions has become a key factor in all phases of the life course. More than ever before, education has become a lifelong process in which individuals continue to learn in formal, nonformal, and informal environments throughout their lives. As a result, their educational careers and competencies and how they unfold in relation to family, educational institutions, workplaces, and private life are a topic of major national interest. Whereas understanding what is happening over the life course requires longitudinal data, most empirical evidence in German educational research is still cross-sectional and therefore only a snapshot of different individuals at a particular point in their educational careers. Successive snapshots in a series of cross-sectional surveys certainly highlight the changes in the structure as a whole. Yet, they do not show the changing (and sometimes) unchanging experiences of individuals as their educational careers progress. Panel data, with the properties of many individuals measured on several occasions spread over time, can be used to describe these patterns of change over the life course. They are especially able to trace the magnitude and regularity of change across groups defined by different characteristics or by exposure to different individual life-course experiences.

Thus, there is a huge demand for high-quality longitudinal educational research in Germany. In particular, there is a clear need to work on improving the analytical and methodological tools that are needed to understand educational pathways through the life course and how they lead to different outcomes. The National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) for Germany is designed to meet these challenges. It is collecting longitudinal

© VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2011

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. H.-P. Blossfeld (✉)
Chair of Sociology I, University of Bamberg, 96045 Bamberg, Germany
e-mail: soziologie1@uni-bamberg.de

Prof. Dr. H.-G. Roßbach
Chair for Early Education, University of Bamberg, 96045 Bamberg, Germany
e-mail: hans-guenther.rossbach@uni-bamberg.de

Dr. J. von Maurice
National Educational Panel Study, University of Bamberg, 96045 Bamberg, Germany
e-mail: jutta.von-maurice@uni-bamberg.de

data on educational processes and individual competence development across the entire life span from early childhood to late adulthood.

The NEPS dataset is the result of a close collaboration of researchers and research institutions in a network of excellence spanning the whole of Germany. Members of this consortium come from major research institutions and are experts in various disciplines (psychology, educational science, sociology, economics, demography, migration studies, statistics, survey methods, etc.). They are collaborating in order to pool the expertise, experience, and efforts needed to deliver the best longitudinal data on education in Germany. The NEPS is hosted by the Institut für bildungswissenschaftliche Längsschnittforschung (Institute for Longitudinal Educational Research, INBIL) at the University of Bamberg. This center in Bamberg is coordinating the development of the research instruments, monitoring the process of data collection, and taking responsibility for disseminating the NEPS data to the scientific community. The principal investigator of the NEPS project is Professor Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans-Peter Blossfeld, University of Bamberg.

The preparation of the NEPS proposal was a very time-consuming process extending over several years. In 2007 and 2008, this proposal was then evaluated scientifically by two panels of leading international experts in the field of education organized by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation, DFG). Thanks to the extremely favorable recommendations of these international proposal reviewers, the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, BMBF) decided to finance the NEPS with an exceptionally large grant.

The key theoretical dimensions of the NEPS are based on the observation that individual's educational trajectories over the life course are the result of a dynamic interdependence of educational decision making, educational processes within different educationally relevant learning environments, and competence development. The central assumptions are that (1) decisions (by parents, students, adults, teachers, etc.) determine whether and to what extent individuals participate in educationally relevant social and institutional contexts; (2) educational processes in specific social and institutional contexts have a strong impact on competence development; and (3) competence development, in turn, influences the processes of educational decision making in each successive step of the life course. Focusing on these three key theoretical dimensions and their time-dependent interaction mechanisms, which generate change and development in education over the life course, establishes a powerful foundation for explanations and evidence-based research in the educational sciences. In addition, it is well-known that the educational outcomes of migrants' children differ substantially from those of their peers from native families. These differences are likely to persist across the whole life course and follow very specific theoretical mechanisms. Therefore, alongside these three main theoretical dimensions, a fourth theoretical dimension of the NEPS is concerned with the specifics of the educational career of migrants and their descendants. It is focusing on the two largest groups of migrants in Germany: Turks and ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union (Spätaussiedler). Finally, a fifth important theoretical dimension of the NEPS concerns returns to education. The NEPS is focusing on not only economic but also noneconomic returns to educational qualifications such as income, job opportunities, job careers, health, reduced crime, increased political participation, family formation, fertility behavior, and homogamy. Alongside these objective returns, it is also assessing individuals' subjective

well-being. The five theoretical dimensions are labeled “pillars” because they will help to integrate the multicohort sequence design of the NEPS in terms of content, theory, and methods. These pillars are described in Chaps. 5 to 9. An additional Chap. 10 describes the role of motivation as a regulative concept across the life course.

When starting a panel study, its methodological design is a major issue. In order to deliver relevant information on major educational stages and the transitions between these stages as quickly as possible, NEPS is implementing a multicohort sequence design based on the crucial educational stages in the life course: Stage 1: From Birth to Early Child Care; Stage 2: From Kindergarten to Elementary School; Stage 3: From Elementary School to Lower Secondary School; Stage 4: From Lower to Upper Secondary School; Stage 5: From Upper Secondary School to Higher Education, Vocational Training, or the Labor Market; Stage 6: From Vocational Training to the Labor Market; Stage 7: From Higher Education to the Labor Market; Stage 8: Adult Education and Lifelong Learning. Panel sweeps of the cohorts included in the NEPS will be conducted at least once a year. The surveys include competence tests and interviews with target persons and—at least for the younger cohorts—also interviews with parents and educators. These educational stages and their consequences for the NEPS are discussed in detail in Chaps. 12 to 18.

The multicohort sequence design is following up six starting cohorts over time. The first is the “adult” cohort in which fieldwork already started in 2009. Four further cohorts (Kindergarten, 5th-grade students, 9th-grade students, college students) started in fall 2010. Fieldwork on the sixth “infant” cohort, which will trace early child development and early entry into child care facilities (nursery, Kindergarten, etc.), will start in 2012. This later start is due to the time needed to prepare the specific instruments for this cohort (video studies, etc.).

The specific methodological problems of the NEPS are addressed by a group of methodologists and statisticians. Sampling issues and methodological challenges are described in Chap. 4. Because different instruments have to be linked across several stages, there is a special need for mode effects studies. These are described in Chap. 11.

The aim of the NEPS project is to deliver the best data on educational trajectories and competence development to the scientific community, and to do this as quickly as possible. Before dissemination, the NEPS data will therefore be documented in a user-friendly way and subjected to strict quality controls. In addition, the project has to make sure that datasets comply with Germany’s strict personal data privacy requirements. Data from each wave will be available within 18 months of the completion of fieldwork. They will be released through the NEPS Data Archive at the University of Bamberg in three modes: (1) through Scientific Use Files that can be downloaded from the NEPS website, (2) through modern remote access technology (RemoteNEPS), and (3) through on-site access at the University of Bamberg. There is a NEPS help desk for data users. The NEPS Data Archive at the University of Bamberg provides additional support for users of longitudinal data. In particular, it is running regular training courses on how to use the NEPS database and conduct longitudinal analyses with NEPS data. Data protection issues and the remote access procedure for the NEPS are described in Chaps. 19 and 20.

This Special Edition of the *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* on the NEPS begins with a more general description of the NEPS, the role of education as a lifelong process, and a short overview of comparable national and international studies in Chaps. 1 to 3.

In the name of the whole NEPS consortium we would like to take this opportunity to thank the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung for its marvelous support in developing the NEPS and for making such an exceptional investment in the infrastructure of the social sciences. We are also grateful for the strong support of the Kultusministerkonferenz (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Federal States in Germany, KMK) and the 16 Bundesländer (federal states) in gaining access to schools and institutes of higher education. We thank the members of the Scientific Board and the Administration Board of the NEPS for their expert and constructive support. We also wish to express our great appreciation to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft for organizing the proposal review processes in a way that ensured the highest academic standards and the international experts and proposal reviewers for their evaluation and advice. Finally, we thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft once again for establishing a new Priority Programme entitled “Education as a Lifelong Process.”