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*Studia paedagogica*. 2017, vol. 22, iss. 2, pp. [135]-152

ISSN 1803-7437 (print); ISSN 2336-4521 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/SP2017-2-8>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/136524>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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# SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN EDUCATIONAL CAREERS: A TYPOLOGY

SABINE GERHARTZ-REITER

## **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to address a gap in research on educational careers: the missing consistent explanations for reasons behind educational failure or success. The project focuses on two types of educational careers: formally unsuccessful (early school leaving) and very successful ones (educational upward mobility). Biographically oriented narrative interviews were conducted with Austrian representatives of these two groups. On the basis of theoretical models explaining social inequality and findings regarding common risk factors, the research project emphasizes the interplay and actual relevance of factors influencing individual students. The main finding of the qualitative study is the reconstruction of patterns of orientation in formal educational careers. The typology presented can account not only for the contrasting degrees of success in the educational careers examined but also for the varying relevance of common factors of influence.*

## **Keywords**

*educational careers, inequity in the educational system, early school leaving, qualitative research*

## Introduction

Inequity in the education system which leads to differing chances for success and failure in educational careers is a key issue in Europe. One of its consequences in particular—early school leaving (ESL)—is a key problem for many contemporary European educational systems. In addition to its great impact on individuals and their social environments, it has major economic and social consequences for the EU, as ESL leads to increased risk of health problems, higher unemployment rates, a higher chance of obtaining low-paid and insecure jobs, reduced political interest, and social exclusion (European Commission, 2015). Therefore, members of the EU have committed to reducing ESL rates to less than 10% by 2020. Austria has already achieved this aim on average (approximately 7%), but for high risk groups the numbers are still far too high (e.g., up to 17.7% for young men with a Turkish migration background) (Statistik Austria, 2014). Moreover, attention needs to be drawn to another indicator of educational inequity: intergenerational social mobility in Austria is so rare that the national education report speaks of the “inheritance” of educational status (cf. Steiner, Pessl, & Bruneforth, 2016).

### Attempts at explaining educational success and failure

Inequity in a country’s education system leads to unequal distribution of success and failure in educational careers among different groups of students. Within the current research project, (extraordinarily) successful careers are defined as careers in which students reach a higher educational level than their parents. Unsuccessful careers, in contrast, are defined as those in which students do not obtain the formal minimum standard of education due to leaving school early. In accordance with the EU’s definition (European Commission, 2015, p. 6), early school leavers are defined as young people who drop out of the formal education system before reaching International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)<sup>1</sup> level 3c, which in Austria means not finishing upper secondary education or vocational training.

Equity in the education system is a common goal which is far from being achieved. Opportunities, especially chances for successful educational careers, vary due to many different factors. There are factors within the education

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<sup>1</sup> ISCED = International Standard Classification of Education

system related to the education system as a whole (e.g., point of first educational choice), the type of school (e.g., composition effects), the individual school (e.g., additional support), teachers (e.g., recommendations for a student's further school career), and instruction (e.g., pace, intelligibility). Other factors relate to the social environment beyond the school (e.g., role models), the region (e.g., available schools), and the individual (e.g., cognitive abilities) (for a detailed analysis, see Gerhartz-Reiter, 2017).

Such factors play a significant role in the educational careers of young people and lead to very different chances in life. One of the most prominent examples is a factor related to the social environment beyond school – the student's socioeconomic background (OECD, 2013, 2014; Statistik Austria, 2014). Generally speaking, the chances of educational success are higher for students whose parents are well educated and have high-status jobs. The likelihood of an unsuccessful educational career is especially high for students from less educated and poor backgrounds.

There is a great deal of information on individual risk factors, but not enough on how these factors interrelate and why they seem to be relevant for some and not relevant for other educational careers. Despite some popular explanatory models (e.g., the theory of social reproduction of Bourdieu and Passeron, 1971; the rational choice theory of Boudon, 1974; and the theory of status culture participation of DiMaggio, 1982) and many results from quantitative research concerning factors potentially influencing educational careers, there are many open questions: Why do some educational careers succeed while others do not? Why do so many students—including children of well-educated parents—leave school early? Why (and how) do some students achieve educational upward movement despite having to face many hindering factors?

For this reason, the question of which factors and patterns of influence lead to ESL and which to educational upward mobility needs to be addressed. In this context, the interplay of factors within the education system (e.g., on the level of the system, school, teacher) and those outside the education system (e.g., on the level of the individual, family relationships) deserves special attention.

### **Research design**

This qualitative study deals with the question of how differing success in the education system can be explained. Focus is placed on two special types of educational careers—educational upward movement and ESL—in order to find out more about supporting and hindering factors, the interplay of factors from different areas (e.g., the education system, individual schools, teachers,

parents, the student), and potential patterns of influence which lead to extraordinarily successful or unsuccessful educational careers. The main question addressed in this paper is why educational careers develop in a certain way and what the crucial aspect is that determines their course.

The research design of this study, which formed the basis of the author's dissertation, takes a qualitative approach. The topic was developed via narration by interviewees in order to consider "the perspectives of the subjects concerned, the subjective and social constructions ... of their world" (Flick et al., 2007, p. 17). As the focus was on participants' educational biographies, biographically oriented narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) were conducted. In order to allow interview partners to talk about their individual experiences from their own perspectives and thereby focus on the subtopics relevant to them, the interviews did not begin with detailed questions but with very broad ones in the form of three different stimuli. The first was:

*I am interested in your Bildungsgeschichte in the broadest sense. What has been important to you in your life so far? What has influenced you as a person? How has your life developed? Can you just tell me everything that comes to your mind (spontaneously)? The order doesn't matter, just start anywhere.*

Depending on how the interviewee responded, up to two additional stimuli were used. In order to ensure that at least some information on certain subtopics was given by the participants, in order to enable a better comparison of the interviews, a list of topics (including aspirations, achievements, support, free time activities) was used flexibly as the basis for spontaneously formulated questions. This list was used only if these topics had not been dealt with in the initial narrations.

Interviews were conducted with 22 young adults in the province of Tyrol, Austria, in 2014 (theoretical sampling; cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and 10 of these interviews were finally analyzed in detail (theoretical saturation; cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Interview partners were 18–25 years old in order to have similar ages for the two research groups. As educational upward movement is usually not achieved before the age of 18, no younger interview partners were chosen. This approach matches well with the data collection method—narrative interviews—as young adults have a higher level of narrative competence (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2008, p. 96). The age limit of 25 was set to ensure adequate memory of school attendance without having this memory distorted or overlapped by later experiences.

Participants were representatives of the two groups focused on in this study: early school leavers and educational upward movers. The criteria for inclusion in the study were having attended school in Western Austria and—for the group of early school leavers—having dropped out of school before

reaching ISCED level 3c (which in Austria means prior to finishing upper secondary education or vocational training). In order to be included in the group of educational upward movers, a person had to have reached higher educational status than their parents. Both groups were diverse in themselves, with group members from a variety of different social and cultural backgrounds, having attended different types of schools, and from different regions (from the city, smaller towns, or small mountain villages). Interviewees from the group of educational upward movers were mainly found at university, but also via professional and private networks. The latter also proved very helpful in finding participants from the group of early school leavers, and programs for reintegrating early school leavers into the education system were helpful for getting into contact with this target group.

The interviews were analyzed and interpreted in detail by applying Bohnsack's documentary method (2003), which focuses on (collective) frameworks of orientation, on the habitus of interviewees. The method aims to reconstruct experiences and the genesis of frameworks of orientation. It helps to explicate implicit patterns of meaning, tacit knowledge which is documented in interviewees' depictions and which forms the basis of everyday practice and helps to give "an orientation to habitualized actions independent of individual intentions and motives" (Bohnsack et al., 2010, p. 20). Moreover, with its focus on comparative analysis and collective orientations, the method helps determine more about individual and collective ways of dealing with factors of influence as well as structural aspects determining the course of educational careers.

The documentary method starts with a reconstruction of the thematic structure of each interview and continues with a detailed formulating interpretation, a step in which the utterances of participants are reformulated into the researcher's language. Next, reflecting interpretation involves the reconstruction of interviewees' orientations which lead their actions. During this stage, comparison within each interview and between different interviews plays an important role. Data analysis and interpretation with the documentary method result in the development of a multidimensional typology, in this case a typology which explains success and failure in educational careers.

### **(Ir)relevant factors of influence on educational careers**

Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of social reproduction (1971) helps in understanding the structural aspects of educational inequity in Austria's education system, as the inheritance of cultural, social, and economic capital supports students from more privileged backgrounds in their educational

careers, whereas students whose parents have low socioeconomic status usually inherit said status. In addition, Boudon's rational choice theory (1974) supports understanding the tendency of children from families with less cultural capital to have less successful educational careers than children from high-status backgrounds. The latter usually get better grades (primary effect) and a cost–risk–benefit evaluation leads lower-status families to choose shorter, mainly vocationally oriented educational careers, which rarely lead to higher education (secondary effect). However, both of these theoretical approaches can explain only certain aspects of the educational careers examined in this study. Especially concerning unexpectedly very successful careers, many questions remain, e.g. why some students with little or no cultural, social, and economic capital have managed to become university students. And why, in contrast, students from wealthy backgrounds who received a great deal of support from their families dropped out of school early.

This study also found some expected and some unexpected results concerning other common factors of influence. On the one hand, the educational careers examined in this research project differed in some aspects due to the type of formal educational success. People with very successful educational careers tended to have non-formal education, whereas early school leavers tended to the contrary. Additionally, attitudes toward learning (Becker, 2010) as well as student–teacher relationships (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Werner, 2007) were mainly positive for the first group, but mainly negative or difficult for the second group. Furthermore, the peer group at school (Solga & Dombrowski, 2012) was rather unimportant for very successful students but important for those who left school early.

Other results, however, seem to contradict previous findings about educational careers. In the study at hand, several factors which have often been described as important and influential for successful careers did not show any clear differences between the two study groups. For example, some interviewees experienced social exclusion from their peer group at school – a factor which is said to have a negative effect on educational careers and increase the probability of ESL (e.g., European Commission, 2015; Nairz-Wirth et al., 2010). In the study at hand, however, social exclusion was experienced also by students who were very successful in terms of formal education. Therefore, this factor can obviously not be described as one which necessarily has influence, but only as one which might have a negative influence on educational careers. The same is true for the quality of the relationship between teachers and parents (Ditton, 2010; Solga & Dombrowski, 2012), the existence of moderate performance problems (Werner, 2007), family relationships, and juvenile delinquency. Therefore, the important question is not which factors are influential – obviously there are many factors which are influential in some careers while not seeming very important in others.

Rather, the illuminating information is why some factors are relevant for some people and negligible for others.

An answer to this question cannot be given by focusing on factors separately. Rather, patterns need to be identified in order to determine which factors were important for interviewees and why. Studying the structural aspects and ways of dealing with given factors as well as reconstructing the genesis of frameworks of orientation in a person’s educational career helped develop a multidimensional typology which can account for the success and failure of interviewees’ educational careers.

### Explaining success and failure in educational careers: A typology

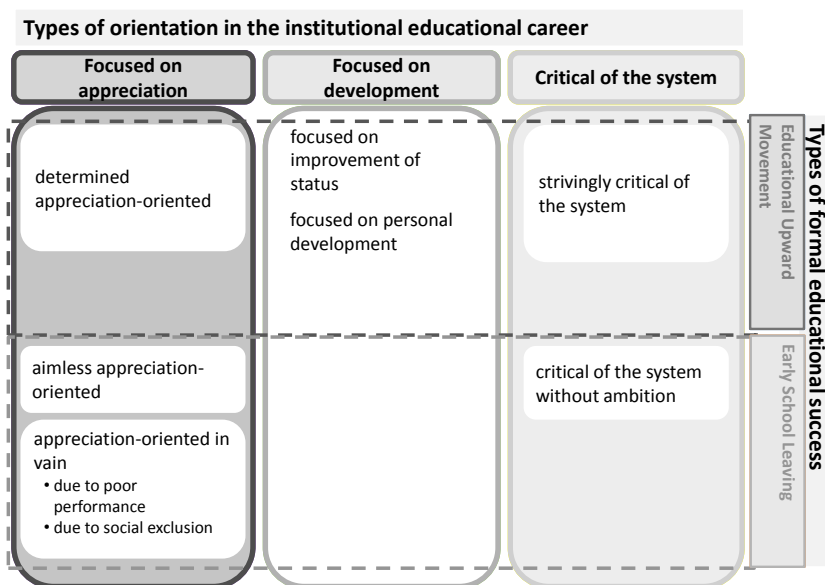


Figure 1. A typology of (un)successful educational careers

Figure 1 depicts the typology developed, which combines two types of formal educational success and three types of orientation in institutional educational careers. The types of formal educational success correspond with the two study groups: educational upward movement and ESL. The types of orientation in institutional educational careers are a condensed portrayal of the reconstructed frameworks of the orientation of the interviewees: what each person’s main aim was and what aspects guided the person’s decisions and actions in the educational field. Based on the data collected,



analyzed, and interpreted, three main types have been identified: “focused on appreciation,” “focused on development,” and “critical of the system.” Depending on whether interviewees were able to achieve their aims and act according to their ideas and expectations in the educational field, their educational career was formally successful or not. Factors of influence are important if they can support a person’s efforts to achieve their main aims or if they are strong enough to prevent the person from reaching the goals. For example, a person who is appreciation-oriented and wants appreciation from others for good grades at school—such as Lena in this study—has a high chance of leaving school early if this aim cannot be achieved due to severe performance problems. Supportive factors, such as a good student–teacher relationship, professional support, the teacher’s didactic competences, comprehensibility in lessons, and assistance with completing school tasks, can help the student achieve the main aim of appreciation. Therefore, those factors are relevant at this point and can support the educational career and prevent ESL. If they are missing, as in Lena’s case, the student sees no chance of achieving her main aim within the school field and therefore leaves school. The same factors, however, will not help a person who is critical of the system without ambition, such as Dominic in this study. As he did not aim for good performance or appreciation due to good performance but rather for freedom and living his life with as few restrictions as possible from the (education) system, factors of influence which might support his performance at school are not relevant for him.

The answer to the question of what is crucial for the course of a person’s educational career depends very much on their orientation. Individual factors of influence are subordinate in this case – their (ir)relevance is based on the person’s basic orientation. In the following section, these findings will be illustrated by a description of the three types of orientation focusing on school-related issues.

#### *Type A: Focused on appreciation*

Representatives of the type focused on appreciation strive for appreciation – their main aim. Depending on how determined or goal-oriented they are as well as how far they are from obtaining appreciation, they either are successful in the education system or leave it early.

The subtype “determined appreciation oriented” generally strives for appreciation (“*This was also something that encouraged me in lower secondary school ... because I also wanted to get appreciation from my family*” I7, L. 91–93) and acts accordingly. They develop a logic of appreciation. They think about how they can get appreciation from the people they want to be appreciated by – due to previous experience or assumptions. On this basis, they try to attain this means in order to use it to be worthy of appreciation. The focus is always

on becoming worthy of appreciation and the means needed for it. Anything not helpful to achieving the main aim is positioned lower in the list of priorities. One main feature of this subtype is that such people see themselves as capable of high-performance, and accordingly as generally able to achieve their aims. For representatives of this subtype, a formal educational career is a possibility to achieve the appreciation they long for. With very good performance at school, students can get very good grades and school reports – and these serve as official evidence of worthiness of appreciation. If school players can be used to achieve aims in this way, relationships with them are positive; if they cannot, they are rather unimportant (“*That’s why I’ve worked hard and studied a lot, and somehow class community wasn’t the most important thing as I simply wanted to get good grades*” I7, L. 143–145). Finally, such people try to get the appreciation they now have proven worthy of (by getting good grades) from the people or institutions they want it from (“*I mean, now [my mother] is proud of me and she boasts about me in front of guests or others that I am a university student. ... She boasts about it, so I think she’s proud*” I7, L. 199–201). Here, educational upward movement is not the actual aim but rather a side effect of striving for appreciation.

The subtype “aimless appreciation-oriented” generally strives for appreciation but not in a systematic way. They do not plan how to get appreciation and also do not use familiar ways to achieve it. This is partly due to the fact that they are sure they deserve appreciation and do not think they have to earn it. This leads to another central feature of this subtype: apart from a vague longing for appreciation they do not have a specific aim that they are working on achieving. Accordingly, in the context of formal education they have little motivation to accept effort or hard times (“*As far as I see it, I mean, I don’t put pressure on myself. ... If I can do it I do it, and if I can’t I stop*” I19, L. 569–570). Representatives of this subtype are led by short-term moods, situational desires which change every now and then and therefore do not lead along a clear line. They do not see the education system as positive or negative – it simply has marginal importance. Therefore, they tend to cancel educational paths they have taken when these would demand a stronger commitment due to threatening failure. Generally speaking, representatives of this subtype know that they could get appreciation for good school reports, for example. However, as they themselves do not really care about good grades and they think they are worthy of appreciation regardless, they rarely make an effort (“*I never had a good school report. I don’t know why. I mean, I studied every now and then a little bit [laughs], but I never had a good school report*” I19, L. 68–70; “*I simply was too lazy to do anything*” I19, L. 581–582). Their relationships with teachers are similar. They have a positive view of teachers who act appreciatively, but they do not make extra effort in order to achieve this. This is also due to the fact that although teachers are seen as powerful players such people

basically do not really care about teachers. The peer group at school is mainly important in terms of representing a pleasant pastime at school and a juvenile practice of appreciation.

The subtype “appreciation-oriented in vain” also strives for appreciation. In contrast to the other two subtypes, however, they do not experience self-efficacy due to insufficient capability to attain the means for appreciation. There are different reasons for the unsuccessful efforts for appreciation: weakness in performance and social exclusion. Representatives of the group for whom the first reason holds true try to obtain appreciation by fulfilling academic requirements. Despite great effort, however, they often fail due to learning and performance difficulties. This again strengthens their self-concept of being weak in performance (“*And I always thought, of course I’ll never make it*” I20, L. 5–6). The latter group try to get appreciation in terms of the identity they are striving for (e.g., being a cool and popular teenager). However, this is not successful, for such reasons as experiencing social exclusion. Bullying by fellow students leads to humiliation which is closely associated with educational institutions due to the school setting. Attitudes toward the peer group at school are accordingly negative (“*A class which is built on blackguarding others [...] pretty bad guys in there*” I10, L. 204–206;). The same is true for teachers, which is also due to lacking appreciation from these school players (“*Non-sporty students were belittled, while sporty ones were praised*” I21, 33:27; “*Appreciation was only given if someone got a perfect score on a test*” I21, 37:36;). Those students who are appreciation-oriented in vain due to poor performance also have negative relationships with teachers. This is mainly based on their excessive demands and missing support (“*If somebody always demands something of you and by tomorrow you have to study this and that – then you start to dislike him*” I20, L. 213–215). The mainly negative relationships with fellow students are due to social experiences connected with their own poor performance (e.g., bullying or boastful, arrogant behavior from schoolmates; “*I didn’t dare ask questions because the others were so boastful, somehow ... I didn’t have friends there, you know, and then ... I didn’t feel comfortable at school, which was really bad*” I20, L. 401–404). For students with both reasons for being in the appreciation-oriented in vain subtype, educational institutions are clearly marked as negative; they are seen as places of failure or humiliation, which leads to panic and fear in situations at school (e.g., test anxiety) or to avoidance behavior, which leads to ESL.

#### *Type B: Focused on development*

The second type of orientation in institutional educational careers is focused on development. Students with this orientation adjust their actions toward the aim of their own development. Standing still, lacking progress in developing, and everything that hinders progress are seen as negative and

need to be avoided. The perception of systems, people, and tasks depends on whether these fulfill a function for the student's goal attainment or are somehow relevant for it. Players in the educational field and other aspects of the institutional educational career are classified accordingly. School is seen as a means to achieving development, and so it is perceived positively. The same holds true for teachers.

Representatives of this type generally have a positive opinion of their own abilities (*"I am good at learning by heart, I'm good at it ... actually, I was motivated"* I8, L. 546). They do not necessarily have distinctive professional or cognitive competences, but they think they can reach their aims based on their abilities and behaviors (*"I'm definitely good at talking. ... I'm communicative, I can talk to people very well, and I'm a good listener, you know"* I8, L. 576–577). Furthermore, they are willing to make efforts at goal attainment. According to differentiation in regard to the focus of the development striven for, there are two subtypes. Students in the subtype "focused on improvement of status" aim at social upward movement, while those in the subtype "focused on personal development" aim at development of their own abilities, knowledge, character, and life management.

Representatives of the subtype focused on the improvement of status are not interested in development in general but use it as a means to achieving higher social status and such resulting positive aspects as social appreciation and better occupational positions (*"I want to live a well-educated life, you know, not stay dumb. ... Also about my occupation, ... I want to move up, I want to do something with my life because my parents worked, worked, worked and didn't have many options"* I8, L. 154–157). Their actions are focused on moving up from their social background. This basic orientation is also reflected in their institutional educational career. Representatives of this subtype want to take advantage of opportunities to reach higher status and see chances to get closer to this aim in the educational system. The certificates the education system assigns are important for them as these influence further chances. Therefore, the system and its players are not questioned. Rather, such students try to make use of the system to reach their own goals. Their relationships with teachers are generally characterized by a great respect for the teacher's powerful position (*"and then the teacher immediately intervened"* I8, L. 383) as well as the desire to get on well with these powerful people as teachers can influence students' further careers (*"I owe him everything"* I8, L. 50). The peer group at school, on the contrary, does not play a major role as long as it is not relevant to upward movement from the original background.

The subtype focused on personal development is also generally oriented toward development, but the aim is not social or economic upward movement but development of personal skills, attitudes, etc. Students in this subtype want to keep learning in order to improve skills and knowledge and also

develop their personality by working on their character and using reflection to enhance their behavior. They try to avoid stagnancy and being occupied by activities which do not foster development. Aspects of their institutional educational careers are considered accordingly. School tasks such as studying are dealt with readily as they often go together with a linked form of professional and personal development (*“Especially subjects like pedagogy I looked forward to [studying]. ... I really benefited personally. Learning wasn’t difficult; I really liked it very much”* I14, 31:30). The educational field is seen as a potential space for development. Teachers are judged according to whether they support or stimulate professional or personal development. If they do this, they are considered important and are seen in a positive light (*“I had a great class teacher. ... We all had a good relationship with her and she was a person we trusted and a class teacher in one person, ... someone who I think had an impact on me personally”* I14, L. 59–63). Appreciation alone (if not connected with stimulation of development) does not lead to a positive perception of teachers. Fellow students are seen as part of the developmental space of school and are generally regarded positively. If the relationships are positive, the peer group at school is used as community of development in which people help each other move forward:

*We always tried to help each other. ... I was quite good at English and then I often tried to help others and I, for example, can’t sing at all ... and then she took the time after school or in breaks ... only the two of us practicing singing.* (I14, L. 86–95).

Negative experiences with peers are used for personal growth, development of behavior, and character development (*“I think I also grew with this”* experience I14, L. 20). Educational choices are made due to personal or occupational goals which do not necessarily go together with the highest possible appreciation due to high educational qualifications.

#### *Type C: Critical of the system*

The basic orientation of the type critical of the system is critical, questioning, and in part rejecting. The aims are different depending on the subtype, but they are generally directed towards freedom and independence. Everything which hinders these respects is perceived negatively. This leads to a basic orientation which can be understood as dissociation from the educational system. Representatives of this type view the standard education system rather negatively, as not suitable for them or the development of their abilities or as restricting their liberty for no purpose. Their attitudes, behavior, or character traits do not match to the standard school system (*“Teachers often thought I had a mental problem, but I simply was an active child. ... If it was time to calm down in the cozy corner, I threw pillows around and so on, and then I wasn’t allowed to go there*

*anymore*” I4, L. 271–276; “*The teacher thought I was mentally ill and during biology ... she sent me to the school psychologist*” I4, L. 288–289). Accordingly, they perceive the school’s performance evaluation system as negative, inappropriate, or arbitrary. They also have a questioning attitude toward players who are powerful in the system, despite the fact that they often do not act correctly. Despite their position of power, their actions are not accepted as given but are criticized and questioned in terms of legitimacy or correctness (“*It was hilarious, just proof that [the teacher] didn’t like me. ... I told him that ... he shouldn’t talk nonsense. He simply doesn’t like me and that’s why he didn’t give me the half a point*” which was needed for a positive test result I4, L. 353–355). The self-concept of representatives of this type is rather positive; they see themselves as sufficiently capable of performance. Their often small efforts at such school tasks as studying are justified by their not fitting the system’s modes of appreciation (especially in terms of performance evaluation) and their not striving for approval from the system.

This type can be subdivided into the subtypes “strivingly critical of the system” and “critical of the system without ambition.” The first subtype generally sees the (education) system as inappropriate for them, restrictive, and deserving of criticism in many respects. However, they understand that the education system is linked to society and the labor market and accordingly influences their chances in life – especially due to the importance of school certificates for the labor market. Although their school ambitions are rather low and their focus is on the sphere outside of school, representatives of this subtype make the necessary efforts in order to be able to leave the institutional educational career with certificates which are conducive for them and fit future plans (“*because then you have something*” I4, L. 257). The peer group at school is associated with mixed experiences. Negative aspects such as bullying and competition among students are not attributed to the kids but to the system which fails to prevent or supports these aspects. However, the peer group at school is not very important as it does not play a role in terms of goal achievement. Representatives of this subtype have a goal which they are endeavoring to achieve and for which they are willing to make effort and deal with hindering factors encountered in the school system.

Students in the subtype “critical of the system without ambition” also have a negative attitude towards the education system, whose purpose is not acknowledged and which is rather perceived in its liberty-restricting aspects (“*Already in primary school I asked myself what this whole system is for*” I21, L. 48; “*The whole system that I am forced into didn’t suit me and simply didn’t make me happy ... that I had to go there again the next day and that I have to study for school when I have just come home*” I21, L. 159–162). In contrast to the always-trying critical subtype, the system critical subtype without ambition has no superordinate goals which go beyond a basic but vague wish for freedom. They have little

ambition to achieve anything and no specific future plans or intentions. Accordingly, they see no reason to make an effort to successfully pass through the system. As they do not have ambitions for their current or future path, apart from a longing to be impeded as little as possible in their own freedom, they concentrate their actions in their educational careers on obtaining as much freedom as possible in the situation at hand. This leads to avoidance of any more effort than is seen as necessary:

*The headmistress ... said she simply does not understand why I don't study and why I don't care, but regarding my question whether it makes a big difference if I finish school with excellent grades or just pass the school leaving exam, she didn't really have an answer (I21, L. 115–122)*

Which happens even if the missing efforts lead to unsuccessful progress in the educational path taken. The consequences of the general criticism of the system are not softened by working towards specific future plans, which leads to a high chance of ESL.

### **Explanatory power of a student's basic orientation**

The main question concerning factors of influence on educational careers in the paper at hand was why some students manage to deal with the hindrances of having little cultural, social, or economic capital and are very successful despite their high chances of inheriting their parents' status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). Why do some students choose an educational career which leads to higher education despite an evaluation of the potential costs, risks, and benefits which would suggest vocational training for a person of their socioeconomic status (secondary effect) and despite bad grades due to primary effects (Boudon, 1974)? And why are some risk factors, such as experiences of performance problems and difficult relationships with fellow students, determining factors which lead to failure in some educational careers but seem to be irrelevant in others in which students pass through the education system very successfully despite a number of risk factors?

The findings of this study regarding the types of orientation in the institutional educational careers examined are able to explain why various factors of influence have different significance for different people. Depending on their basic orientation, which is closely connected to their attitudes and aims, some factors are much more important than others. If a factor is somehow related to reaching their aims, it has relevance in their educational career. For example, if the main aim is to obtain appreciation from the family and the student thinks that this aim can be achieved by getting good grades at school, the factor of teachers will only be important as a possible

means to get good grades. Bad relationships with teachers, and even open disregard or humiliating acts by some of them, will not lead to failure in their educational careers. This can, of course make the achievement of success and thereby the achievement of appreciation at home more difficult, but this will not make the student give up. The latter will only happen if the goal cannot be achieved at school at all. Another example of the varying relevance of individual factors is the influence of the peer group at school. Experiencing bullying and social exclusion is regarded a risk factor for educational careers. However, several of the interviewees experienced bullying at school but did not drop out of school early – on the contrary, their careers were very successful and they achieved educational upward movement. Again, the explanation of when this factor is relevant and when not can be found in the basic orientation of the interviewees. If the factor is somehow related to their basic orientation and the linked aims, it has an influence, while otherwise it does not. For people basically striving for an identity as popular kids, appreciation from the peer group is highly relevant. If the peer group at school excludes or bullies the given student, he or she has no chance of achieving the appreciation longed for at school and so tries to avoid this sphere, which leads to ESL. For students striving for development of their status, however, the peer group is not necessarily that important. Bad relationships with fellow students can be a nuisance for them but do not affect their goal achievement, which makes them not determinant for their own educational career. Therefore, these students endure even bullying as the school sphere still offers chances to achieve the main aim of development.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study aids in understanding the multiple-factor phenomenon of failing educational careers – a problem which is widespread in many European countries and leads to high costs in terms of social, fiscal, and health-related consequences (European Commission, 2015). On this basis, possible interventions and programs on the national level need to focus on individual support programs.

This study provides an identification and reconstruction of patterns of orientation in formal educational careers. These patterns account for the varying relevance of different factors influencing different students and serve as explanatory models for successful and less successful educational careers. The findings confirm that general solutions, initiatives, and recommendations are not particularly helpful for individual educational careers. On the contrary, interventions need to start at different points, as different aspects are relevant for different personalities. Accordingly,



measures taken to foster successful educational careers and approaches for overcoming inequities in education need to be associated with those basic types of orientation in the formal educational careers of those for whom they can be beneficial. This exploratory but not representative study reconstructed three types of orientation. For representatives of each type in this study, different factors were relevant and different combinations of factors and characteristics contributed to fostering or hindering the educational career. Accordingly, different measures would have been helpful for them.

For representatives of the type focused on appreciation, approaches supporting the appreciation of their strengths and competences would have been important. Support for individual competences in the cases at hand would have been possible by supporting the students in defining and pursuing tangible aims; specific measures for supporting professional competences; focusing on a supportive, appreciative climate in class and the school community; or an adaptation of the school's practice of appreciation, which would have enabled not only students with good grades, but also those with performance weaknesses or learning difficulties to be appreciated in the formal education context.

For representatives of the type focused on development, in the successful educational careers studied the possibilities of relationships with school players were a central issue as role models outside of school to support them in their educational careers were missing. Within the education system, they were able to find role models and reliable contact partners who enabled secure, supportive relationships, who encouraged them in their striving for development, and who offered the individual help they needed.

For representatives of the type critical of the system, a clear goal orientation is crucial for their successful formal educational careers in order to be able to pass through a system which is viewed critically and thereby obtain the best possible chances for their future. Accordingly, measures to work on individual goals for personal life planning would have been helpful. Even more important would have been learning environments designed to be suitable for the given personalities. At this point, a focus on a much more open organization which leaves more space for individual ideas and interests instead of top-down decisions regarding course content and ways of learning would be supportive. The same holds true for a focus on the balancing of power relationships which would enable cooperation between teachers and students, as has been implemented in many reform schools.

In order to assess the explanatory power of the research results presented, the limits of this study have to be considered. The main limits are the small number of interviewees in this qualitative exploratory study. In order to determine how well basic orientations can explain success or failure of

educational careers in general, a mixed-methods study with a larger number of participants would be helpful. Moreover, the interviewees in this study are from a very limited regional area: Western Austria. For conclusions on European educational careers, interviews should be conducted with young adults from different European countries.

Although the empirical study has been conducted in Austria, the basic patterns identified will certainly be found in other European countries as well, as the interview partners are European citizens who share many social and cultural characteristics with citizens from other EU member states. Moreover, the structural challenges they encounter are very similar to those in other European countries. It can be assumed that additional patterns will be found if empirical data from other European countries is included. This could be implemented in a follow-up project.

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