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Educational Stratification and Understandings of Meritocracy: A Comparative Perspective

by

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Declaration of Authorship

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

I declare that my thesis consists of 56, 865 words, excluding references and appendices.

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Abstract

This PhD thesis examines the relationship between processes of educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania. The first empirical chapter explores the different patterns of educational stratification in European countries, adding the post-socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe to the analysis of educational "regimes". Comparing 25 European countries, this study distinguishes three clusters of countries which are classified into either sponsored, tournament, or contest models of stratification. For the next two empirical chapters in the thesis, I chose to focus on Germany, which resembles a sponsored stratification system, and Romania, which fits the model of a tournament stratification system. The second empirical chapter employs a mixed methods design to look at how far people in Germany and Romania perceive their countries as education-based meritocracies. First, I evaluate the perceived fairness of educational opportunities at a population level using data from Round 9 of the European Social Survey that asks participants to rate the fairness of opportunities for themselves and other people in their countries. I then conduct semi-structured interviews with elite students from Germany and Romania to explore how they conceptualise educational privilege. While Romanian participants identify more explicit manifestations of educational privilege related to both economic and cultural capital, German participants identify more implicit ways in which privilege operates, mostly through cultural capital. In the third empirical chapter, I compare the ways in which elite students from Germany and Romania understand educational success and failure. I find that the image of the successful pupil in both countries is connected with the processes of educational selection that participants had to navigate. In Romania, where pupils have to navigate standardised exams to get into high schools, the image of the most successful pupil is the self-driven individual who can sustain her motivation. In Germany, where pupils are selected into either Gymnasiums or vocational tracks at an early age based on their academic potential, the image of the most successful pupil is the effortless achiever. Overall, this thesis unravels the associations between different logics of educational stratification, the perceived fairness of educational opportunities, and understandings of merit.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation to study meritocracy as related to educational stratification

To a larger extent than in the past, educational achievement plays an important role in defining success, failure, and social mobility, both subjectively and objectively (Baker, 2014). Success gained through educational achievement is believed to stem from a combination of talent and effort (van Noord et al., 2023). However, there is a broad literature demonstrating that socio-economic background influences educational success (e.g. Heisig et al., 2019; Pfeffer, 2008). As Markovits (2019) argues, "Meritocrats may be made rather than born, but they are not self-made" (p.342), since their educational success is influenced not only by talent and effort, but also by the resources and support of their parents and teachers.

Under conditions of unequal opportunities, attributing educational success solely to talent and effort leads to perpetuating and legitimising inequalities. Yet, high-achieving individuals gain meritocratic legitimacy through successfully navigating the requirements of their educational systems. Since educational systems vary in how they test and select individuals to be part of the elite, pupils develop different strategies and skills to attain educational success. This thesis undertakes a comparative exploration of how elite students socialised in different types of educational systems understand educational success, with the goal of unveiling meritocratic narratives that contribute to legitimising inequality.

One of the aims of this thesis is to unravel the meanings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania, two countries with distinct patterns of educational stratification, as Chapter 4 will reveal. For this purpose, I will undertake what Steiner-Khamsi (2010) referred to as a contextual comparison, which aims to understand context, rather than decontextualise a social phenomenon. In Chapter 5, I examine the extent to which individuals from Germany and Romania perceive their country as an education-based meritocracy. In Chapter 6, I look at the meanings of merit attached to educational success by elite students from Germany and Romania.

In this Introduction, I start by examining several conceptualisations of meritocracy in section 1.2. Then, in sections 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5, I present the connection between notions of meritocracy and three other key concepts: fairness of educational opportunities, educational privilege, and educational stratification. The relationship between these four concepts will be further analysed throughout the chapters of this thesis: Chapter 4 will focus on different models of educational stratification in European countries; Chapter 5 will look at the extent to which people from Germany and Romania perceive educational opportunities in their countries to be fair; Chapter 6 will explore different understandings of meritocracy – either centred on talent or effort – by comparing the way in which elite students from Germany and Romania define and explain educational success. Finally, section 1.6. of the Introduction presents the structure of the thesis.

1.2. Notions of meritocracy

The term "meritocracy" was coined by Michael Young (1958) who envisaged a dystopian world in which individuals are stratified according to their merit, which is defined as a combination of IQ and effort. He believed that in a meritocratic society individuals must accept that their social status is a direct expression of their deservingness. Although now widely accepted by individuals in countries from the Global North as a desirable model of society (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012), meritocracy is considered by some scholars a "myth" (Goldthorpe, 2003) or an "unfulfillable promise" (Mijs, 2016b) because meritocratic selection is influenced by non-meritocratic elements, such as socio-economic background.

Meritocracy refers to a social system where individuals' place in the social hierarchy is based on their talent and effort, rather than on ascriptive characteristics (Alon and Tienda, 2007). It also denotes an ideological discourse about individual responsibility, abilities, and hard work, which is accompanied by a system of beliefs (Littler, 2017). In her seminal book "Against Meritocracy", Jo Littler (2017) emphasises that the meaning of meritocracy as an ideological discourse is contextually specific (p.10).

Meritocratic beliefs incorporate perceptions about the way a society is and opinions about the way a society should be (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). In this thesis, I refer to "perceptions of meritocracy", "ideas about meritocracy", and "understandings

of meritocracy" in relation to people's beliefs about what happens in their societies, not what should ideally happen. Thus, this thesis explores the following aspects classified under the umbrella term of "meritocracy beliefs": 1. How far people believe that the society they live in is meritocratic – in relation to rewarding talent and effort; 2. What characteristics people believe are rewarded and interpreted as "merit" in their societies – a certain manifestation of talent, effort, or a combination of both. The first facet of "meritocratic beliefs" is explored in Chapter 4, while the second is explored in Chapter 5. However, when reviewing the relevant literature on meritocracy, I also refer to "meritocratic beliefs" as normative ideas about a fair distribution of rewards when this is the meaning intended by the authors of the studies presented.

Sen (2000) talks about the benefits of rewarding merit, which include incentivising individuals to do actions that produce desirable results for society. This approach attaches merit to actions and results, not to people. However, he points out that some notions of meritocracy attach merit directly to people, which means that a person labelled as "talented" is deserving of rewards regardless of whether they use those talents to perform acts with good consequences or not. This idea that rewards are "owed" by society to people deemed meritorious is what feeds the "meritocratic hubris" of the successful (Sandel, 2020, p.25). But do people who get to the top in meritocratic societies internalise their success and believe it is owed to them due to their intelligence and effort? In Chapter 6, this thesis will investigate the perceptions of high achieving students regarding their success.

In Social Policy, notions of merit and deservingness tend to have been used to look at whether those in need of support are worthy of being helped by others in their society (Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; van Oorschot, 2006). Deservingness discourses were analysed in this case to target the legitimacy of transfers to different types of welfare recipients. Recently, criteria of deservingness have started being used to assess successful individuals (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011). While poor individuals are seen as deserving if they have little to no control over their situation (Van Oorschot, 2000) successful individuals are seen as deserving if they are completely responsible for their position in the social hierarchy and have reached that point through their skills and hard work (Rowlingson & Connor, 2011). This perspective is

built around the importance of effort: individuals are deserving of support only if they cannot strive; everyone else needs to strive if they want a good standard of living. Madan (2007) argues that discourses focused on merit which legitimise striving are common in societies with high inequalities.

1.3. Meritocracy and fairness of educational opportunities

Can meritocracy exist in the absence of a commitment to equalising opportunities? In a debate with Marie Duru-Bellat and Agnès van Zanten, Phillip Brown (2010) argued that a meritocratic social system involved creating a level playing field between contestants so that educational outcomes express individual and not socio-economic differences. He claims that meritocratic societies attempt to give everyone a fair chance of success, even if those with higher social status are more likely to succeed. He contrasts a meritocratic society to what he calls an achieving society, where the goal is to win in a winner-take- all contest, no matter how one achieves success. Solga (2016) looked at the associations between fairness of educational opportunities and beliefs in meritocracy. She explained that according to the meritocratic creed, inequalities resulting from unequal efforts and abilities, given equal educational opportunities, are considered fair. However, an unfair distribution of educational opportunities would be seen as a violation of key justice principles in modern societies. According to the perspectives of Solga (2016) and Brown (2010) a society cannot be meritocratic if it does not offer fair opportunities to everyone. Thus, this thesis explores individuals' perceptions about the fairness of their own opportunities, as well as the fairness of opportunities for other people in their countries.

The literature on evaluations of fairness distinguishes between self-regarding (or egocentric) and other-regarding (sociotropic) evaluations. Self- regarding evaluations are connected to the personal situation of an individual within a society, while other-regarding evaluations capture societal conditions as a whole (Schnaudt et al., 2021). In Chapter 5, I analyse self-regarding and other-regarding evaluations about the fairness of educational opportunities in Germany and Romania. The aim is to gauge the extent to which people in Germany and Romania believe that their societies meet the conditions of education-based meritocracies, whereby individuals can be successful based on their effort and academic inclination.

Interpretations of fair opportunities are connected to understandings of merit. To someone who believes in formal equality of opportunity, defined by Rawls (1971) as "careers open to talent" (p.66), merit is simply understood as the ability to perform at a high standard, regardless of the advantages these individuals might have benefitted from. To someone that sees equality of opportunity through a Rawlsian (1971) perspective, merit consists of the skills and effort that are not derived from favourable circumstances, such as being born in a wealthy or supportive family. Luck egalitarians (such as Cohen, 1989; Dworkin, 1981) separate merit from talent entirely, as they equate merit with effort and good choices, while talent is seen as a product of luck (Arneson, 2004).

Debates about the relationship between understandings of merit and perceptions of fairness are not just important in the realm of Philosophy, but they guide what processes of educational selection individuals perceive as legitimate. For instance, people socialised in countries with different educational systems have contrasting views on whether talent should or should not be a basis for allocating prestigious positions in society (Brown et al., 2016). Educational systems promote social mobility for some individuals considered talented and hard-working, but also stratify individuals according to perceived ability. These classification are based on some shared constructions of merit, which are not value-neutral, but are embedded in societal-level beliefs about what constitutes worth in a given time and place (Rivera, 2016). As Alon and Tienda (2007) indicate, the definition of merit in an academic context has shifted fundamentally in the past century, from proficiency in Latin and Greek, to showing strength of "character", to constantly getting high grades. In her research looking at admissions into prestigious consultancy companies, Lauren Rivera (2016) showed how ideas about merit inform who is steered toward or away from positions of prestige. This thesis will look at people's understandings of merit in countries with different types of educational systems, as these accounts of success favour some categories of pupils over others (Nyström et al., 2019).

1.4. Meritocracy and educational privilege

Although it is highly likely that individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds who benefit from advantages in terms of resources and guidance will be successful in educational competitions, the transmission of privilege is not guaranteed in

meritocratic societies. Sandel (2020) claims that collectively and retrospectively, it is almost predestined that individuals from privileged backgrounds will be declared the winners of the meritocratic competition (p. 177). However, he argues that it is likely that individuals who went through a competitive struggle will remember the intense effort they put in. Even though some children are better equipped than others to negotiate their place in an education-based meritocracy, it does not mean that they are destined to succeed (Bills, 2019; Power et al., 1999). Thus, Chapter 6 of my thesis focuses on the opinions of those who have successfully navigated a series of educational selection processes. Are they aware of the advantages they had? Do they attribute their success to talent, effort, or structural factors, such as their socio-economic background? Do they see meritocratic achievement and structural inequalities as contradictory?

Based on a study of pupils' transitions from primary to secondary education in the UK, Lucey and Reay (2002) report that the discourse of meritocracy protects the status of some of the middle classes, but also creates an ultra-competitive climate that excludes those who are not self-denying and disciplined enough. Interviewing pupils and conducting ethnographic research in schools to explore the damage that meritocratic discourses inflict on young people, Reay (2020) argues that the current competitive culture has a negative impact even on those deemed successful. She claims that even high-achieving pupils come to believe that doing well at school is not enough and see being "the best" (p. 410) as imperative. Markovits (2019) also points out that meritocracy is a trap for everyone, even for the most successful, who are constantly evaluated and ranked. In a similar vein, Sandel (2020) refers to the individuals who get accepted to elite universities are "triumphant but wounded" (p.180) by the relentless pressure to perform and succeed. He explains that affluent parents can offer their children substantive advantages in the competition for entry to prestigious educational institutions, but usually at the cost of transforming their school years into a high-stress series of tutoring for exam preparation, and a schedule full of extra-curricular and volunteering activities.

How do the privileged make sense of their advantages? There are studies suggesting that privileged individuals are oblivious of their privilege and do not recognise their advantages (Friedman et al., 2021; McIntosh, 2003). However, conducting an

ethnography at a prestigious private school in the US, Swalwell (2013) mapped students' responses aimed at reconciling the acknowledgement of their privilege with their concern about social inequalities. She discovered that some students aimed to be responsible with their privilege by being honest and not cutting corners, while others, realising that inequality is entrenched and difficult to address, opted towards a conscious inaction that would reduce the manifestation of their privilege.

But how can the acknowledgement of privilege be made compatible with young people's desires to secure the best educational opportunities for themselves? In Chapter 5 of this thesis, perceptions of privilege are captured by looking at the differences between self-regarding and other-regarding evaluations about the fairness of educational opportunities. Then, this research looks at the way in which elite students conceptualise educational privilege and the obstacles in the way of fairly rewarding talent and effort in their countries.

1.5. Meritocracy and educational stratification

The notion of meritocracy is intertwined with that of educational attainment, which is widely perceived as a proxy for merit and the main legitimate determinant of social attainment (Hadjar and Becker, 2016). To understand the perspectives of the successful, one would benefit from understanding the type of selection processes they went through. Practices of educational stratification vary considerably between educational systems in different countries. That is why in Chapter 4 of this thesis I will analyse the patterns of educational stratification that structure educational pathways in different European countries.

Some countries place emphasis on early separation as a tool for creating homogenous groups from an early stage. Other educational systems are more comprehensive or integrated, although they have more subtle ways of dealing with heterogeneity of ability. Dumas et al. (2013) argue that Scandinavian countries offer individualised one-to-one training for pupils who need extra help keeping up with requirements; the countries in Southern Europe mostly manage educational failure through grade repetition; countries in the Anglo-Saxon world often practice unofficial selection based on ability (setting) within schools; and countries from Continental Europe tend to have a clear delineation between different types of school. Green et al (2006) link

these forms of educational grouping to common historical and cultural legacies in different countries.

Some systems of educational selection emphasise talent, while others place more value on effort as the determining factor for success. Hopper (1968) claims that educational systems vary with respect to the ideologies that legitimate educational selection: in systems with more centralized selection practices, it is seen as necessary to identify the most appropriate people for academic pathways, based on their academic potential; in systems less standardised, selection is seen more along the lines of "survival of the fittest" in a competition, where motivation to succeed is likely to play a big role in determining the outcome. He thinks the first type of educational allocation mentioned resembles a "Talent Show", while the second resembles a "Military Initiative Test". These different requirements for being selected as part of the elite are likely to incentivise individuals to adopt different strategies in order to succeed.

Along the same lines, Turner (1960) describes the norms of elite selection through education as either following a "sponsored" logic, whereby individuals are selected early based on their perceived academic inclination, or the logic of a "contest" that postpones final selection so that elite status becomes a "prize" taken through individuals' efforts. Turner's 'sponsored mobility' model resembles Hopper's "Talent Show", as its main goal is to sort people into the pathways that best suit their talents, thus ensuring that talent is effectively allocated in society. Concurrently, the "contest" mobility system is a match for the "Military Initiative Test", as the main objective is to give elite status to the individuals showing "enterprise, initiative, perseverance, and craft" (Turner, 1960, p.857), so that victory goes to the "most deserving", not necessarily the most talented.

Rosenbaum (1979) suggests a third mobility model, which he named "tournament" and is derived from Turner's (1960) concept of a "contest". A "tournament" mobility system is composed of a sequence of competitions and is "historical", in the sense that the outcomes of each competition influence an individual's prospects to succeed in subsequent selections. Van Zanten (2019) mentions that the "tournament" mobility model can be understood as an "exclusive" form of contest, where there are clear winners and losers for each competitive test, and losing one competition decreases

chances of winning in the next competitive selection. In a similar vein, Fishkin (2014) argues that the outcome of every educational competition is the input for the next selection process, as the skills that individuals bring to a contest are the results of the opportunities that were made possible by previous contests.

Turner (1960) argued that the predominant organising norms which define the legitimate mode of social mobility are internalised by the people living in these societies and contribute to shaping the school system. He further argues that these organising norms lead to social control through facilitating individuals' acceptance of their place in the social hierarchy, especially for those who receive less of a proportional share of opportunities. In a system of contest mobility, acceptance is accomplished through inculcating the norm of ambition, while in a sponsored-type system, the legitimation of social inequality is realised through cultivating in masses the belief of the superiority of the elite and through encouraging individuals to make "realistic" plans. Thus, in Turner's perspective, the prevailing societal norms shape the educational system.

Turner (1960) suggests that there is a causal relationship between societal values and the configuration of educational institutions, as the prevailing mobility norms determine the timing and the nature of educational selection processes. For instance, the contest norm of mobility favours late educational selection, because it sets as the most desirable outcome the victory of the most perseverant and crafty, rather than solely the most talented. Furthermore, the contest norm discourages any sharp separation by ability between pupils, and emphasises the role of education as an opportunity, placing the responsibility on student's motivation to make use of it to advance in life. On the other hand, the sponsored norm of mobility promotes early selection into different educational pathways, especially for promising pupils who should be given a form of training appropriate for their destined elite positions, as the goal is to make the best possible use of talents in society by sorting individuals into their suitable pathways. This model favours the selection of those with high academic potential and cultivating belief in their superior competence. Educational selection under sponsored mobility norms is ideally made by individuals who are trained to detect intellectual or artistic inclination.

However, Turner (1960) further seems to indicate that the relationship between norms about social mobility and pathways of social mobility is somewhat reciprocal, as he claims that *"the way upward mobility takes place determines in part the kinds of norms and values that serve the indicated purposes of social control" (p.859).* Drawing on Turner's work, Kerckhoff (1995) refers to "sponsorship" and "contest" not as norms, but as institutional arrangements that constitute sorting machines providing different educational and occupational pathways. Thus, Kerckhoff emphasises how these norms became embedded in institutional practices that influence educational and social stratification. Based on the work of Turner and Kerckhoff, one could argue that institutional arrangements related to the timing and nature of educational selection both reflect and shape people's norms about legitimate success. Rosenbaum (1974) also emphasises the importance of the frequency of selection processes, especially when opportunity for mobility after selection is limited, the winners win the right to compete in the next round, while losers' opportunities become narrower.

Against this backdrop, Busemeyer (2014) argues that educational institutions have feedback effects on individual attitudes and preferences, which contributes to stabilising the development paths of education regimes over time. Svallfors (2012) explains the relationship between welfare states and welfare attitudes as reciprocal: welfare regimes are rooted in distinct political ideologies and values; welfare regimes tend to shape attitudes among their citizens in specific ways. Similarly, in the realm of education, the work by LeTendre et al. (2003) indicates that German respondents, who experienced educational tracking at an early age, found the issue of tracking far less problematic than respondents in the United States or migrants to Germany. Thus, there is a strong line of research which seems to indicate that causality works in both directions: not only are institutional features embedded in specific norms which are prevalent within society, but the make-up of institutions influences the attitudes of individuals who are socialised to accept these institutions as legitimate.

Because outcomes of educational selection processes influence subsequent educational opportunities and trajectories, this thesis maps the processes of educational stratification in different countries by looking at various dimensions: stratification within secondary education; vocational orientation; links between initial vocational education and the labour market; transitions from secondary

education; stratification within tertiary education; and links between different educational qualifications and the labour market. Vocational orientation is conceptualized by Bol and van de Werfhorst (2013) as "the extent to which education provides students with vocational skills, and the specificity of these skills" (p.4).They measure this concept through looking at the prevalence of vocational enrolment and the setting in which vocational education and training takes place – either school-based, work-based, or a combination of the two. In a similar vein, the dimension of "vocational orientation" in this thesis comprises of a variable measuring the prevalence of enrolment in initial vocational education and training (iVET) at upper-secondary school level and two variables measuring the percentage of people who did predominantly school-based or work-based iVET training.

In societies deemed meritocratic, competitive educational selection processes structure subsequent educational opportunities. However, the timing at which these educational paths diverge varies, as does the way these paths and the skills related to them are described and valued. Including six dimensions of stratification in my analysis, I aim to develop an encompassing representation of the architecture of distinct educational routes in different European countries.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

My PhD thesis takes a comparative perspective to explore the relationship between processes of educational stratification, perceptions of meritocracy, and perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities. The thesis consists of three empirical chapters, designed to be read and understood independently, as journal articles. However, these three empirical chapters build together towards illustrating the connection between processes of educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania.

In this thesis, the Introduction is followed by Chapter 2, which constitutes a literature review, and Chapter 3 which presents the methodological approach, describing the research design and the particularities of each type of data collection and analysis. The three empirical chapters are presented thereafter.

In Chapter 4, I compare educational systems to identify distinct models of stratification. To do so, I bring together multiple dimensions pertaining to

educational stratification and school-to-work transitions which have been treated as disparate by most classifications (vocational orientation, stratification within secondary, as well as tertiary education, links between different educational qualifications and the labour market). This empirical chapter is a slightly edited version of a paper published in the Journal of European Social Policy.

In Chapter 5, I use data from the European Social Survey to explore the perceived fairness of educational opportunities in Germany and Romania. I also analyse interviews with elite students from these two countries to explore their views on what constitutes educational privilege in their educational systems. I look at how far people in Germany and Romania perceive their countries as education-based meritocracies. Then, I explore the barriers that participants identify as standing in the way of fairly rewarding talent and effort in these countries. This chapter addresses the link between the perceived unfairness of educational opportunities and the attribution of educational privilege to either cultural capital, or both cultural and economic capital.

In Chapter 6, I report on interviews I carried out with students at prestigious universities in the UK, who went to school in either Germany or Romania. This thesis presents their attributions of educational success and failure. I reflect on the relationship between the strategies students use to successfully navigate the requirements of their educational systems and their understandings of meritocracy as either focused on talent or effort.

In Chapter 7, I bring together key findings from the three empirical chapters, provide a summary of the answers to each of the research questions, and present the main contributions of this thesis. I also reflect on my positionality in the context of my findings, identify limitations to my research, and suggest avenues for further research.

The next chapter will present the multiple strands of literature I draw on to establish conceptual links between processes of educational stratification and perceptions of meritocracy. Each strand of literature will lead to the formulation of one or more research questions.

2. Literature Review

This thesis analyses understandings of meritocracy in relation to processes of educational stratification by comparing countries from Eastern and Western Europe. In this literature review, I start by examining in section 2.1. several studies that present different ways of conceptualising and operationalising meritocratic ideas and beliefs. Then, in section 2.2. I present the literature comparing models of educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Eastern and Western Europe, and explain how this literature contributed to the formulation of the main research aim. After that, section 2.3. briefly presents the correspondence between different strands of literature and the research questions addressed in the three empirical chapters of the thesis. In sections 2.4, 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7, I review four different strands of literature that are brought together to build towards an understanding of the relationship between educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy.

2.1. Conceptualising meritocracy

Most academic literature on meritocracy focuses on the ways in which the ideology of meritocracy justifies inequality in the US and the UK (e.g. Markovits, 2019; Mijs & Savage, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Mijs and Savage (2020) point out that since 1980, the belief that success is determined by hard work has increased in the UK, to the extent that it is now almost universally held among the working class. Along the same lines, Littler (2017) argues that the meritocratic narrative gathered a positive charge in the UK by the 1980s through being embedded in the ideology of neoliberalism.

Thus the "neoliberal meritocracy", which promotes the idea of individualistic, competitive success, considers vast inequalities to be legitimate as long as those with remarkable ability and savviness can climb the social ladder (Littler, 2017). However, Littler points out that meritocracy– both understood as a social system structured around the advancement of people based on their individual achievement, and a set of discourses – is contextually specific. Furthermore, Lamont (2012) argues that a comparative exploration of merit evaluations is increasingly important in the context of increased educational competition that influences individuals' life chances. For

instance, Heuer et al. (2020) argue, on the basis of representative surveys and focus groups, that the cultural framing of meritocracy in Germany differs from that in the UK. The authors note that whereas individual performance is considered to be reflected by market value in UK, respondents from Germany support a work-centred meritocracy, where contribution should be primarily rewarded. By focusing on Germany and Romania in the qualitative strand of my analysis, I explore two ideologies of meritocracy that are less well understood and documented.

Meritocratic ideas and narratives have been conceptualised and operationalised in different ways. Sandel (2020) referred to the "meritocratic ethic" (p.24) as the idea that we do not deserve to be rewarded, or held back, based on factors beyond our control. He argues that this meritocratic ethic promotes morally objectionable attitudes, such as hubris among the winners, who come to believe that their success is entirely their own doing. Thus, he sees the meritocratic ethic as a normative stance that influences individuals to internalise a meritocratic lens of analysis regarding their own position in the social hierarchy.

Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) differentiate between objective and subjective approaches to studying meritocracy. The objective approach assesses the extent to which social positions are distributed according to educational achievement, which is considered a proxy for hard work and dedication. In regard to the subjective approach, they distinguish two dimensions of analysis: 1. Whether individuals perceive that their society rewards skills and effort; 2. Whether they consider that merit (in the form of hard work and educational achievement) should be important in determining one's income. Mijs and Savage (2020) measure meritocratic beliefs through looking at people's assessments of whether success is determined by hard work in their society. Thus, the literature on meritocratic ideas incorporates dimensions linked to what Jamaaat (2013) distinguished as perceptions and beliefs. He defines perceptions as subjective estimates of existing social phenomena and beliefs as normative ideas about fair arrangements in society. Based on this classification, this thesis only looks at perceptions of meritocracy in connection to educational achievement.

Educational achievement is considered a proxy for ability and effort. However, educational achievement is influenced by socio-economic background (Pfeffer, 2008).

On this basis, Goldthorpe (2003) criticises what he called the myth of "education-based meritocracy", a theory developed by Daniel Bell (1972). The theory of education-based meritocracy posits that in post-industrial societies, the relationship between class of origin and educational attainment becomes gradually weaker, while the association between educational attainment and class of destination grows stronger. The theory is depicted in Figure 2.1 below.

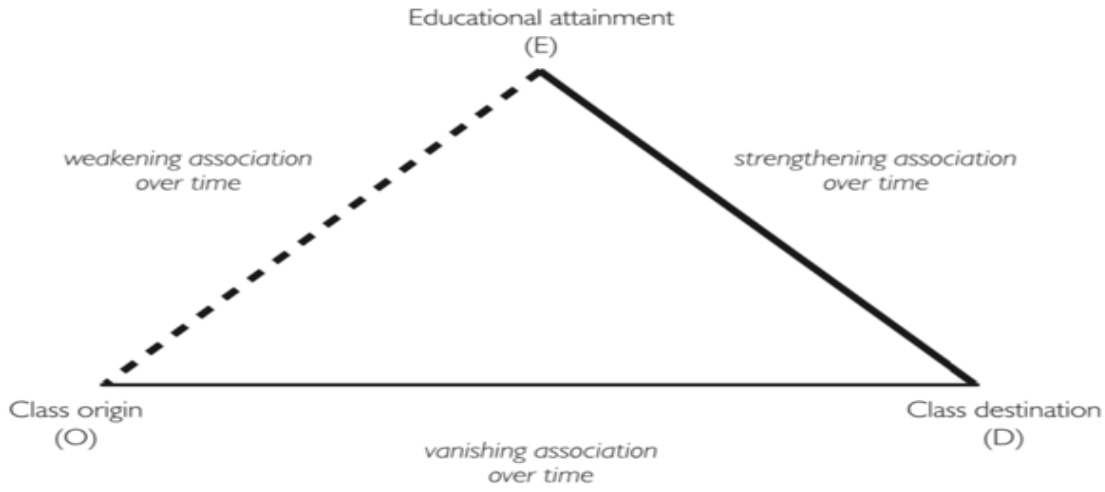

Figure 2. 1: The "Meritocratic Triad" depicting the theory of education-based meritocracy, from Goldthorpe (2003)

Although Goldthorpe (2003) points out that there is no consistent evidence that modern societies meet the conditions of an education-based meritocracy, very few studies (e.g. Spruyt, 2015) explore people's perceptions on whether educational achievement reflects talent and effort, or is influenced by class of origin. This thesis contributes to filling a gap in the subjective approach to studying meritocracy by exploring whether and how individuals perceive educational achievement as meritocratic. Thus, in Chapter 5, I explore how far people in Germany and Romania perceive their societies are education-based meritocracies, where everyone has a fair opportunity to succeed through education. In Chapter 6, I explore perceptions about the interplay between talent, effort, and socio-economic background in influencing educational success in Germany and Romania

Some authors (Markovits, 2019; Mijs, 2018; Sandel, 2020) mention processes of educational selection as important in supporting meritocratic ideologies. However, the relationship between educational systems and meanings of meritocracy is not the focus of their work. Moreover, they do not identify the relative salience of talent over effort in meritocratic accounts of success, even though emphasising one component or the other might lead to different notions of meritocratic legitimacy. Thus, this thesis contributes to filling a gap in the literature on meritocracy by placing more emphasis on educational systems, the perceived fairness of educational opportunities, and meritocratic accounts of educational success in different countries.

2.2. Educational stratification and meritocratic beliefs: comparing Eastern and Western Europe

Since 1948, the educational systems of socialist countries in Eastern Europe were transformed to integrate elements of vocational and academic education for everyone, closely match occupations with educational qualifications, and introduce class quotas to admissions to higher education in the 1950s (Nieuwbeerta & Rijken, 1996). This socialist legacy is likely to have influenced the way in which people in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) understand the relationship between merit, educational success, and inequality. Indeed, Janmaat (2013) points to an interesting research puzzle: while the level of income inequality believed to be acceptable has sharply increased in post-socialist CEE countries, people in Eastern Europe have also grown more sceptical of whether existing incomes reflect meritocratic principles. This goes against the pattern observed by Mijs (2019) in the US, where there is a positive correlation between rising income inequality and stronger beliefs in meritocracy. The first part of this section looks at the socialist legacy that influenced the processes of educational stratification in post-socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The second part of this section looks at understandings of meritocracy in post-socialist CEE countries.

2.2.1. The socialist legacy and educational stratification in post-socialist CEE countries

Unlike countries like Germany and the UK, which either reinstated or introduced the tripartite system of school tracking in the final years of World War II (Chitty, 2014;

Hart, 2016) the former socialist CEE countries adopted around 1948 comprehensive education systems with seven to nine years of primary school. The aim of the comprehensive education was to provide everyone with a complete elementary general education (Nieuwbeerta and Rijken, 1996). This transformation also happened in Eastern Germany, which, following reunification in 1990, adopted the structure of the educational system from Western Germany (West and Nikolai, 2017). During the socialist period, vocational education was specialised and closely aligned with the state- planned industry, while most programmes of tertiary education were technical and were strongly linked to the requirements of the centralised economy (West, 2013).

Many socialist regimes initially wanted to constrain the intergenerational transmission of economic and cultural capital, so they restricted access to higher education for individuals from higher-class backgrounds (Kraaykamp and Nieuwbeerta, 2000). However, a new elite emerged in the second stage of the socialist transformation, around the 1960s. They aimed to secure their children's access to the most prestigious educational routes (Gugushvili, 2017). As the variance in people's financial capital was low, differences in cultural and social capital gained prominence (Bodovski et al., 2017).

After 1989, when the educational system ceased to function as an instrument of manpower planning and allocation, the links between qualifications and occupations weakened, as employers gained discretion over the attributes they considered when hiring (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2010). Thus, higher educational qualifications stopped ensuring access to professional jobs for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. The disadvantage associated with low parental education intensified after 1989 in most post-socialist countries (Gugushvili, 2017), making it harder for working-class people to succeed through education. The new elite risen from the revolution in 1989 had to solidify their status through distinctive educational symbols, so they distanced themselves from pursuing Engineering at higher education level, which used to be a well-regarded educational pathway in socialist systems (Tomusk, 2000). Analysing the relationship between class of origin- educational attainment- class destination (OED) in post-socialist Hungary, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2010) find that transition to a capitalist economy has slightly

increased the association between social origin and educational attainment. They also indicate that in post-socialist Hungary tertiary qualifications produce lower "class returns" for people from relatively disadvantaged class backgrounds as compared to the period before 1989.

West (2013) reviewed the common features of vocational education and training in CEE countries before and after 1989. He presents some common features of what he calls the "communist style" of education system. During socialism, educational systems in CEE countries were characterised by comprehensive education up to age fourteen or fifteen. The comprehensive education included elements of both academic and vocational training, in line with the "polytechnic" ideas of education that contested the division between mental and physical work. At upper secondary level, the systems were characterised by a sharp division between academic and vocational education. The separation between academic and vocational education at this stage happened because there was a rapid expansion of upper-secondary education which was mostly achieved through the introduction of technical schools. West (2013) also argues that the VET systems of CEE EU Member States have undergone diverse transformations after 1989 due to the challenges of transitioning to free market economies, and the demands associated with pursuing EU membership. The author mentions that after 1989, several CEE countries, such as the Czech Republic, have reinstated the full Gymnasium, which was restricted during socialism. Yet, he still thinks that VET systems in CEE post-socialist countries retain essential similarities because of their common socialist legacy and the parallel events they underwent around the same time period.

When comparing educational systems in CEE countries with those from Western European countries, Dumas et al. (2013) found that CEE countries do not belong to the same group as one another in regard to the characteristics of vocational education and training at secondary school level. For example, they found that the Czech Republic and Slovakia were similar to Austria and Germany, as they used early tracking to separate between general and vocational education and placed a strong emphasis on apprenticeships. Their view was that Romania was rather similar to Italy because of the lack of high-quality vocational programmes. Even though they have

common characteristics, educational systems from post-socialist CEE countries seem to have developed distinct features.

Educational systems from post-socialist Eastern European countries present similarities with other European countries, but also have distinctive elements (Silova, 2009). The literature on educational stratification in post-socialist CEE countries (e.g. Beblavý et al., 2013; Dumas et al., 2013; Saar and Ure, 2013) is in its infancy, and has not looked at multiple dimensions of stratification at the same time. Thus, to better understand the link between the distribution of educational opportunities and individuals' understandings of meritocracy in these countries, I will first need to explore the specific characteristics of educational stratification in these countries.

Silova (2010) examines the ways in which comparisons between Eastern and Western European countries have been used in education research over the years. She argues that the value of studying post-socialist educational systems lies in the discovery of unexpected combinations of educational configurations. For that reason, this thesis will not impose a framework that conceptualises educational systems in CEE countries as a distinct educational model, nor does it assume similarity to other countries. Rather, I will test whether post-socialist CEE countries are more similar to each other or to certain Western European countries as regards patterns of educational stratification.

2.2.2. Understandings of meritocracy in post-socialist CEE countries

The socialist ideal of meritocracy was built around a mix of technical and academic skills and provided an enduring justification for inequality (Gugushvili, 2017). Because the accumulation of capital within families was restricted, the legitimation of social status as earned through education was important. The socialist programme aimed to create an education-based meritocracy within the framework of a command economy (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2010).

Analysing meritocratic discourses that have been mobilised in the West, and particularly in the UK and the US, Littler (2017) shows how the notion of meritocracy has transformed over the years. She argues that the notion of meritocracy started as a negative critical term used to discredit a system of hierarchy based on perceived academic ability in Michael Young's work. The author describes how by the 1980s,

“meritocracy” has turned into a positive term mobilised under a neoliberal agenda to connect competitive individualism with a belief that social mobility is attainable through talent and effort.

Varriale (2023) argues that the neoliberal discourse on meritocracy has travelled from the centres of global capitalism to Eastern Europe. The author mentions that the expansion of the European Union into Eastern Europe, for instance, was accompanied by a discourse of "return to Europe"(p.31), used by both Western and Eastern political elites to promote liberal values and individual responsibility, thereby legitimising neoliberal conceptualisations of meritocracy in Eastern Europe. Saar and Trumm (2017) argued that the neoliberal discourse on meritocracy, which included negative stereotyping of social failure as an incapacity to adapt to the demands of a capitalist economy, became popular among the elite from post-socialist CEE countries. However, they argue that this neoliberal rhetoric did not achieve prominence at the mass level, since a considerable proportion of the general public still held egalitarian views. Thus, there might be a tension in CEE countries between the meritocratic ideas of the elites and the understandings of fairness held by more disadvantaged individuals.

According to the studies reviewed by Janmaat (2013), since the late 1990s, people in CEE countries have favoured meritocratic criteria as principles that should influence income. Most people in both Eastern and Western Europe believe that effort and skills should be prioritised over need or group affiliation in decisions regarding the allocation of resources. Moreover, the author suggests that people in Eastern Europe have similar beliefs to people in Western Europe about which occupations should be paid more than others. Based on these studies, it seems that meritocratic ideas have been widely embraced in Eastern Europe, and that these ideas have been influenced by the neoliberal narrative on meritocracy.

However, meritocratic ideas regarding educational achievement in Eastern Europe have not been studied widely. Generally, individuals from Eastern Europe have been found to place a high value on educational achievement. Based on a comparative analysis of respondents from 26 countries, Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) find that people in Eastern Europe hold strongly the view that education should determine one’s own income, while being less likely to believe that people in their societies are

fairly rewarded for their efforts and skills. Thus, they seem to hope for a stronger link between educational achievement and occupational destination.

To compare understandings of meritocracy in Eastern and Western Europe, the overarching aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between logics of educational stratification and attributions of educational success in different European countries. I refer to "logics" of stratification because education systems are embedded in societal belief systems about the role of education (Gross, Meyer and Hadjar, 2016), which sustain different "ideologies of legitimation" regarding educational selection (Hopper, 1968). Similar to the "welfare state logics"(Scruggs and Allan, 2008), "educational stratification logics" help classify educational systems beyond the extent to which educational attainment is linked to social origin and social destination, by focusing on the underlying principles and goals of allocating pupils to different educational routes.

Through engaging with different strands of literature and multiple research methods, this thesis will link macro structures related to the institutional characteristics of educational systems with cognitive and evaluative aspects. This approach is similar to that of Heuer et al. (2020), who explore the way in which people in four different countries frame meritocracy, based on their assumption that people's cultural repertoires for evaluating fairness are grounded within their institutional context. Thus, I explore the link between processes of educational stratification, conceptualisations of educational privilege, and people's understandings of educational success and failure.

2.3. Research questions and strands of literature

Next, this chapter presents the multiple strands of literature that are brought together to present the link between processes of educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania. In section 2.4. I review the literature on educational and welfare "regimes" to point out different models of educational stratification and the gaps in this strand of literature; Section 2.5. draws on a burgeoning literature examining the perceived fairness of life chances in countries belonging to different educational regimes; Section 2.6. reviews the sociological literature looking at different forms of capital and how they contribute to

different interpretations of educational privilege; In section 2.7. I present several comparative studies looking at understandings of meritocracy in different countries.

The first two research questions are derived from reviewing the literature in section 2.4. on educational and welfare regimes. In section 2.4. I show the way in which I formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes?

RQ2: Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?

The answers to these research questions analysed in Chapter 4 helped me select Romania and Germany as cases for the analysis undertaken in Chapters 5 and 6. Section 3.1. in Chapter 3 on Methodology presents a detailed account of how I chose to compare Germany and Romania. Thus, the following four research questions have been developed on the basis of results from Chapter 4, along with insights from several relevant strands of literature.

The literature presented in section 2.5, about the perceived fairness of opportunities in different countries, has informed the development of the third research question of this thesis, addressed in Chapter 5:

RQ3: How do people with different education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries?

The strand of literature on forms of capital and manifestations of privilege, presented in section 2.6. has contributed to the formulation of the fourth research question, also answered in Chapter 5:

RQ4: How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort?

The same strand of literature on forms of capital is used to formulate the fifth research question, addressed in Chapter 6:

RQ5: How do elite students from Germany and Romania navigate the requirements of their educational systems?

By answering this research question, I explore the way in which distinct logics of stratification are connected to different strategies for successfully navigating processes of educational selection and allocation. Also in Chapter 6, I look at attributions of educational success by addressing the sixth research question, which is inspired by the literature presented in section 2.7. about understandings of meritocracy in different countries:

RQ6: How do elite students socialised in Germany and Romania understand the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success and failure?

Next, I will present each strand of literature previously mentioned, and indicate how the studies reviewed influenced the phrasing of each research question.

2.4. Educational and welfare regimes

This section starts by exploring the way in which education is analysed as a dimension of welfare regimes by some studies. I then justify the focus of this thesis on educational systems as a separate constellation of institutional characteristics, rather than looking at education as a dimension of welfare systems. After that, I review the most well-known typologies of educational regimes and identify gaps in this literature. I suggest that examining the nexus between vocational education and higher education is important for understanding the way in which pupils are allocated to different educational routes, and I review several studies looking at the models of sorting individuals into different educational and occupational pathways.

While comparative research in the field of Social Policy has mostly focused on typologies of welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996), education is most often overlooked when analysing patterns of expenditure that reflect the priorities of the welfare state (West & Nikolai, 2013) However, the comparative literature on social investment (Garritzman et al., 2016; Nikolai, 2011) recognises the pivotal role of education in the configuration of the welfare state. These studies show that different welfare states have implemented social investment reforms in various manners and to very different extents. Drawing on data on public spending in a wide range of policy areas, Castles and Obinger (2008) suggest that the Eastern European EU Member States form a "post-Communist" policy cluster. However, the

commonalities they identify within the "post-Communist" cluster are mostly determined by structural economic factors, such as low labour force participation, low public spending on education and social security. Nuances around spending priorities within educational systems are missing from this analysis of general spending priorities.

These studies look at the level of overall spending for public education, but do not specify which stage of education is prioritised. Although education policies are interrelated to other policies, such as labour market policies, looking at them just as one component of a welfare regime would lead to overlooking the way in which different educational stages interact to create the architecture of educational opportunities. Thus, this thesis will look at educational regimes independently, treating educational systems as complex structures shaped by the interplay between different processes of educational stratification at various educational stages.

I take "regimes" to mean constellations of institutional characteristics shaped by institutional path-dependencies (Janmaat et al., 2013). Esping-Andersen (1990, p.13) referred to welfare "regimes" as mechanisms that can both correct the structure of inequality and constitute systems of stratification in their own right. Even though he devised the typology of welfare regimes based on public spending in the form of cash benefits for social assistance, the same description could be applied to the way in which educational systems function. On one hand, they stratify individuals according to their ability; on the other hand, they correct inequalities by giving some individuals deemed talented and hard working the chance to access prestigious educational institutions and jobs. In this case, educational systems are conceptualised as institutional frames whose configuration is the one that determines how effects unfold (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017).

Existing research studies on education regimes including the US and EU-15 countries have identified four clusters of countries: the Continental, Mediterranean, Nordic, and English-speaking (Green et al., 2006; West and Nikolai, 2013). Although reaching similar results, these authors used different theoretical frameworks and variables for their analysis. West and Nikolai (2013) focused on institutional characteristics related to inequality of educational opportunity, expenditure, and the gaps in educational achievement. Green et al. (2006) focused on identifying common factors

of school systems in different regimes and their association with variations in skills inequality and the strength of social inheritance in determining educational outcomes. Table 2.1 below outlines the characteristics of the four educational regimes.

Table 2.1. Characteristics of the four educational regimes identified in previous literature

Educational regime	**Countries included**	**Features related to selection**	**Features related to vocational orientation**
Anglo-Saxon	UK, Ireland, US	Almost comprehensive education till age sixteen, with exception of selective schools in England and Northern Ireland, that take pupils of age eleven	High variety of educational routes; marginally developed initial VET; fragmented post-compulsory training
Nordic	Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway	Non-selective, publicly funded comprehensive school systems till age sixteen	Above average rates of participation in vocational education programmes; VET a viable and respected educational route
Continental	Germany, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland	Tracking at young age (between age nine and twelve); grade repetition	High rates of enrolment in VET; VET plays a central role and provides apprenticeship schemes

Mediterranean	Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France	Academic selection for upper-secondary between thirteen and fifteen; grade repetition; setting in core subject areas during lower secondary education	Poorly developed initial VET programmes; High levels of early school leaving

The table was created by the author of this thesis based on research by West and Nikolai (2013), Green et al. (2006), West (2023)*, Busemeyer (2014).*

The model of four educational regimes, which corresponds to the model of four European welfare regimes identified by Ferrera (1996b) and Leibfried (1992) is derived from comparing countries from Western, Northern, and Southern Europe with each other and with the US or countries from East Asia.

How would this model hold if countries from Eastern Europe were included? This is particularly relevant, as the model is not very stable, with some countries assigned to different educational regimes depending on which aspects of educational systems are included in the analysis. For example, Netherlands resembles the German/ Continental model in regard to the vocational apprenticeship system, but also resembles France in regard to the division of pupils into multiple streams in secondary education (Dumas et al., 2013).

Thus, the first research question of this thesis is:

RQ1: *How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes?*

A re-evaluation of the classification of educational systems is desirable not only because most typologies exclude countries from Eastern Europe. Also, the existing studies on educational regimes have mostly focused either on compulsory education, tertiary education, or vocational education and training, but not on how they are assembled to create stratification and mobility patterns. This is an important limitation. Exploring how vocational specificity affects unemployment levels in countries with varying levels of employment protection and educational stratification, Brzinsky-Fay (2017) demonstrated that vocational specificity

influences school-to-work transitions differently when interacting with certain characteristics of the labour market or educational systems. Thus, this thesis integrates in the same analysis multiple dimensions related to educational stratification and school-to-work transitions.

The studies mentioned in Table 2.1. capture the vocational-academic divide by looking at age of first selection and enrolment indicators into different types of programmes. This says relatively little on the links between VET programmes, academic education and the labour market. Yet, there are different ways of drawing a divide between higher education and vocational education. For instance, Powell et al (2012) explore conceptualisations of academic and vocational competence in the German, French, and British educational models. They find that the delineation between VET and HE is less clear cut in France, while in Germany, the boundary between VET and HE is still clear and impermeable, despite the emergence of hybrid organisational structures (Powell and Solga, 2010, 2011).

The VET-HE nexus is relevant for understanding the rationales of allocating pupils to different educational routes. Hopper (1968) claims that educational systems vary with respect to the ideologies that legitimate selecting pupils into different educational routes. In some educational systems, elites are recruited based on their academic potential and they have to further develop general, academic skills. The idea that there can be a clear separation between vocational and academic skills supports this type of elite recruitment. On the other hand, there are educational systems where selection into the elite is justified in terms of their effort and technical skills, such as in Sweden and the former USSR (ibid.). In these systems, a vocational component is also integrated into the training of the most academically inclined pupils.

Literature on the rationales justifying the allocation of pupils to different pathways is scarce. Walther (2006) constructs "transition regimes" by looking at the strength of the relationships between occupation and educational qualifications in Italy, Great Britain, Denmark, and Germany. He distinguished four clusters of transition systems: 1. the universalistic regime in the Scandinavian model, defined by an inclusive schooling system which places focus on education and activation; 2. The liberal regime in Anglo-Saxon countries, characterised by a largely comprehensive education

system combined with open access to employment; 3. The employment-centred regime in the Continental countries, featuring selective and standardised educational and training routes; 4. The familistic regime in the Mediterranean countries, defined by a nonselective educational system and low-standardised training schemes. He links the characteristics of educational systems to the characteristics of employment practices in these four countries which he takes as representing the models for different transition regimes, but he does not test whether these traits are indeed common for other countries too. Thus, the second question of this thesis is:

RQ2: Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?

Chapter 4 will answer these two questions by identifying clusters of similar educational systems and then analysing the architecture of educational pathways in these different types of educational systems. The architecture of educational pathways influences the opportunities available for individuals with different levels of perceived academic ability (Busemeyer, 2014). Conducting a comparative analysis including Germany, Japan and the US, LeTendre et al. (2003) found that distinct processes of educational selection and differentiation reflect widely held beliefs about the role of education. Furthermore, despite having different views on what factors should influence educational trajectories, respondents from all three countries were willing to accept differential educational outcomes if they believed the mechanism of selection into different educational strata was fair. Thus, perceiving educational opportunities as fair indicates that individuals deem the system of educational selection in their country as legitimate. In the next section of this chapter, I will review the literature on perceptions about the fairness of individuals' opportunities to succeed.

2.5. Perceived fairness of opportunities

Young (1958) and Sandel (2020) argue that successful individuals would internalise their position in a meritocratic society and consider they got ahead by virtue of their talent and effort. But are successful individuals more inclined to perceive opportunities as fair and believe that everyone has a chance to succeed?

Empirically, research is inconclusive on whether more educated people are more prone to perceiving their society as meritocratic (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). Therefore, Mijs (2016) suggests that research could benefit from exploring the way in which different institutional settings contribute to shaping people's meritocratic beliefs rather than trying to attribute these beliefs to (universal) human psychology. In line with this recommendation, this thesis will take a comparative approach to understanding individuals' perceptions about the fairness of opportunities to succeed.

To look at perceived meritocracy in countries belonging to different educational regimes, Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016) used data from the International Social Survey Programme in 2009. They investigated perceptions of people who went to school in different Western European countries in regard to the way success was achieved in their societies. They examined how much weight respondents from different countries attributed to ascribed characteristics as opposed to individual responsibility for explaining success. They found that opinions regarding the fairness of educational opportunities differed significantly between countries and that different factors were identified as important in influencing one's chances of going to university and of getting ahead in life. For instance, they found that in Germany, parental education, the person's own education, and social networks were considered key to getting ahead in life. In Sweden ambition was seen as more important for getting ahead than in other countries. People in the UK emphasised hard work and the person's education as important factors for success, while people from Italy identified being from a wealthy family and one's social network as essential.

Their research looks at the identified importance of factors categorized as either ascribed or related to individuals' responsibility but does not explore whether people in these countries see these factors as fair and legitimate ways of getting ahead in society. One's educational attainment is classified by Lavrijsen and Nicaise as part of someone's individual responsibility, but the authors mentioned that this factor is only partly dependent on individual effort, and partly dependent on social origin. However, they do not explore the extent to which people in these different countries consider educational attainment as meritocratic or as influenced by parents' socio-economic background. They only investigate whether people from different countries

believe that access to university is available in their country only to "the rich" or "students from the best secondary schools".

Spruyt (2015) examine whether people in Flanders tend to attribute educational success and failure predominantly to talent, effort and social background. They found that talent was not deemed very important by respondents, who were much more inclined to attribute educational success to effort, although a considerable proportion of individuals also acknowledged the role of social background. However, Spruyt only looked at individuals' perceptions of educational success in Flanders. My thesis will contribute towards filling a gap in the literature on perceptions about the extent to which educational success is meritocratic in countries with different types of educational systems.

Based on the results in Chapter 4, I chose to focus on comparing two countries belonging to different models of educational stratification: Germany and Romania. Germany is a typical case for the sponsored model of stratification, where selection into the academic track happens early on, while Romania is illustrative for the tournament model, which requires individuals to compete in a series of educational examinations. Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016) argue that in Continental countries (including Germany), the perceived importance of both ascribed assets and educational achievement reflects the relatively strong association between socio-economic background and educational achievement observed in countries where educational tracking happens at an early age. They do not include post-socialist CEE countries in their analysis. However, the educational system in Romania has contrasting features to those that Lavrijsen and Nicaise identify as influencing German people's perceptions of success. As presented in Chapter 4, the first formal educational selection in Romania happens later on, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, and it is based on a standardised examination.

Building on the work of Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016), In Chapter 5 of this thesis, I address the question:

RQ3: *How do people with different education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries?*

Focusing on the inequality of opportunities may seem a more conservative or "mild-mannered" (Phillips, 2004, p.2) approach to studying fairness within a society than looking at equality of outcomes. However, Fishkin (2014) argues that equalising the structure of opportunities could be more radical than compensating for inequalities through income redistribution. He claims that opportunities not only shape what we have, but our talents, abilities, and aspirations. Since the meritocratic creed relies on perceptions of a fair distribution of opportunities (Solga, 2016), this thesis focuses on people's evaluations regarding the fairness of educational opportunities for themselves and others in their countries.

After exploring how people with higher and lower education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries, I analyse different interpretations of educational privilege in these countries. The literature on different forms of capital, which I review next, provides an account of why privilege can be conceptualised in different ways.

2.6. Forms of capital and the transmission of privilege

Looking at the link between social origin and educational attainment, sociologists highlight how processes of educational selection contribute to the transmission and legitimation of intergenerational advantages, diverting children from lower socio-economic backgrounds from academic pathways (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997).

Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of capital that can be passed on to the next generation: economic, which is immediately convertible into money; social, which is formed by social obligations and can provide advantages in accessing education and job opportunities; and cultural, encompassing the knowledge, skills and dispositions one uses to navigate the social world. Those who possess cultural capital are more prone to succeed in educational settings because they are better able to understand and navigate the expectations of those environments. Moreover, teachers tend to interpret their embodied cultural capital as a sign of talent and ability (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

There are ongoing debates about the appropriate way to define and operationalise cultural capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Sullivan, 2007). Sullivan (2007) argues

that cultural transmission can have many forms, including the active transmission of knowledge, through parents reading to their children and coaching them in school subjects; the passive transmission of skills, through children picking up styles of speech, ideas, and forms of argument, by hearing parents discuss certain topics; the development of attitudes and beliefs regarding education and work ethic, as parents might instil a sense of efficacy that encourages their children to think of themselves as academically able. Thus, instead of focusing on a narrow definition of cultural capital, this thesis takes into consideration both the direct and indirect ways of acquiring a sense of how to swiftly navigate the standards of educational systems.

Bourdieu (1986) suggests that the three forms of capital – cultural, social, and economic – have different levels of visibility. He claims the transmission of cultural capital is "the best hidden form" (p.7) of accumulating privilege and does not receive the same external control and censoring as the direct, visible forms of transmitting advantages. His theory mostly refers to ways in which advantages can be passed on from one generation to another without being easily detected by others in society.

But how do individuals make sense of their own privilege? There are studies suggesting that most individuals are oblivious of their privilege and do not recognize their advantages (Friedman et al., 2021; McIntosh, 2003). The study by Walgenbach and Reher (2016) shows how privileged students from Germany deflected and normalised their privilege after participating in a group exercise that asked everyone to take a step forward for each advantage identified off a list of characteristics. Their strategies included placing their experience as part of a homogeneous collective, and keeping the discussion about privilege disconnected from the discussion about disadvantage. On the other hand, research by Charles et al. (2021), Swalwell (2013) and Allouch et al. (2015) identified strategies through which privileged students could acknowledge and make sense of their advantages, without denying their effort and abilities.

Thus, this thesis will explore the way in which privileged students make sense of educational privilege. Consequently, the second research question I address in Chapter 5 is:

RQ4: *How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort in their countries?*

Individuals draw on economic, social, and cultural capital differently, depending on what is required to secure good educational opportunities. The framework developed by Boudon (1974) explains the twofold process through which parental background influences educational achievement. The term "primary effects" refers to how social origin influences the more or less favourable conditions for the cognitive and social development of children. Moreover, there are "secondary effects" of social origin, which manifest at points of transition between different school levels because of the way families from different backgrounds make educational choices. Acknowledging there are secondary effects of social origin on educational attainment is important for drawing attention to how the setup of educational systems channels parental influence around branching points in children's educational journeys. Empirical evidence suggests that the advantage of having parents with higher education is larger in nations where the educational architecture contains many bifurcations and routes that lead to "dead ends" (Pfeffer, 2008, p. 546). The fear of downward mobility is particularly activated at transition points, when middle-class parents use various strategies to ensure their children are allocated to high-performing schools (Lucey and Reay, 2002).

The field of education can be considered a game without specific rules, which prompts players to adopt different strategies, depending on their social position (Kosunen and Seppänen, 2015). To study how the game is played, one needs to identify the forms of capital which are active and effective for gaining success (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For example, Van Zanten(2019) explains how families make direct use of economic and cultural capital to secure access to grandes écoles, the most prestigious higher education institutions in France. In Finland, economic capital is translated in cultural capital through developing skills in classical music or sport, which facilitate access to the best schools (Kosunen and Seppänen, 2015). On the other hand, in countries such as Ireland and South Korea, economic capital plays a direct role in securing educational advantages, as there is widespread participation in private tutoring (Exley, 2020; Lynch & Moran, 2006). That seems to also be the case in post-socialist CEE countries, where private tutoring has become very widespread (Bray, 2006; Silova, 2010a).

To explore the strategies used to gain educational success in different types of educational systems, Chapter 6 of this thesis addresses the question:

RQ5: *How do elite students from Germany and Romania navigate the requirements of their educational systems?*

Understanding the strategies employed by successful pupils and their families in educational systems with different processes of educational selection can shed light on which qualities and factors are most important for securing educational success. Next, I will review the studies looking at perceptions and understandings of merit in different countries.

2.7. Understandings of merit in different contexts

There is a small, but blossoming line of research comparing understandings of merit and success in different contexts. Most studies use qualitative methods to compare meritocratic narratives in a few countries. For example, there is a series of studies (Brown et al., 2016; Power et al., 2016) comparing the perspectives of students from Oxford University, an elite university in England, and Sciences Po, an elite higher education institution in Paris, in regard to their talent, academic success, and sentiments of privilege. These studies highlighted some differences between the meritocratic discourse promoted by elite students in UK and France. Students from Sciences Po believed that a meritocratic process should rely on a system of fair and transparent entrance examinations and not emphasise talent, because taking talent into consideration could lead to exposing the process to a higher influence of social and cultural capital. On the other hand, students from Oxford believed that to be high-performing as an employee, it was not enough to be well qualified or perform to a high standard in academic examinations, but to manifest a broader range of talents and "soft" skills.

Employing a similar methodology, Warikoo (2018) examined students' understandings of merit regarding university admissions at elite American and British institutions. She found that there is a strong similarity between participants' discourses and the framing of merit promoted by their universities. Based on in-depth interviews with undergraduates attending Harvard University, Brown University, and Oxford University, she discovered that students in the US evaluate

merit based on individuals' contribution to the overall merit of the group of students, while British students tend to use a more universalist and individualist frame to evaluate merit.

There are very few studies investigating a possible association between perceptions of meritocracy and welfare regimes. Heuer et al. (2020) conduct a mixed methods study looking at the way in which people from countries belonging to different welfare regimes (Germany, Norway, Slovenia, and the UK) frame meritocracy. They find that people in these four countries have different interpretations of which merits should be rewarded and why. In the UK, there is support for a market-success meritocracy, where individual performance is considered to be adequately reflected by market value; In Germany, respondents indicate support for a work-centred meritocracy, where remuneration should reflect individual work effort; in Norway, the public seems to endorse a common-good meritocracy, where social utility is also considered an important component when deciding on remuneration; in Slovenia, meritocracy is not seen as a priority, but balanced against values of equality and collectivism. The research by Heuer and co-authors (2020) makes an important contribution to the sociological literature on meritocracy by showing the diversity of meanings this concept can take in different societies. However, this study only looks at understandings of meritocracy in relation to the distribution of income, without considering other aspects of social stratification. Moreover, it does not analyse individuals' views on talent and effort separately, but rather focuses on the kind of effort that is most appreciated.

To fill this gap in literature, I explore how interviewees understand the interaction between talent and effort in influencing educational success. To do so, the final research question addressed in Chapter 6 of this thesis is*:*

R6:How do elite students socialised in Germany and Romania understand the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success and failure?

Very few studies look at meritocratic perceptions by disentangling evaluations of talent from evaluations of effort (e.g. Spruyt, 2015; Wetter & Finger, 2023). Alesina and Giuliano (2009) differentiate between beliefs that effort or luck explains inequality, treating inherited talent as a form of a lucky draw in the lottery of birth, in

line with the luck egalitarian perspective (Arneson, 2004; Dworkin, 1981). However, talent has a central role in legitimising success, as it has become an unchallenged source of status and privilege (Mijs, 2021). For instance, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2005) find that German pupils are likely to perceive there is an inverse relationship between ability and effort. They attribute this finding to the early selection into different types of schools in Germany, which is based on perceived academic potential at age ten, rendering the effort applied after this school selection as somewhat ineffective. Societies supporting distinct concepts of merit, either prioritising talent or effort, are likely to legitimate different forms of inequality, since talent tends to be interpreted as stable, and effort as alterable (Weiner, 1985). Meritocratic ideas focused on effort can be perceived as more "democratic", since, in theory, everyone can work hard (Mijs and Savage, 2020). However, people tend to see poor individuals as deserving of help and support if they have little to no control over their situation (Van Oorschot, 2000). Therefore, ideas of meritocracy emphasising that everyone can succeed through hard work could be detrimental to the social protection of disadvantaged individuals.

Before addressing each of these research questions in the three empirical chapters included in this thesis, I present how the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis were translated into the research design. Thus, the following chapter addresses the methodological approach of this thesis.

3. Methodology

This chapter starts by presenting the research design in section 3.1. and explaining the rationale for using mixed methods to explore understandings of meritocracy through a comparative perspective. Then, in section 3.2, I outline the correspondence between the data and the methods used to address each research question. In sections 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5, I describe how the multiple types of data used in this thesis were collected and analysed. Finally, in section 3.6, I discuss the types of inference used to integrate findings from different chapters.

3.1. Research design

This thesis uses a comparative perspective to unravel the link between patterns of educational stratification and people's understandings of meritocracy in different European countries. The comparison consists of multiple stages. First, 25 European countries are compared regarding their processes of educational stratification. Based on the similarities and differences between these 25 countries, the thesis develops a typology of different patterns of educational stratification.

On the basis of this classification, I chose to focus on comparing understandings of meritocracy in two countries belonging to different clusters: Germany and Romania. Germany is a typical case for the sponsored model of stratification (see Chapter 4), while Romania is illustrative for the tournament model. The sponsored-type system is the least demanding of those deemed academically inclined, while the tournament-type system requires individuals to navigate a series of competitions to prove themselves as having the potential to be part of the future elite. To explore meritocratic beliefs in Eastern and Western Europe, it was important to include a country from CEE in the analysis. Having grown up in Romania, I have a good understanding of the educational system and the practices of educational selection in this country and I can also read research papers written in Romanian. This is why I selected Romania from the countries belonging to the tournament cluster.

The analysis undertaken does not isolate variables for controlled comparisons. It is rather aimed at understanding the relationship between different institutional configurations related to educational stratification and individuals' perceptions of

fairness and meritocracy. The decision to focus on just two countries was based on the desire to gain a good understanding of the particularities of each case included in the analysis, which is a demanding and time-consuming task for researchers (Azarian, 2011). Paired comparisons allow for a depth of analysis that is not usually possible when looking at more cases, as they require a deep background knowledge of the cases examined (Tarrow, 2010).

The comparison undertaken in this thesis focuses on the interaction between the macro-level of institutional configurations which are characteristic for educational systems, and the micro level of individuals' understandings of educational success. To investigate both the institutional structures related to educational selection, and the meanings people attribute to these forms of stratification, I will use a mixed methods research design capturing: 1. Institutional patterns of stratification at the macro level; 2. Patterns of fairness beliefs at the macro level, based on aggregated individual-level evaluations; 3. Micro-level understandings of educational success and failure. These different levels of analysis correspond to the three sets of research questions presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3. 1: Research questions and level of analysis

Research questions	Level of analysis	How addressed
How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes? Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?	Macro: Institutional patterns of stratification	In Chapter 4, using quantitative methods
How do people with different education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries?	Macro: Patterns of fairness evaluations	In Chapter 5 using mixed methods

How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort?	Micro: Descriptions of educational privilege	
How do elite students from Germany and Romania navigate the requirements of their educational systems? How do elite students socialised in Germany and Romania understand the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success and failure?	Micro: individual strategies to succeed Micro: Understandings of educational success and failure	In Chapter 6, using qualitative methods

These three sets of research questions presented in Table 3.1 correspond to different levels of analysis that will be placed in dialogue with each other. The approach is suitable for bridging the macro-to-micro divide.

The choice of methodology is aligned with critical realism as a research philosophy. According to critical realism, the world is composed of underlying structures and tendencies that exist whether or not detected through experience (Gorski, 2013). This paradigm blends ontological realism with epistemological constructivism, positing that our understandings are built from our own perspectives (Maxwell, 2012). Critical realism concurs that all knowledge is conceptually mediated, and places importance on the mechanisms that produce the events we observe and acknowledge. Instead of talking about universal causes of phenomena, critical realism focuses on the tendencies and mechanisms that make things happen in a certain way in societies (Danermark, 2002). According to Meyer and Lunnay (2013) critical realism places importance on the analysis of lay accounts of social phenomena, because the interpretations of lay accounts offer the potential for social researchers to unveil the distinctions and tensions between lay and sociological understandings. However, the authors further suggest that critical realists distinguish between the empirical, which reflects the experience of the participant, and the "actual" or the "real" generative mechanisms that exist behind social phenomena. In research designs informed by critical realism, quantitative methods are mostly used to provide

descriptions of patterns of observable events, while qualitative methods are used to interpret these patterns and uncover the conditions that allow phenomena to unfold differently depending on the context (Zachariadis et al., 2013).

The thesis contains both descriptive and explanatory aspects. I used descriptive quantitative analysis to unravel patterns of educational stratification in Chapter 4, and to explore perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities in Chapter 5. In alignment to what Savage (2009, 2020) identified as the strength of descriptive analysis, the goal of the descriptive exploration in this thesis was to identify categories and patterns. In this thesis, cluster analysis, a descriptive multivariate technique, was used to classify countries according to patterns of educational stratification. In Chapter 5, descriptive quantitative analysis was used to highlight different patterns of perceived fairness among people with different levels of education from Germany and Romania. Qualitative analysis was used in Chapter 5 to explore notions of educational privilege in Germany and Romania and to help in offering possible interpretations for the patterns of perceived fairness observed through the survey data. In Chapter 6, qualitative analysis was used to explore students' experiences of navigating the requirements of their educational systems, and the way in which they portrayed the image of a successful pupil at each stage in their educational journeys.

3.2. Data and Methods

This thesis combines quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse three different types of data. Table 3.2. below presents the data and methods used to address each research question.

Table 3. 2: Research questions, data, and methods

Research question(s)	Data	Method
RQ1: How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes?	Dataset containing country-level macro data	Cluster analysis

RQ2: Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?		Description of the distinct logics of educational stratification illustrated by a country representative of each cluster
RQ3: How do people with different education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries?	Round 9 of the European Social Survey	Descriptive statistics about the frequency of each score of perceived fairness by country and education level
RQ4:How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort?	Interviews with undergraduate students who went to school in Germany and Romania and study a social science discipline at a prestigious university in the UK	Analysis of in-depth interviews, focusing on the answers participants gave to questions regarding the way in which talent and effort are rewarded by their educational systems
RQ5: How do elite students from Germany and Romania navigate the requirements of their educational systems?		Analysis of in-depth interviews focusing on the answers participants gave to the questions around the way they navigated each educational transition and the way they understood success at each educational stage
RQ6: How do elite students socialised in Germany and Romania understand the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success and failure?		

Next, I will present in more detail how the three types of data used in this thesis were designed, executed, and analysed. In section 3.3. I present the data and methods used in Chapter 4 to analyse patterns of educational stratification in European countries. In section 3.4. I present the European Social Survey dataset and the methods used in Chapter 5 to explore and compare perceptions about the fairness of educational opportunities in Germany and Romania. In section 3.5. I describe the way I collected and analysed the in-depth interviews which I report on in Chapters 5 and 6. Section

3.6. explains how the different types of data and methods were integrated to analyse the relationship between different logics of stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania.

3.3. Analysing patterns of educational stratification in European countries

3.3.1. Dataset containing country-level macro data

The study makes use of an original dataset with 21 variables that I constructed based on data from several sources: Eurostat (2020), which deposits data compiled by several countries; Cedefop (2017), who conducted a survey on opinions and experiences of vocational education in different European countries; reports by Eurydice (2020) including country-level data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys (OECD, 2016). I used the latest data from Eurostat and PISA that were available for all countries of interest at the time I undertook the analysis, in 2020. Thus, I used Eurostat data from 2016, 2018, and 2019 and PISA data from 2015. For a detailed description of how each variable was operationalised, see Table A.1 in Appendix 1. The dataset includes country-level macro- data.

The dataset includes information on 25 countries. I decided to only include in the analysis the post-socialist CEE countries which are members of the European Union because I wanted to focus on cases that share enough commonality to keep comparison possible (Ebbinghaus, 2012). Comparing most European countries at the same time avoids situations where contrasts are overemphasised, like in small-N comparisons. For instance, consider the case of the educational system in Norway, which appears as strongly stratified compared to the US (Allmendinger, 1989). However, when compared to educational systems in various continental countries, it is classified as part of the more comprehensive Scandinavian model (Busemeyer, 2014).

3.3.2. Cluster analysis and descriptions of each cluster

The dataset previously described in section 3.3.1. is analysed using cluster analysis in Chapter 4. I employ cluster analysis to examine different patterns of educational

stratification because it is a method that enables an exploratory approach to data analysis and focuses on understanding the relationship between cases treated as "wholes" (Byrne and Uprichard, 2012). In cluster analysis, previously unknown categories emerge out of the assortment of attributes associated with the cases. As it is a descriptive method, the success of the results is to be judged by whether or not the clusters produced are "meaningful" (Bartholomew et al., 2008). However, establishing whether a cluster is a valid depiction of reality is a complex task, especially since the method is cluster seeking, but the procedure itself is cluster-imposing through the way in which the researcher chooses to calculate distances between cases. Therefore, "malpractice" of cluster analysis would be to run through just one cluster analysis and stop there (Byrne et al., 2012). I mitigate this limitation of the method by 1) defining clearly articulated theoretical dimensions that will serve as yardsticks for the empirical analysis; 2) conducting a series of cluster analyses, each with slight variations in regard to the variables included; 3) checking the correlations between variables to ensure that no dimension of stratification is given disproportionate weight. This, "trial and error" approach, involving iteration is helpful for finding the optimal cluster method for the structure of the data.

The descriptions of how educational pathways are formed in one country characteristic of each cluster provide a narrative that illustrates each model of stratification. These descriptions help connect the processes of stratification at different stages in a way that emphasizes the distinctive aspects of each model. Presenting the strengths of cluster analysis, Byrne and Uprichard (2012) propose their preferred approach for describing the classifications resulting from cluster analysis. Their suggested approach begins with a tabular description of the clusters, including a measure of central tendency for scale variables, followed by translating the table into pen pictures. They argue that the textual description contributes to the interpretation of the typologies generated. In this thesis, the descriptions of stratification processes in one country from each cluster help illustrate the models of educational stratification resulting from cluster analysis.

3.4. European Social Survey and its analysis

The European Social Survey (ESS) prioritises comparability between countries. Therefore, the quality of the data collection process is monitored at multiple stages

through quality assurance procedures. The ESS target population is individuals aged 15 or over living at private addresses. For this reason, the ESS requires each participating country to secure a minimum effective sample size of 1,500. However, countries with a total population of fewer than 2 million people aged 15 or over constitute exceptions and their minimum sample required is 800. Random probability sampling is used at all stages. Some countries chose simple random sampling, while others choose stratified or cluster random sampling (ERIC Core Scientific Team 1, 2022). The size of the sample from Germany is 2358, while the sample from Romania comprises of 1846 respondents.

This thesis uses data from the 9th round of ESS, named Justice and Fairness. Collected between 2018 and 2019, this is the most recent round of the ESS that includes questions on the perceived fairness of the way in which income and opportunities are distributed in different European countries. The questionnaire was designed to capture the perceived fairness of life chances in European societies. When considering the design of the questionnaire, the authors considered that the perceived fairness regarding the distribution of educational opportunities is likely to affect one's perceptions about the fairness of own income, own job opportunities, and the general distribution of income and jobs (Liebig et al., 2018). The authors suggested that all these variables related to perceived fairness are likely to carry information about the perceived legitimacy of social inequalities in different European societies.

The items in the survey capture two different aspects of fairness evaluations: 1) egocentric (self-regarding) evaluation, looking at the situation of the individual within their society; 2) the sociotropic (other-regarding) evaluation, assessing the opportunities for everyone in a society (Schnaudt et al., 2021). Self-regarding assessments were found to have a strong influence on individuals' evaluations of the political and economic systems. Yet, researchers have generally agreed that other-regarding assessments of fairness have an even stronger effect on evaluations regarding the political and economic systems in both Western European and CEE post-socialist countries (Kluegel & Mason, 2004). Thus, it is plausible that individuals' evaluations of the educational system in their countries are reflected in both self-regarding and other-regarding perceptions about the fairness of educational

opportunities. Therefore, this thesis includes both self-regarding and other-regarding aspects of fairness evaluations.

The self-regarding evaluation of educational opportunities is measured through *the item "Compared to other people in my country, I have had a fair chance to achieve the level of education I was seeking"*, while the other-regarding evaluation is measured through the item *"Overall everyone in [country] has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek".* Some individuals allocate different scores when assessing the fairness of their own opportunities and the fairness of opportunities for everyone in the country. What could explain this? If the fairness evaluation of one's own opportunities is lower than the evaluation of opportunities for everyone in their country, it could mean the respondent believes they had specific obstacles in their way, perhaps associated with their socio-demographic profile. If the fairness evaluation of one's own opportunities is higher than the fairness evaluation of educational opportunities for everyone in their country, it could mean the respondent thinks they had a fair chance to compete for a good education, but there are obstacles impeding others from entering this contest.

Fairness could be assessed as a threshold, meaning that it is accomplished when the result is within reach even if some people have to work harder than others to achieve the same result. On the other hand, fairness of opportunities could be interpreted in a manner similar to equality of opportunity. To my knowledge, there is no study that investigates the way individuals interpret the survey items and evaluate the fairness of their educational opportunities as compared to the fairness of opportunities for everyone in their countries.

In Chapter 5, spike charts are used to show the distribution of scores related to the perceived fairness of educational opportunities by education level. This facilitates the visualisation and comparison between the patterns of perceived fairness regarding educational opportunities in Germany and Romania. I present distributions by education level to facilitate the comparison between individuals with different educational experiences and qualifications.

I constructed a variable named perceived privilege, which records the difference between the score attributed by respondents to the fairness of their own educational opportunities and the fairness of opportunities for everyone in their countries. This

variable can take values from -10 (meaning people consider themselves to be very disadvantaged in relation to others in their country who have fair opportunities) to 10 (meaning people consider they had fair opportunities, while thinking others in their countries are very disadvantaged). I also use spike charts to look at the distributions of perceived privilege for people with different education levels from Germany and Romania.

3.5. In-depth interviews and their analysis

3.5.1. Sampling

I interviewed undergraduate students who went to school in Germany and Romania and were enrolled in social science programmes at prestigious universities in the UK. I chose to interview individuals studying social science disciplines because they tend to have more awareness of social inequality and have been found to be more sceptical of meritocracy (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). These students are the least likely among people with higher education to promote meritocratic narratives. The reason I chose to interview this group is to explore which meritocratic ideas are so entrenched that they are reproduced even by people who are aware of social inequalities. If even these students are espousing certain meritocratic ideas, it might suggest that other groups are even more likely to support these narratives.

Participants from Romania are very similar to participants from Germany in regard to educational achievement, field of study, and age. The rationale was for participants to be similar in all respects, apart from having either been to school in Germany or Romania. This approach is helpful for allowing the main line of comparison to be between participants experiencing educational stratification in different education systems. This is why I restricted my sample to a very specific sub-category of educational elites: undergraduate students studying social science disciplines at prestigious universities in England. Keeping the two sub-groups very similar was also the rationale for why I did not conduct more interviews with students who remained in their country of origin. Social science subjects are not very prestigious in Germany or Romania, so it would have been difficult to identify educational elites who have chosen this field of study and have chosen to stay in their home countries. Moreover, had I spoken with educational elites from Germany and Romania who studied

prestigious subjects such as Medicine or Law in their home countries, several other factors could have explained a difference in perceptions. The variation of perspectives observed could have been due to participants studying different kinds of disciplines, as Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012) point out that field of study contributes to people's perceptions about meritocracy. Alternatively, had I interviewed people who go to university in different countries, differences in perceptions about success could have been influenced by them experiencing different processes of admission to higher education. This is relevant considering that research by Warikoo (2018) shows how students in different countries tend to reproduce meritocratic discourses that illustrate similar conceptualisations of success as those informing admission decisions at their university. Interviewing individuals who all study social science disciplines and who have broadly similar experiences at university in the UK, the analysis of their understandings of merit can focus on their experiences of educational selection and grouping during their school-based education.

Being accepted at prestigious universities in the UK involved participants getting very high grades, so they represent a fraction of the elite students from their countries. I refer to the participants as "educational elite" or "elite students" because their educational results are very good, and they have also pursued extracurricular activities that allowed them to be selected to top universities in the UK. I selected "champions" of meritocracy in fields of study that build awareness of social inequality because I wanted to capture the tension between acknowledging structural inequalities and using one's advantages to attain educational success.

The acquisition of distinctive educational capital abroad represents a strategy for gaining or maintaining elite status, especially for those studying at prestigious universities in the UK and the US (Munk et al., 2012). Studying abroad can be viewed as a means of accruing transnational social and cultural capital. Because of the recent expansion of higher education in European countries, acquiring transnational capital might be seen as a strategy of the elite to renew their means of social differentiation (Ye and Nylander, 2015). Due to globalisation and the massification of higher education, there is an increased focus on skills such as foreign language proficiency and the ability to work in a multicultural environment, which constitute transnational capital (Gerhards and Hans, 2013). Opportunities to acquire transnational capital,

such as studying abroad, are distributed unequally between social classes. The importance of parents' economic capital for studying abroad is particularly noteworthy (ibid.), especially in countries like Germany or Romania, where higher education is free of charge. Looking at social class boundaries in Poland, Drabowicz and Warczok (2022) find that fluency in Western foreign languages became particularly important in Eastern Europe after 1989, because it was a requirement for getting managerial jobs created by international corporations or jobs in the public sector that required communicating with the European Union. This might be why the number of enrolments in UK universities from Romania kept increasing post-Brexit (Universities UK, 2022), even if the price of the degree has doubled.

Out of the thirty-one students interviewed, thirty students had at least one parent who went to university. The participants were not selected based on socio-economic background. However, their similarity in terms of socio-economic background allowed for a thicker description and exploration of the pressures they faced and the strategies they adopted in order to be academically successful. Therefore, it is telling that most individuals in the sample had higher-educated parents, as the socio-economic profile of my sample matched the profile of students who were more likely to study abroad. A very large proportion of students going to university in other countries had parents with higher education qualifications (González et al., 2011). Most participants had at least one parent who had a professional or managerial job. Their occupations would fall under categories I (higher managerial, professional, and administrative occupations) and II (lower managerial, administrative, and professional occupations) of the official National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification. This classification was developed based on a widely used class scheme measuring employment relations and conditions of occupations, known as the Goldthorpe Schema (Goldthorpe, 2007; Office for National Statistics, 2023). Most participants have at least one parent whose occupation would correspond to the highest level of occupational prestige and security, having professions such as doctors, higher-grade civil servants, lawyers, computer scientists, accountants, scientists, professors, and managers of large companies. However, six participants from both countries (two from Romania and four from Germany) have parents who work in occupations corresponding to the second category of the NS-SEC 7, such as teachers and nurses (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2018).

The sample is balanced in terms of gender, comprising of eight women and seven men from Germany, and nine women and seven men from Romania. Twelve out of sixteen interviewees from Romania grew up in Bucharest, the capital city, three participants are from other big cities in Romania, while only one Romanian participant is from a smaller city. This reflects the polarization of opportunities for people from rural and urban areas in Romania. Eight of the German participants are from villages and towns, while only seven are from big cities. As educational systems slightly vary in the different German Länder, it is important to explore the experiences of individuals from different regions. The interviewees are from Bavaria, which has a traditionally tripartite structure (Esser and Relikowski, 2021) , Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg, Hamburg, Brandenburg, and Berlin. Brandenburg and Berlin were part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) where education was organised under socialist principles before 1990 (West and Nikolai, 2017). However, following reunification in 1990, the structure of educational systems in the Länder from East Germany was replaced by the structure of the West German school system (Weiss and Weishaupt, 1999) In Brandenburg and Berlin, the first educational selection into different types of schools happens after six years of primary schools. However, all interviewees from these Länder went to selective Gymnasiums after four years, at age ten, because their parents considered that they would be challenged in a more constructive way at Gymnasium. Therefore, their experiences of educational selection were very similar to the ones of interviewees from other Länder.

I recruited interviewees on LinkedIn and from students' unions and groups of German students with scholarships. These scholarships are given on the basis of assessed merit, not financial need. The recruitment via LinkedIn was very successful, as each participant was approached directly. Of course, reaching out to participants on LinkedIn meant that they could also see my profile, containing information about my education and work. Thus, they could also get insights into my educational trajectory. I reflect further on my positionality and how this could influence my interaction with the participants in Chapter 7 (section 7.3).

3.5.2. Conducting the Interviews

During the interviews, I used a timeline as a visualization tool that helped participants plot the series of their educational experiences and transitions. Timeline interviews are used by researchers who are interested not only in how interviewees relate their stories, but also in the lived experiences of the interviewees. They are useful for eliciting insights that place events and perceptions of these events within the context of wider life stages. The method entails drawing a timeline in the middle of the paper and gradually plotting events on this timeline, as they are mentioned in conversation. Usually, the interviewee begins with events related to the topic of discussion and gradually, related events may come up as the story unfolds (Adriansen, 2012). Therefore, this method is very helpful in evoking the perceived connections between educational trajectories and contextual factors. The typical timelines of German students included fewer educational transitions than the timelines of Romanian students. By reflecting on the factors influencing their educational choices at each transition point, interviewees connect their own educational trajectory to the institutional characteristics of the educational systems that structured these events in their lives.

The last section of the interviews consisted of questions meant to elicit participants' opinions about the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries. They were asked about the fairness of the educational selection process, as well as about the role of talent and effort in influencing educational success. These questions were somewhat similar to survey questions. By probing further and asking "why" to almost every answer given by participants in this section of the interview, I got them to elaborate on their answers and to explain what factors they considered when responding. Because the questions leading up to this section were about their experiences and educational journeys, this final round of questions helped participants compare their own chances of reaching educational success with the opportunities of other people in their countries.

I conducted the interviews with German students in English, while the ones with Romanian students were conducted in Romanian, and then translated to English. I am fluent in both languages. In my translation, I aimed for comparability of meaning, while also emphasizing subtle but important deviations from the way concepts are

expressed in English. For example, I translated "bagaj cultural" as "cultural baggage", rather than "cultural capital", because I wanted to show the Romanian representation of the way in which culture is carried forward from one generation to the next. Gaining conceptual equivalence is facilitated by the researcher having not only a proficient understanding of the language, but also being familiar with the culture, so she can pick up on the full implications carried by a term (Wong and Poon, 2010). Having been to school in Romania and having been through the same selection processes as my interviewees, I have a good understanding of their references and the context they are describing. Moreover, my interviewees are fluently bilingual, and some of them slipped between Romanian and English during the interview, which allowed us to find together a suitable translation of what they wanted to express.

Because of COVID-19 and the regulations in the UK at different times, some interviews were conducted online, and others in person. After the social distancing rules were lifted, I asked participants whether they prefer online or a face-to-face interviews. Most participants living in London wanted a face-to-face interview. However, because most interviews were conducted during the lockdown restrictions, only nine interviews were conducted in person, while twenty-two interviews were conducted online. When conducting the interviews in person, the participants could draw on the timeline themselves and could then explain their drawings to me. On Zoom, only the host of the meeting could draw on the whiteboard, so I had to base my drawing on their instructions and check to see whether I understood the details correctly. While sharing the screen on Zoom, the images of researchers and participants become small. Therefore, while using the whiteboard in Zoom, the timeline became the point of focus for both myself and the participants. By way of contrast, face-to-face interviews allowed our attention to move quickly from the timeline to one-another.

To have time to establish rapport with participants on Zoom, I would start by asking them a few open-ended questions about their choice of study at university and their educational journey, so as to talk for at least fifteen minutes before sharing the screen and drawing on the whiteboard. Eye contact is hindered during online interviewing, because looking at the camera or at the interviewee's image of the screen fails to establish a reciprocated gaze (Oliffe et al., 2021). However, many individuals find

Zoom useful in forming and maintaining rapport with the researcher(Gray et al., 2020), especially since online interviewing is similar to one-to-one communication online via Zoom or FaceTime, which was routinely used during the pandemic (Lobe et al., 2022). Furthermore, Zoom interviewing increases participants' convenience and comfort, as they can speak from their homes, which reduces the formality of the conversation (Oliffe et al., 2021).

3.5.3. Interview schedule

The interview was structured around four main topics: 1. Participants' educational journeys and the accomplishments that helped them gain admission to a prestigious university; 2. factors for success and failure during past educational stages and transitions; 3. reviewing the timeline and how certain processes of educational selection influenced further educational opportunities; 4. participants' general opinions about the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries and the way in which talent and effort are promoted. I started with collecting information about their field of study, the place where they grew up, and their socioeconomic background because I considered this information important for providing context and helping me identify effective probes. The interview guide is provided in Appendix 5.

Based on the guidelines provided by Jane Ritchie and colleagues (2014), I chose to start the discussion with participants' choice of university and field of study, to ease them into the interview. I asked them about the timing of their decision to study abroad, the alternatives they were considering, and the achievements that they think set them apart from other candidates. I considered these questions relatively straightforward and a good way to understand how they made sense of their accomplishments without having to reflect very much on their answers. After this, for the main sections of the interview, I combined factual questions such as "What kind of school did you go to?" with questions that stimulate reflection, such as "Could you describe the most successful pupils at that school?", or "What was your main motivation to do well at school?". Mixing questions which require shorter and longer answers was helpful for maintaining the flow of the interview, as the most difficult questions should be asked in the middle of the interview (Harvey, 2011). I decided to ask questions about participants' general opinions about the importance of talent and

effort in achieving educational success towards the end of the interview because I considered these questions easier to answer than the more personal ones. Also, I preferred that participants answer the general opinion questions after having reflected on their experience. Otherwise, they could have framed the accounts of their own experiences based on how they had answered the general questions about educational opportunities.

The questions from the semi-structured interviews which I used for the analysis in Chapter 5 ask for participants' opinions regarding statements such as *"The school system creates the conditions whereby talent finds its way to the top"* or "*If you are prepared to work hard, it does not matter what school you go to"*. These questions are similar to survey questions. Yet, asking "why" and probing extensively, I got participants to explain their answers and to provide examples in support of their claims. Thus, I could gain a better understanding of the way they interpreted concepts such as talent, effort, and privilege.

The interview contains questions about participants' accounts of the successful pupils through reference to their classmates and themselves, which I analyse in Chapter 6. I ask participants to analyse their peers who were successful at each educational level, as well as the peers who could not keep up with the requirements. Inspired by the sociology of valuation and evaluation (Lamont, 2012), I wanted to see what forms of success are given regard and validation by the participants. Also, the way participants compared their peers and made sense of the profile of the most successful pupil is relevant for revealing the boundaries that separate elite students from other peers. Boundary work was approached by Lamont (1992) to explore different definitions of personal worth among elites in France and the US. In a similar vein, this thesis explores which type of success participants relate to, and which type of success is dismissed by them as not reflecting desirable skills. An experimental study conducted by Feather and Simon (1971) showed that others' success was more often attributed to ability than own success, and that others' failure was more likely to be attributed to bad luck than own failure. Thus, by asking participants about the success of their peers, I elicited a discussion about the traits required to excel at school. These descriptions of success might have been diluted if I had only asked questions about participants' own success.

To foster honest evaluations, Knapik (2006) recommended orienting the topic of discussion in an interview as something located in the world shared between the researcher and the participant in that moment. This advice is based on a project asking interview participants about their experiences of being interviewed for research. She found that when asked directly about their experiences and achievements, some people formulate answers knowing that what they say can be related to larger social issues. She further noted that when participants felt that the focus of the research gaze was themselves, rather than the phenomenon of interest, they were cautious not to say something that could be reworked by the researcher in line with their own agenda. Thus, switching the focus back and forth from participants' educational journeys to the success and failure of their peers, I could gather a range of perspectives without placing too strong of a scrutiny on participants' self-image. Through this, I aimed at minimising their defensiveness in regard to the advantages they benefited from.

3.5.4. Ethical Considerations

Before initiating data collection for the qualitative strand of my research, I followed the procedure for ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The study was classified as low-risk, since the participants did not belong to vulnerable groups and the topic of the study was not considered sensitive. Nevertheless, matters of consent and confidentiality were treated as highly important.

I obtained informed consent from participants in writing ahead of each interview. The process of obtaining informed consent consisted of me sharing an information sheet presenting the aims of the project and a consent form with the participants. The informed consent form is provided in Appendix 3. The information sheet contained information about the research project, as well as information about what the participation in this project would involve. These documents were sent to participants by email ahead of the interviews. They could either sign the consent form electronically and send it to me before the beginning of the interview, or sign a copy provided in person, before the start of the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded about data anonymity and confidentiality, and that they could choose not to answer some questions, or to

withdraw after the interview. I emphasised that findings will be written in a way that does not make their answers attributable to them, even by their peers. Anonymity of interview data was preserved by saving the files with a code assigned to each participant, that did not contain any personal information about the participants. To protect confidentiality, interview recordings were stored in a separate folder to anonymised transcripts. Data from this project were securely stored using LSE's OneDrive.

I anticipated that participants might experience discomfort if they had to reveal that their educational success was partly determined by external factors, such as their parents' support in granting access to high-quality educational opportunities. As my research focuses on processes of educational stratification, I prepared for the possibility that participants might remember moments of stress or anxiety caused by the high stakes of educational selection. I told participants that they do not have to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable with. Also, in line with advice given to qualitative researchers by Annette Lareau (2021), I told them that there are no right or wrong answers, and that I am interested in their experiences and their opinions.

My strategy to come up with adequate responses to emotionally- charged moments was to focus the discussion on how the participant was able to overcome the difficulties mentioned, so as to bring a positive perspective to the conversation. Indeed, a sensitive moment appeared in one of the interviews, as the participant remembered one of her parents strongly opposed her educational choices. In light of the suggestions made by Goodson and Sikes (2001), I took responsibility for diverting the discussion when I believed the interviewee was delving too deep into issues specifically related to the personal relationship with her parents. I asked about the requirements that the participant had fulfilled in order to be successful in taking that educational opportunity, which made the interviewee feel empowered and more comfortable with her decisions.

3.5.5. Qualitative analysis

I managed and analysed the data using the Framework approach in NVivo developed by NatCen Social Research (Ritchie et al., 2014). The first step was to transcribe the interviews, which helped me become familiar with the data. Based on the main

patterns identified in the interviews, and the main topics included in the interview guide, I drafted an analytical framework, which consisted of a series of matrices covering the most prominent themes and subthemes. This thematic framework was used to organize data, as each participant was assigned a row, with each column representing a subtheme. Then, the data were grouped by subthemes. In case of very long answers, a summary was entered in the appropriate cell, including relevant quotes and staying as close as possible to the words used by the participant. At this stage, the relevant text from Romanian transcripts was translated and introduced in English into the Framework. The development of the analytical framework was an iterative process. If the data did not fit properly under the analytical categories already identified, I added categories or edited the subthemes. In the final stage of the process, I worked through the charted data, drawing out a range of experiences and views from both German and Romanian participants so as to identify similarities and differences.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I use thematic analysis to explore the meaning participants attributed to educational privilege and to educational success. Elliott (2005) argues that thematic analysis focuses on the substantive elements of participants' accounts, while there are other ways of analysing participants' narratives that focus on the form and coherence of discourses. Based on this classification, I chose thematic rather than discourse analysis because I was more interested in the content of participants' narratives about their educational success, rather than the structure of these narratives.

The matrix-based format has the advantage that it facilitates both cross-case and within-case analysis, and it allows the analyst to shift between different levels of abstraction (Ritchie et al., 2014). Exploring the consistency or contradictions of narratives within cases was an important feature for this project, as a significant share of interviews conveyed both meritocratic explanations for educational success and a recognition of structural (dis)advantages. Sometimes, an interviewee would highlight the hard work and talent of those who were academically successful, but then provide in other passages a clear acknowledgement of the support they had from their family or the importance of going to a prestigious school. This complexity of interviewees' attributions of success made it important to look carefully at the

context of the questions to understand what might account for the different framing of the answers. Thus, I considered this approach more suitable than the grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) or the thematic networks approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001) which both focus on bottom-up open coding rather than identifying the larger themes or tensions in the data.

3.6. Research process and types of inference: integrating insights from quantitative and qualitative analysis

Using mixed methods was a key feature of my research design. The cluster analysis undertaken in this thesis informs the qualitative component. I selected the countries for Chapters 5 and 6 based on the clustering from Chapter 4. Moreover, the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter 4 helped me gain a better understanding about the patterns of educational stratification in European countries, which informed the phrasing of some of the questions for the interviews which I report on in Chapters 5 and 6.

I use mixed methods to check the plausibility of interpretations from one method to another. According to the typology developed by Almalki (2016) the research design for this study best fits the triangulation design where both quantitative and qualitative research elements are given similar importance and have been developed relatively independently from each other. However, the preliminary results of the quantitative analysis were used to choose the cases for qualitative research. The insights from both strands of research are integrated for analysis and interpretation. As Silva and Wright (2008) argue, using mixed methods is effective not as a way to verify the accuracy of facts, but rather to assess the credibility of interpretation. In Chapter 7, I bring together the key insights from the three empirical chapters to build towards analysing the relationship between different logics of stratification and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania.

This PhD thesis relies on abductive analysis, which aims at generating novel theoretical insights that enhance existing theories through identifying empirical findings that go beyond the initial theoretical premises (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013). According to Timmermans and Tavory (2012), abduction depends on the researcher's positionality and engagement with the broader theoretical field. The authors further argue that while using abductive analysis, the researcher can detect

surprising and relevant observations in their findings based on comparing their empirical results with the implications of multiple theoretical frameworks. By first conducting the quantitative analysis on patterns of educational stratification in different countries, I familiarised myself with the literature on different logics of educational stratification and different ideologies of legitimising ability grouping. Based on this literature, I was expecting individuals educated in Germany and Romania to have distinct understandings of merit, since they were educated in very different types of educational systems. However, previous theoretical frameworks did not specify how individuals in Germany and Romania understand the interplay between talent and effort in influencing educational success, apart from the suggestion that German pupils tend to attribute success to intrinsic talent (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2005). Comparing the interview data with the existing theories allowed me to identify additional dimensions to the ways in which elite students understand success and failure within the educational realm, and how these ways of framing educational success differ between Germany and Romania.

To unravel how the institutional configurations of educational systems influence individuals' strategies for successfully navigating processes of educational stratification and their understandings of merit, I compare the experiences of elite students from Germany and Romania. I approach this comparison with "ethnographic sensibility" (Simmons and Smith, 2017), taking into consideration how interviewees make sense of their contexts. This approach is aligned to what Steiner-Khamsi (2010) referred to as "contextual comparison" (p.326), whereby comparison represents a tool to understand, rather than abstract from, the context. I incorporate participants' meanings of merit and educational privilege into the analysis so that I capture the processes through which they make sense of their lived educational experiences.

The next three chapters of this thesis constitute the empirical chapters which are presented in the form of three self-contained research papers.

4. Mapping the distinct patterns of educational and social stratification in European countries

Abstract

This chapter analyses how educational and initial vocational training systems in Europe vary regarding the way in which they structure educational routes for pupils of different academic ability. The study uses cluster analysis to explore the degree of similarity between 25 European countries, including variables related to: stratification within compulsory education; vocational orientation; links between initial vocational education and the labour market; transitions from secondary education; stratification within tertiary education; and links between educational qualifications and labour market outcomes. I identify three clusters of countries that have distinct patterns of stratification. This research contributes to the literature on educational regimes and school-to-work transitions by adding countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and integrating multiple dimensions pertaining to the link between educational and social stratification. Thus, it develops a more encompassing representation of the architecture of educational pathways in different European countries.

4.1. Introduction

Education systems have a multi-stage architecture (Di Stasio and Solga, 2017), composed of institutions which unfold different effects depending on their combination with other institutions(Brzinsky-Fay, 2017). The ensemble of these institutional characteristics contributes to the formation of different "worlds of competence production" (Allmendinger and Leibfried, 2003), which structures transitions between different educational stages and towards work. This chapter looks at the way in which the organisational structure of different educational systems across European countries shape distinct patterns of stratification. I take educational stratification to mean the selection of students into educational pathways

(between and within schools) that guide subsequent transitions to further levels of education and work. Selection by ability into different types of schools, whether academic or vocational, is referred to as tracking. Ability grouping within schools is referred to as streaming if it happens for all subjects, or setting, if pupils are grouped only for some subjects.

An increasing proportion of occupational positions in post-industrial societies are defined by educational credentials or qualifications(Baker, 2009; Esping-Andersen, 1993). In this chapter, I analyse the allocation of pupils into educational categories, which either puts "brakes" to restrain opportunities (Allmendinger, 1989) or channels high achievers into certain trajectories. This process of allocation is guided by ideal-typical educational routes which have embedded expectations of what pupils can and should achieve (Schels and Wöhrer, 2022).

The chapter seeks to answer the following questions: *How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes? Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?* I take "regimes" to mean constellations of institutional characteristics shaped by institutional path-dependencies (Janmaat et al., 2013). In this case, educational systems are conceptualised as institutional frames whose configuration is the one that influences how educational categories are formed (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017). A regime- type model groups countries according to overall rationales (Walther, 2006).

Integrating insights from comparative political economy and educational sociology, Österman (2018) and Busemeyer (2014) point out that vocational orientation is a double-edged sword that could lead to less inequality of income, but also less social mobility in terms of class. Here, vocational orientation is defined as the extent to which an educational system provides individuals with occupation-specific skills rather than general skills (Österman, 2018). Also, Busemeyer (2014) argues that delayed tracking is not a sufficient condition for low levels of social inequality, as there are more subtle ways of stratification within schools that still create a hierarchy of recognition. Informed by their work, I aim to explore different models of stratification by looking at how the nexus between vocational and higher education

(VET-HE) in different post-industrial European societies interacts with prior forms of educational differentiation.

To look at patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and segmentation (Andreß and Heien, 2001) associated with different educational routes, I capture what happens at different educational stages and transitions, until after graduation from either vocational or higher education. I treat institutional configurations at different educational stages (primary, secondary, tertiary) as interlinked. This is important because disparities that emerge during early phases of schooling carry over into adulthood, while, at the same time, mechanisms of diversion towards less prestigious tertiary education programmes can be anticipated and affect choices made earlier on (Borgna, 2017). Therefore, the analysis undertaken in this chapter will include variables focusing on both secondary and tertiary education, as well as variables exploring how educational qualifications at different levels are coupled with the labour market.

4.2. Different models of educational stratification

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature about different rationales for allocating students to specific educational paths. I bring together multiple classifications focusing on different educational stages to explore the sequence of stratification processes that leads to the formation of distinct educational and occupational routes.

Turner (1960) relates the characteristics of educational selection to the prevailing norms of social mobility in the UK and US by constructing two ideal-typical patterns of accessing the elite – contest and sponsored mobility systems. Contest mobility creates the conditions whereby elite status is "won" through aspirants' efforts, and credentials are visible enough to be recognised by society at large. Premature judgements are avoided, so as to keep individuals competing for as long as possible. Sponsored mobility is a system where elite membership is "given" by established elite members based on the recognition of complex talents and skills. It operates early selection, to give time for the preparation of the "chosen" future members of the elite.

Kerckhoff (1974) argues that Turner's discussion of "elite recruits" applies to all levels of stratification systems, but that different norms can coexist. For example, the

author argued that the British educational system was a blend between sponsorship and contest mobility, as sponsorship was mostly used for controlling access to elite positions, while access to the other strata mostly followed the contest mobility pattern. In a similar vein, Van Zanten (2019b) argues that sponsorship and contest co-exist in most contemporary educational systems, because the contest norm has become the legitimate ideal of most educational systems since the 1960s. However, Van Zanten further claims that the spread of the contest norm has not completely abolished previous forms of sponsorship and might have even created new ones. She illustrates this idea by arguing that in France the development of a single comprehensive system of lower-secondary schools, which replaced the previous tripartite system, did not fully abolish academic and social hierarchies. Soon after selection into different types of schools was eliminated in the 1980s, various options of selective classes appeared, offering an emphasis on languages, the arts, or European culture, which were appealing for successful upper- and middle- class students. Another example of the norms of contest and sponsorship coexisting is the incomplete reorganisation of secondary education on comprehensive lines in England. Even though the secondary school system is now predominantly comprehensive, roughly 5% of secondary schools have remained selective grammar schools (West, 2022).

To go beyond the frameworks developed by Turner and acknowledge that there are multiple strata other than the intellectual elite and the "masses", it is helpful to upgrade the image of the "contest" for elite accession as being a tournament, with some exiting the race at different stages, while fewer remain eligible for the final rounds (van Zanten, 2015). The tournament model of mobility, coined by Rosenbaum (1979), is characterised by a sequence of competitions that have implications for individuals' mobility chances in all subsequent selections. Winners have the opportunity to compete for high levels, while losers are either denied the opportunity to compete further or permitted to only compete for lower levels. This broadens the focus from only looking at who is selected at different stages, to who is excluded or denied access to further educational opportunities.

Thus, this chapter looks at processes of educational stratification through the lens of three distinct models: sponsored mobility, leading to segmentation of educational

routes according to identified potential; contest mobility, whereby individuals' efforts are channelled towards winning a spot for the most desirable educational route; tournament, a series of competitions in which the aim is to avoid losing or being excluded at each stage. This thesis focuses on classifying European countries according to their predominant patterns of educational stratification, even though the co-existence of multiple norms is acknowledged in the description of the different clusters. A segment of the population from countries belonging to the "sponsored" stratification cluster might go through competitive examination processes which are rather characteristic of contest mobility, while some individuals might benefit from sponsored mobility even in systems labelled as "contest" or "tournament". However, this research groups countries according to their overarching model of stratification, which is likely to influence the experiences and the perceptions of the widest proportion of the population.

This classification favours comparison, not just between countries, but also in regard to the predominant model of stratification for the same country at different times. For example, England was seen by Turner (1960) in the 1960s and Morgan (1990) in the late 1980s as representative of sponsored mobility, but was later found by Mountford-Zimdars (2015), who used data from the 2000s about university admissions, to correspond to the contest model of stratification. The key characteristic Turner associated with the sponsored mobility in England was the tripartite system of separating pupils at age eleven based on ability, although he reflected on the possibility that the sponsored system would be weakened by the introduction of the comprehensive school. Morgan (1990) argued that the system maintained characteristics of sponsored mobility because of the high standards required for individuals to get admitted to universities, and the continued belief that not everyone was capable of continuing with higher education, which was still a training ground for the future elite. In the context of the massification of higher education and the school system being predominantly comprehensive, Mountford-Zidars (2015) argues that contest-type mobility is now most common in the England, as selection into prestigious universities is mostly influenced by results in A-level examinations. Yet, as around 5 % of secondary schools in England are still grammar schools selecting pupils at age eleven based on their ability (West, 2022), it is

important to acknowledge that the historical legacy of sponsorship might still influence individuals' norms about selection into the elite.

The recent empirical studies on educational and school-to-work transition regimes have mostly focused either on compulsory education, tertiary education, or vocational education and training, but not on how they are assembled to create stratification and mobility patterns. Existing research on education regimes including the US and EU-15 countries has identified four clusters of countries: the Continental, Mediterranean, Nordic, and English-speaking (Green et al., 2006; Lavrijsen & Nicaise, 2016; West and Nikolai, 2013). They have focused on institutional characteristics related to inequality of educational opportunity, public expenditure allocated to different educational levels, and gaps in educational achievement. However, these studies capture the importance of vocational tracks only by looking at enrolment and public spending indicators. This says relatively little about the specificity of vocational skills and their links to academic education and the labour market, which is strongly determined by whether initial vocational education and training (iVET) is school-based, workplace-based, or mixed (Anderson and Hassel, 2011). Studies focusing on comparing countries within these four regimes have found significant differences. For example, the research by Helms Jørgensen et al. (2019) argues that the Nordic model of educational transitions is not very distinctive, since the Nordic countries have been through significant departures from the universal school-to-work transition regime because of the policy shifts that have occurred since the 1990s.

Mons et al (2013) classified education systems in the OECD by looking at educational curricula at secondary education level in a broad sense, including aspects of the prescribed curricula (such as the integration of life skills into the curriculum), practices of grouping pupils according to ability, the quality of discipline, and pupil-teacher relations. Similar to the differentiation Bernstein (1971, 1975) made between the 'collection' code, whereby educational knowledge is distinct from practical knowledge, and the 'integrated' code with a greater emphasis on pupils' experience of learning in a less compartmentalised way, Mons et al. (2013) distinguish between two variations of the 'collection' model, and the 'total education' model. Countries assigned to the 'collection' model share a strict hierarchy of educational curricula

corresponding to distinct educational pathways, rigid teacher-pupil relations, and a targeted incorporation of life skills only in the curricula for the lower performing students. Yet, the 'producer' model, including countries from Central Europe such as Germany and Czech Republic, promotes close links between education and the labour market, while the 'academic' model, represented by France and Italy, is more resistant to the demands of the labour market, and seeks to promote abstract encyclopaedic knowledge. On the other hand, the 'total education' model, mainly found in Northern Europe and English-speaking countries, is characterised by the integration of vocational subjects and life skills alongside traditional academic disciplines, an orientation towards providing personalised support and a focus on the individuality of pupils.

The institutional setup of the education system affects the distribution of income and status, as it influences the educational pathways of individuals placed in different parts of the distribution of academic skills. In short, a well-established VET system might prevent those from the middle segment of the academic distribution from pursuing higher education, but it could also incentivise those at the lower tail of the skills distribution to work hard to secure qualified employment (Busemeyer, 2014).

Looking at how European countries draw distinctions between different institutions providing tertiary education, Cedefop (2019) classifies higher education systems in the European Union as either unified, university-dominated, or binary. Most educational systems in Europe are composed of a mix of institutions that are stratified by prestige and selectivity. In binary system, the difference between the academic and the vocational institutions is clear cut, whereas, in unified systems, both traditional and vocational tertiary programmes are offered within universities (Willemse and de Beer, 2012).

These typologies construct different categories of European educational systems based on the aspects of differentiation they focus on, but they do not examine how these processes of educational stratification interact to create educational routes. Therefore, integrating the multiple interrelated aspects of educational stratification in the same analysis will allow for a more holistic exploration of the institutional configurations influencing individuals' educational transitions throughout their educational trajectories. My analysis will bring together variables related to

vocational orientation, and stratification within higher education, which have been treated as disparate by other studies.

Different logics of drawing the divide between higher and vocational education have been previously studied by focusing on a few European countries. Powell et al.(2012) explore how competence is conceptualised in the German, French, and British educational models. Walther (2006) constructs "transition regimes" by looking at how segmented or flexible school-to-work transitions are in Italy, Great Britain, Denmark, and Germany. Both studies only use a few canonical cases.

Very few studies (Borgna, 2017; Dumas et al., 2013) have included the post-socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe to the analysis. I am including these countries, as they have a history of promoting a strong link between educational attainment and social status, but have adjusted to accommodate less rigid trajectories in post-industrial economies (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2010). While West (2013) considers the educational systems from CEE countries as a distinct regime, most research studies comparing educational systems from Eastern and Western Europe (Dumas et al., 2013, Beblavý et al., 2013) identify differences between these countries, challenging the idea that they can be regarded as part of the same educational model (Malinovskiy and Shibanova, 2022; Roberts, 2001). For instance, Saar and Ure (2013) integrate the CEE countries to the typologies of education and labour market systems already developed for the Western European and East Asian countries by Green (1999). They argue that Romania and Bulgaria are similar to France and other Latin countries, the Baltic countries resemble the UK because of their emphasis on general education, while Slovenia and the Czech Republic are closer to the German model because of the vocational orientation of their education. However, they do not test this typology empirically using the same variables for all countries.

4.3. Methodology

As patterns of stratification are composed of multiple institutional features, I employ cluster analysis, a multivariate descriptive technique that establishes similarity based on a large number of characteristics of the units of interest (Bartholomew et al., 2008). The method has been widely used in institutional regime analyses (Busemeyer, 2014; West and Nikolai, 2013) employing a systemic perspective which

allows institutions to "hang together and interact"(Ebbinghaus, 2012, p.3). Cases are treated as "wholes" (Byrne et al., 2012) and each case is assigned to a cluster based on how similar or dissimilar the case is relative to other cases.

As cluster analysis establishes categories based on relative relationships between the cases, the grouping can be sensitive to the inclusion of cases and variables (Busemeyer, 2014). Thus, I used theoretical principles to guide my choice of variables. Comparing most European countries at the same time avoids situations where contrasts are overemphasised, like in small-n comparisons. To illustrate this point, a relevant example is how the educational system in Norway is seen as strongly stratified compared to the US (Allmendinger, 1989), but is classified as part of the more comprehensive Scandinavian model when compared to multiple continental countries, such as Germany (Busemeyer, 2014). Therefore, adding the EU member states from CEE allows for an exploration of a wider range of educational characteristics, while still focusing on cases sharing enough commonality in their educational structures to make comparison possible (Ebbinghaus, 2012).

To measure the distance between cases, I employ Ward's method, as it minimises variance within clusters and has been found to yield the most accurate partitions in most instances (Bartholomew et al., 2008). As it has been previously used to devise educational regimes by Busemeyer (2014) and West and Nikolai (2013), it is the most suitable approach to allow comparability with prior typologies. At each stage in the clustering process, Ward's method considers all pairs of clusters and asks how much "information" (measured as the sum of squares about the mean) would be lost if that pair were to be amalgamated (Bartholomew et al., 2008).

Because the distance-measuring algorithm is sensitive to the scale of variables, all indicators are standardised using z-transformations, giving each variable a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. I use data from Eurostat, as well as a survey on opinions towards vocational education conducted by Cedefop. I also make use of reports by Eurydice (2020) and OECD (2016), including country-level data from PISA surveys. Even though PISA data has relatively high nonparticipation rates, the problem occurs mostly at the pupil level (Jerrim, 2021), so it is less relevant for studies that look at schools and educational systems than for studies on educational achievement. For a detailed description of how each variable is operationalised, see

Table A.1in Appendix 1. The average values for each cluster are presented in Table 4.1. The table of correlations between the variables can be found in Appendix 2.

In the analysis, I provide short descriptions of each cluster and I illustrate the formation of educational pathways through focusing on one country that is representative of the cluster. The purpose of the descriptions is to shed light on the connection between processes of educational stratification at different educational stages, and to explain how the patterns of stratification in these countries resemble the sponsored, contest, or tournament model.

The dimensions and associated variables that are included in this analysis are presented below. The variables selected are related to the ways in which educational pathways are formed, providing information about processes of differentiation and educational transitions. There are nonetheless ways in which pupils who have been allocated to certain educational routes can move to different educational tracks. For example, in educational systems with early selection, such as Germany and the Netherlands, reforms have been implemented to reduce the rigidity of the educational pathways. Still, according to research by Hillmert and Jacob (2010), upward mobility into the academic track from the lower school tracks is still quite rare in Germany, while general permeability between tracks is found to be even lower in Netherlands than Germany (Jacob and Tieben, 2009). Research by Bittman and Schindler (Bittmann and Schindler, 2021) provides several explanations for why high-performing but risk-averse individuals in Germany who follow the vocational track lower their aspirations and do not upgrade to academic upper-secondary education. Reasons are related to following a different curriculum, teachers having lower qualifications and expectations, as well as peer-group effects leading to lower aspirations. Thus, allocation into different educational pathways is still highly relevant for individuals' life chances.

I justify the choice of indicators both in terms of their relevance and how they are connected with other indicators.

4.3.1. Stratification within compulsory education

The variables selected for this dimension capture the age of first formal selection by ability and the various forms of grouping by ability. I look at the allocation of pupils to

different school types, as well as into different classes within the same school, as research by Chmielewski (2014) shows that course-by-course grouping constitutes an implicitly unequal system of grouping. Even though the author finds that setting or streaming leads to less segregation by socio-economic status than tracking, it still influences pupils' future achievement and educational choices. Thus, this thesis takes into consideration forms of selection by ability into different types of school, as well as within the same school. This thesis also includes data on percentage of pupils who repeat a year, which is a way of dealing with heterogeneity in educational performance, in the absence of targeted support for low achievers. Research by Motiejunaite et al. (2014) indicates that European countries offer different levels of support for low achievers, with Nordic countries and the UK providing the most extensive targeted support. Their research uses data from Eurydice related to policies targeting low achievers in regard to the possibility of requesting a reading specialist, national tests to identify individual learning needs, and the existence of reading comprehension strategies in the national curriculum. Yet, their analysis is a 'yes' or 'no' inventory on whether these provisions are mentioned in official policies, and the authors acknowledge that there is significant variation regarding the ways in which these support programmes are implemented in different countries. More granular data about different levels of support provided at school would be required to accurately incorporate the extent and type of assistance provided to low achievers into a rigorous classification, but this information is currently not available.

Turner's (1960) framework about norms of stratification considers the different timing and approach of selection into the elite, so including data on the mode of educational selection would be relevant for this classification. However, the available data provided by OECD Education at a Glance (OECD, 2023) about national examinations has missing data for Portugal and Sweden. Additionally, the OECD report does not take into consideration examinations organised by schools that select a percentage of a cohort into academic tracks, such as examinations for entry to Gymnasiums in Czechia and Slovakia, which are relevant for sorting the 'most promising' pupils. Moreover, the dataset indicates the educational level when the national examination takes place, but there are some inconsistencies regarding this classification. For instance, the GCSE examination in England is considered to take place during upper-secondary education, contrasting with studies focused on the UK

which position this examination as occurring at the end of lower-secondary education (e.g. Capsada-Munsech and Boliver, 2019) . Furthermore, the dataset does not indicate a national examination at the end of lower-secondary education in Bulgaria either, even though the national assessment taken there at the end of seventh grade is used for placing pupils into upper secondary schools (Guthrie et al., 2022). As all European countries have national examinations at the end of secondary education, the differentiation regarding modes of selection refers to selection after primary and lower-secondary education, but the data available regarding examination at these stages is not reliable. Since the dataset compiled by OECD mentions the aims of the national examinations as including 'student access to selective institutions' and 'student selection into courses/tracks', this information seems to overlap with the information already included in this thesis on percentage of selective schools, and percentage of schools that use streaming.

Focusing on age of formal selection and the different forms of ability grouping is aligned with Turner's theoretical framework. Based on Turner's assertion that under the contest system elite status must be recognised by society at large, while under sponsored mobility selection into the elite is made by individuals trained to recognise intellectual or literary competencies, it would seem intuitive that contest mobility is compatible with a national standardized examination and sponsored mobility would rely on teachers' judgements. Yet, Turner (1960) classified England in the 1960s as an example of sponsored mobility, since selection into different types of schools happened at age eleven, albeit through standardized examination. Thus, the timing of selection and the rigidity in the hierarchy of educational pathways is most indicative of the norms of stratification.

4.3.2. Vocational orientation

The variables related to this section pertain to the characteristics of vocational education and training programmes at the secondary education level, rather than the overall orientation of the curriculum during secondary education. This is because there is limited and patchy information available regarding the extent to which educational curricula are traditionally academic or integrate vocational components providing 'life skills'. The classification by Mons et al. (2013) classifying curricula in different OECD countries relies on reports on educational systems provided by

UNESCO, OECD, and the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Framework Archive, that the authors interpreted in a way that ascribes different levels to each dimension included into the analysis (such as 'high', 'medium' or 'low' attention paid to teaching life skills). However, the authors do not provide a rigorous explanation about the process behind developing these categorical variables. Therefore, turning these classifications into numeric variables would risk a reduction in the rigour and accuracy of the hierarchical cluster analysis. Moreover, Mons et al. (2013) find strong links between educational curricula and student grouping policies. Since the analysis in this thesis includes multiple variables related to stratification within compulsory education, incorporating variables related to the differentiation of educational curricula in secondary education could result in overemphasising this dimension of stratification.

The architecture of opportunities for tertiary education and work is influenced by the proportion of pupils enrolled in vocational education, and the way vocational educational is delivered. The prevalence of vocational education indicates the extent to which vocational routes are common and institutionalised, and the degree to which a country places emphasis on vocational skills. The type of iVET provision indicates whether iVET is rather integrated within the educational system or connected to the labour market.

In relation to social destination, Nylund (2012) argues that the purpose of vocational programmes is socialising pupils for extended working-class positions, although in Germany, for example, the highest segment of apprenticeships offers access to relatively higher skilled occupations (Protsch and Solga, 2016). Nonetheless, iVET might signal lower academic ability and prevent people from lower socio-economic backgrounds from pursuing higher education (Hoidn and Šťastný, 2021). Although iVET that is occupation specific and delivered at the workplace is more effective for reducing unemployment risks (Shavit and Muller, 2000), graduates of school-based iVET have higher chances of pursuing tertiary education (Virolainen and Persson Thunqvist, 2017).

Many European countries have recently been engaged in curriculum reforms oriented towards introducing learning outcomes in the design and renewal of VET curricula (Cedefop, 2012), aimed at strengthening the link between VET and the labour market

and promoting more individualised learning paths (Cedefop, 2010). Yet, it is difficult to assess whether the learning outcomes approach has been implemented into a meaningful way, as the relationship between the written and taught curricula was found to be complex (Cedefop, 2012). Pilz (2016) warns against using general overviews of VET systems to analyse country approaches, since it is rather important to explore the enacted curriculum and the practical relevance of teaching vocational subjects. The author further specifies that for many countries, studies into teaching models are limited or rudimentary, so his work only focuses on a few cases. As a proxy for the specificity of vocational teaching, Shavit and Muller (2000) argue that iVET education with a more prominent work-place component tends to be more specific, while iVET provided in educational settings is less likely to lock a person into a narrow occupational trajectory.

4.3.3. Links between initial vocational education and the labour market

Initial vocational education can act as a safety net, protecting people against unemployment and unskilled work, but can also restrict the range of occupation opportunities available (di Stasio, 2017). Occupations requiring vocational education and fewer years of training tend to rank lower in terms of social recognition (Abrassart and Wolter, 2020). I include indicators looking at the coupling between initial vocational education and the labour market because it influences transition outcomes: in countries where linkages are strong, qualifications are a prerequisite for working in certain professions. Usually, in these countries, the labour market value of vocational qualifications is higher (Lavrijsen and Nicaise, 2013).

4.3.4. Transitions from secondary education

Looking at transitions between educational stages is important as there are "secondary effects" of social origin that manifest because of the way in which families from different backgrounds evaluate the risks and gains of different educational choices at certain branching points (Boudon, 1974). Assessing the opportunities of young people with vocational and general education to pursue further education can reveal the extent to which graduates of iVET are diverted away from further study. I also capture the proportion of early leavers to assess the extent to which educational systems offer educational opportunities for everyone.

4.3.5. Stratification within the tertiary education system

With the growing number of higher education programmes in many European countries, the diversity of institutions increased. Graduates of tertiary education are increasingly heterogeneous regarding the type of qualifications and the quality of those qualifications (Triventi, 2013). While Bachelor programmes are more accessible, students from disadvantaged families are more likely to study less prestigious types of degrees and less likely to continue with a Master's (Neugebauer et al., 2016). In countries where type of qualification (whether theoretical or vocational, postgraduate or undergraduate) matters more, relative educational achievement and the prestige of universities might matter less, and vice-versa. Moreover, the distribution of graduates in different fields of education is relevant for the nature of transitions from education to work. Knowledge economies based on high-end services are rather reliant on high "general" skills, whereas knowledge economies based on advanced manufacturing depend of the higher education system to supply specific skills (Durazzi, 2019). To assess the profile of tertiary skills that knowledge economies rely on, I include indicators related to the percentage of tertiary education graduates in Engineering and other STEM subjects, as well as in Social Science and Administration. This chapter includes variables linked to both differentiation in terms of types of degrees, and fields of study.

4.3.6. Links between educational qualifications and labour market participation

I look at employment rates of young graduates and compare the employability of individuals with different degrees to see which type of education provides more or less safety when it comes to finding jobs. Marques et al. (2022) argue that different models of capitalism have varying capacities to absorb graduates in jobs that match their qualification levels. The authors mention that some countries invest more in VET, while others invest more in higher education, which leads to cross-national differences in the architecture of educational and occupational routes. The indicators I use highlight differences in employment rates based on types of qualifications, revealing the relative employment advantages of some qualifications in certain economies.

Moreover, I look at mismatch rates between area of occupation and field of education, to capture the degree to which higher education is occupation specific. The type of skills sought by employers and promoted by governments varies based on the knowledge economy that countries rely upon. Different "families" of educational disciplines are complementary to different economic sectors with more or less specific requirements in terms of skills needed (Durazzi, 2019). The probability of a good occupational match is higher in countries where qualifications have a stronger link to occupational destinations, but the penalty for a mismatch is also more significant in such countries (Bol et al., 2019).

4.4. Analysis

The hierarchical tree diagram (dendrogram) resulting from the cluster analysis illustrates the similarities between the cases considered, and the connections that could be established between large-scale groups. The clustering using Ward's linkage is illustrated below in Figure 4.1.

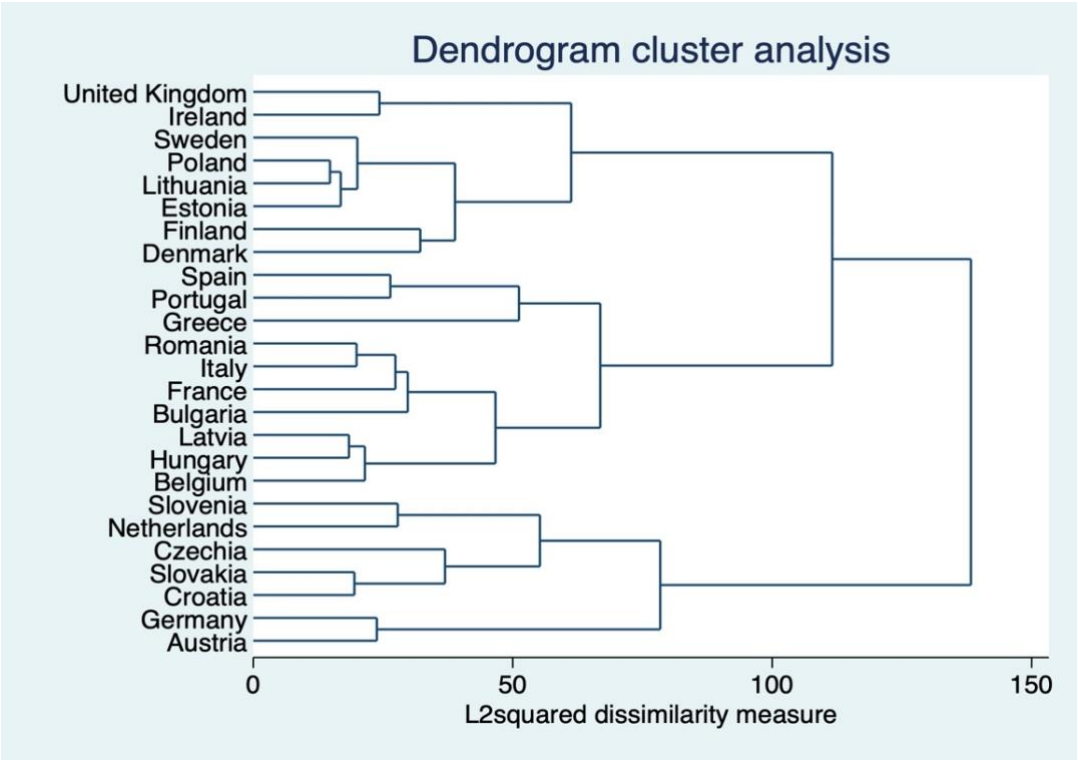

Figure 4. 1: Dendrogram of the cluster analysis

To decide on which cluster solution is the most appropriate based on the results from the cluster analysis, I combine theoretical insights with statistical insights about the

extent to which clusters are well-defined and well-separated. I calculated the Calinski-Harabasz stopping index, which was 3.66 for the two-cluster solution and 3.63 for a three-cluster solution. Because the scores were very close, I decided that the three-cluster solution is the most appropriate when also taking into consideration the theoretical perspective. Having three clusters allows for more nuanced distinctions between the different types of educational systems. Moreover, the three-cluster solution can illustrate the differences between the model of sponsored, contest, and tournament stratification. The resulting classification is:

Cluster 1: Austria, Germany, Croatia, Slovakia, Czechia, Netherlands, Slovenia

Cluster 2: Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Spain

Cluster 3: Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Ireland, UK

The mean values per cluster for each variable included are presented in Table 4.1 below. They are compared to the overall mean of the values of all countries.

Table 4. 1 Mean values for each cluster

	Cluster 1 (Sponsored)	Cluster 2 (Tournament)	Cluster 3 (Contest)	Country Mean
Age of first selection	12	13.7	15.1	13.68
Percentage of schools practicing streaming and setting	34%	26%	53%	37%
Percentage of selective schools	80%	63%	41%	60%
Percentage of pupils who repeat a year	4.3%	9.75%	1.45%	5.59%
Percentage of pupils in iVET in upper-secondary education	65.9%	44%	42.9%	49.8%
iVET at school only	26.9%	59.6%	41.9%	44.8%
iVET at workplace	39.2%	15.3%	24.5%	25%

iVET employment premium over lower secondary qualifications	31.2%	20%	26.6%	25.2%
iVET employment premium over general secondary education	5.6%	4.5%	6.1%	5.3%
Proportion of VET graduates in matching jobs	42.8%	39.2%	47.8%	42.9%
Percentage of early leavers	7.4%	11.7%	8.2%	9.4%
Percentage of iVET graduates continuing education and training	36.9%	32.8%	27.7%	32.3%
Percentage of general education graduates continuing education and training	84.9%	78%	70.6%	77.5%
Proportion of students enrolled in programmes different to Bachelors	11.5%	11.4%	8.1%	10.3%
Proportion of graduates in Engineering	16.1%	14.6%	14.15%	14.8%
Proportion of graduates in Social Sciences	32.5%	35.2%	31.7%	33.3%
Horizontal Mismatch Social Sciences	17.3%	16%	18.3%	17.14%
Employment premium tertiary degree	8.9%	20.76%	14.7%	15.5%

Difference in employment between Master's and Bachelors graduates	7.9%	5.1%	2.5%	5.1%
Horizontal mismatch rate	29%	28%	30%	29%
Employment rate VET graduates	81%	74%	81%	78%

Table 4.2. below summarizes the characteristics of each cluster. The labels of "high", "medium", and "low" are attributed through comparison between the mean values of each cluster. Employing the same strategy as Malinovskiy and Shibanova (2022), the label "low" is assigned if the mean value for a cluster is lower than the difference between the overall country mean and half of the overall standard deviation (Mean-0.5*Std); the label "medium" is assigned if the value for a cluster falls within the interval [Mean-0.5*Std; Mean+ 0.5*Std]; the value "high" is assigned if the mean for a cluster is higher than the value of the sum between the overall mean and half of the overall standard deviation.

Table 4. 2 Characteristics of each cluster

	Cluster 1 (Sponsored)	Cluster 2 (Tournament)	Cluster 3 (Contest)
Stratification within secondary education	Early age of first selection; High percentage of schools selecting based on ability through tracking; Medium percentage of pupils who repeat a year	Medium age of first selection into different types of schools; Medium level of schools practicing streaming and setting; High percentage of pupils who repeat a year	Late age of first selection into different types of schools; High percentage of schools practicing streaming and setting; Low percentage of pupils who repeat a year
Vocational orientation	High percentage of pupils enrolled in iVET programmes in secondary school; High percentage of iVET	Medium percentage of pupils enrolled in iVET programmes at secondary school level; High percentage of	Medium percentage of pupils enrolled in iVET programmes; Medium percentage of iVET programmes with a

	programmes including training at the workplace;	iVET delivered at school only	strong workplace component, and medium percentage of iVET programmes delivered at school only
Links between vocational education and the labour market	High employment premium of iVET graduates over people with lower secondary qualifications; Medium percentage of iVET graduates working in jobs matching their qualification	Low employment premium of iVET graduates over people with lower secondary education and below; Medium percentage of iVET graduates working in jobs matching their qualification	Medium employment premium of iVET qualifications over lower-secondary education or below; Medium percentage of iVET graduates in jobs matching their qualification
Transitions from secondary education	Low percentage of early leavers; Medium percentage of iVET graduates continuing with their education; High percentage of graduates from general secondary education programmes continuing with their education	High percentage of early leavers; Medium percentage of IVET graduates and graduates from general upper secondary education continuing education and training.	Medium percentage of early leavers; Low percentage of graduates from general secondary education programmes continuing with their education; Medium proportion of iVET graduates continuing with their education
Stratification within the tertiary education system	Above average proportion of graduates in Engineering and Architecture; Medium percentage of students enrolled in tertiary education programmes different from Bachelor's degrees	Above average percentage of students enrolled in tertiary education programmes other than Bachelor's degrees; Medium percentage of graduates from Engineering and Social Science	Low proportion of students enrolled in tertiary programmes different from Bachelor's degrees

Links between educational qualifications and labour market participation	Above average employment rate of graduates from VET programmes; Low employment premium for tertiary degrees; High employment premium for a Master's over a Bachelor's degree	Low employment rate of VET graduates; Medium employment premium for a Master's over a Bachelor's degree; High employment premium for a tertiary degree	Above average employment rate of graduates from VET programmes; Low employment premium for a Master's over a Bachelor's degree; Above average horizontal mismatch rate

4.4.1. Cluster 1: Sponsored stratification, followed by contest for those following the academic route (Germany, Austria, Croatia, Slovakia, Czechia, Netherlands, Slovenia)

This cluster is characterised by a high proportion of pupils enrolled in iVET programmes, which is provided at the workplace to a high extent. Tracking between academic and vocational education takes place at an early age and is the main form of differentiation during compulsory education, leading to a rigid separation between the academic and vocational trajectories. Vocational education has strong links with the labour market in Germany and Austria, where a high percentage of iVET graduates work in jobs that highly match their qualifications. In other countries from this cluster, the percentage of people with iVET qualifications working in highly matching jobs is slightly lower, which amounts to an overall medium level of matching between occupation and qualification for iVET graduates.

The similarity found between Czechia, Slovenia, Germany, and the Netherlands matches the findings by Beblavy et al. (2013) who look at educational and social stratification in OECD countries. In Czechia and Slovakia, a small proportion of the cohort (around 15%) is selected at age eleven for academically oriented secondary schools (Gymnasiums), but there are subsequent points of selection into Gymnasiums. This stratification system combines the early allocation of those academically oriented with their prolonged competition for well-regarded educational credentials, since the employment premium of having a Master's over having a Bachelor's is the highest for this cluster.

With a clear delineation of the academic path, while at the same time providing good occupational opportunities for those pursuing vocational paths, Germany most

closely resembles the "sponsored" (Turner, 1960) model of stratification. Selection into different tracks happens early on, at age ten, legitimated by the ideology of "innate talent" which is best channelled into either theoretical or practical pursuits (Powell and Solga, 2011). Almost half of the pupils enrolled in secondary education pursue vocational education. The employment rate for iVET graduates is high, while the proportion of iVET graduates working in jobs highly matching their qualifications is also high. Thus, this educational system resembles the sponsored mobility system because selection into different educational routes happens early on, and because there is a strong match between educational and occupational trajectories. This segmentation of educational and occupational trajectories is also consistent with Germany's employment-centric transition regime, where school-to-work transitions mostly follow standardised and sector-specific tracks (Schels and Wöhrer, 2022), with employment sector and skill level now representing key dividing lines in regard to income and employment protection (Diessner et al., 2022). However, the system presents some features of contest mobility, especially for those who pursue the academic route, which is now the most common school track (Becker et al., 2016). This is because most pupils who go to Gymnasiums take the Abitur national examination, which represents an important criterion for differentiating between candidates to different universities (Kübler, 2019), especially since many higher education institutions employ the restricted admissions (numerus clausus) principle of controlling access to programs that are in high demand (Unangst, 2019) Even though access to German higher education is formally said to be open to all those who hold a higher education entrance certificate, in practice, a considerable proportion of undergraduate programs are selective (Finger, 2016), with around 40% of programmes being subject to restricted admission in 2020 (Hachmeister et al., 2020).

4.4.2. Cluster 2: Tournament (Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, France, Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain)

This cluster is characterised by a combination of tracking and streaming in upper secondary education. On average, almost half of the pupils in upper-secondary schools follow the vocational track, which is mostly provided in schools. Educational systems in this cluster display considerable stratification within tertiary education. In France, the proportion of people with tertiary degrees different from traditional

Bachelor's programmes is high, whereas the overall diversity of tertiary degrees in this cluster is medium. This is characteristic for systems of stratification that encourage prolonged competition (Turner, 1960). At the same time, the proportion of early leavers from education is also high, which indicates a considerable minority was left behind. Because of the above average levels of stratification both within secondary and tertiary education, as well as a high percentage of iVET graduates continuing with their education, this system of stratification resembles a tournament. In a tournament, there is a distinction between winners and losers at each selection point, but winners must keep competing, for there is no assurance of subsequent success (Rosenbaum, 1979).

The distinctive aspect of this cluster as a tournament is that the hierarchy established for the selection into upper-secondary schools influences the subjects one chooses to study at university. In Romania, allocation into different streams in high school influences the subjects taken at the Baccalaureate exam, a decision which in turn influences the choice of fields of study at tertiary level. The only schools which select pupils based on academic ability for admission to lower secondary education are called National Colleges (colegii nationale). They are educational institutions which offer lower secondary education, as well as high school education. Pupils who attend national colleges at lower secondary stage are not automatically accepted for high school at the same institutions, but they usually get very high grades for the National Evaluation examination, which facilitates their access to prestigious high schools (Cornea, 2021). At lower-secondary level, national colleges cater both to pupils who live in their catchment areas and to pupils who are accepted the basis of a selective exam, usually in a subject related to a specialised area of study, such as the 'English-intensive' streams. Thus, the educational system in Romania exhibits some elements of sponsored mobility for the pupils selected in the prestigious "national colleges", in a similar manner to how institutional sponsorship occurs in France through allowing prestigious lycées in Paris to select their students (Van Zanten, 2019a).

Among all countries included in the analysis, Romania has the highest rate (almost 50%) of iVET graduates who continue with their education and training, as the rate of employment for iVET graduates is below average and the employment premium for people with tertiary degrees is high. Thus, competition is prolonged, but there are

clear hierarchies established at every educational transition. Those with low grades have limited options for the kind of educational opportunities they can further pursue and compete for. The incentive to obtain educational advantages in Romania is also amplified by the limited system of social protection in a country whose type of capitalism was labelled, along with Bulgaria and the Baltic countries, as "neoliberalism excelling in market radicalism" (Buttler et al., 2023, p. 160).

4.4.3. Cluster 3: Contest with sponsored mobility for the most academically inclined (Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Ireland, UK)

This cluster has the lowest proportion of pupils below the age of fifteen who attend selective schools. However, there is some ability grouping before the first point of tracking even in Scandinavian countries, where some pupils considered most academically inclined are selected into classes or schools specialised in specific subjects (Heiskala and Erola, 2019).In this cluster, countries have a medium vocational orientation at upper-secondary level. Some iVET programmes are provided at the workplace, and others are provided only at school. The proportion of VET graduates who work in jobs highly matching their qualifications is above average. However, the proportion of people who finish vocational or general upper-secondary education and continue with their education is below average. This might have to do with the fact that the employment premium for having a tertiary degree is below average.

Interestingly, the employment premium for having a Master's over a Bachelor's degree is low, meaning postgraduate degrees do not necessarily provide advantages in terms of employability. The horizontal mismatch rate between field of study and occupation is the highest for tertiary graduates in this cluster, which means there is open competition among graduates from different fields of study (Tholen, 2013).

Finland, a country where the first official tracking happens at age 16, is representative of the contest cluster. Only around 4% of students in tertiary education are enrolled in programmes other than Bachelor's degrees (as compared to an average of 10.3% across all European countries included), while the employment premium of having a Master's over a Bachelor's degree is low, which shows there is

not a strong hierarchy among types of higher education degrees. Pupils get to choose their subjects for the final matriculation exam from a wide range of options, which leads to diversified syllabi and educational pathways. Similar to the UK context, in Finland it is difficult to establish a clear hierarchy between so many combinations of different subjects that pupils choose for their final examination (Kupiainen et al., 2016; McMullin and Kulic, 2016). In urban Finland, ability grouping before the first point of tracking takes the form of selection into classes and schools specialised in specific subjects, such as foreign languages, math, and arts (Kosunen and Seppänen, 2015). Some comprehensive schools in urban Finland select a significant proportion of their pupils for 'emphasised teaching' into a particular subject, and they give 'aptitude tests' to assess pupils' skills in that subject (Seppänen et al., 2023). Seppänen et al. (2023) further mention that the application and selection process for classes with a special emphasis leads to a concentration of pupils from higher socio-economic backgrounds in these classes, since skills in these different subject areas are usually developed through extracurricular activities, which are related to family resources. As streaming and setting within secondary schools is not negligible, some groups of pupils are categorised as more academically inclined. This shows that there are some elements of sponsored mobility for those deemed most talented. However, for most individuals in Finland, the educational stratification system they navigate resembles a contest- type where formal educational selection happens relatively late, and educational pathways are not clearly demarcated hierarchically. This could be the outcome of previous reforms focused on integrating vocational and general tracks (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019).

This cluster mostly resembles a contest-type mobility system, as the definitive sorting is delayed, and there is more flexibility and openness regarding educational trajectories and entry into work. However, for a small percentage of pupils deemed the most academically inclined, there is a form of sponsored mobility in the UK (through selective grammar schools in England and Northern Ireland), as well as in Finland (through selection into classes with an emphasis in a particular subject).

4.5. Discussion

This chapter contributes to the literature on educational regimes and school-to-work transitions by adding countries from Central and Eastern Europe and integrating

multiple dimensions pertaining to the link between educational and social stratification. My analysis distinguishes three clusters of countries, which is incongruent with the four regimes of educational stratification previously identified by West and Nikolai (2013) and Green et al. (2006), as they separate between the Nordic and the Anglo-Saxon clusters. Differences occur because this thesis only focuses on the stratification dimension of educational inequality, while the additional cases included bring qualitatively new dimensions to the analysis of educational regimes. In addition to adding new cases, this analysis brings together variables related to vocational orientation, type of stratification, and the prevalence of different forms of education and training. Thus, it differs from prior studies on educational regimes by focusing on the type of educational allocation and how different pathways fit together. This leads to key differences in how countries cluster.

The Scandinavian countries cluster together with Ireland and the UK, and with Estonia and Lithuania. An explanation for this can be that school-to-work transition policies in Scandinavian countries in recent decades have assimilated some neo-liberal features that have increased individual responsibility for successful transitions (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019). Also, Busemeyer (2014) points out that what he calls the "Anglo-Saxon" countries, including England, have education systems that are formally comprehensive and characterised by a low level of stratification. The difference between the UK and the Scandinavian countries in Busemeyer's (2014) study is due to him including variables covering the mix between public and private spending on education; without the inclusion of expenditure, this analysis reveals the similarity between the UK and Scandinavian countries in terms of educational stratification. The UK, Ireland, and the Nordic countries were also found to cluster together by Mons et al. (2013) who classified countries based on their educational curricula and found these countries to correspond to the 'total education' model, which emphasises individualised learning and integrates vocational and life skills in the curriculum, alongside traditional academic disciplines. Comparing educational systems from Baltic countries with the educational systems in France, the UK, and Germany, Saar et al. (2008) find that the weak links between the educational systems and the labour market in some Baltic countries make these systems similar to the UK. Želvys et al. (2017) also point out the similarities between Lithuania and the UK as regards educational selection and ability grouping.

In contrast to the study by West (2013), this analysis identifies multiple patterns of educational stratification among post-socialist countries with EU membership, challenging the idea that post-socialist CEE countries constitute a distinct and coherent educational regime. This finding is aligned with most research comparing CEE countries to "old" EU members (Dumas et al., 2013, Beblavý et al., 2013, Malinovskiy and Shibanova, 2022). Just as the typology suggested by Saar and Ure (2013), this chapter finds that Romania and Bulgaria are similar to France, while Czechia and Slovakia are similar to Germany. This is aligned with findings by Roberts (2001), who articulates the differences between countries like Czechia, where academic education is considered to be only for those academically inclined, and countries from South-East Europe, where there is more integration between vocational and general education programmes. Thus, educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe are different and tend to gravitate towards distinct models of educational stratification.

This article maps the diversity of stratification patterns in European educational systems, which is useful for understanding how educational systems influence patterns of inclusion and exclusion into certain occupations. I use employment rates and employment premiums for graduates from different types of degrees, as well as horizontal mismatch rates, to capture the linkages between education and occupations. I do not include variables related to the status of the occupations linked to certain educational qualifications, so the analysis is rather about the mechanisms through which educational systems allocate people to different pathways than about the success of those who pursue different educational routes.

The educational systems classified as part of the sponsored stratification cluster are characterised by an early selection of pupils into academic tracks, a high percentage of pupils enrolled in iVET programmes, and a relatively strong match between vocational education and the labour market. As a result, educational pathways are segmented based on perceived abilities. Educational systems labelled as part of the tournament model of stratification rely on streaming and tracking at upper-secondary school level. While a medium percentage of students are enrolled in iVET programs, a higher than average proportion of iVET graduates continue with their education. Similar to the sponsored type, this model creates a hierarchy among

different educational tracks and streams, limiting the future prospects of students who are not part of the higher-ranking groups. Contest-type educational systems are characterised by late selection into different types of schools, and an increased possibility to customize the choice of subjects of study and post-compulsory pathways. There is a lower proportion of students enrolled in tertiary programs other than Bachelor's degrees, resulting in less stratification based on the type of tertiary qualification. The link between field of study and occupation is looser for tertiary qualifications. Consequently, the distinction between winners and losers of different educational transitions is not as straightforward as in the sponsored or tournament models.

All educational systems exhibit institutional characteristics which combine features of the contest and sponsored mobility ideal-types (Turner, 1960), with some resembling a tournament (Rosenbaum, 1979). This chapter classifies European educational systems according to the predominant model of educational stratification. However, none of these countries exhibit just one logic of stratification. For example, in Germany, which is representative of the sponsored cluster, students who are selected into Gymnasiums have to take the Abitur national exam and are ranked according to their grades for admission into a significant number of programmes employing the numerus clausus principle of restricted access (Finger, 2018). Thus, pupils selected to the academic track face a contest at the stage of admission into universities. On the other hand, Romania, which is representative of the tournament cluster, exhibits some characteristics of sponsored mobility for pupils who go to national colleges at primary or lower-secondary school. These pupils are already identified as educational elites and most of them get high grades at the National Evaluation, which helps them continue to study at national colleges at upper-secondary level (Cornea, 2021). In Finland, which belongs to a contest-type model, elements of sponsored mobility for those deemed most talented are manifested as selection based on specific talents/inclinations, such as musical instruments, or foreign languages (Seppänen et al. 2023). Thus, it is worth noting that a fraction of individuals from different educational systems experience multiple logics of mobility throughout their educational journeys.

Classifying processes of educational stratification as promoting either sponsored, tournament, or contest mobility, I create a heuristic device that is useful for investigating different strategies of securing educational advantages. Moreover, Rosenbaum (1979) argues that creating the cognitive representation of "tournament" as an institutional logic will allow people to relate structures at a macro level with behaviours and beliefs at a micro level. This chapter provides similar cognitive representations for 25 educational systems in Europe. Thus, this research lays the groundwork for interrogating how the architecture of different educational and training systems influences individuals' motivations, beliefs, and attributions of educational success. This is also relevant for mapping educational reforms that lead to a change in the underlying pattern of stratification. For example, the English educational system which was previously considered the representation of the sponsored mobility ideal-type (Turner, 1960), was since reformed to postpone the first tracking for most students from age eleven to age sixteen, and now belongs to the 'contest' cluster. Even though different countries are classified as having the same predominant pattern of stratification, it does not mean that elements of contest or sponsorship occur uniformly, or are interpreted identically. The historical development of each educational system is likely to influence the specific characteristics of the interplay between contest, sponsorship, and tournament norms in different countries. Moreover, representing educational systems as contests and tournaments can be useful for directing the attention of policymakers towards the educational and occupational opportunities of those who lose in these competitions and might not have clear alternative routes for further developing their skills.

5. Perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities in Germany and Romania

Abstract

This chapter uses mixed methods to investigate the extent to which individuals from Germany and Romania perceive their countries as education-based meritocracies, whereby everyone has a fair chance to reach the educational level desired. First, I assess the perceived fairness of educational opportunities at a population level using data from Round 9 of the European Social Survey that asks participants to rate the fairness of opportunities for themselves and for others in their countries. To investigate the reasons for the differences observed regarding the perceived (un)fairness of opportunities, this research employs semi-structured interviews with elite students from both Germany and Romania. These students provide an insider's perspective into what constitutes educational privilege in these two countries. It was found that Romanian participants associate educational privilege with both cultural and financial resources, while German participants mostly associate educational privilege with cultural capital.

5.1. Introduction

Many educational policies endorse a "meritocratic promise", asserting that the allocation of social positions should be based on personal abilities and effort rather than ascribed characteristics related to social origin (Lavrijsen and Nicaise, 2016, p.1). The principle of meritocratic fairness implies that people should be rewarded based on their talent and the choice to exert effort (Andre, 2021). According to Goldthorpe (2003), the theory of "education-based meritocracy" posits that as the association between individuals' social origin and their occupational status is increasingly mediated via educational attainment, the direct link between parental background and class of destination will gradually fade away. Yet, the model of education-based meritocracy can be distorted in two ways: by social origin influencing educational attainment regardless of hard work, or by social origin

directly impacting social destinations, regardless of educational attainment (Lavrijsen and Nicaise, 2016, p.2). In this chapter, I focus on perceptions about the first connection, between social origin and educational attainment.

There is an abundance of studies showing that even when selection processes are "meritocratically" set up (e.g. standardised, based on achievement), a student's socio-economic background still influences the track or stream a student is allocated to (Mijs, 2016, p.18). Children of wealthier and well-educated parents are more likely to be selected for the academic track (Nikolai and West, 2013), placed into well-regarded streams or high schools (Duru-Bellat, 2000), or admitted to universities (Triventi, 2013). However, education in modern societies is presented as an "opportunity", that individuals make use of depending on their talents and efforts (Solga, 2016). The meritocratic approach to selecting individuals for sought-after schools, universities, and occupations, has become so embedded in the public mind, that it has become synonymous with fairness (Nahai, 2013). If educational opportunities are perceived as unfair, then societies are perceived as unjust. Otherwise, unequal outcomes are accepted even by those with low levels of education, as the "survival of the fittest" is widely considered a fair principle (Solga, 2016). Yet, there are very few studies (e.g. Spruyt, 2015) looking at the way in which people perceive the fairness of educational opportunities.

This chapter investigates the way in which people educated in different types of educational systems perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries. Thus, this research addresses the following question: *How do people with different education levels from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries?*

Using data from round 9 of the European Social Survey, a cross-national survey that measures the attitudes and beliefs of diverse populations in more than thirty European countries, I look at perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities in Germany and Romania. This chapter explores individuals' perceptions about the fairness of opportunities for everyone in their country to assess the level of legitimacy attributed to educational systems in Germany and Romania. Moreover, the chapter investigates how individuals perceive their own opportunities relative to others in their country, with the aim to infer the satisfaction

levels of individuals with different education levels regarding their relative chances to gain the education level sought.

Then, in order to identify barriers that stand in the way of a fair distribution of educational opportunities, this thesis focuses on the opinions of elite students from Germany and Romania. Based on semi-structured interviews, this chapter will further answer the question: *How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort in their countries?*

In this analysis, I look at how people with different educational levels perceive the fairness of their own educational opportunities, as well as the fairness of educational opportunities for other people in their countries. This chapter compares the perceptions of educational opportunities for people who went to school in different types of educational systems. Romania and Germany were selected because they belong to different educational regimes, as Romania resembles a tournament model of educational stratification, while Germany is most similar to the sponsored mobility model (as suggested in Chapter 4).

In Germany, there is a relatively strong link between educational qualifications and labour market positions (Allmendinger, 1989), although there are also large social background effects on track allocation in secondary school (Skopek and Leopold, 2020). Inequality has increased in Germany since the beginning of the 2000s, which has been accompanied by a rising share of affluent individuals who believe their society is unfair (Sachweh and Sthamer, 2019). Secondary education in the German Länder is characterised by tracking into distinct educational paths. According to Eurydice (2021), each track leads to different leaving certificates and qualifications, including the Hauptschule (lower track), Realschule (intermediate track), and Gymnasium (academic track).

Romania is a post-socialist country that has recently experienced growing levels of inequality, currently being one of the most unequal countries in the EU in terms of income disparities (Precupetu, 2013). In the post-socialist transition period, the educational system has been through major reforms aiming to align with Western European educational systems and embrace the meritocratic principle of giving equal chances to individuals to compete on an international market (Toc, 2018). Romanian

secondary school graduates are allocated to high schools based on a centralized mechanism that ranks students based on their grades in lower secondary school, and their score in the national standardised evaluation at the end of lower secondary school. Based on their list of ranked preferences over combinations of high schools and streams, pupils are assigned to their most preferred high school stream that still has available seats (Munteanu, 2019). In Chapter 4, I argued that this mechanism of selection and allocation of pupils to high schools with different levels of prestige leads to a system of educational stratification that resembles a tournament.

5.2. Conceptions of fairness

This section will present the manifold facets that influence the way in which individuals interpret and assess the fairness of their educational opportunities. There are multiple interpretations of fair opportunities. A fair chance might be interpreted as fair in absolute terms, meaning there are nobody experiences additional obstacles. It could also be interpreted as satisfying a certain threshold of sufficiency so that it is possible and within reach to get the result desired, even if some people need to apply more effort than others to achieve this goal. In line with the second perspective, Brown et al. (2010) claim that a meritocratic society attempts to give everyone a fair chance of succeeding through education, even if success comes easier to those with higher status.

The most familiar baseline of fair opportunities is the idea of a fair contest. This principle holds that at a particular moment of selection, one should be judged only on those characteristics relevant to one's (future) performance (Fishkin, 2014), such as talent and effort (Allen, 2011). For individuals to have fair opportunities to compete in a contest, three conditions need to be satisfied: procedural fairness, background fairness, and "stakes fairness" (Jacobs, 2010). Procedural fairness is related to the basic rules that guide a competition and determine the winners and losers. There are factors related to someone's situation, such as nepotism, that could undermine procedural fairness. Background fairness requires a level playing field for all competitors. Thus, a condition for fairness of educational opportunity is that individuals have roughly equal chances to obtain a given level of education, independent of their social background (Rawls, 2001). Group-based discrimination,

such as ethnicity, social class, or gender discrimination, is the paradigmatic case of violating background fairness.

"Stakes fairness" has to do with the distribution of benefits and costs within a competition (Jacobs, 2010, p. 256). In a society with unfair stakes, profound divisions emerge because a single disadvantage or failure leads to the accumulation of multiple disadvantages (Mazzoli Smith et al., 2018). In the educational realm, disadvantages at an earlier stage in one's life affect opportunities later on (Borgna, 2017), as people's educational and occupational trajectories are influenced by high-stakes processes of educational selection and allocation into different curricular tracks (Bol and van de Werfhorst, 2013a).

Access to educational opportunities can be conceptualised as "fairness capital", made out of dimensions related to both societal and personal circumstances (Thomas, 2021). Individuals with the same education level might have different occupational opportunities in different countries. Similarly, certain characteristics related to one's socio-economic background could hinder people from receiving their desired educational level in some countries, but not others. In the research conducted by Irwin (2018) her participants offered complex accounts of their own experiences of opportunity, which were presented in relation to wider socio-economic phenomena. Consequently, the author challenges the many studies into lay understandings of inequality that have focused on what people do not see, rather than what they do see and the contexts that influence their views. In line with this perspective, I treat individuals' evaluations regarding the fairness of educational opportunities as indicative of the extent to which they consider their societies to be meritocratic.

The scope of fairness conceptions is relevant for capturing evaluations of fairness at both societal and individual levels. Regarding the main reference point of fairness evaluations, there is a difference between egocentric (self-regarding) and sociotropic (other regarding) fairness attitudes (Kluegel and Mason, 2004; Schnaudt et al., 2021). Egocentric evaluations focus on the personal situation of an individual, while sociotropic evaluations are concerned with society as a whole (Schnaudt et al., 2021, p. 4). However, perceived fairness at an individual level seems to relate to perceived fairness at societal level. Forsé (2009) found that people who believe that effort is generally not rewarded in their society also tend to feel that their own income does

not reflect their own efforts. On the other hand, some people might struggle to see the barriers in the way of equal opportunities for others if they enjoy privileges that shield them from ever encountering these constraints (Andersen et al., 2021, p. 1120). On the other hand, Shane and Heckhausen (2017) argue that general beliefs about meritocracy at a societal level are not heavily influenced by personal setbacks. Moreover, Sayer (2011, p.13) argues that meritocratic ideas are built around the false assumption that if success and social mobility are possible for some individuals, then success must be attainable for all individuals.

5.3. Heterogeneity of fairness evaluations based on education level

This section presents several research studies exploring how perceptions of fairness vary cross-nationally, and between individuals with different education levels. There is a thin and fragmented understanding of the way in which people evaluate inequality and what drives them to consider the distribution of opportunities as unfair (Bottero, 2020). There is a broad literature from social psychology that suggests some people might be biased towards seeing the distribution of opportunities as fairer than it is (Bénabou and Tirole, 2016; Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Based on this literature there are two main explanations of what drives individuals' beliefs about inequality: self-serving bias and system-justifying beliefs (Mijs, 2018).

According to the theory of self-serving bias (Bénabou and Tirole, 2016), people defend their self-perceptions by perceiving success as deserved, and failure as accidental. In order to preserve self-esteem, individuals are likely to attribute success to factors within their control, such as effort, and failure to external factors, such as luck (Ross et al., 2010) Consequently, beliefs in fair educational opportunities would be higher for people who successfully get into further stages of education.

However, there are theories suggesting that one's position in the social hierarchy is not necessarily an important determinant of their beliefs in meritocracy. System-justification beliefs are tendencies to support and rationalise existing social arrangements and institutional architectures, sometimes at the expense of self-interest (Jost, 2019 p.263). Despite evidence of status and power differences that lead to unequal opportunities, individuals tend to justify the existing system because system-justifying beliefs reduce cognitive dissonance (ibid.). Jost et al. (2003) go even

further in arguing that sometimes disadvantaged individuals are even more likely to support the social system that is responsible for their misfortune. These two perspectives lead to somewhat contradictory intuitions regarding the association between education level and evaluations of fair opportunities: the self-serving bias theory predicts that individuals with higher education are more likely to believe educational opportunities as fair, while system-justification theory predicts that individuals are likely to perceive opportunities as fair, regardless of their education level.

Empirically, research is inconclusive on whether and how education level affects perceptions of meritocracy (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). Highly educated people might have internalised the belief that educational qualifications should be rewarded, but they may also have an increased consciousness of inequality (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2009). Therefore, Mijs (2016) warns that the approach to studying meritocratic beliefs in terms of (universal) human psychology is rather narrow. Instead, he suggests that researchers should explore how different socialisation paths and institutional configurations contribute to shaping individuals' perceptions of meritocracy.

There are very few studies comparing how people from different countries evaluate the fairness of opportunities to succeed in their countries. Yet, the research by Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016) suggests that opinions about the fairness of opportunities differ significantly between countries. The authors used data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 2009 to investigate perceptions about the fairness of life chances for adults aged 18 and over who went to school in Western European countries from different educational regimes. They find that perceptions as regards the statements from ISSP "only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university education" and "only the rich can afford the costs of attending university" vary most strongly between people with different educational levels in countries from the Continental regime, which includes Germany. Their research indicates that in Germany, 35% of respondents agree that only the rich can go to universities, while 31% think that only students from the best schools go to universities. Moreover, their study finds that everywhere apart from the Nordic countries, people with more years of schooling have more

positive views on everyone's chances to obtain a university education than people with lower levels of education.

Based on a survey of a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 75, Spruyt (2015) found that most people in Flanders believed effort and dedication to be the most important factors for obtaining a university degree. However, almost half of the respondents acknowledged the importance of parents' education level for getting a diploma. Interestingly, higher educated people believed social background influenced school success or failure to a greater extent than the less educated. Individuals with higher education were also less inclined to attribute school success or failure to talent. The author thus suggests that completion of higher education increases awareness of social inequalities.

The cross-national variation in results might be explained by differences in the structure of opportunities in different countries, and the visibility of unfair (dis)advantages. Janmaat (2013) reviewed multiple perspectives about cross-national differences in perceptions of inequalities and indicated that, according to some theories, certain properties inherent to societies explain differences in inequality beliefs. Bottero (2020) also argued that different inequality regimes affect the visibility of inequality. In alignment with these perspectives, Bourdieu (1986) argues that the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital is well hidden from others who tend to notice the more direct and visible forms of passing on advantages, such as the transfer of economic capital. On the other hand, Keller et al. (2010) argue that disadvantages connected to poverty are less tolerated by people in Europe because they are more visible. On the basis of these studies, it seems that the way in which educational systems are designed can influence the extent to which people perceive educational opportunities to be fair for themselves and for others. Therefore, this chapter compares perceptions of educational opportunities between people who were socialised in different types of educational systems.

There are few studies indicating that the configurations of educational institutions shape the perspectives of people belonging to different social and educational groups. For example, Mijs (2016) claims that students in mixed-ability groups are more inclined to attribute failure on external factors, while students in tracked classes (whether vocational or academic) are more inclined to blame themselves for bad

results. This happens because pupils' meritocratic beliefs are shaped by exposure to individuals who have been more (disadvantaged). Brunori (2017) argues that individuals assign too much importance to their own observations when quantifying the role of circumstances on successes and failures, because they learn about inequality through personal experiences . Furthermore, Bottero (2020, p.52) argues that living within a structure of inequality shapes what people see of it. She further claims that subordinate groups internalise inequality by limiting their aspirations to what they deem realistic for people in their position (p.78), so as they can be satisfied with the outcomes. Thus, this research explores how people with different education levels and experiences perceive the fairness of educational opportunities.

5.4. Recognition of privilege

There are studies showing that people with higher education might not be aware of how privileged they are. Brunori (2017) states that privileged individuals have limited exposure to the structural barriers that negatively affect people's agency. Moreover, research by Evans and Kelley (2004) finds that in 21 countries, including countries from Eastern and Western Europe, individuals have a tendency to see themselves as being in the middle of the social hierarchy, even if they are at the top of the distribution of educational attainment.

However, other studies suggest that people at elite universities are aware of their privilege. Students from both Oxford in the UK and Sciences Po in France acknowledged they had advantages in the competition to get to a prestigious university, such as access to parental support and better schools than most pupils in their countries (Power et al., 2016). In a similar vein, students from Oxford recognised that some people could not attend schools that would make admission to Oxbridge an attainable goal for them, although they believed it was not the responsibility of the university to take into consideration those disparities (Warikoo and Fuhr, 2014)

The visibility of educational privilege to people with higher education could be influenced by the forms of capital that constitute educational privilege. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that privilege is mostly noticed in its crudest forms, as help with schoolwork and extra teaching, but the essential part of cultural capital is passed on more discretely and indirectly, as if by osmosis. Their work talks about the

visibility of privilege to external observers, but does not touch on individuals' awareness of their own privilege. This thesis will look at people's perceptions of their own privilege, as well as the extent to which they evaluate opportunities for other people in their countries as fair.

Certain forms of capital are more salient in securing educational advantages depending on the characteristics of the educational system. Van Zanten (2019) details how families in France leverage both economic and cultural capital to succeed in pivotal competitive rankings, aiming to gain entry to grandes écoles, France's elite higher education institutions. In contrast, in Finland, families convert economic capital into cultural capital by honing skills in areas like classical music or sports, which in turn eases admission to selective schools (Kosunen and Seppänen, 2015). Meanwhile, in countries like South Korea, Romania, and other Eastern European countries, the pronounced role of economic capital is evident through the prevalent involvement in private tutoring (Bray, 2006; Exley, 2020; Silova, 2010a).

Keskiner (2015) argues that parents' strategies to help pupils get selected into the academic track are more covert if selection happens earlier on. Indeed, Apple and Debbs (2021) suggest that members of the German public who defend the tracking system in Germany tend to argue that selection into Gymnasium is fair because it is based on performance, not parents' money. Thus, they do not recognise the role of economic capital in securing access to the academic track. This might have important implications for the legitimacy conferred to the system of educational selection, since research by Taylor-Gooby and Martin (2010) shows that Germans tend to oppose the idea that people with more money should be able to buy better social services.

5.5. Data

The study draws on two different types of data –survey data and in-depth interviews with people educated in Germany and Romania. The research interest is to examine: a) evaluations about the fairness of educational opportunities in Germany and Romania, and b) people's conceptualisations of privilege and the factors that make educational opportunities unfair. Thus, the methodological approach draws on quantitative data to conduct a population-level analysis of fairness evaluations, and qualitative data to bring out different interpretations of educational privilege. Thus, I use quantitative analysis to answer the first research question and qualitative

analysis to answer the second research question, about educational privilege. Below, I detail the procedures for data collection and analysis.

5.5.1. Survey data

This chapter looks at perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities, collected in round 9 of the European Social Survey, in 2018-2019. In both countries, the sample was selected through a multi-stage random sampling approach. Respondents were asked to choose the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: *"Compared to other people in my country, I have had a fair chance to achieve the level of education I was seeking"*; "*Overall everyone in [country] has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek"*. The first question measures self-regarding (egocentric) evaluations of fairness, while the second measures other-regarding (sociotropic) evaluations of fairness (Schnaudt et al., 2021). The response options are expressed on a scale from 0 "Does not apply at all" to 10 "Applies completely". These items are part of a broader concept defined as "justice of life chances within society", which is employed to look at "how societal structures shape opportunities to get access to social positions and the resources related to them" (Liebig et al., 2018, p.28).

To the best of my knowledge, this dataset has not been used so far to assess the perceived fairness of educational systems, but to look at the associations between perceived unfairness of opportunities and voting behaviour (e.g. Schnaudt et al., 2021). Thus, there is a lot to uncover regarding the way in which people in different countries evaluate the fairness of their opportunities.

To compare the way in which people in different countries evaluate theirs and others' educational opportunities, I construct a variable named "perceived privilege". This variable records the difference between the perceived fairness of respondents' own chances to gain the educational level sought, and the chances of everyone else in their country. The variable can take values from -10 (meaning people consider themselves to be very disadvantaged in relation to others in their country who have very good opportunities) to 10 (meaning people consider their opportunities were very fair while thinking others in their countries were very disadvantaged).

The scenario depicting the fairest society in regard to how educational opportunities are distributed is that whereby perceived privilege is 0, and both values of perceived fairness are 10. If respondents perceive their opportunities to be less fair than others', it might be an indication of them thinking something related to their background or circumstances held them back or that they encountered obstacles along their desired educational trajectory. If people perceive their chances to have been fairer than others', it might mean that they believe structural inequality exists in their country, but it affects groups they are not a part of. It could also mean that they had access to resources that made it possible for them to compete in educational selection processes that others were excluded from.

5.5.2. Interview data

I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students who study social sciences at Russell Group universities and who went to school in either Germany or Romania. As they required high grades to get into prestigious universities, these individuals have an insider's perspective into what it takes to successfully navigate the requirements of the school systems in which they were educated. Social science students are generally more aware of social inequalities than people studying different subjects (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012), so they are more likely than students from other disciplines to provide elaborated accounts of how privilege is manifested and what barriers come in the way of rewarding talent and effort. During the interviews, I asked participants about their opinions of the overall fairness of educational chances, and about the extent to which they think their educational system rewards talent and effort.

Young people studying abroad have some distinct characteristics. A very large proportion of people studying abroad have parents with higher education qualifications. Indeed, out of thirty-one interviewees, thirty of them had at least one parent who pursued higher education. Along the same lines, people who study in the UK are those able to overcome the barriers posed by studying in another language and paying tuition fees or taking a loan for higher education (González et al., 2011). Higher education institutions in the UK used to be the most attractive for European students before Brexit, but their popularity has decreased in recent years for people in some European countries, such as Germany: 29% less German students started

higher education in the UK in 2021 compared to 2011 (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). However, the number of enrolments from Romania kept increasing post-Brexit (Universities UK, 2022).

Before initiating data collection, I obtained ethical approval by following the process created by the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). I obtained informed consent from participants in writing ahead of each interview (see Appendix 3). At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded about data anonymity and confidentiality, and that they could choose not to answer some questions, or to withdraw from the study. To maintain the anonymity of my participants, I use pseudonyms. Also, I do not mention their field of study or their university when analysing their answers.

5.6. Methods

This chapter focuses on studying the differences in how people in Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities in their countries. This is one of the few papers looking at inequality of opportunity from a subjective perspective, focusing on people's evaluations regarding educational opportunities in their countries. I used mixed methods to provide an overview of how educational fairness is perceived by people with different educational experiences in Germany and Romania, and then provide an explanation for why perceptions of fairness might differ between the two countries.

To look at distributions in perceptions of educational privilege for different educational categories, I display spike charts showing the fraction of individuals from each educational category with a certain score of perceived educational privilege. I analyse both the magnitude and the shape of the distribution in perceived privilege for higher education graduates in each country.

To explore why patterns in perceived fairness of educational opportunities vary between the two countries, I interviewed individuals who were successful in these two educational systems and could share their insiders' perspectives. They shared their views on the barriers preventing talent and effort to be rewarded fairly by their educational systems. Thus, they provided valuable insights about their interpretations of educational privilege.

5.7. Quantitative findings

The average score of perceived fairness of educational opportunities varies considerably between the two countries. Table 5.1. below presents the average score in both self-regarding and other-regarding evaluations of fairness among people with higher education, as compared to the representative sample from Romania and Germany. The scores are measured on a scale from 0, indicating the lowest level of fairness, to 10, indicating the highest level of fairness. The average score of perceived fairness of opportunities for everyone in Romania (4.64) is the lowest among all European countries. In Germany, the average score of perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone is 6.34. To calculate these averages, I used the weighting procedure recommended in the ESS weighting guide for Stata users (Kaminska, 2020), which corrects for differential selection probabilities within each country, for nonresponse and for noncoverage (p.4).

Table 5. 1 Average values of perceived fairness regarding educational opportunities

Country	Mean score: Fairness of one's own opportunities	Mean score among HE graduates: Fairness of one's own opportunities	Mean score: Fairness of opportunities for everyone	Mean score among HE graduates: Fairness of opportunities for everyone
Romania	5.62	7.71	4.64	4.97
Germany	7.77	8.72	6.34	5.96

As shown in Table 5.1, when it comes to perceived fairness of one's own opportunities, the average score based on the evaluations of all German participants is higher than the average score among higher education graduates from Romania. This shows that regardless of their education level, people in Germany are more inclined to perceive their country as an education-based meritocracy, where individuals have a fair chance of getting the education they want.

When it comes to evaluating opportunities for everyone in their countries, German higher education graduates are on average more critical than people with lower levels of education. By way of contrast, in Romania, people with higher education perceive overall educational opportunities as fairer than people with lower levels of education.

Before I explore the distributions of perceived privilege across educational categories, I look at the distributions of scores for each component that influences the score of perceived privilege: perceived fairness of own educational opportunities, and perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in the country. I compare scores in perceived fairness of educational opportunities and perceived privilege by education levels. The four levels of education included in analysis are categorised based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) from 2011(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012): lower secondary education and below (up to and including ISCED level 2); general upper-secondary education (academic education at ISCED level 3 and 4); vocational education (at ISCED levels 3,4 and 5); and higher education (academic education at ISCED levels 5,6,7 and 8).

5.7.1. Fairness of individuals' own educational opportunities

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 display the perceived fairness of respondents' own educational opportunities in Germany and Romania, by level of education. On the horizontal axis, scores given to the survey item "*Compared to other people in my country, I have had a fair chance to achieve the level of education I was seeking"* range from 0, meaning respondents think the statement does not apply at all, to 10, meaning they think the statement applies completely to their situation. The vertical axis displays the proportion of respondents in each education level category who choose a certain score from 0 to 10.

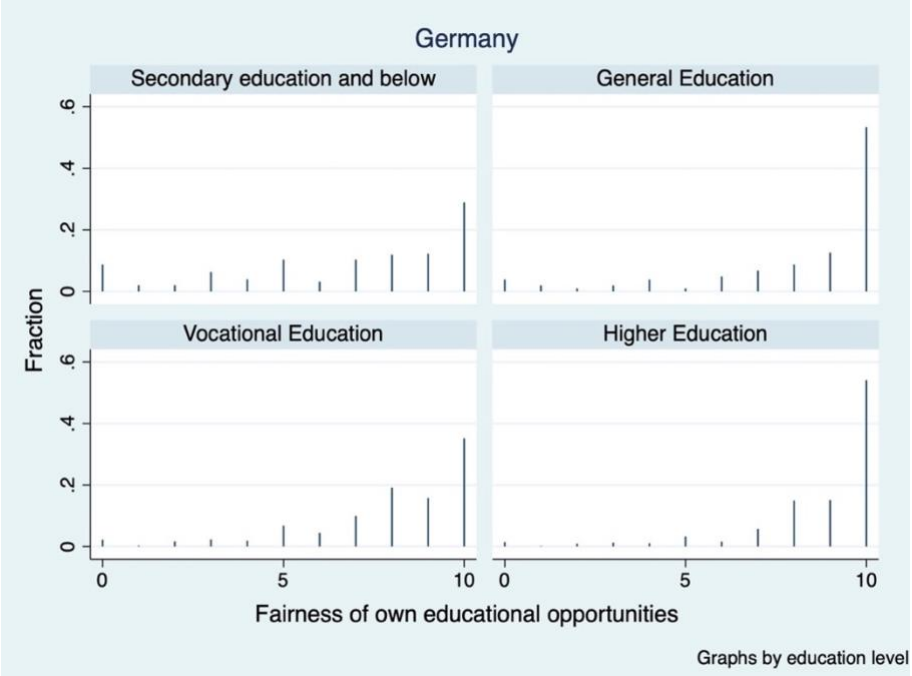

Figure 5.1: Perceived fairness of own educational opportunities in Germany, by level of education

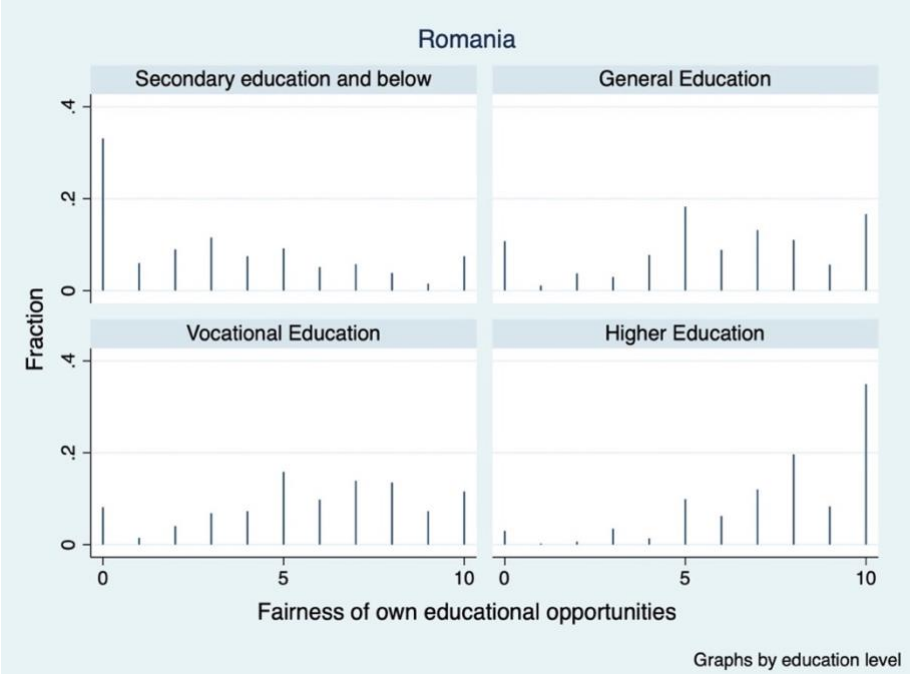

Figure 5. 2: Perceived fairness of own educational opportunities in Romania, by level of education

As shown in Figure 5.1, in Germany, across educational categories, the mode for perceived fairness of one's chances of getting the educational level they sought is 10. This means that across educational categories, most people in Germany are very satisfied with the educational opportunities available to them. These results seem to

indicate that perceptions of fairness regarding one's educational opportunities in Germany do not depend on the level or type of education of the individual.

This is not the case in Romania, where over 30% of people with secondary education and below perceive their chances of getting the educational level wanted as very unfair. In Romania, the distributions in perceived fairness of opportunities for those with general and vocational education are relatively symmetrical, with a mode of 5. This means that while a considerable proportion of respondents with general and vocational education from Romania are relatively satisfied with their educational opportunities, a substantial proportion of them are dissatisfied with their chances of attaining the educational level sought. As indicated in Figure 5.2, the mode is 10 only for people with higher education in Romania. This means there is a clear difference between how higher education graduates and people with lower levels of education evaluate the fairness of their educational opportunities.

5.7.2. Fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in the country

Figures 5.3 and 5.4 below display the perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in Germany and Romania, by education level. The horizontal axis shows the range of values taken by responses to the statement "*Overall everyone in [country] has a fair chance of achieving the level of education they seek",* where 0 means "Does not apply at all", and 10 means "Applies completely". The vertical axis represents the percentage of respondents in each category segmented by education level who select a specific score between 0 and 10.

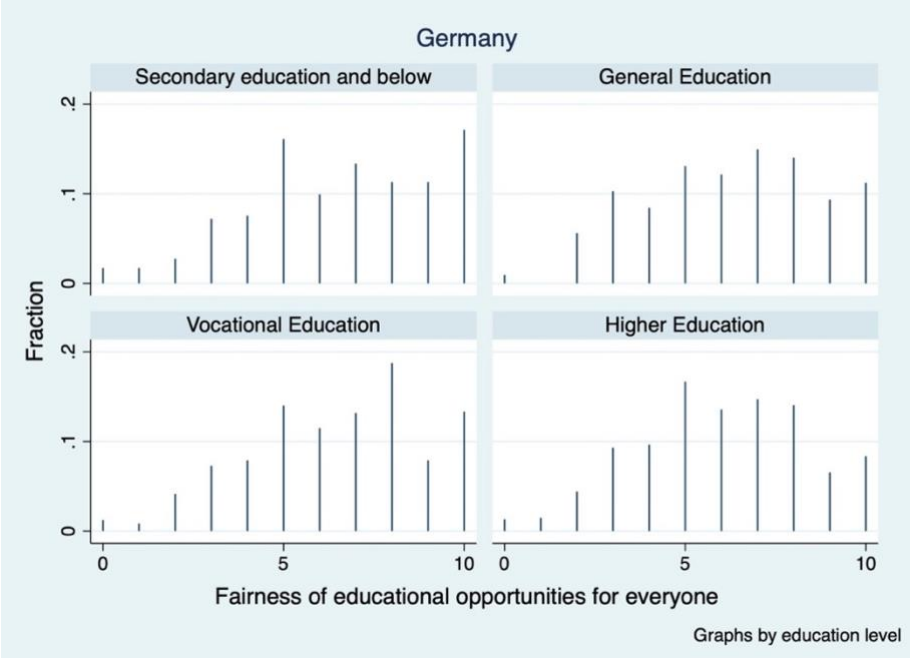

Figure 5.3: Perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in Germany, by education level

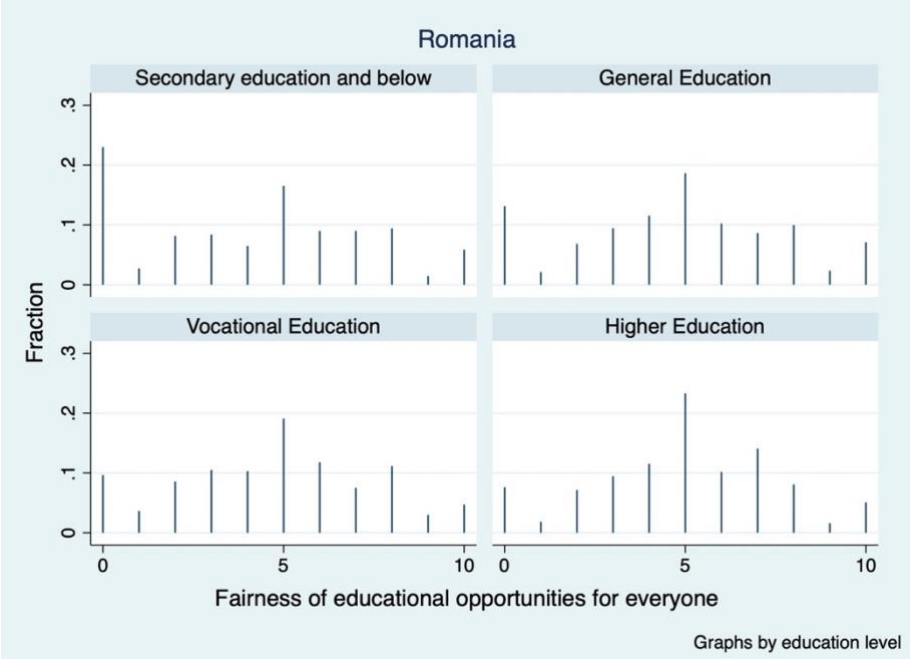

Figure 5.4: Perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in Romania, by education level

Figure 5.3. indicates that in Germany, the mode is five only for the distribution of scores for people with higher education, while the mode is seven for people with vocational education, and 10 for people with lower secondary education. This means people with lower educational levels in Germany tend to appreciate the fairness of

educational opportunities for everyone in more favourable terms than people with higher education. This observation is aligned with previous findings that beliefs about meritocracy at a societal level are not heavily influenced by personal experiences (Shane and Heckhausen, 2017).

As shown in Figure 5.4 , in Romania, the distributions of perceived fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in the country are similar across educational categories, except for people with secondary education and below, who evaluate more critically the fairness of others' educational opportunities. For people with other levels of education, the mode of perceived fairness regarding overall educational opportunities is five. In Romania, the other-regarding evaluations of fairness among people with higher education are more favourable than those of people with lower levels of education.

5.7.3. Perceived privilege

The scores of perceived privilege are calculated for each respondent in the ESS, by subtracting the score given to "perceived fairness of opportunities for everyone" from the score given to "perceived fairness of own educational opportunities". Negative scores are interpreted as perceptions of disadvantage. In Romania, 27% of respondents perceive themselves as disadvantaged, 23% perceive themselves to have (had) as fair opportunities as everyone else in their country, and 50% perceive their opportunities to be fairer than others'. In Germany, 16% perceive themselves as disadvantaged, 21% think they had as fair opportunities as others in their country, and 63% perceive themselves to be privileged compared to others in their country. In both countries, a considerable proportion of individuals perceive their chances to have been fairer than others', which might indicate that they believe structural inequality exists in their countries, but it affects other groups of people.

The distributions of perceived privilege scores are shown in Figures 5.5 and 5.6 below, displaying spike charts of perceived educational privilege by educational level in both countries. On the horizontal axis, privilege is represented from – 10 (very disadvantaged) to 10 (very privileged). The vertical axis represents the proportion of individuals within each education level category who attribute different scores ranging from -10 to 10 to their perceived privilege.

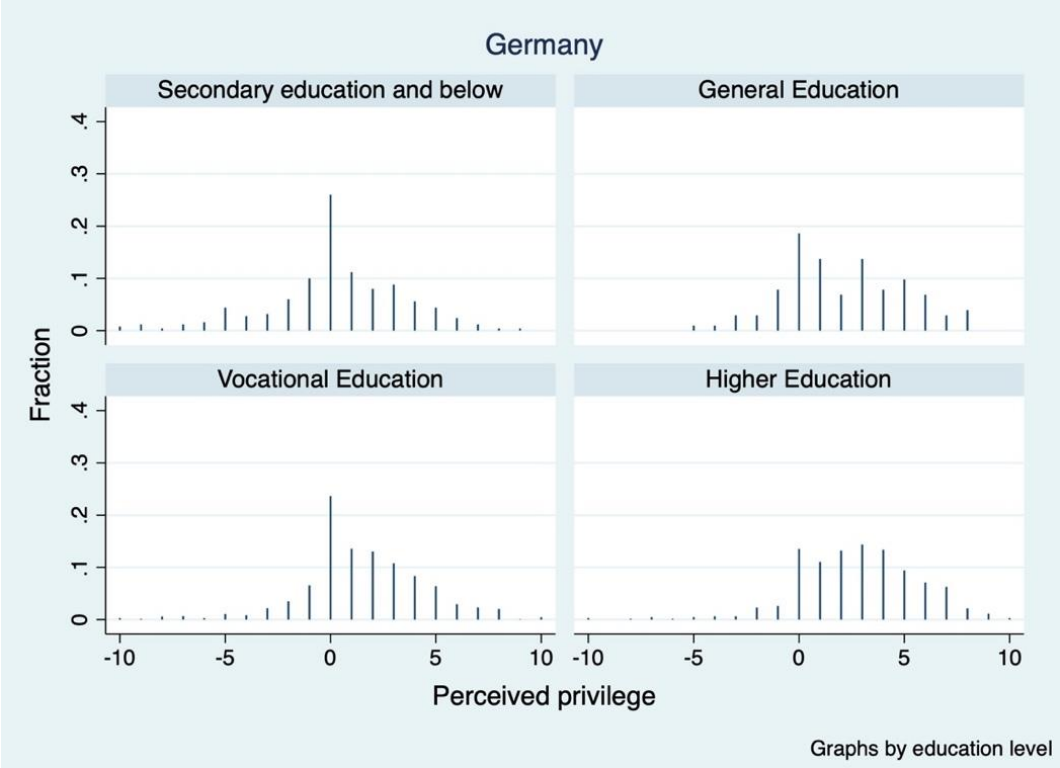

Figure 5.5: Perceived privilege in Germany, by education level

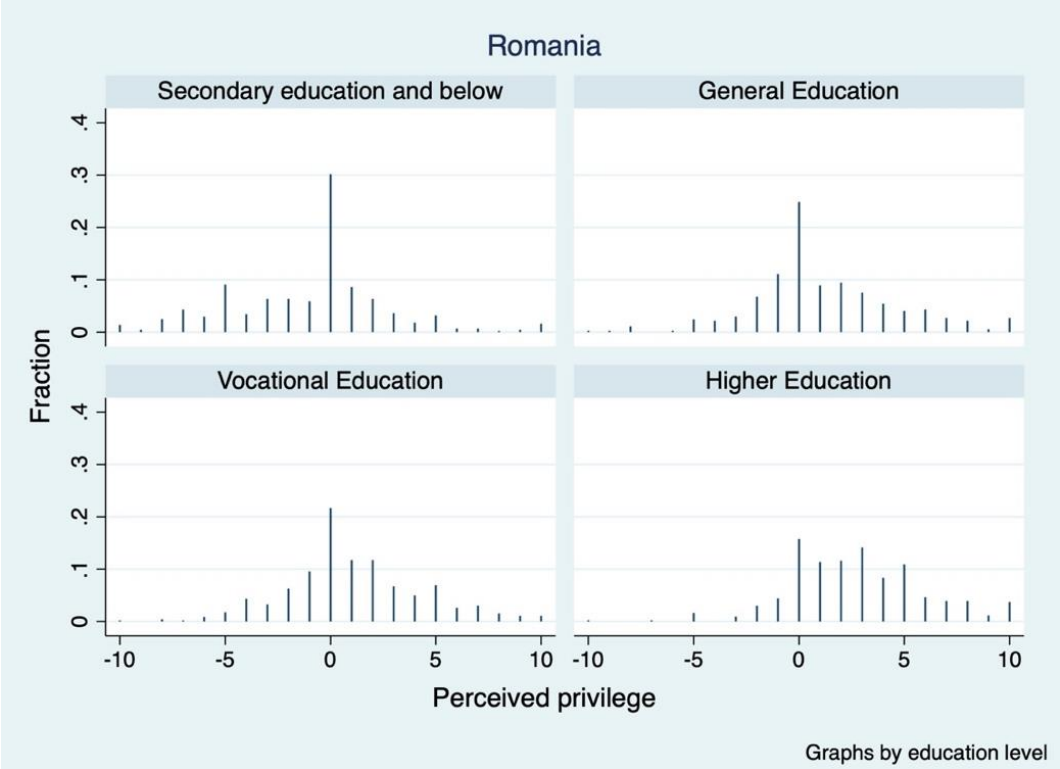

Figure 5.6: Perceived privilege in Romania, by education level

Figures 5.5 and 5.6. show that in both countries, for most educational categories, the mode of perceived privilege is 0. This means it is common for people to perceive they had as fair chances as everyone else in their country, regardless of their education level. This finding is somewhat aligned with the observation that people perceive themselves to be towards the middle of a social hierarchy (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Savage, 2007). Therefore, the average level of perceived fairness in each country is relevant for understanding how people evaluate their educational system in terms of providing fair opportunities for themselves and others.

However, as shown in Figure 5.5, among Germans with higher education, the mode of perceived privilege is 3, which indicates that highly educated respondents from Germany perceive there is a notable discrepancy between the educational opportunities they benefitted from, as compared to other people in their country. The average scores of perceived privilege among people with higher education is very similar in Romania (2.74) and Germany (2.77). Hence, higher education graduates from both countries tend to perceive educational opportunities as polarised.

A bigger difference between the scores attributed to one's opportunities and others' opportunities indicates a greater perceived disparity between the chances of individuals within a society. Values from five to ten, indicating a large difference in the evaluation of one's and others' opportunities, are relatively prevalent among respondents with higher education in both Romania and Germany. Values of perceived privilege between five and ten are encountered among 28.5% of Romanian higher education graduates and 26.5% of German higher education graduates. This shows that a considerable proportion of higher education graduates from both countries are aware they had a substantial advantage over other people in their countries.

The scores of perceived educational privilege in Germany are mostly explained by differences in other-regarding evaluations of educational opportunities between individuals with different education levels. Perceived educational privilege in Romania is mostly formed due to the way in which people with different education levels perceive their own opportunities to succeed in the educational system. These findings are important for understanding the patterns of perceived educational privilege in Germany and Romania. However, they provide little help in identifying

the interpretations of educational privilege and sources of educational disadvantage in the two countries. For this focus of research, surveys are of limited use. Therefore, the following subsection will present insights from the qualitative analysis exploring conceptualisations of educational privilege in the two countries.

5.8. Qualitative findings

This section looks at the way in which elite students from Germany and Romania who study at prestigious universities in the UK conceptualise educational privilege and describe the barriers towards a fair distribution of educational opportunities in their countries.

5.8.1. Romanian educational system: polarisation of opportunities

Most Romanian participants are aware that some people have advantages in competing to get into what they deem to be good high schools. Some participants emphasise that allocation to high schools bears very high stakes. Thus, several interviewees believe it is a problem that schools do not offer enough academic support to enable children to do well in the National Evaluation examination without extra tutoring. Several participants mention that even though selection to high school is the transition point that officially has high stakes, the formation of educational privilege starts earlier on because of the different quality of primary schools. Selection into high school is highly influenced by prior selection processes and, in the words of Cristian, "*every day spent in a low-performing school diminishes one's chances of getting into good high schools or universities*", because peers there have low expectations, and teachers have low expectations from the pupils.

Participants generally believe that educational opportunities are very polarised in Romania. Cristian explains that selection into high-schools leads people to believe that "good" pupils go to "good" high schools, while everyone else gets poor-quality education. Roxana and Emilia argue that individuals from rural areas are disadvantaged, because the quality of education is lower there and there are fewer options of schools to go to.

The private tutoring system is perceived to be very detrimental to any attempt to equalise the chances of people to do well at school. Educational performance relies heavily on private tutoring, which most participants see as unfair to those who

cannot afford it. Adrian and Cristian explain how an emphasis on private tutoring is not only unfair to those who cannot afford it, but also degrades the quality of education for everyone. They describe how teachers did not feel responsible and motivated to observe the progress of everyone in the class as a result of assuming they would receive guidance from private tutors.

Some participants put forward another perspective, which is that chances of getting good grades for the National Evaluation are fair, because it is a competitive, standardised exam, of medium difficulty. They believe that anybody who studies hard and prepares by doing similar tasks and exercises can get good results. However, other participants point out that not everyone has the same level of information and support to prepare for the National Evaluation and the Bacalaureat examinations, especially if they do not benefit from private tutoring.

5.8.2. Barriers to rewarding talent in Romania: "Only privileged talent rises to the top"

Most Romanian students interviewed believe pupils do not have equal chances to develop and demonstrate their talents. They mostly identify disadvantages stemming from lack of resources. Clara expressed very astutely that *"only the talent of people whose socioeconomic status is above median has a chance to be recognised*". She went on to explain that pupils whose parents do not actively invest in developing their children's talents do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their abilities at school, so a lot of talent stays hidden. Clara mentioned that in her view *"if someone is incredibly talented, that might shine through anyway but those are exceptions. There are lots of smart pupils who remain undiscovered because they don't have good opportunities".*

In a similar vein, Cristian believes that children from poor families have very limited chances to develop their talents. He argues that *"parents' financial and cultural resources are the number one factor determining educational success in Romania*". This links with a concern expressed by other participants that schools are unequal in terms of quality and reputation, which has important implications for how individuals are judged after finishing school. Florin believes that once someone goes

to a low-achieving high school, they are labelled as unintelligent, and they are not given many chances to *"prove otherwise and rise above this label"*.

Based on the accounts of several participants, talent is not identified in a consistent way at school. Emilia thinks school helps you "*identify your talents, because you are bombarded with a lot of ideas*". Once she discovered her interest, however, she did not receive further support to develop related skills, so it was all left to her initiative. She believes that schools do not offer pupils a lot of opportunities to develop their talents, so they must be very assertive in resourcing them. This means that pupils raised in environments that nurture their skills and passions will be exposed to a wider range of activities that can foster a broader variety of abilities.

Still, one of the participants who did not come from an affluent family, argued that it is possible with a lot of individual effort to develop your talents without much support. She argued that *"It is possible to develop your talents in the Romanian educational system, and I am proof that you can. But why would you have to go through all that to make it?"* It seems that the meritocratic narrative of individual success is somewhat stronger for the participant who came from a less affluent background and experienced upward social mobility. However, the participant acknowledges the tremendous effort that went into her developing those talents without external support and suggests that it should be easier to achieve that. Thus, there seem to be certain differences in how successful individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds assess the possibility of disadvantaged pupils developing their talents through the Romanian educational system. Interestingly, in this case, those from less affluent backgrounds seem to think that it is possible to overcome the structural obstacles in the way of rewarding talent, whereas those who benefitted from more advantages tend to acknowledge how their financial and cultural resources helped them cultivate their skills.

5.8.3. Barriers to channelling effort towards ambitious endeavours in Romania

When asked if effort can get you far, several Romanian students emphasised that the effort required to do well for pupils who went to schools considered low-performing would be much higher than the effort they had to make to be successful. Emilia

explained that the high school one goes to matters for how much one would be challenged in a constructive way by teachers and peers. If teachers do not have high expectations, pupils' efforts will not be channelled as effectively. Cristian expressed this idea as *"effort is a quasi-necessary condition, but not sufficient"*. In a similar vein, Mihnea associated the relationship between effort and school to nutrition and exercise: only when combined they lead to good results. The only participant in the sample who did not go to a prestigious school expressed the view that the school one goes to can limit one's opportunities to develop skills. She felt that she had to put in more effort than those who went to private schools or did tutoring. She thought if she had been to a better school, she would have developed some skills more quickly.

The opposite view was expressed by Florin, who said that going to a low-performing school can be compensated for by doing private tutoring because he saw the Bacalaureat as an exam of medium difficulty. However, he went on to say that *"without tutoring, you do not stand a chance to get to a good university from a technical high school*". Thus, he thinks tutoring can help compensate for one's allocation to a low-performing school, but if the person does not have the financial resources to procure this extra support, allocation to a technical high-school can heavily restrict one's further opportunities of going to university.

5.8.4. German educational system: "selection is biased"

Several participants argue that the educational system in Germany is "*fairer than in countries where you need to pay to get a good education*", such as the UK. However, they accept there is still a lot of "bias" surrounding selection into the three different types of schools. Moreover, Friedrich and Jakob mentioned that the school environment at Gymnasium positively affects one's motivation and how acceptable it is to be studious and work hard for school. Yet, most participants are aware that socio-economic background is very connected to the type of school one goes to. Thus, most participants identify ways in which background fairness is not met.

When it comes to stakes fairness, which is related to the distribution of gains and costs in a competition, participants' opinions regarding the educational tracking process differ. Some participants say that the allocation to different types of schools is relatively fair, as there are opportunities for pupils to move from one track to another at a later stage in their lives. However, Johannes and Ilse express the opposite view,

that most movement between types of schools is from Gymnasium to Realschule and not the other way around. Thus, Johannes argues that the discourse suggesting that pupils who pursue the vocational route can then move to the academic track at any point is misleading.

5.8.5. Barriers to rewarding talent in Germany: early selection favours individuals from educated families

Some German participants were concerned that not everyone had fair chances of showing their talent before the early tracking process. In their opinion, this could happen because some pupils are late bloomers, while others do not have guidance on how to prepare for Gymnasium in the same way as those whose parents also went to Gymnasiums. Nonetheless, they tended to agree that those who were selected for Gymnasiums manifested more talent than the others. Theresa argued that:

> *"I think the people going to Gymnasiums often are more talented than the people who don't go there, but there are many factors playing into that… You have people coming from educated families, maybe having more skills or being a bit more intelligent going to a Gymnasium and then them making it in life. It is not only a matter of them being educated in the system, but also all the generations before them. So, there's much talent base not going to a Gymnasium*"

Most participants recognised parents' role as crucial for encouraging pupils to develop certain skills. So, they are aware that some people have more nurturing environments that offer them advantages when it comes to developing skills. Yet, they also think that the system is designed to effectively select people with manifested talents.

However, some participants believe that the German educational selection does not accomplish its intended purpose, which is to identify academic ability and allocate students to different types of schools based on their potential. Dorothea argues that tracking at such a young age relies heavily on the support parents provide, which makes it difficult to accurately identify intellectual potential. Another perspective is that the German educational system mostly caters for what Johannes called 'median students', the ones with good, but not excellent results. Johannes felt that his teachers were mostly focused on getting those who did not study enough to work harder, but not on motivating those with good results to achieve more. He believed that the

German educational system fails to support those *'at the tails of the achievement distribution'*, whose potential is not fully realised.

5.8.6. Barriers to rewarding effort in Germany: role of natural talents and skilful application of "right effort"

There are participants who believe the educational system in Germany is designed in such a way that if you put effort, you will get good results in your exam. Matthias claims that: *"In Gymnasium, if you study a lot, if you prepare yourself for your exam, then you will very likely do very well in your exam*".

However, other participants held different views. They emphasised that talent and natural inclinations favour some individuals over others. Marlene claimed that:

> *"Effort can get you very far, if you put in a lot of effort and if that is productive and efficient. But then again, some people work a lot and just don't understand the content and then don't get very far. So, where you are depends on your natural skill and talent, or whether you put in the right effort at the right time*"

Apart from talent, several German interviewees seemed to believe that the way one is taught how to apply effort, either by school or parents, influences the amount of effort one needs to successfully meet the requirements. They contradict the idea that there is a strong correlation between amount of effort and educational outcomes. Lukas explains that the skill to gauge when and how to apply "the right effort" seems to be very important for being successful at school. This insight is very much in line with Bourdieu's (1990) theory that habitus, as a practical sense which can be similar to a "feel for the game" (p. 66), is developed through the gradual acquisition of knowledge in the form of getting to decipher the rules of a game.

Some German participants claimed that the influence of socio-economic background is mitigated by the fact that one can do well at Gymnasium if they apply effort at decisive moments. However, the participant whose parents did not go to university argued that there is a relationship between socio-economic background and the capacity to sustain motivation to study throughout Gymnasium. He emphasised the contrast between one of his high-achieving classmates who had strict parents, was very motivated to become a doctor, and whose "key to success was effort", and his friend, whose parents did not value education to a similar extent. His friend could not

motivate himself to study hard at important stages during the Gymnasium. Even though his friend was *"was a very clever guy, he completely failed because he couldn't put enough effort into studying. After repeating tenth grade twice, he left school without any qualification."* This shows how pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are not motivated by status maintenance and do not aim at a clear occupational trajectory might struggle to maintain the motivation to study and perform well at school.

Some participants also mention differences in opportunities provided by schools as important in framing how relevant effort is for one's life chances. Some pupils get to showcase initiative just by virtue of being able to get involved in a lot of different activities at their schools, while others would have to be much more assertive to create those opportunities for themselves. Jakob argues that effort will take you to the top of the educational pathway you were allocated to: "*if you go down the vocational route, hard work will only bring you the best options available for that educational certificate but will not allow you to study theoretical subjects at university".* His perspective reflects an awareness of how the structure of the educational system influences people's opportunities to succeed, regardless of the effort they invest in their studies.

5.9. Discussion

Overall, people in Romania are more critical regarding the fairness of educational opportunities in their country than people in Germany. Thus, Romanians are more sceptical of their country being an education-based meritocracy than individuals from Germany. However, in Romania, there is a considerable difference between the perceived fairness of one's own educational opportunities among people with higher education and people with lower levels of education. This indicates that a substantial proportion of higher education graduates from Romania report that they had good opportunities to attain the educational level sought. Still, Romanian higher education graduates are overall more critical than German higher education graduates about the fairness of educational opportunities for both themselves and other people in their country.

The patterns of fairness evaluations among people with different levels of education within these two countries differ. In Romania, people who completed higher

education perceive educational opportunities for everyone in their country to be fairer than people who attained other educational qualifications. That is not the case in Germany, where higher education graduates are more critical than vocational education graduates about the fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in their country. This finding is aligned with research by Sachweh and Sthamer (2019) who suggest that high-income groups in Germany have become fairly critical in their assessment of social injustice. This is a conflicting finding to what Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016) reported, that people with lower education in Germany are more inclined to think that only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university degree. However, the questions from the European Social Survey are different to those analysed by Lavrijsen and Nicaise; my thesis does not explore how individuals perceive their chances of having gone to university, but to having completed the education level they wanted. The difference in results could be a manifestation of respondents retrospectively accepting the education level they obtained as what they desired in the first place, in line with Bottero's (2020) observation that subordinate groups internalise inequality by developing a self-limiting sense of what are appropriate expectations for them.

This chapter shows that it is fairly common for individuals from Germany and Romania to think they had fairer educational opportunities than other people in their countries. Perceived privilege is particularly prevalent among higher education graduates in both countries. This research does not refer to "perceived privilege" as something only experienced by a few wealthy individuals, but as a more widespread acknowledgement that one had access to opportunities that were denied to others in their society. Thus, perceived privilege in this study can be understood as being able to apply effort, show one's talents, and gain recognition for one's skills. Even though the average score of perceived privilege is similar among higher education graduates from Germany and Romania, elite students' conceptualisations of privilege differ between these two countries.

The component of perceived privilege that varies more is different in Germany from Romania. Differences in perceived educational privilege in Germany are mostly due to differences in other-regarding evaluations of educational fairness, as people with higher education tend to perceive opportunities for everyone in their country to be

less fair. Differences in Romania are mostly due to the way people perceive their own opportunities to succeed in the educational system, as respondents are generally sceptical of everyone in their country having fair educational opportunities. This shows that the patterns of perceived (un)fairness of educational opportunities are not universal and cannot be generalised to people in all European countries. Thus, as Mijs (2018) suggests, it is valuable to employ a comparative perspective when exploring how individuals perceive the fairness of the societies they live in. Exploring the barriers identified by participants from both countries as standing in the way of ensuring fairness of opportunities is also important for better analysing the results of the ESS survey.

Elite students from both countries talk about barriers in the way of background fairness, as well as stakes fairness (Jacobs, 2010). Romanian participants argue that background fairness is distorted by unequal access to private tutoring and extracurricular activities. They also state that the stakes of getting into a prestigious high school are unfairly high because there is a substantial difference in quality and recognition between those high schools and all others. Moreover, some participants claim that individuals' grades for admission to high school are unfairly influenced by the varying quality of lower secondary schools.

Some students from Romania argue that economic capital is a threat to background fairness in their educational system, which is an essential difference from the way German students interpret barriers to fairness of educational opportunities in their country. Some German participants mentioned explicitly that parents' money does not matter for securing better educational opportunities in their country. Notably, the argument that educational selection in Germany is not influenced by parents' money is used to support the legitimacy of the early tracking system (Apple and Debs, 2021). However, most German participants acknowledge the advantages that pupils have if their parents went to Gymnasium and university. Some participants consider the stakes of the tracking process unfairly high because it happens very early on and not a lot of people manage to move from the vocational track to the academic track.

The barriers identified by Romanian students as standing in the way of a fair reward of talent and effort are related to a lack of "financial and cultural resources", that make it impossible for people deprived of these resources to cultivate their talents

and develop their skills. Participants from Germany understand the barriers to rewarding talent and effort as mostly related to cultural capital and to the very entrenched ways of preparing for and during Gymnasium. Some pupils learn from their families how to meet academic requirements, while others cannot access this knowledge. While Romanian participants identify more explicit manifestations of privilege – material resources and developmental opportunities, German participants identify more implicit ways in which privilege operates, usually through learning from parents how to study, communicate, and channel their effort effectively. In line with Bourdieu's (1986) argument that the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital is less visible and less condemned by others than economic capital, we can argue that unfairness of educational opportunities is less visible in Germany than in Romania.

These conceptualisations of the barriers to ensuring fair educational opportunities for everyone can be understood in the context of the processes of educational stratification in Romania and Germany. Exley (2020) suggests that parents are most incentivised to use private tutoring in times of increased anxiety. Since the Romanian educational system has two high-stakes standardised examinations, and the first one at age fourteen influences further educational opportunities, private tutoring is used to ensure that pupils get the best chances of succeeding. Consistent with Keskiner's (2015) observation that parents' strategies to help pupils get selected into the academic route are more covert in educational systems operating early tracking, parents' cultural capital is considered influential in Germany, where tracking happens as early as age ten.

6. Meritocracy seen through the eyes of its champions: a comparative study of educational elites

Abstract

This chapter examines the strategies employed by elite students from Romania and Germany to achieve success in their respective educational systems. It also explores the way in which they understand the role of talent, effort, and structural factors in shaping educational success. The image of a successful student aligns with the requirements of the selection processes, with Romanian students emphasising self-drive and German students projecting an image of effortless achievement. The strategies employed by students shed light on the support received from families and teachers. Analysing ideas about meritocracy in tandem with strategies for gaining educational advantages, this thesis shows how participants' strategies to succeed can be masked by meritocratic narratives surrounding educational success.

6.1. Introduction

The process whereby students with academic potential assess and navigate the structure of educational opportunities is not linear or simple (Power et al., 1999). Reay (2020) argues that high-achieving middle- and upper-class students are under a lot of pressure to be 'the best' and believe doing well is not enough, as in most middle-class families high academic performance is understood as ordinary (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Students at elite schools describe what it takes to achieve academic success as "playing a game" (Howard, 2013, p.217), in which you have to understand the rules and the effective ways of gaining advantage over others. Thus, students at prestigious educational institutions do not see social background as destiny, because their success is dependent on them "taking their opportunities" (Brown et al., 2016). This resonates with the claim by Markovits (2019) that

meritocracy is a "trap" even for those who manage to successfully prove themselves through increasingly exploiting their educational credentials.

The perceived interplay between structural factors and individual merit is complex, and it guides the way in which elite students internalise and enact their privilege, either making effort visible or concealing it. Conducting an ethnography at an elite school in the US, Khan (2011) was surprised to find that instead of arrogance, students were displaying much "ease of privilege" (p.77) as they made hard work seem commonplace and effortless. By way of contrast, conducting a mixed-methods study on attributions of school success, Clycq et al. (2014) report that the discourse emphasising the importance of pupils' agency and effort is the dominant explanation for performing well at school in Flanders, a region where the education system is very rigidly stratified.

The embodiment of elite status could take different forms depending on the requirements of the educational system. Turner (1960) differentiates between "sponsored" mobility systems, where elite membership is "given" on the basis of complex talents and skills, and "contest" type mobility systems, where elite membership is "won" through a series of competitions, and skills have to be visible to everyone. Because talent and effort have to be demonstrated to different audiences, their display might vary depending on the type of educational systems.

There are comparative studies illustrating the differences in perceived importance and desirability of talent and effort. Brown et al. (2016) conduct semi-structured interviews and find that there are differences in how elite students at Sciences Po in France and Oxford in the UK perceive the role of talent and effort in meritocratic selection. While students in France are against an emphasis on talent, because they think it would lead to arbitrary and discriminatory practices, students in the UK are more likely to believe they need to showcase talent and "personal qualities" to be considered among the best. In a similar vein, the work by Warikoo (2018), who interviews students at elite universities in United States and Britain, shows that students' narratives about success and merit seem to follow the criteria of evaluation applied by educational institutions. Moreover, comparing interpretations of merit in four European countries through a mixed-methods design, Heuer et al. (2020)

suggest there is a fundamental link between dominant institutional arrangements and people's understanding of meritocracy.

Based on the assumption that there is an underlying affinity between processes of educational selection and people's perceptions of merit, I explore attributions of educational success and failure in two countries with very different educational systems. Germany most closely resembles the sponsored (Turner, 1960) logic of stratification, as selection into different tracks happens early on and is legitimated by the ideology that "innate talent" can be effectively channelled into either theoretical or practical pursuits (Powell and Solga, 2011, p. 55). In contrast, the educational system in Romania resembles a tournament (Rosenbaum, 1979), as the competitive examination for access to different tracks and streams at upper-secondary level influences individuals' further options for university.

This chapter will answer the questions: *How do elite students from Germany and Romania navigate the requirements of their educational systems? How do they understand the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success and failure?* The research will take a comparative approach, contrasting insights from students who went to school in Germany and Romania and who now study social science disciplines at elite universities in the UK.

6.2. Configurations of educational systems in Germany and Romania

This section presents the different configurations of educational transitions in Germany and Romania. Figure 6.1. below displays the structure of primary and secondary school in Romania and Germany.

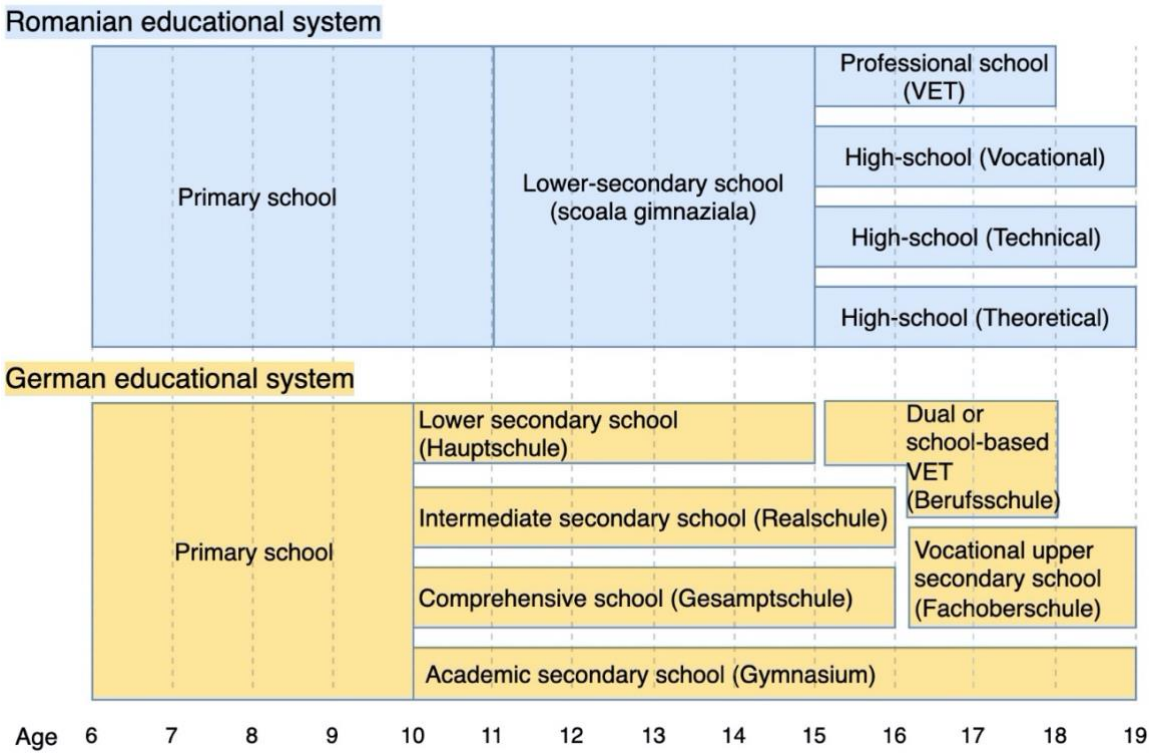

Figure 6.1: Structure of Romanian and German school systems

After the primary school stage, secondary education in the German Länder is characterised by division into distinct educational paths, each with their own leaving certificates and qualifications (Eurydice, 2022). The traditional educational paths are the Hauptschule (lower track), Realschule (intermediate track), and Gymnasium (academic track). The traditional tripartite structure has been altered in most Länder with the introduction of Gesamtschule, which admits students with different levels of ability within a single school, although they are still grouped into different classes (Schnepf, 2002). In all states where the Gesamtschule was introduced, it did not replace the three-tier system entirely but instead became a fourth school track (Becker et al., 2016). Another departure from the traditional model is that some states now have a two-tier secondary school system, having renounced the low-track Hauptschule. Although there is now heterogeneity between the architecture of educational systems in different Länder, the academic Gymnasium exists in all 16 German Länder, and it is now the most popular school track (ibid.).

Secondary education in Germany breaks down into lower secondary level, which is undertaken from ages ten or twelve to ages fourteen or fifteen (Kultusminister Konferenz, 2019), and upper secondary level, when pupils can choose between

academic education, education in upper secondary vocational schools, or vocational training within the dual system (Eurydice, 2022). The academic track of upper-secondary education ends with the Abitur examination. In all Länder, pupils receive a final grade which is a combination of the grades earned over the two last years of upper-secondary schooling and the results of the Abitur examination (Waldow, 2014). Universities can decide upon their selection criteria within the legal framework of each state, but the final grade from Abitur is generally the main criterion for differentiation (Kübler, 2019).

In Romania, lower secondary education (ISCED 2) is pursued between the ages of ten or eleven to fourteen or fifteen. The only schools which select pupils based on academic ability for admission to lower secondary education are called national colleges (colegii). They are educational institutions which offer lower secondary education, as well as high school education. Pupils who attend national colleges at lower secondary stage are not automatically accepted for high school at the same institutions, but they usually get very high grades for the National Evaluation examination, which facilitates their access to prestigious high schools (Cornea, 2021). Access to upper secondary education in either high school or professional education depends on the standardised National Evaluation examination. Romanian pupils who finish lower secondary education are assigned to high schools based on a score derived from their grades in lower secondary education and their performance in the National Evaluation. In descending order of their admission scores, pupils are allocated to their most preferred high school stream with available seats (Munteanu, 2019).

At the end of high-school, pupils take the baccalaureate exam, called “Bacalaureat” or “Bac”. Having a baccalaureate diploma is a requirement for university admission in Romania. Even though universities can define their own admission processes, which are quite diverse, the grade from the Bacalaureat is in most cases the primary determinant for differentiating candidates (Titan et al., 2022).

Olympiads are academic competitions organised at a national level by the Ministry of Education, with the aim of improving the skills of high-achieving pupils with special abilities for certain subjects by stimulating their critical thinking and creativity (Ministerul Educatiei, 2017). The culture of Olympiads has a long tradition, as the

first International Mathematics Olympiad was held in Romania in 1959 (Rindermann, 2011). Prestigious lower-secondary and upper-secondary schools in Romania compete with each other in the Olympiads, and teachers whose pupils get awards at the Olympiads are paid considerable bonuses. The preparation for Olympiads can take a few months, during which pupils who compete dedicate less time to other school subjects. However, an award in one subject is sometimes rewarded by teachers of multiple subjects, who give the winning students a maximum grade of 10 as a recognition for their effort and for promoting the school.

6.3. Understandings of merit in different educational systems

This section reviews the literature related to the way in which students attribute educational success in different contexts. With reference to "meritocratic" achievement, which is composed of talent and effort (Young, 1958), I will focus on reviewing the perceived balance between ability, hard work, and structural (dis) advantages for attaining success in different educational settings. Acknowledging the disadvantage faced by others and maintaining the perception that educational success is based on merit might seem contradictory. Yet, research by Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) suggests that students at elite universities can simultaneously uphold both viewpoints. Interviewing students at Oxford University, the authors found that many participants recognised the disadvantages faced by others in gaining admission to prestigious universities. Despite this, participants in their study still saw the process of admission to Oxford as meritocratic, since candidates were judged based on their abilities. My research embraces the complexity and inconsistency of meritocratic ideas and explores different narratives about the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in influencing educational success.

Dweck's research (2007) suggests that there are two main views about intelligence and ability. The fixed mindset posits that intelligence is a predetermined, internal entity – individuals are seen to have a certain amount of intelligence and they cannot do much to change it. Thus, effort would be a compensatory mechanism for lack of intelligence. By contrast, the growth mindset sees intelligence as a more dynamic quality that can be developed and increased with effort. Dweck suggests people subscribe to elements of both views and that mindsets are shaped by context.

Delving deeper into the factors that influence young people's ability perceptions, Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) suggest that certain characteristics of educational systems which are related to performance ranking and comparison alter the ways in which students interpret academic ability. Batruch et al. (2019) argue that promoting competition between pupils can lead to them attributing gaps in performance to differences in ability rather than acknowledging pre-existing differences in cultural capital. Moreover, Mijs and Paulle (2016) interview pupils at a top academic secondary school in the Netherlands and find that they see effort for school as unnecessary, since they are in fact "set" from age twelve to attend university. The authors argue that pupils' attitude towards effort is influenced by the institutional characteristics of the educational system in the Netherlands, where individuals are selected into academic or vocational routes based on perceived ability at age twelve.

Emphasising effort as an explanation for success is encouraged more in some educational systems. Trautwein et al. (2006) conducted a comparative study with pupils from East and West Germany prior to reunification to explore how learning environments influence the impact of educational achievement on pupils' overall confidence. They describe the learning environment in East Germany as placing high emphasis on effort. This effort must be visible to classmates, so social comparisons are used systematically. In their view, the learning environment in West Germany did more to protect the self-image of all pupils, so academic success and failure were seen as multiply determined, with some of its causes falling outside a student's realm of responsibility. They found that East German students were more likely to attribute academic success to effort than West German students. Also, by comparison to pupils in the US, German pupils are more likely to believe there is an inverse relationship between effort and ability, as they were more likely to suggest that "capable children do not need to work hard" (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2005, p.226). On the other hand, high-school Romanian students think effort is the most important factor for educational success, while socio-economic factors are acknowledged, but considered of secondary importance (Toc, 2018).

Thus, there are different perspectives on whether achievement should appear easy or not. Displays of both effort and effortlessness can be exclusionary practices in different contexts. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argue that people from privileged

backgrounds inherit knowledge and know-how that is acquired indirectly, without intention or effort. Indeed, effortless achievement is valorised in many Western educational institutions, as it is associated with "authentic intelligence" (Jackson and Nyström, 2014, p.394). For programmes where effortless achievement is considered unattainable, individuals place value on "stress-less" achievement, which means a lack of unproductive worrying (Nyström et al., 2019, p. 471). However, there are elite schools in Norway where pupils share an open attitude towards reading, striving for intellectual excellence, and dedicating significant effort to preparing for tests, to an extent that leads to problematic pressure (Halvorsen, 2022). The author attributes the sense of unease that children at these schools have with the challenging task of dealing with the tension between elitism, encouraged at school, and egalitarianism, encouraged in the society.

The existing literature indicates that perceptions of meritocracy are also shaped by prior successes and failures. Mijs (2016) uses PISA data to look at pupils' attributions of their mathematics performance and finds that pupils who have been tracked by ability are more likely to attribute poor results to their lack of ability, rather than to external factors such as teachers and luck. However, the belief they can constantly improve their skills motivates pupils to take responsibility for their results and make efforts to advance in the hierarchy of educational performance (Allen, 2012). Research conducted with applicants to highly selective medical schools in Germany shows that after the results of the admission process, successful candidates believed more strongly that one's effort is important to succeed (Wetter and Finger, 2023) Thus, it is expected that individuals with successful educational trajectories will believe that talent, effort, or both play an important role in educational achievement.

Research suggest there is a tension between wanting to be judged on your merits and admitting that you were privileged. Sherman's (2017) research on elites in New York describes how her participants struggle to legitimise their positions, and often acknowledge the role of luck. The author interprets participants' accounts not as a way of concealing privilege, but as reflecting their unease with justifying their position through meritocratic narratives. Allouch et al. (2015) find that elite students tend to use a discourse emphasising personal responsibility as a way of reducing the tension between their privilege and the acknowledgement of social inequalities. In

line with this perspective, Swalwell (2013) found that privileged students with a commitment towards acknowledging inequalities have different strategies of reconciling their advantaged position with their orientation towards social justice. Some individuals see the task of the privileged as having personal integrity, being honest and making responsible use of the opportunities available to them. Others felt overwhelmed with how entrenched inequality is and opted for a kind of conscious inaction oriented towards resisting to reproduce the behaviours and discourses that would further their privilege. Their tactic was to adopt a resigned discourse about inequalities being entrenched and difficult to shift. Interviewing classical musicians, Scharff (2021) found that her participants were also employing a fatalistic discourse about inequalities as an unavoidable reality. Thus, the author suggests that "inequality talk", the act of acknowledging inequalities, might perform a range of ideological functions, some of which do not lead to challenging inequalities.

6.4. Methodology

I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students who study social sciences at Russell Group universities and who went to school in either Germany or Romania. The sample comprised of 15 German students, eight women and seven men, and 16 Romanian students, out of which nine were women and seven were men. The interviews with German students were conducted in English, while the ones with Romanian students were conducted in Romanian, and then translated to English by the author of this thesis, who is fluent in both languages. Because of COVID-19 and the regulations in the UK at different times, some interviews were conducted online, and others in person. Table A.4 in Appendix 4 provides more detail about the characteristics of the sample.

The reason for choosing undergraduate students is that they have not yet received their final grades that would classify them as higher or lower achieving based on the performance categories of the British university system. Thus, their views on success would not be as influenced by the ranking they go through during university. The decision to focus on individuals studying social science is informed by the fact that the coupling between area of study and occupation is looser than in other fields. This proved helpful in generating nuanced accounts of their motivations to be high-achieving at school. Social science students are generally more aware of social

inequalities and more sceptical about meritocracy than people studying different subjects (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). Interviewing them elicited complex accounts of the interaction between structural and individual factors in influencing their educational journeys.

The group of students interviewed in this thesis have decided to study abroad, in the UK context, so their motivations and understandings of educational success cannot be unhesitatingly generalised to the whole population of successful pupils from Germany and Romania. This is especially the case since the university requirements in the UK call for more involvement in extracurricular activities. However, most participants made the decision to study abroad in their final year of high school, so most of the strategies applied for being successful at school preceded their commitment to studying at a UK university. When asked about what their educational trajectory would have been had they stayed in their country of birth, most interviewees said they would have studied either Medicine, Law, or Computer Science. Thus, had they stayed in their home countries, they would have still been part of the educational elite.

Germany and Romania are both in the top ten European countries sending the most individuals to study abroad in the UK (HESA, 2023). In the context of globalisation, there is an increased focus on foreign language proficiency and the ability to work in a multicultural environment, skills which constitute transnational capital (Gerhards & Hans, 2013). According to Bühlmann et al. (2013), transnational capital can be considered a specific form of cultural capital, as it corresponds to an ability to feel confident and comfortable in various geographical places, when interacting with people from different countries. Thirty out of thirty-one students interviewed have at least one parent who went to university, which is not surprising given that a large proportion of students who study in other countries have parents with higher education qualifications (González et al., 2011).

I conducted in-depth interviews to explore participants' educational journeys and the way in which they defined success and failure with reference to both themselves and their peers. During these interviews, the concept of a timeline was used as an elicitation and visualisation tool. Participants were encouraged to plot moments of transition in their educational journeys on this chronological timeline. Experiences

and reflections were captured in relation to key moments of educational selection, which prompted participants to recollect the broader context of their educational transitions (Adriansen, 2012). Exploring strategies to succeed together with perceptions about success allows me to analyse simultaneously the resources families use to navigate educational transitions, and the meritocratic ideas that conceal these advantages. Van Zanten (2015) took a similar approach to studying the way in which (upper) middle class parents make their involvement in their children's educational trajectories as invisible as possible through the use of meritocratic discourses.

Before initiating data collection, I obtained ethical approval by following the process created by the Research Ethics Committee at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). I also submitted a data management plan that presented my strategy for obtaining informed consent, for storing and anonymising the data. Data from this project were securely stored using LSE's OneDrive. I obtained informed consent from participants in writing ahead of each interview (see Appendix 3). To maintain the anonymity of my participants, I use pseudonyms and I do not mention their university or field of study in the analysis.

The data was managed and analysed using the Framework approach in NVivo developed by NatCen (Ritchie et al., 2014). The first step was to familiarise with the data while transcribing the interviews. Based on the content of the interviews, and the main themes followed in the interview guide, I drafted an analytical framework, including a series of matrices which relate to different thematic issues. This framework served as a tool for organising the data. The development of the analytical framework was an iterative process, as it was refined when the data collected from interviews did not fit properly under the analytical categories already identified. The final analytical stage involved working through the charted data, mapping the range of experiences and views of both German and Romanian participants, identifying similarities and differences.

6.5. Findings

This section reports insights about three themes: students' strategies for performing well and carving their educational trajectories; attributions of success; attributions of failure. The first theme corresponds to the first research question, while the last two themes relate to the second research question. That allows for an explanation of how

the processes of allocating pupils to different educational trajectories are related to participants' strategies of meeting the requirements, and with their perceptions of success and failure.

6.5.1. Strategies for navigating processes of educational selection

Most students interviewed emphasised that it was important for them to make use of the opportunities available for them. Julia expressed this idea astutely: "*I wanted to do something with my life and use the opportunity I was given as well as possible".* This sense of responsibility towards individual fulfilment is also observed by Allouch et al., (2015) who find that students tend to legitimise their favourable social position through cultivating their individual integrity. Most interviewees' commitment to meeting the standards required to have a successful educational trajectory indicates that they were intentional about navigating the requirements of their educational systems.

These requirements look different depending on the structure of each educational system. To visualise the key educational transitions that German and Romanian participants had to navigate, I provide below the 'typical' timelines for the interviewees from both countries. Some participants changed school at the same educational level, because they either moved to a new city, or they were dissatisfied with their initial school. I will not include these moves on the typical timeline, because they do not mark high-stakes transitions from one educational stage to another. The vertical lines on these typical timelines illustrate the 'bottlenecks' in the opportunity structure, which Fishkin (2014) defined as the narrow places through which pupils had to pass to reach the wide range of opportunities on the other side. This typical timeline does not represent the only possible pathway to success, but it indicates the most well-established route to success through education, based on the experiences of the segment of educational elites interviewed for this study.

The typical timeline of educational transitions for German participants is illustrated below.

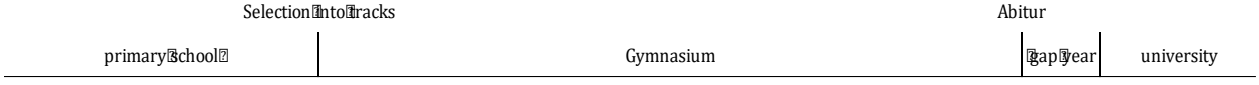

Figure 6. 2: Typical timeline German participants

The typical timeline for Romanian participants is shown in the figure below.

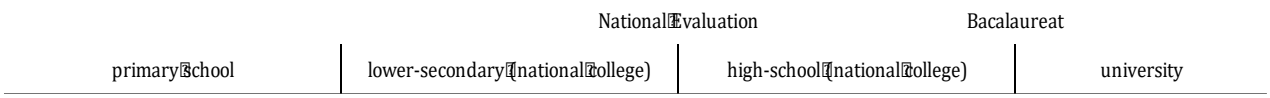

Figure 6. 3: Typical timeline Romanian participants

Romanian students' strategies

Several Romanian students mention they felt the highest pressure to do well in high school, before the Bacalaureat, and in lower secondary school, before the National Evaluation. The strategies employed by Romanian students to get good grades in these exams differed. Most of them received private tutoring, at least in the final year of high school. Almost all participants said private tutoring to help prepare for the exams was very common among their classmates. Mihnea commented on the association between private tutoring and high grades and pointed out that a very high proportion of those who got grades over nine (out of ten) in the baccalaureate examination received private tutoring.

Even though the first formal high-stakes selection happens in Romania at age fourteen, before enrolling in upper-secondary education, some Romanian families are influenced by the allure of selectivity even earlier on, at primary or lower-secondary educational level. Mihai and Cristian explain that their parents wanted them to go to national colleges for their lower-secondary school because they thought these schools would give pupils an advantage when it came to further selection processes. The idea that one's allocation to a certain school at lower-secondary level would influence further educational opportunities is aligned with the logic of the tournament model of stratification, where the ranking in each competition affects one's chances in subsequent competitions (see Chapter 4). Some participants mentioned they put a lot of effort to get into a selective lower secondary school. Emilia took tests at seven schools and went to the only selective school which accepted her. Larisa and Elena mentioned that their parents wanted them to get into these national colleges, as they thought that their high level of selectivity attested to the quality of their future peers and teachers.

Several participants mentioned that parents managed their time in lower secondary school. Clara and Roxana mentioned their parents tried to ensure they dedicated time to preparing for academic competitions, even though this would not directly help their admission to high school. However, Elena mentioned that participation in academic competitions and Olympiads was very much appreciated by teachers. Furthermore, Larisa explained that participating in academic competitions was useful for her, because teachers started to associate her with someone very studious and high-achieving. Consequently, they would not give her low grades if occasionally she did not know how to answer certain questions.

In high school, most participants considered that conscientiousness remained important. Marius explained that during high-school, involvement in extracurricular activities became more important in determining status and gaining teachers' appreciation. He thought this happened also because the effort required to get high grades was lower than in lower secondary school, especially in the Social Science and Humanities streams. Because pupils had less homework imposed in high school, they were more responsible for managing their own time in a productive way. This increased responsibility meant that some pupils would go through school on "auto-pilot", as Bogdan put it, "*not knowing what they wanted to do or why it was important for them to study".* On the other hand, most pupils who were thriving were proactive in pursuing an academic interest, often in alignment with the subjects they wanted to pursue at university. Roxana explained that most pupils who were hard-working in high-school were planning ahead and preparing for university admission.

<u>German students' strategies</u>

Most German participants recollected studying a lot in the last two years of Gymnasium because they wanted high grades in Abitur. This is because only the grades taken in the last two years contribute to the final grade. Friedrich explains: *"the German education system works in a way that you can game the system by not studying until grade ten and studying hard after".*

In a similar vein to Romanian participants who wanted their children to go to national colleges from lower secondary school, a few German participants mentioned their families were hoping that their children would get selected early into Gymnasiums. However, their motivation differed. Some German participants

mentioned their parents wanted them to go to selective schools because they wanted their children to be challenged. The quote below illustrates why Annike's parents wanted her to go to a Gymnasium after four years of primary school, even though most of her peers stayed six years at primary school: *"They thought I had a too easy of a time in primary schools and I need to work more, so decided to put me into a more competitive school".*

Most German participants mentioned their parents had a prominent role in guiding their decision of secondary school. This was particularly manifested through them identifying and advocating for their children's talents, guiding them towards a particular subject, and providing them with an insider's perspective about the rigours of Gymnasiums. Julia explains how her parents anticipated the transition to secondary school and suggested to teachers in advance what educational trajectory was best suited for their child: *"My parents thought I was just really talented in languages, and I didn't have another focus that I was particularly interested in […] so they suggested it, and it made sense to my teachers*".

6.5.2. Romanian students' attributions of success and failure: the myth of the self-driven individual

Success: Effort sustains talent

For most Romanian students interviewed, success was viewed as being tightly connected to hard work and dedication. The effort required to excel took different forms in lower secondary school and in high school. In lower secondary education, most interviewees painted the image of the successful pupil as that of the over-achiever who participated in academic competitions. For this, one had to signal great talent, but then also put a lot of work into developing their academic skills. Emilia suggested the best pupils were the ones who displayed **"the spark",** which meant the potential to achieve high performance in Olympiads. This quote from the interview with Cristian illustrates the high expectations placed on pupils: *"Best students had straight 10s in all four years, went to Olympiads and competitions, they were well rounded and ticked all the boxes"*. Some participants felt that teachers' attention was focused primarily on those who were learning more than the curriculum required and exceeded the demands. Emilia explained that this favoured pupils with parents

who could talk to them about a wide range of academic topics and help them prepare for school.

Apart from being talented, several participants mentioned that the best pupils in secondary school had to be conscientious, well-behaved, do their homework, and show interest during classes. Bogdan described how these traits related to work ethic were associated with personality traits, as individuals were divided into "good" or "bad" pupils when puberty started. Therefore, Adrian claimed that impressing teachers was very important, and "good" students would try to appease them. Emilia described how teachers' criticism, which she called "*motivation through reproach*" made her want to prove that she is *"a child who can be successful"*. She recounted that her teachers attributed one occurrence of success to chance, whereas it only took one bad result for them to judge pupils' ability by saying that *"maybe this is not for you because you cannot do more".*

Based on several accounts, the image of the most successful pupil in high school changed from purely conscientious to *"extroverted, confident, and able to get their point across",* as described by Crina. Moreover, Emilia described the best pupils in high school as *"assertive autodidacts who have accumulated a good dose of cultural baggage".* She pointed out that pupils were very assertive in building their knowledge: *"You had to chase the teacher to get more information, not the other way around"*. Roxana made the point that the ones who excelled had a strong interest in a field of study, sometimes coinciding with what they wanted to do at university. She described her most successful peers as *"people who put education first and had high ideals".*

In high school, those who could afford private tutoring had an advantage, because they received extra information and knowledge. Bianca said 80% of her classmates were doing private tutoring during high school, which made it more difficult for her and the other 20% to keep up. She believed that teachers were not putting that much effort at school because the assumption was that pupils would do tutoring and they would have a chance to ask questions then.

Based on insights from several participants, there were two categories of pupils who did well in high school: those who put in a lot of time and effort, and those who were "smart", were involved in a lot of extracurricular activities, and found questions easy

to answer. Elena gave a detailed description of the layers of success among her peers in high school: "*the two highest achievers had tunnel vision and did not do anything besides school*". After that, there were the ones who were the "*image of everything the others wanted to be":* good at school, going to the national Olympiads, had a great social life. Larisa thought being in the second category of high achievers was desirable because she got to do a lot more activities and develop more skills than just what was required for school. In contrast, Bogdan admitted he was envious of the ones who got higher grades, and that is why he used to say they had nothing else to do but study. Notably, the ones in the second category, who aim at a well-rounded development, still put a lot of effort into developing their academic abilities, but channel this effort towards a wider range of activities.

The same narrative about the two different perspectives on educational success appeared in conversation with Adela, and Florin, who both enquired what kind of success I was referring to: *"getting good grades or understanding the content and integrating it?"* Florin believed that doing well in high school was different from having high grades. He was not interested in getting straight 10s, but in getting good grades in the subjects he was tested in at the Bac.

Even though most Romanian participants tended to place emphasis on effort as an explanation for educational success, there were some gender differences among interviewees related to the importance they assigned to good grades and whether they perceived being a diligent student as an important part of their identity. Several Romanian men (four out of eight) mentioned explicitly that having good grades during high school was not important for their self-perception and their confidence that they would get high grades at the Bacalaureat examination. However, several Romanian women (four out of eight) acknowledged that getting top grades and being a high achiever at school was a big part of their identity. Thus, it seems that Romanian men tended to acknowledge their effort towards studying and learning, but only as a part of their personality, not a dominant characteristic.

Some participants emphasised the contrast between people who succeeded *only* through effort channelled towards fulfilling what was required at school and people who developed a broad range of skills and were confident they could get high grades without dedicating all their time to studying. Along the same line, Khan (2011) found

that students who believed that working hard was the *only* way to get ahead were patronised by other students, who were more self-assured and for whom "working hard and excelling were commonplace" (p.120). I interpret the narratives of participants in my study as meaning they looked down on effort that was not channelled towards developing useful skills.

Failure: lack of resources and guidance

It is noteworthy that some participants from Romania described classmates who did the bare minimum and met the requirements at high school as pupils who were failing. Cristian thought his peers who did not display a strong interest in academic pursuits and did not engage in extracurricular activities were lagging behind.

Those who could not keep up with the requirements in secondary school were deemed "slow learners", a term used by Dana. They were not fully integrated in the peer group either. In contrast, bad performance among Romanian pupils at prestigious high schools was attributed solely to losing motivation, as Roxana mentioned that *"the fact they got into that stream means they are intelligent and hard-working"*. It seems that students cannot conceive of errors in the selection process. Some of them explain that their peers got poor results in high school because of a lack of effort or changes regarding their priorities. Clara mentioned that her peers who could not keep up *"completely lacked motivation, even if they had the intellectual capacity to fulfil the requirements".*

Several Romanian participants referred to support from parents as a necessary condition for being able to dedicate a lot of time and effort to studying. They mostly associated parents' support with providing the necessary resources and encouragement to keep their children at a prestigious school. Emilia saw her peers' inability for self-driven independent learning as a reason for failure in high school. However, she did not perceive this inability for intense individual study as intrinsic, but as influenced by the climate at home, which did not allow some pupils to dedicate so much time to studying and searching for answers themselves. Thus, she related failure to an inability to prioritise studying. Emilia further mentioned that five of her classmates who did not have highly educated parents dropped out of her school to go to other high schools. In a similar vein, Bianca explained that some of her classmates

were asked by their parents to help them with agricultural work, so they could not spend so much time studying.

For some Romanian pupils, their relationships with teachers constituted reasons for becoming demotivated. The ones who had the feeling that their teachers disliked them and were biased against them started saying there was no point in trying to prove themselves. One participant said grades started to not matter anymore when he realised he did not admire or respect his teachers and did not care about their perceptions of him. Moreover, Marius argued that some strict teachers would sometimes give bad grades randomly when they were annoyed. Elena mentioned that teachers' expectations were very high for the pupils in the Maths stream, and they would pick some pupils whose confidence they would undermine through harsh criticism. Florin thought grades were used by teachers to induce fear, and some pupils who did not know how to appease them would take grades of 3. Some people got low grades because they were tutored by teachers who taught them different approaches from those preferred by their teachers from school. It is noteworthy how much importance Romanian students placed on teachers' opinions of their academic potential and performance.

6.5.3. German students' attributions of success and failure: the myth of the effortless achiever

Success: Some are smart and others are "just" hard workers

When asked to describe the profile of a successful pupil, several German participants described the people who would successfully keep up with the requirements at Gymnasium, rather than only the best ones in their class. Lukas explained that they had to showcase a positive attitude towards learning, although they were not expected to have crystallised interests: *"You show interest [...] even if you know it's not actually genuine interest [...], I would say that's very important that you participate in class".*

For good results, Marlene argued it was sufficient to be dedicated, complete the assigned work, and showcase a willingness to learn: *"I don't think there was any correlation with having parents who have gone to university or are well off, because I guess, this is the upside of that system: if you just sat down and did your work, you could*

do really quite well". Marlene sees hard work as being the primary factor determining achievement in an environment which she thinks does not stimulate original thinking. Therefore, she thinks there is no relationship between parents' background and educational success. In her eyes, social background is not linked with effort, as she argues that everyone could study hard if they wanted to.

Similarly, other interviewees claim that hard work is a necessary and sufficient ingredient to succeed because the level of difficulty at the Gymnasium is not very high. For example, Matthias mentioned he was only putting in a moderate quantity of effort. "*It used to be that the Gymnasium was a very difficult place to be but the level has significantly dropped […] I never did that much work for Gymnasium, but you don't have to be incredibly smart to do well, you just have to put in a bit of work".*

Against this backdrop, some participants criticised the educational system for not challenging the top achievers and not encouraging original thinking. They mentioned teachers encouraged obedience and praised pupils who would stick to the material that was taught to them, rather than try to come up with alternative perspectives on a subject. Marlene argued that: *"in terms of spotting talent, they spot the wrong talent […] the people who are really good at just learning off by heart and just reciting what was learnt rather than thinking outside the box".*

The same participants who denied that socio-economic background played an important role in determining educational success claimed that the educational system in Germany did not cater for the most talented and did not encourage pupils to be exceptional. However, other participants expressed a different view, that intelligence is what distinguished people from Gymnasium from other hard-working pupils. Jarvis claimed that:

> *"I think that at the general Gymnasium, it's mostly the case that yes, people there were disciplined, but they were also smart and they just had something, probably high IQ. And at the other school, especially because we had a lot of people who went to Realschule, who didn't get the recommendation in the elementary school, you ended up with loads of people that were* ***just*** *hard workers" [emphasis added]*

Thus, some German interviewees placed importance on distinguishing between those who are "just" hardworking, and those who display "raw" intelligence. In Johannes's words *"You always have to differentiate between people who* ***just*** *learn a lot and people*

who are really intelligent"[emphasis added]. When asked how he could tell the difference, he gave examples of people who *"understood concepts easily, without studying for a long time*".

When asked about effort, most German participants talked about how talent and natural inclinations favoured some individuals over others. Several participants argued that one's level of ability (often seen as innate) limited the extent to which effort could increase performance. Claudia claimed that "*Certain things are just natural, whether you're a quick thinker or not".* Moreover, it is noteworthy that several interviewees spoke about their peers as being hardworking while using words like "lazy" and "naturally good" to describe themselves. Some participants also emphasised that they did not study very hard, at least until the last two years.

Most German participants (both men and women) talked at some point in their interviews about effortless achievement due to natural intelligence. They did not seem to think there was a contradiction between them succeeding through innate talent and their parents having had a role in engaging them in intellectually stimulating activities. On the contrary, some students alluded to an intergenerational transmission of inclinations. For example, Ilse claimed that *"Maths is in my blood because of my dad, so I really liked Maths".*

Most German men interviewed (five out of seven) described their strategies for success as aligned with the image of the effortless achiever. Interestingly, some German women (four out of eight) also presented themselves as effortless achievers, which indicates a contrast with the existing literature identifying effortless achievement as mostly compatible with masculine stereotypes (Jackson and Dempster, 2009). Yet, some gender differences were observed in regard to German students' understandings of the role of effort in achieving educational success. While most German participants (both men and women) described their effort as strategically invested at key moments, a few German women attributed educational success to consistent effort throughout their Gymnasium. Leonie described best students in her school as individuals who enjoy studying and are "very ambitious", while Theresa explained that *"Homework was taken seriously, so you always had to come prepared. The best students were reliable and prepared consistently for classes, didn't just cram before the exams".*

Thus, there is diversity in German women's perspectives about the role of effort in achieving educational success. Interestingly, consistent effort and conscientiousness were associated with an obedient feminine attitude that was undervalued even by some women who wanted to portray themselves as creative and critical thinkers. Claudia, one of the participants, commented on this variation in girls' attitudes towards effort, with an intention of differentiating herself from girls who were "obedient". Similar to Johannes, Claudia thought it was unfair that teachers rewarded "just" effort and a dutiful attitude: "*I always got worse participation grades than these girls because I wasn't as sweet or as obedient you could say, but I participated more. I think the system is so unfair because teachers get so influenced by their preconceptions"*. Instead of going down the route of being diligent and studying consistently, an image she associated with a type of girl she dismissed, Claudia believed that *"I could easily get good grades if I sat down and studied […] I got good grades before, so I had this notion in my head that if and when it really matters, I'm going to study and do well"*. Thus, studying consistently seems like a well-trodden path to success that some women admit to having taken, whereas other participants (most men and the other German women interviewed) highlight how they intentionally avoided this path, so as to succeed through attributes different from diligence. Thus, there is a common trend among German interviewees to present themselves as effortless achievers, or achievers through strategic or "limited effort", but few of the women interviewed had a different discourse and acknowledged the constant effort they made during Gymnasium.

It is noteworthy that most German participants spoke about parental support when asked to describe the best pupils at their Gymnasiums. Some interviewees acknowledged that pupils from middle-class backgrounds, with parents who went to Gymnasium and then to university, had higher chances of going to Gymnasium and performing well there. The advantage of having educated parents was only offset in their accounts by being "extraordinarily smart", which they associated with innate ability. Parental support was seen in terms of inculcating norms and behaviours aligned with the requirements of the Gymnasium, which would make it easier for pupils to do well there. Theresa explained how advantages were transmitted to the next generation when asked to describe the pupils who did very well at Gymnasium: *"I think they were mostly the children of people who had also been to that school. And*

those who did well but didn't have parents who went to that school before them were very smart people, or people whose parents had gone to other Gymnasiums and also people who lived in this rich area of the city" . Also, Annike described how advantages related to her socio-economic background were manifested during the selection process for the Gymnasium: *"If you look at my Gymnasium interview, they asked me questions and I was able to answer them because my parents watched the eight o'clock news with me every day […] And it was a certain background question that I was able to answer."*

This description of constant and effortless learning is very aligned with Bourdieu's description of how middle-class students gradually acquire advantages for the educational realm: "*Having imperceptibly acquired their culture through a gradual familiarization in the bosom of the family, [they] have academic culture as their native culture and can maintain a familiar rapport with it"* (Bourdieu, 1996, p.21).

Failure: Misalignment of inclinations, upbringing, and requirements

Some German participants emphasised the narrow scope of the talents rewarded by an educational system which relied heavily on compliance and memorising by heart. They often mentioned one's inclinations, seen as "natural", as explanations for why some people were performing better in certain subjects, such as languages. Several participants saw the other perspective, of some pupils being too creative to want to align themselves with what the school expected of them. Marlene argued that their school rewarded a narrow range of talents, which some people were born with, while others had no control over developing these skills. She claimed that at her Gymnasium: *"We had a lot of languages […] And if you're just naturally not very good at languages […] And I think some people are just not as inclined to that and […] their talents or interests lie elsewhere and unfortunately, schools just don't really ask for those talents"*

The lack of recognition for a wider range of skills was perceived as a lack of acceptance for people from other backgrounds and with different strengths. Theresa indicated that her Gymnasium moulded pupils into individuals with specific skillsets and behaviours. Those who did not fit this standard had to drop out. She argued that: "*When it came to judging us, that school did not care about people, especially those who*

came from lower socio-economic background with parents who hadn't been to Gymnasium and were not always capable to help, for example with Latin"

Most participants mentioned lack of support as a cause for failing to keep up with the requirements. They associated parental support with the ability of getting help with homework. Theresa mentioned help from parents was most important in the early years, before admission to the Gymnasium: *"I think it was people from lower socio-economic backgrounds whose parents couldn't help them get through those early years, that were crucial".* They considered migrants unprepared to provide this kind of support to their children, as Lukas explained that: A *lot of people (including my best friend) from Serbia, Romania, the Eastern European states, did not have trouble speaking German, but sometimes their parents did. So, they were at a massive disadvantage when it came to homework help"* .

6.6. Discussion

This chapter explores Romanian and German students' strategies to succeed at school and their attributions of success and failure. It shows that for most interviewees, taking the opportunities offered to them is seen as a way of behaving responsibly, and not being wasteful of their talents and their parents' support. The same emphasis on making responsible use of one's opportunities was identified in the work of Swalwell (2013) and Allouch et al. (2015) as a way for elite students to reduce the tension between their privilege and their awareness of social inequalities. This finding is aligned with research by Batruch et al.(2019) claiming that highly stratified educational systems amplify students' tendency to form expectations that are congruent with the social status of their family.

For most participants, educational success involved not only being good at school but also being actively involved in extracurricular activities and having a fulfilling social life. Participants from both countries seemed to condemn effort that did not lead to the enhancement of one's skills and knowledge. Yet, there are differences in the way participants from Germany and Romania interpreted the relationship between talent and effort. Natural ability was perceived by some Romanian students as having the potential to achieve very high performance in the Olympiads. They acknowledged that performing at such a high level also required a lot of effort. They tended to look down on the effort that was only directed towards getting high grades, but not

improving one's ability. On the other hand, some German students perceived natural intelligence as allowing pupils to fulfil the requirements at school with less effort. Thus, Romanian students adhered more to the growth mindset, while German students seemed more inclined to refer to talent and intelligence as fixed (Dweck, 2007). Kurtz-Costes et al. (2005) also found that German pupils were likely to perceive there was an inverse relationship between ability and effort. They argued that a possible explanation could be that the early selection into different types of schools in Germany made the effort applied by pupils after tracking seem pointless.

The image of a successful pupil was aligned with the requirements of educational selection processes: in Romania, the successful pupil was seen as self-driven, while in Germany, the most successful pupil was seen as an effortless achiever. This difference in participants' understandings of success could be connected with the processes of educational selection they had to navigate. The Romanian educational system places more importance on effort and determination to do well in two subsequent national examinations that rank students in order of their grades. In contrast, the German educational system relies on early selection based on signalling intellectual potential (Powell & Solga, 2011). Mijs and Paulle (2016) identified a similar reasoning when observing the minimal effort displayed by Dutch students attending a prestigious academic secondary school. They associated pupils' reluctance towards effort in secondary school with the early educational selection in the Netherlands, which allocated pupils to the academic path at age twelve without providing them with further incentives to work hard.

The strategies participants employed to navigate the highest stakes selection processes are relevant for understanding the nature of the support received from families and teachers. Furthermore, analysing these strategies together with their descriptions of educational success revealed how certain advantages were masked behind the meritocratic narratives that attributed educational success to intelligence, effort, and ability to motivate oneself (van Zanten, 2015). Through asking students about their strategies of navigating consequential transition points, we got a glimpse of how they were supported through these processes. Romanian participants argued that most pupils in their country who got high grades in exams were supported by their parents and did private tutoring to get guidance on how to prepare for the

standardised examinations. Still, most interviewees associated the image of the high-achieving Romanian pupils with passion and self-drive. Some German students could project the image of effortless achievers because they had parents who could help them gradually acquire the knowledge and dispositions appreciated by Gymnasiums. Identifying the characteristics associated with the image of a successful student shed light on the discourses that favoured some categories of students over others (Nyström et al, 2019).

Most participants acknowledged that they benefitted from their parents' help. Some German students mentioned their parents helped them with homework and advocated for their talents to their teachers. Romanian students mentioned the importance of parents' help with homework in primary school, as well as them funding their tutoring in lower secondary school and high school. Although most students acknowledged structural inequalities played into the selection processes, they did not seem to doubt the intelligence and skills of those who were selected to the most prestigious tracks and streams.

Most participants only attributed failure to a lack of intelligence before a decisive selection stage, such as selection to the Gymnasium in Germany, or selection into the best high schools in Romania. After that, they mostly attributed failure to a loss of motivation. This shows that they believed the educational selection process to be legitimate, even though they were aware the playing field was uneven. This finding aligns with the study by Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) suggesting that students perceive a highly selective process of admission at an elite university as meritocratic, even though they acknowledge that some candidates had substantial disadvantages.

This study finds that most people interviewed were aware of structural disadvantages. German students mostly identified disadvantages related to parents' education and migrant status that affected pupils' allocation into different types of schools. Romanian participants mostly referred to socio-economic disadvantages related to a lack of both economic and cultural capital, and to living in rural areas. Thus, this thesis presents an opposing perspective to the study conducted by Mijs (2016) claiming that pupils from advantaged groups tend to underestimate the structural barriers of less advantaged individuals. However, most of the disadvantages identified by participants in this study have to do with parents and

their capacity of providing guidance and support. As the research by Scharff (2021) indicates, discourses about inequality can be characterised by a fatalistic tone that justifies using one's privilege. Some participants associated lack of parental support with low socio-economic status and being a migrant. This narrative attributes students' failure to their family environment, similar to what Clycq et al.(2014) identify as a deficit thinking discourse about educational failure in the Flemish case. Attributing low achievement solely to socio-economic background can lead to a resigned discourse about inequalities being so entrenched that they become impossible to address. This way of perceiving disadvantage is similar to the discourse described by Scharff (2021) and Swalwell (2013) which paints inequality as an unavoidable reality.

7. Conclusions

The overarching objective of this research is to explore the relationship between processes of educational stratification and understandings of meritocracy in different European countries. In section 7.1. I provide a summary of the answers to the six research questions addressed in the three empirical chapters of this thesis. Then, in section 7.2. of this final chapter, I integrate insights from the three empirical chapters to illustrate the relationship between different logics of educational stratification, perceptions of fairness regarding educational opportunities, and understandings of meritocracy in Germany and Romania. In section 7.3, I reflect on my positionality in the context of my findings. In section 7.4, I present the main contributions and analytical gains of this thesis. Finally, in section 7.5, I highlight research limitations, as well as avenues for further research.

7.1. Summary of findings from each chapter

In Chapter 4, I aimed to address the gap in the literature on patterns of educational stratification in post-socialist CEE countries by analysing them in comparison to Western European countries. Providing an answer to the first research question, "How do educational systems in different European countries vary regarding the ways in which they structure different educational routes?", my analysis distinguishes three clusters of countries. The first cluster, consisting of Germany, Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, the Netherlands and Slovenia, most resembles a "sponsored" stratification system. The second cluster, including Belgium, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Italy, Greece, and Spain, is classified as a "tournament" model of stratification. The third cluster contains Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Ireland, and the UK, and corresponds to the "contest" model of stratification. The three-clustered classification is incongruent with the four regimes of educational stratification previously identified by West and Nikolai (2013) and Green et al. (2006), which separate between the Nordic and the Anglo-Saxon clusters. Differences occur because this thesis only focuses on the stratification dimension of educational inequality, and it includes new variables related to the type of provision of vocational education, stratification within tertiary education, and links

between educational qualifications and the labour market. In contrast to the study by West (2013), this analysis identifies multiple patterns of educational stratification among post-socialist countries with EU membership, challenging the idea that post-socialist countries constitute a distinct and coherent educational regime.

By integrating multiple dimensions pertaining to the link between educational and social stratification, I unravel the way in which processes of educational stratification at various educational stages are combined to create the architecture of different educational pathways. To answer the second question, "Can we identify distinct models of stratification corresponding to different educational regimes?", I describe the distinctive features of each educational regime identified. In the educational systems classified under the sponsored stratification cluster, students are selected early on into academic tracks. A significant portion of pupils participate in iVET programmes. There is a strong match between vocational education and the job market. Educational pathways are segmented based on perceived abilities, leading to distinct groups of students following different tracks. The educational systems labelled as part of the tournament model of stratification rely on streaming and tracking at upper-secondary school level. Repeating a year is more common than in other educational regimes. While a medium percentage of students are enrolled in iVET programs, a higher than average proportion of iVET graduates continue their education. Similar to the sponsored type, this model also creates a clear hierarchy among different educational pathways, limiting the prospects of students who are not part of the higher-ranking groups. In contrast, the contest-type educational systems delay the selection of students into different school types, allowing for more customization in subject choices and post-compulsory pathways. There is a lower proportion of students enrolled in tertiary programs other than Bachelor's degrees, resulting in less stratification by type of tertiary qualification. The link between fields of study and occupations is more flexible in this model. Consequently, the distinction between winners and losers is not as straightforward as in the sponsored or tournament models.

In Chapter 5, I answer the third research question by looking at how people from Germany and Romania perceive the fairness of educational opportunities for themselves and for everyone else in their countries. Overall, Germans are more

inclined than Romanians to agree that educational opportunities are fair for themselves and everyone else in their country. When comparing fairness evaluations between people with different educational levels within the same country, ESS data indicates that in Germany higher education graduates are more critical than vocational education graduates about the fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in their country. By way of contrast, in Romania, higher education graduates assign a higher score to the fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in their country than people with other levels of education. This shows that patterns of perceived fairness regarding educational opportunities are dependent on the context and cannot be generalized to people in all European countries.

To provide an answer to the fourth research question "How do elite students from Germany and Romania conceptualise educational privilege and the barriers to fairly rewarding talent and effort?" I conducted interviews with high-achieving students from Germany and Romania. Romanian students tended to see privilege as derived from both financial and cultural capital. Most of them identified private tutoring as a common practice which creates disadvantages for those who cannot afford it. German participants mentioned more subtle ways in which privilege operates in their educational system, mostly related to cultural capital. Based on these insights, it appears that privilege seen as rooted in cultural capital is less noticeable and less contested by others in terms of its contribution to an unfair distribution of opportunities. However, privilege attributed to economic capital is more noticeable and more likely to be perceived as a tangible barrier in the way of a fair distribution of educational opportunities. Moreover, it is plausible that privilege attributed to cultural capital is rather identified by those with a higher education level who are more familiar with the requirements of educational success than by those with lower levels of education.

In Chapter 6, I answer research questions five and six and I unravel the strategies that Romanian and German participants adopted in order to succeed at every stage of their educational journeys and their attributions of educational success and failure. The image of the successful pupil in both countries is connected with the processes of educational stratification that individuals have to navigate. In Romania, where pupils have to navigate standardised exams to get into high schools and later on, to get into

universities, the image of the most successful pupil is the self-driven individual who can sustain their motivation. In Germany, where pupils are selected into either gymnasiums or vocational tracks at age ten to twelve, based on their academic potential, the image of the most successful pupil is the effortless achiever. Thus, attributions of merit could be classified as effort-centred in Romania and talent-centred in Germany. Romanian participants see effort as essential for supporting and nurturing talent, even though they do not believe effort just by itself is a sufficient condition to succeed. Some German participants see effort as sufficient to keep up with the requirements during Gymnasium, but they see a need to differentiate between those who ***just*** work hard, and those who also display "raw" intelligence, understood as the ability to grasp complex concepts quickly.

There are also similarities regarding the way in which participants from Germany and Romania understood the role of effort. Participants from both countries seemed to condemn effort for effort's sake, as they thought rewarding people who put a lot of effort into just memorising the content they need for school leads to promoting the wrong kind of skills. Romanian participants seem to think effort is justified only if pupils acquire broader skills or get involved in activities that expand their horizons. Thus, they tend to admire only the effort that expands one's ability and skills. German participants seem to think that pupils should stick to a moderate level of effort, as the marginal contribution of effort seems to decrease after a certain level. Moreover, several German participants described instances in which too much effort could be understood as compensating for a lack of talent. Although they have somewhat different interpretations of the relationship between talent and effort, elite students from both countries see strategies based on "just effort" as undesirable.

7.2. Integrating insights about educational stratification, fairness of educational opportunities, and understandings of meritocracy

Taken together, the insights from the three empirical chapters illustrate the relationship between processes of educational stratification in Germany and Romania and people's understandings of merit in these two countries. The answers to these six research show how distinct logics of educational stratification correspond to different strategies of gaining educational success. The strategies adopted to succeed are

intertwined with individuals' understandings of educational success and failure. Through exploring strategies to succeed at educational transition points, along with perceptions of the most successful pupils, I unravel how meritocratic narratives are perpetuated in the two countries. Students from Germany and Romania navigated different educational requirements, either focused on perceived academic potential, or the capacity to sustain motivation. In relation to these educational transitions, participants' meritocratic narratives were centred predominantly on talent or effort. At the same time, the forms of capital used to secure advantages in the school selection process were connected to individuals' conceptualisations of educational privilege.

Students' strategies to succeed, and their related understandings of success and failure, have been developed within the context of the institutional structure of stratification processes. Having to navigate different requirements influenced the way individuals internalised ideas of meritocracy either centred on effort or talent. Thus, their understandings of success are shaped by the existing patterns of educational selection and allocation to different educational pathways. Moreover, the strategies used to secure educational advantages, which are tailored to the patterns of educational stratification in each country, influence individuals' perceptions of whether educational privilege is constituted only of cultural capital, or economic capital too. These perceptions can, in turn, legitimise the existing arrangements related to educational stratification. For instance, some German participants mentioned explicitly that parents' economic capital does not contribute to securing better educational opportunities in their country. Research by Apple and Debs (2021) shows that the acceptance of the argument that educational selection in Germany is not influenced by parents' money ensures the legitimacy of the early tracking system. Moreover, the legitimacy that participants ascribed to processes of educational selection in their countries can be observed from how they attributed educational failure before and after a decisive selection stage. Most participants only attributed failure to a lack of intelligence before a decisive selection stage, such as selection into gymnasiums in the German context, or selection into a prestigious high-schools in the Romanian context. However, they mostly attributed failure to a loss of motivation among their peers who were previously filtered by these selection processes. This

shows how participants trusted selection processes in their countries to identify people with manifested talent and drive to succeed.

Thus, insights from interviews with Romanian and German students show how processes of educational stratification influence individuals' understandings of meritocracy, and are, in turn, legitimated by these understandings of educational success and failure. Therefore, this thesis shows a reciprocal influence between institutional features related to educational stratification and people's understandings of educational success, failure, privilege, and merit.

In the following two sections, I explain the connections between processes of educational stratification, understandings of educational privilege, and understandings of legitimate educational success. The next section starts by illustrating the relationship between different logics of educational stratification, perceptions of educational privilege, and attributions of educational success in Germany and Romania. Then, I discuss the connection between elite students' conceptualisations of privilege and their understandings of meritocracy.

7.2.1. Logics of educational stratification, perceptions of privilege, and attributions of educational success in Germany and Romania

Based on data from the European Social Survey, most individuals in Germany, regardless of their educational level, believe they had fair opportunities to achieve the educational level they were seeking. Perceptions of educational privilege in Germany are the result of people with higher education believing that others in their countries have had less fair chances to gain the educational level sought. German elite students, who were selected at early ages into the academic track based on their academic potential, see educational advantages as mostly derived from cultural capital. They perceive educational privilege as derived mostly from parents' education, not their economic resources. German students at elite universities in the UK tend to see merit as centred around talent and academic inclination, promoting the myth of the effortless achiever. However, effortless achievers are usually those who did not have to make intense, visible effort during Gymnasium, because they had parents who helped them gradually acquire the knowledge and dispositions praised by the educational system.

In Romania, a country with an educational system that resembles a tournament, people with lower secondary education and below are most prone to evaluating educational opportunities as unfair. Here, higher education graduates evaluate the educational opportunities for everyone in their country as fairer than do people with lower levels of education. Elite students from Romania report that educational advantages are not only passed onto children in the form of cultural capital, but are also influenced by financial resources. Indeed, studies by Bray (2006) and Silova (2010) confirm that private tutoring became a major enterprise in Eastern Europe after the collapse of socialism, with more than half of Romanian pupils in urban areas receiving private tutoring. Romanian students at prestigious universities in the UK tend to see the model of the most successful pupil in Romania as passionate and hard-working, with "big ideals and great ambition". Academic inclination is just a prerequisite, but the difference lies in the determination to achieve more than what is required for school. However, the myth of the self-driven individual coexists with the reality of widespread private tutoring, where teachers assign extra homework to pupils, while also managing their workload in preparation for the standardised examinations. Thus, the image of the self-motivated individuals who can study independently and master a high quantity of material is often sustained by teachers and parents who offer them resources and guidance.

The architecture of educational stratification influences the moments when pupils feel the most pressure to get good results. Several Romanian participants talked about the pressure they experienced before their standardised exams, as they knew high grades were important for their future life chances. They also mentioned that they were doing private tutoring even though they did not feel like they needed extra support to succeed, just because they thought they should put all resources they had into getting the desired results. This anxious striving resembles what Sandel (2020) described as the cost of being successful for pupils in the US, which usually takes a toll on their mental health. This phenomenon is also identified by Brown et al. (2004) who argue that, in the UK, the middle classes are increasingly caught in an opportunity trap, having to limit their freedom in order to get ahead, as the price of success has become higher.

However, this discourse of "giving it your all" was not common among German students, who pointed out that they were working harder in the last two years before the Abitur, but even then they kept a balance between studying and other social activities. This fits with the explanation given by Turner (1960) that in a sponsored-type system, individuals selected to pursue the academic path have a more stable trajectory, and do not experience the anxiety of having to prove themselves throughout their educational journeys. On the other hand, in a contest or tournament model of stratification, individuals considered to have academic potential have to continue competing in order to attain high levels of success, as there is no assurance that they would be successful in their next educational transition (Rosenbaum, 1979).

7.2.2. Conceptualisations of educational privilege and understandings of meritocracy among elite students from Germany and Romania

Most interviewees in the sample showed awareness of structural disadvantages to do with socio-economic and migrant status, which they mentioned when explaining why some of their peers were not able to keep up with the requirements. Participants from both countries identified disadvantages associated with a lack of parental support for homework. Romanian participants also pointed out that some parents could not offer the resources and support that would allow pupils to prioritise school, which was necessary to meet competitive requirements at prestigious schools. German participants mentioned the migrant status of parents as a disadvantage, because of their supposed poor command of the German language, making it difficult for parents to help their children with schoolwork. In contrast to research by Mijs (2016) claiming that privileged individuals socialised in highly stratified educational systems are not aware of the disadvantages held by others, this thesis finds that they acknowledge disadvantages having to do with parents' socio-economic background.

However, in alignment with the study by Walgenbach and Reher (2016), most participants did not draw connections between their privilege and others' disadvantages. Most of the advantages identified by participants had to do with their families providing financial and emotional support, as well as encouraging them to develop habits that would help them succeed through education. Thus, in line with findings by Brown et al. (2016) who observed that educational elites individualised systemic inequalities through talking about being lucky to have supportive parents, I

observe a similar tendency to locate (dis)advantages within the family. When asked why some of their peers could not keep up with school requirements, most participants attributed educational failure to a lack of parental support.

Most participants acknowledged that their former peers faced disadvantages, but they still conferred legitimacy to the system of educational stratification through the way in which they attributed failure to keep up with school requirements. Several participants attributed the failure of their peers from the Gymnasium (in Germany) or high school (in Romania) in a very different way from the failure of those who could not get into these selective schools. They considered that the failure of those who were selected for the competitive academic track or stream could only be attributed to a loss of motivation or a difficult situation in the family. It seems that the students interviewed could not conceive of errors in the educational selection processes. As their peers had already proven their ability in the educational selection process, neither the potential of these pupils to perform at a high level nor the potential of their families to support them was questioned by the participants. Thus, they attributed the poor performance of their peers to temporary circumstances, such as a family crisis, or a change in priorities during adolescence, but not to anything immutable, that spoke of the ability or the long-term motivation of the person. On the other hand, several participants attributed the failure of other pupils who could not get into these sought-after schools almost as predestined, as they associated their outcomes with lack of academic inclinations or with the inability of their families to help and guide them.

It was common among the participants interviewed to say that the most successful pupils displayed talent and hard work. Although most participants acknowledged the advantages held by themselves and their peers, their descriptions of their most successful peers emphasised their intelligence, effort, and ability to motivate themselves. This insight is aligned with research by Brown et al. (2016) who find that students at prestigious universities in France and the UK are aware that the playing field for educational success is uneven, yet they still perceive educational achievement as meritocratic. I interpret participants' perspectives to be more aligned with what Rawls (1971) calls the entitlement to "legitimate expectations" (p.235), rather than with the meritocratic claim that those who are successful are morally

deserving (Sandel, 2020). Similar to students from Oxford whose perspectives are presented by Warikoo and Fuhr (2014), participants in this study acknowledged that the rules of the game were not fair for everyone, but still believed that those who played the game and demonstrated their skills were entitled to their rewards. In other words, they acknowledged that their success was partly due to their good fortune, and not entirely their own doing, although they did not deny that they possessed the qualities required to succeed.

Thus, it appears that participants can perceive their educational achievement as meritocratic, without inferring from their experience that their society is meritocratic or that everyone has a chance to succeed. This perspective is useful for emphasising a distinction between the notion of a meritocratic society, contingent upon fair opportunities to succeed for everyone (Brown, 2010), and the individual merit-based accomplishments of those who followed the rules and demonstrated their skills and tenacity. However, this raises a dilemma about whether elites who have gained their status by being judged on their merits can deem their success as truly meritocratic within societies where not everyone has a fair chance to compete for elite positions.

Notably, most participants did not display a sense of entitlement and did not claim that their success was purely their own doing. On the contrary, they acknowledged the resources and support they had, and they felt a duty to honour those opportunities by making the most out of them. Interestingly, this was accompanied by internalised pressure to succeed. In the words of one participant, they felt that they had "no excuses to fail". This shows that meritocracy is not only ruthless to the ones who fail, but also to the ones who are successful, but view their current success as fragile, or as a steppingstone to achieving more. This perspective is aligned with insight from the work by Charles et al. (2021) who find that elite students who did not display an entitled attitude justified their privilege through showing that they were constantly proactive and did not waste their opportunities. The authors point out that, ironically, feeling discomfort about their privilege prompted these individuals to consolidate their privilege even further. Strangely, turning a self-critical meritocratic lens onto themselves was what propelled some participants in my study to channel their efforts even more in the direction of success, which contributes to sustaining a culture of performativity.

The participants recruited for this study were studying social science disciplines, and they showed a commitment to acknowledging inequality. In a similar vein to the study by Swallwell (2013), this analysis uncovers some ways in which privileged students reconcile their privileged position with their commitment to social fairness. Most of the tactics mentioned in Swalwell's research were used by participants in this project, namely: the desire to act responsibly and value opportunities available to them, and the resignation in the face of realising that educational inequalities are entrenched by the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantages.

7.3. Positionality and Reflexivity

In terms of socio-economic background and educational trajectory, I am similar to most of the participants in this study. Thus, in the same vein as Khan (2010) and Rivera (2016), I have insider credibility and I am familiar with the experiences and interactional styles of most of my participants. Similarity is a basis for trust, so that interviewees feel more comfortable disclosing details of their lives to someone they feel would understand their perspective (Rivera, 2016). For that reason, I do not interpret participants' ambivalent accounts of meritocratic success as an attempt to conceal their advantages, but as a way to make sense of somewhat conflicting ideas. Still, I highlight in the analysis the inconsistencies that stem from their attempt to reconcile meritocratic narratives of educational success with their awareness of social inequalities.

Having gone to school in Romania, I am an insider into the world of Romanian participants. I think this is partly why they shared with me insights about practices that are atypical in other educational systems, such as pressuring pupils to go to Olympiads, or the widespread use of private tutoring to prepare for the exams. It seems that my understanding of the intricate details of the Romanian school system gave them a licence to express their critical views without delegitimising the knowledge they acquired. Our shared experiences allowed participants to make jokes and use other references from Romanian culture in drawing comparisons. For example, a participant compared the Romanian school system with the training of the Romanian gymnastics team, wanting to emphasise that the goal is excellence, not the enjoyment of the process. Similar to Khan (2010), I embed myself in the narratives of my interviewees. Thus, I cannot be an objective observer – even though objectivity is

never completely possible in the first place. However, what I lose in terms of objectivity, I gain in terms of understanding. Reflexive practice, understood as counteracting confirmation bias (Dean, 2017), was very important when analysing the interviews with the Romanian participants. To do this, in line with suggestions by Jones (2013), I did not only select quotes that matched with my views of the Romanian educational system, but also quotes that represented different perspectives.

By way of contrast, I do not have direct experience with the German educational system. This allowed me to probe around some of the rules and educational practices they perceived as common-sensical, and to get a perspective on what participants identified as key features of their educational system. My position of an outsider to their society might have made it easier for German interviewees to talk about social class. Most German students mentioned the link between educational selection and social class, whereas social class was very rarely mentioned in the conversations I had with Romanian students.

In my capacity as a doctoral student, I believe participants might have perceived me as someone who has placed a strong emphasis on educational performance, so they might have assumed I sympathise with the perspective that educational success is mostly determined by individual merit. That could have made them slightly more reluctant to disclose that their educational success might have been facilitated by external factors. I partly addressed this issue by creating an informal setup for discussion, dressing casually, and not using academic or formal language in the interaction. Indeed, most of them told me they received private tutoring or that they got help from their parents with schoolwork.

On the other hand, the topic of my research and my affiliation with the Department of Social Policy could have signalled a commitment to social equity and to minimising educational inequalities. Thus, it is possible that their widespread acknowledgement of inequalities in education was related to social desirability. However, there were also participants who claimed that there was no relationship between socio-economic background and educational success and who attributed most of the differences in achievement to intrinsic talents and inclinations. These perspectives were present in my research, so that leads one to believe the incentives for social desirability were

not very strong. Also, to mitigate the risk of social desirability bias, I used a neutral tone in how I presented my research to the participants, saying that I am interested in exploring their educational journeys and their views on educational success. This strategy is aligned with the approach taken by Lareau (2003), who considered that fieldwork involved a balancing act between being authentic and remaining neutral.

7.4. Main Contributions and Analytical Gains

This thesis brings an original contribution to the literature on the relationship between educational systems and the (re)production of unequal life-chances by focusing on the experiences of the "winners" of meritocratic educational selection. This is important because meritocracy as an ideology has been found to have negative implications even for the most successful individuals (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020). By exploring the way in which students at prestigious universities talk about privilege and disadvantage, success and failure, talent and effort, I capture some ways in which they resist internalising and reproducing meritocratic discourses, and other ways in which they perpetuate the myth of meritocracy. Shining light on the most pervasive narratives that promote meritocracy, this thesis raises awareness of the meritocratic ideas that individuals express even when they are aware that the playing field is not even for everyone. If these meritocratic narratives are reproduced unintentionally, then exposing them could help reduce their perpetuation.

This research adds an original contribution to the literature on educational regimes by bringing together more cases and analytical dimensions linked to educational stratification. Therefore, Chapter 4 provides an encompassing picture of how educational pathways are structured in different European countries. This thesis classifies educational systems as promoting either sponsored, tournament, or contest mobility, following the work by Turner (1960) and Rosenbaum (1979). Thus, I create a heuristic device that is useful for investigating different strategies of securing educational advantages, and different understandings of the role played by effort and talent in different countries.

In Chapter 6, I analyse understandings of meritocracy by exploring the relative salience of talent versus effort in attributions of educational success. In Romania, a country belonging to the tournament model of stratification, the myth of meritocracy revolves around the importance of effort. On the other hand, in Germany, which is

part of the sponsored mobility cluster, the myth of meritocracy centres on the importance of talent. Thus, this study helps develop the hypothesis that individuals who go to school in educational system resembling the sponsored model are more likely to place emphasis on talent in defining success, while those going to school in tournament or contest models tend to place a stronger emphasis on effort. The study by Mijs and Paulle (2016) tends to confirm this hypothesis, since they argue that in the Netherlands early tracking provides those selected for the academic route with a rationale for "taking it easy" and minimising effort. The authors believe that pupils' opposition towards working hard for school is connected to early tracking, since they are mostly set from age twelve to pursue higher education. Therefore, this thesis opens up avenues for further research into understandings of merit in countries different from Romania and Germany.

In chapter 6, I show how meritocratic narratives mask the support that some pupils receive, and others do not. In Romania, the most successful pupils are deemed to be self-driven and hardworking by virtue of being intrinsically passionate about learning certain subjects. However, most of them receive private tutoring and benefit from guidance in organising their time and structuring the material they have to prepare for the exams. In Germany, the pupils deemed most successful are those who display "raw intelligence" without putting a lot of effort into preparing for school. Most of these pupils do not have to make a visible effort, because they come from families where at least one parent has pursued the academic route and can help them gradually acquire the suitable knowledge and dispositions that are rewarded by the education system. By only focusing on individuals' skills and accomplishments, we would fail to see what resources and conditions facilitated the development of those abilities.

Thus, by looking at strategies to succeed alongside descriptions of educational success, this thesis reveals the complexity of the interplay between talent, effort, and structural factors in shaping educational success. Deconstructing success and demonstrating it involves more than talent and effort, this thesis contributes to relaxing the meritocratic imperative. By showing what Brown (2004) refers to as the "price" of success, this thesis contributes to demystifying meritocracy and exposing its romantic allure. Behind talented and driven individuals there is a whole system of

educational and social stratification that works to promote their qualities so as to maintain the appearance of meritocracy, thus legitimising inequalities.

This thesis creates connections between the literature on educational stratification, the sociological literature looking at the (re)production of educational advantages, and the literature on meanings of meritocracy in different contexts. In this way, I unravel associations between the institutional configurations of educational systems, and individuals' most pervasive ideas about talent and effort in Germany and Romania. Thus, this work adds an original contribution to the scholarship on the formation and legitimation of inequalities by creating bridges between the fields of Social Policy, Sociology, and Education. Insights from this thesis contribute to enhancing knowledge about the legitimation of inequalities: a) within educational systems; b) at a wider societal level.

Findings about the perceived fairness of educational opportunities, presented in Chapter 5, are relevant for understanding the formation and legitimation of educational inequalities. In Germany, a country corresponding to the sponsored mobility model, where students are selected by perceived ability at a young age, elite students tend to perceive privilege as mostly entailing cultural capital. Some participants mentioned that their educational system is fairer than educational systems in countries where money can buy educational advantages. These participants seem to feel strongly that educational advantages derived from economic capital would be unfair. This finding is aligned with research by Taylor-Gooby and Martin (2010) showing that individuals from Germany are resistant towards the idea that those with more money should be able to buy better social services. Yet, research by LeTendre et al. (2003) finds that in Germany socioeconomic differences associated with geographic location are connected to the quality of schools available. Thus, it would be effective if strategies aimed at addressing educational inequalities in Germany would highlight the indirect role of money in securing educational advantages.

This thesis also contributes to advancing understanding about different ways of legitimising inequality at a wider societal level. Specific understandings of merit may have different implications for inequality, since talent is seen as intrinsic and effort is seen as within a person's control (Weiner, 1985). Talent-centric narratives of merit

can justify different educational and occupational trajectories as almost predestined, and inequality as a "natural" consequence of different levels of ability. Policymakers in countries belonging to the sponsored mobility cluster might reflect on how early tracking may feed into ideas about intrinsic ability, which legitimise inequality as an inevitable result of the distribution of innate talent. On the other hand, understandings of merit focused on effort, as found in Romania, may legitimise a conception of inequality that associates poverty or lack of success with laziness. The conception of meritocracy focused on effort can be seen as more "democratic" because everyone can work hard (Mijs and Savage, 2021). However, it might legitimise a reduced focus on providing valuable alternative routes for those who are not highly achieving because of the assumption they could or should work harder. Policymakers in countries belonging to the tournament stratification cluster might reflect on how the constant competition created by the education system might feed into ideas about hard work and dedication which are not attainable standards for everyone in their societies.

Another contribution of this thesis is including the post-socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe in the discussion about educational stratification and perceptions of meritocracy. This research adds to the work by Dumas et al. (2013) by including more variables related to stratification within secondary and tertiary education, and to links between educational qualifications and the labour market. Thus, it provides a more comprehensive picture of the way in which different educational systems structure educational pathways. This is an important gain, as vocational orientation influences school-to-work transitions differently when interacting with other characteristics of the labour market or educational systems (Brzinsky-Fay, 2017). The findings that educational systems in post-socialist CEE countries tend to gravitate towards distinct models of educational stratification contributes to the literature exploring different developments to CEE educational systems after 1989 (Roberts, 2001; Saar and Ure, 2013; Silova, 2009).

An element of originality is that this thesis analyses understandings of meritocratic success in Romania, which, according to the ESS data, is the country in Europe where respondents are least likely to believe that educational opportunities are fairly distributed. This shows the complexity of meritocratic attributions of success: Can

success through hard work be considered meritocratic when there are clear barriers preventing some people from entering the contest? The finding that elite students attribute educational success mostly to hard work adds to the sparse knowledge about perceptions of meritocracy in Eastern European countries. Previous research showed that individuals from Eastern Europe were most likely to hold the view that education should determine a person's income, and were critical regarding the extent to which effort was rewarded in their society (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012). Under these conditions, there might be a strong pressure for high-achieving students to work very hard so as to illustrate the desired qualities for an elite selected on the basis of educational success. If educational elites behave according to this meritocratic ethic of hard work, tensions might arise between their values and those of individuals with more limited opportunities, as suggested by Saar and Trumm (2017). This is particularly relevant since a considerable proportion of individuals from CEE countries are sceptical that their societies are meritocratic, which might lead to them contesting the accomplishments of elite students.

7.5. Limitations and avenues for further research

I acknowledge a number of limitations to this study. First, by solely examining the experiences of students who attended schools in two countries with distinct types of educational systems, it is impossible to compare how people in countries belonging to the same educational regime perceive success and merit. Thus, future research could test whether the notion of meritocracy in other countries categorised under the sponsored model is centred on talent, and whether the model of educational success in other countries classified under the tournament cluster is focused on effort. Furthermore, it would be interesting to adopt the same methodology to interview individuals who went to school in a country belonging to the contest model of stratification.

Second, this thesis focuses on classifying European countries according to their predominant patterns of educational stratification. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4, there are some elements of contest mobility encountered by people pursuing the academic route in countries labelled as belonging to the "sponsored" stratification cluster. Also, there are some features of sponsored mobility in countries labelled as belonging to the "contest" or "tournament" stratification model, such as the selective

grammar schools in England. In a similar vein, Van Zanten(2019) argues that the norms of contest and sponsored mobility coexist in most countries. In the case of France, she claims that the norm of sponsored mobility is manifested through the strategies used in elite lycées to prepare pupils for elite higher education tracks. If processes of educational stratification are connected to understandings of meritocracy, then individuals following these sponsored mobility routes might have different meritocratic narratives than other people in their country. This thesis focuses on comparing understandings of educational success between countries, but not within countries. Thus, future research could compare the meritocratic narratives of individuals who went to grammar schools in England, or elite lycées in France, and other people in their countries.

Third, there is not a complete overlap between the questions in the European Social Survey, and the questions I asked in the semi-structured interviews. The questions in the survey focus on the fairness of educational chances, while in the interview, I focused on understandings of success and failure, and the role of effort and talent. As mentioned in the Introduction, and in Chapter 5, these concepts are connected: opportunities are unfair for those who face particular obstacles in the way of having their effort and talent identified and rewarded. However, to achieve more precision, subsequent research could focus on designing a survey that includes questions on the perceived fairness of educational opportunities, along with questions on the perceived causes of unequal educational opportunities, and questions on the importance of effort and talent in achieving success.

Furthermore, participants' understandings of success and failure are captured retrospectively, as they are asked to describe the most successful and unsuccessful pupils at every stage of their educational journeys. This method cannot capture how each process of educational selection influenced their views on success, talent, and effort. An ambitious endeavour for future research would be to study evaluations of fairness and success longitudinally, using quantitative methods to detect changes after an important process of educational selection, and qualitative methods to unpack the factors that contributed to them changing their perceptions.

Additionally, my choice to interview participants who grew up in Romania and Germany, but now study at prestigious universities in the UK raises questions about

how representative this sample is for unpacking the views of the broader educational elite from Germany and Romania. Having chosen to study in the UK, these individuals could be more willing to adopt views on meritocracy that support the existence of prestigious universities. On the other hand, individuals who study Social Science are likely to be more aware of social inequalities, so their explanations for success and failure might display less entitlement than those of individuals who pursued other occupations. I opted for a narrow sample of students who can be considered the "champions" of meritocracy because I wanted to capture the differences stemming from their experiences in different educational systems, up to the point of selection into universities. Participants from both countries share the experience of studying a social science discipline and of being admitted to a prestigious university in the UK. Yet, the views German and Romanian participants had on merit, talent, and effort were considerably different in the interviews I conducted. However, it can be argued that participants in this sample are substantively different from those with similarly high grades who decided to stay in their home countries and study Medicine, Law, or Computer Science. Therefore, future research could focus on the understandings of merit of individuals studying Medicine or Law in Germany and Romania and compare the findings to those presented in this thesis.

Finally, this thesis focuses on the experiences of educational selection and understandings of merit of the "champions" of meritocracy. However, one of the interesting patterns revealed in Chapter 5 is that people's evaluations of the fairness of educational opportunities for everyone in their countries does not vary considerably by education level. Thus, it is possible that beliefs in meritocracy are internalised by individuals, regardless of whether they have been successful or not. One of the most painful concerns regarding meritocracy is that it can lead those who were not able to pursue higher education to think that they lack the talent and the perseverance to succeed. Thus, it is important for subsequent qualitative research to look into how people with vocational qualifications understand the fairness of their educational opportunities, and the factors that contributed to their educational choices. Using interviews would allow for a more nuanced account of the way in which they evaluate the educational opportunities available to them, which would facilitate comparison with the results from my PhD thesis using data from the European Social Survey.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Variables Included for Analysing Patterns of Educational Stratification

Table A.1: Variables for each analytical dimension

Analytical dimension	**Variable of interest**	**Source and measurement**
Stratification within secondary education	Age of first formal selection	Eurydice (2020)
	Percentage of schools where pupils are grouped by ability for all or some of their classes (streaming and setting)	PISA 2015 data, reported by headteachers
	Percentage of selective schools, where pupils are admitted based on prior academic results – measured at age 15	PISA 2015 data, reported by headteachers
	Percentage of pupils who had to repeat year at least once in lower-secondary education (repetition)	PISA 2015, reported by pupils
Vocational orientation	Percentage of students enrolled in vocational programmes (iVET) in upper secondary education	Eurostat, 2018, calculated by dividing the number of pupils enrolled in vocational education to the total number of pupils in upper secondary education

	Percentage of adults having graduated vocational secondary education (iVET) delivered at school only	CEDEFOP 2016 opinion survey on VET Available here
	Percentage of graduates of vocational secondary school (iVET) whose programmes were delivered at the workplace in a substantial proportion (half of the time or more)	CEDEFOP 2016 opinion survey on VET
Links between initial vocational education and the labour market	Employment premium for iVET graduates over those with lower secondary qualifications	CEDEFOP, 2018 Available here: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/data-insights/25-are-young-ivet-graduates-more-likely-be-employment-those-lower-level-qualifications
	Employment premium for iVET graduates over graduates of general secondary school	CEDEFOP, 2018 Available here: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/data-insights/24-are-young-ivet-graduates-more-likely-be-employment-those-general-stream
	Percentage of employees aged 15-34 with upper secondary vocational education who work in	Eurostat, 2016. Calculated by dividing the number of VET graduates with jobs that highly match their qualification by the total number of employees with vocational education

	jobs that highly match their qualification	
Transitions from secondary education	Percentage of early leavers from formal education	Eurostat, 2019. Percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education or training
	Percentage of iVET graduates who continue education and training	CEDEFOP: VET graduates (ISCED 3-4), aged 18-24 who participated in formal or informal further education and training in the four weeks prior to the survey Available here: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/key-indicators-on-vet/indicators?year=2018#37)
	Percentage of graduates of general secondary school who continue education and training	CEDEFOP
Stratification within the tertiary education system	Percentage of 20–24-year-olds enrolled in tertiary programmes different from bachelor's programmes	Calculated by subtracting the number of people enrolled in Bachelor programmes from the number of people enrolled in tertiary education
	Percentage of tertiary graduates (ISCED 5-8) from Social Sciences, Law, Business and Administration	Eurostat, 2018
	Percentage of tertiary graduates (ISCED 5-8) from Engineering and Manufacturing	Eurostat, 2018

Links between educational qualifications and labour market participation	Employment rate of young people (20-34) who completed a vocational qualification at ISCED level 3-4	Eurostat, 2018
	Employment premium of master's over Bachelor's graduates aged 25 to 34	Eurostat, 2018 Expressed as the difference between the employment rates of master's graduates and bachelor's graduates
	Employment premium for graduates of tertiary education	Eurostat, 2019. Calculated as the difference between the employment rate for people aged 18 to 34 with a degree of ISCED 5-8 and those with ISCED 0-4, from 1 to 3 years after graduation
	Horizontal overall skills mismatch rate (the discrepancy between a person's current occupation and the field of education of their highest level of educational attainment)	Eurostat, 2018. Calculated for people who finished their education within 15 years
	Horizontal skills mismatch rate in Social Science, Law, Business, and Social Administration	Eurostat, 2018. Calculated for people who finished their education within 15 years

Appendix 2. Table of correlations between the variables used for cluster analysis

Table A.2: Correlations between variables

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
A	1.00																				
B	-0.51	1.00																			
C	0.02	-0.21	1.00																		
D	-0.06	-0.08	-0.23	1.00																	
E	-0.26	0.43	-0.02	-0.19	1.00																
F	0.19	-0.17	0.11	0.24	-0.45	1.00															
G	-0.38	0.12	-0.09	-0.08	0.18	-0.77	1.00														
H	-0.18	-0.18	0.20	-0.03	-0.11	-0.26	0.46	1.00													
I	-0.37	0.27	0.12	-0.43	0.44	-0.48	0.30	0.05	1.00												
J	-0.11	0.12	0.05	-0.03	-0.02	-0.18	0.26	0.30	0.32	1.00											
K	0.02	0.00	-0.04	0.51	-0.15	0.23	-0.01	0.04	-0.26	0.11	1.00										
L	0.05	0.17	0.05	0.16	0.51	-0.14	0.07	-0.04	0.06	-0.03	0.32	1.00									
M	-0.10	0.30	-0.24	0.41	0.30	-0.21	0.20	-0.02	0.01	0.37	-0.02	0.25	1.00								
N	0.10	0.27	-0.40	0.33	0.18	-0.04	-0.02	-0.27	0.03	-0.10	0.08	0.43	0.31	1.00							
O	-0.07	0.46	0.00	-0.20	-0.15	0.23	-0.10	-0.27	0.04	-0.06	0.05	0.13	-0.07	0.07	1.00						
P	-0.02	0.10	-0.56	0.07	0.04	-0.37	0.30	0.11	-0.03	0.16	-0.13	-0.20	0.15	0.13	-0.36	1.00					
Q	-0.23	0.08	0.19	-0.14	0.12	-0.57	0.48	0.57	0.39	0.40	0.05	0.22	0.00	-0.06	-0.11	0.05	1.00				
R	0.20	-0.13	0.08	0.24	-0.48	0.74	-0.44	-0.08	-0.28	0.12	0.22	0.07	-0.16	0.13	0.44	-0.25	-0.30	1.00			
S	-0.15	0.51	-0.47	-0.11	0.38	-0.23	0.07	0.45	0.44	-0.07	-0.07	0.00	0.23	0.30	0.27	0.07	-0.17	-0.21	1.00		
T	0.05	-0.17	0.48	0.15	-0.01	-0.04	0.25	0.14	0.02	0.09	0.15	0.27	-0.04	-0.05	0.06	-0.27	0.15	0.05	-0.12	1.00	
U	0.13	0.14	0.30	-0.17	-0.05	0.18	-0.15	-0.31	-0.21	-0.28	-0.05	-0.05	-0.15	-0.11	0.00	-0.13	-0.15	0.02	-0.13	0.51	1.00

A- age of first selection

B- percentage of selective schools

C- percentage of schools practicing streaming and setting

D- repetition

E- proportion of pupils in iVET in upper-secondary education

F- percentage of iVET graduates whose programmes were delivered only at school

G- percentage of iVET graduates whose programmes were delivered at workplace in a substantial proportion of the time

H- proportion of iVET graduates in matching jobs

I- iVET employment premium over lower secondary qualifications

J- iVET employment premium over general secondary education

K- percentage of early leavers

L- percentage of iVET graduates continuing education and training

M- percentage of general education graduates continuing education and training

N- proportion of students enrolled in tertiary programmes different to Bachelors

O- proportion of graduates in Social Sciences

P- proportion of graduates in Engineering

Q- employment rate VET graduates

R- employment premium tertiary degree

S- difference in employment Masters versus Bachelors

T- horizontal mismatch Social Science

U- horizontal mismatch total

Appendix 3. Consent Form

Educational selection and educational success

Participation in this research study is voluntary

Table A. 3: Consent form

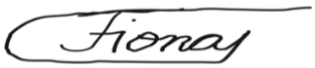
I have read and understood the study information or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and provided I had any, my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	YES/NO
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions	YES/NO
I am willing for the discussion to be audio and video recorded	YES/NO
I understand that the information I provide will be used as part of a research project that will result in a written thesis, which could be published. I understand that my words may be quoted, but my name will not be included and I will not be identifiable in any research outputs	YES/NO
I understand that the researcher would disclose what I say only if I mention a significant harm to myself or somebody else	YES/NO
I give permission for the (anonymised) information I provide to be deposited in a data archive so that it may be used for future research	YES/NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: _____ Date _____

Interviewer name: Fiona Gogescu

Signature:  Date

For information please contact: Fiona Gogescu at f.t.gogescu@lse.ac.uk

Appendix 4. Sample of participants for in-depth interviews

Table A. 4: Sample of Participants

Name	Gender	Country of origin
Emilia	Woman	Romania
Clara	Woman	Romania
Cristian	Man	Romania
Mihnea	Man	Romania
Adrian	Man	Romania
Marius	Man	Romania
Larisa	Woman	Romania
Roxana	Woman	Romania
Bogdan	Man	Romania
Crina	Woman	Romania
Elena	Woman	Romania
Dana	Woman	Romania
Adela	Woman	Romania
Mihai	Man	Romania
Florin	Man	Romania
Bianca	Woman	Romania
Ilse	Woman	Germany
Claudia	Woman	Germany
Marlene	Woman	Germany
Theresa	Woman	Germany
Leonie	Woman	Germany
Annike	Woman	Germany
Julia	Woman	Germany

Dorothea	Woman	Germany
Friedrich	Man	Germany
Jakob	Man	Germany
Johannes	Man	Germany
Karl	Man	Germany
Jarvis	Man	Germany
Lukas	Man	Germany
Matthias	Man	Germany

Appendix 5. Interview schedule

Educational stratification and students' understandings of educational success

Interviews with undergraduate students

Aims of the interviews:

1. Plot their educational routes, including decisions which led them to their trajectories
2. At each 'branching point', explore what factors influenced their choice to follow a particular educational pathway – how were opportunities perceived, taken or declined?
3. Explore narratives around individual merit as reflected by educational success
4. Explore their understanding of the link between their educational qualification and future occupational status

Introduction

- Introduce self and research objectives. Mention it is part of a research project exploring the relationship between educational institutions and ways of understanding educational success in a comparative perspective.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Purpose is to have a conversation about their views and experiences. Invite them to help me plot their educational transitions on a timeline.
- Check if they have any questions. Remind them participation is voluntary - can choose not to answer certain questions or withdraw. Interview will last approximately 60 minutes, check if OK.
- Anonymity and Confidentiality
- Permission to start recording

1. Background and context

Gather information about age, field of study, parents' occupations, place where they grew up

2. Admission to elite university

Aim: Establish how and why they applied to their university and programme.

Why did you choose to study [course] at [name of university]? Were you considering any other options at the time when you made the decision?

How long in advance did you decide what to study at university?

What do you think set you apart from other pupils in your country who have applied to this programme?

What helped you get selected for this programme? (Ask openly then use prompts)

Prompts:

- Prior educational achievement (grades, awards)
- Quality of formal education received – ask what they understand by 'quality'
- Teachers
- Character traits – individual effort, determination, responsibility – probe
- Parental background and support
- Peer support/networks

What advantages, if any, do you think this programme will offer you after graduation?

How long in advance did you decide on what to study at university?

3. Previous educational stages

Aim: Map their educational journey.

Let's go back and map the stages of your journey

Why did you choose this school? What about the subject/stream?

How well did you fit in?

What made a good student there? What were the attributes most appreciated by the teachers? How would you describe the students who were doing really well?

What about those who struggled to keep up with the requirements?

What were the alternatives you were considering at the time?

What made you decide against studying [alternative]?

Can you tell me more about the process of selection at this stage? What do you think is the goal of sorting pupils in this way?

Do you think it has to do with recognition of merit? In what way?

How did you prepare for that?

Prompts for each branching point:

- Family expectations – probe whether they wanted to 'do better than their parents' or feared they might 'do worse' than their parents
- Teacher recommendation
- Pressure from school to look ahead to future careers
- Considerations of entry to university – pragmatic steps required to be eligible
- Perceived ability and educational potential – living up to the expectations
- Choices made by peers/ group of friends
- Quality of educational provision at chosen school, stream or track

Once completed timeline with all experiences of educational selection:

4. Reviewing educational pathway up till present and projecting forwards

Aim: Encourage participants to reflect on how their educational choices fit together

- Invite participant to review timeline, add any missing information
- Probe for any areas where motivating factors are missing
- Ask participant to reflect on timeline and make sense of the structure of opportunities taken:

How did your prior experiences influence your choices later on?

Have you felt any pressure to succeed at any point along the way? When? In what way?

Was being good at school a big part of who you were at that point? Why? When did it become that way?

- Perceptions of peers who took a different track – what might have influenced this outcome?

5. Overall views of educational success and merit

Do you think that the school system in which you were educated creates the conditions whereby 'talent finds its way to the top'?

Do you believe that 'If you're prepared to work hard, it doesn't matter what school you go to'?

How important is effort in determining educational success? Do you know any people you went to school with that worked hard but didn't end up going to a good university? Are there any who didn't go to university at all?

Do you think the system of educational selection is fair? Why/Why not? ask for examples

Does everyone have an equal opportunity for success through education?

Thank you and close