



Article

Learning and Living in Urban Spaces: Contrasting Multi-Disadvantaged Life Contexts of Young People in Barcelona, Hamburg, Lisbon, and Vienna

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Abstract

The paper examines the interplay between urban spaces and learning outcomes of young people in vulnerable positions. Urban spaces accumulate more opportunities than regional or peripheral sites but entail also more risks in access to quality education, stable employment, affordable housing, and healthy living environment. Young people in vulnerable positions are more likely to experience urban spaces as constraining rather than enabling their educational and life achievements. In that regard, the paper shows how various actors, factors, and spaces contribute to the production of multi-disadvantaged life contexts in selected urban spaces. Based on the findings of the European-funded research project ##, the paper draws from a mixed-method design and specifically addresses four metropole urban spaces – Barcelona, Hamburg, Vienna, and Lisbon. The findings suggest that urban spaces amplify social and spatial divisions and inequalities, yet this has marginal impact on the quality of young people's learning outcomes. Rather, it is the composition of multi-disadvantaged life contexts that creates unique conditions for young people to develop their life projects and unfold their potentials for learning and living.

Keywords: Learning Outcomes, Life Contexts, Multiple Disadvantages, Urban Spaces, Young People

Introduction

The quality of learning outcomes (LOs) has only recently been associated with the spaces, in which they unfold (Freytag et al., 2022; Helfenbein, 2021; McLeod et al., 2023). The *spatial turn* has Social Sciences and Humanities has inspired new research avenues that elaborate on the relation between the spatial and the social (Lefebvre, 1974; Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010), emphasizing in particular that spaces cannot be considered as mere containers in which social life unfolds, but rather as actively influencing social interactions and opportunity structures. In that regard, we conceptualize *urban spaces*¹ as contexts, within which multiple opportunities and constraints meet individual trajectories.² We further depart from the assumption that LOs of young people cannot be reduced to their individual motivations, capabilities, or competencies, nor solely attributed to the impact of institutional contexts, spatial dispositions, or structural settings on educational trajectories. This leads us to contemplating the specific function of contexts in urban spaces.

In the comparative and international education, the concept of *context* has been vividly discussed and re-interpreted (Crossley & Jarvis, 2001; Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012). Crucially, scholars agree that context not only helps to situate the framework within which a comparison between different variables is meaningful and possible. Far more, context is a dynamic fabric constantly re-produced and re-installed at different

¹ In the paper, we do not conceptualize urban spaces in opposition to rural spaces or regions. For the purpose of our analysis of multi-disadvantaged life contexts, urban spaces offer a more viable source of information and contrast, both statistically (accessibility of data sources) and analytically (contrasting differently scaled and sparsely populated rural areas has its own methodological challenges which we cannot address in this paper).

² It is important to notice that individual residence preferences must be considered when addressing the quality of living and learning and that spaces cannot be viewed as overdetermining the latter (Hedman et al., 2011).

temporal and spatial scales. In other words, contexts *produce* education (Parreira do Amaral, 2021) and “entail founding relational characteristics in which *agency* and *structure* are contexts for one another” (Kazepov, 2005, p. 6). We adopt this conceptualisation to analyse, juxtapose, and contrast four multi-disadvantaged life contexts within specific urban spaces. Scholarly work on urban spaces and their relation to learning and living contexts has expanded in the last years and focuses on various issues, such as the impact of the immediate environment (e.g., air pollution, availability of green spaces) on academic performances (Lin & Van Stan, 2020), the relation between youth marginalization and low levels of skills and education (Davino et al., 2021), the exposure of urban youth to stress and vulnerability (Buttazzoni et al., 2021; Vázquez Brage, 2024), or on the spatial marginalization of youth in the so-called liminal urban spaces (Nestore, 2022). Our approach is not to highlight one specific trait of multi-disadvantaged life contexts nor to compare LOs across different contexts. Instead, we elaborate on the interplay of different structural and individual factors in the production of multi-disadvantaged life contexts in the selected urban spaces. It is within these contexts that young people develop their educational trajectories and where the construction of LOs unfolds. We address multi-disadvantaged life contexts to particularly highlight the intersections of disadvantage that place some young people in vulnerable positions. Against this background, the main research question reads as follows: *What role do structural and individual factors play in the production of multi-disadvantaged life contexts and how do the latter unfold in various urban spaces?*

The paper focuses on four urban spaces —Barcelona, Hamburg, Lisbon, Vienna and their districts with larger portions of young people in vulnerable positions (Nou Barris, Hamburg-Mitte, Favoriten, Amadora) – which were analysed as part of the European-funded research project CLEAR³. The CLEAR project was conducted over three years (2022-2025) in a total of sixteen EU regions, two in each of the project countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain. The selected urban spaces resemble some of Europe’s most prosperous hubs that accumulate a considerable number of young people and offer a unique entry point for the study of multi-disadvantaged life contexts. The selection of the cities was partly limited by the country focus within the larger research project, and was partly informed by the interest in contrasting urban spaces (and their broader regulatory contexts) from different welfare regimes (continental Europe vs. South Europe), governance systems (federal vs. unitary), and economic and labour market dynamics. The paper contributes to the international and comparative education debate by analysing and situating urban spaces as living and learning contexts within larger educational landscapes. It also poses questions on educational and spatial justice in urban spaces and delves into the production of educational trajectories of urban youth in vulnerable positions. In the following, we briefly introduce the

³ Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course (CLEAR) (Grant Agreement No. 10106115)

methodological design, present the main results and provide a brief analysis of multi-disadvantaged life contexts. We conclude with a short discussion and contextualization of our findings in international and comparative education.

Method

The paper's methodological approach is rooted in the conceptual underpinnings of the CLEAR research project, which has integrated three overarching theoretical perspectives – the Life Course Research, Intersectionality, and Spatial Justice.⁴ These theoretical perspectives have informed the methodological design, operationalization of the fieldwork, as well as interpretation of the results within the CLEAR research project. We briefly introduce their central contribution.

Through the perspective of *Life Course Research* (Heinz et al., 2009) we perceive LOs as processual, relational as well as socio-cultural and socio-historical phenomena that co-evolve in specific spatial frameworks. In its turn, the perspective of *Intersectionality* (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2019) has helped us to theorize inequalities as relational phenomena that are inherently embedded in structural and spatial organisation of places. Finally, the perspective of *Spatial Justice* (Soja, 2010) has enabled us to perceive spaces both as products and producers of social and power relations, which actively shape the possibilities and limits of reaching and following certain life courses. Through the combination of these theoretical frameworks, we consider LOs as resulting from the complex interplay of actors, factors, and spaces in the production of multi-disadvantaged life contexts.

We have operationalized the analysis of multi-disadvantaged life contexts in the selected urban spaces in three steps: *first*, we have contextualized the urban spaces based on publicly available research literature and by analysing the key socio-economic, educational, and employment indicators (N=51) derived from Eurostat or national/regional statistical bureaus; *second*, we have analysed primary research data from semi-structured interviews with local policy practitioners and professionals in education and training (N=27) and from narrative interviews with young people (18-29 years) (N=43) that were collected during the CLEAR research project in the selected urban spaces. This analytical exercise was framed by a series of guiding questions to navigate the data interpretation; *third*, we have analysed, juxtaposed and contrasted four multi-disadvantaged life contexts with the aim of identifying how different actors, factors and spaces contribute to their production. Well aware of the recurring controversies that accompany all attempts to

⁴ The research project *Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe. A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under-)Achievement in the Life Course* (CLEAR) has explored the factors that affect the quality of learning outcomes across European regions. It was designed as a multi-level, mixed-method study with transversal participatory elements. Conducted over three years (2022-2025) in eight EU countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain –, the project intended to spark innovative policy solutions and enhance social upward mobility of young people. For more information: <https://clear-horizon.eu/>

contrast or compare contexts (Abu-Lughod, 1975), we avoid providing clear-cut conclusions and exact constellations of actors, factors, and spaces in producing multi-disadvantaged life contexts. Rather, we take this as an opportunity to *bring back* (Steiner-Khamsi & Gorur, 2019) the context in the debates on LOs that have been reduced to standardised metrics about the quality of education (Grek, 2024).

Results

The results are presented in three subsections and then synthesized. The first subsection contextualizes the selected cities using publicly available sources. The second subsection is based on our empirical study and discusses the recurring themes in the analysis of the data. The third subsection focuses on the results of contrasting the selected urban spaces using both data sources.

Contexts and contours of the urban spaces

Barcelona can be characterized by high population density, aging population, and persisting system of school segregation (Benito & González, 2007). While it lacks deprived areas, as the low performing learners are scattered across the city and its working-class districts, it faces high unemployment rates among young people, a considerable number of which has a low educational attainment (Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2020). While Barcelona is a dominant regional economic hub, it suffers from deep structural flaws. It heavily relies on services, particularly on tourism, that account for nearly 90% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This creates a quality gap on the labour market: seasonality of the jobs, low wages in the tourism sector, and instability for young people's employment opportunities. More so, due to urban segregation, the city is broadly split into a tourist-dominated centre, wealthy residential zones, and gentrifying peripheries. For young people in vulnerable positions, the high housing costs lead to displacement and a life in overcrowding and deprived neighbourhoods, which complicates their educational trajectories and disrupts their support networks. In terms of educational challenges, the school system, despite considerable improvements over the last years, may reinforce existing initial inequalities that threaten especially young males and students from migrant background.

Hamburg, in turn, can be considered a prosperous city and both a tourist and a migrant magnet. While it hosts multiple businesses and generates many employment opportunities, a large number of young people do not enter the labour market, albeit the inequality in access to tertiary and vocational education between people from migrant background and German nationals is considerably low (Schuller, 2017). This has systemic and bureaucratic reasons, such as the lack of language skills, poor living conditions or gap of services that support institutional transitions (Gehrke, 2017). However, it is also connected to the economic structure of the city, which favours highly educated people to work for the companies located in Hamburg,

thereby raising the housing and living costs for the local population and contributing to opportunity hoarding (Apple & Debs, 2021). The economic structure of Hamburg creates a high-bar entry requirement that leaves many young people behind. While the presence of international corporations favours highly educated professionals, which drives up the cost of living and housing, many young people, particularly those from migrant background, have difficulties to access the labour market and fully realize their educational goals. This, in turn, fuels the peripherization of young people who increasingly seek to live outside the city to lower their living costs and/or seek to live in their preferred neighbourhoods (Hedman et al., 2011).

Lisbon has a rather low population density, high rates of foreign nationals, as well as high rates of unemployed young people. However, it has a remarkably low level of ESLs and people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The social fabric of the city seems to play a significant role in creating supportive measures to avoid exclusion. At the same time, its economic structure can only partially integrate people with low educational attainment, which, coupled with unaffordable housing, corroborates the precariousness of young people in multi-disadvantaged positions (Núcleo Executivo CLAS da Amadora, 2018). In general, the physical landscape of the functional Lisbon Metropolitan Area reflects decades of uneven development during which many disadvantaged areas began as informal (self-built) settlements due to the state's historical inability to provide housing, and where there is strong ethnic and racial presence, resulting from post-colonial immigration. While the Special Rehousing Programme (PER) improved material conditions (plumbing, electricity, infrastructure), it often reinforced socio-spatial segregation by concentrating poor urban populations in bounded territories (Wacquant, 2008) that contrast with the wealthier urban zones. In that regard, for young people in Lisbon's peripheries, the neighbourhood has a double meaning: it is a space of protection, deep sociability, and symbolic belonging, but it also operates as a social category that triggers suspicion from employers and institutions, to which young people not seldom respond by developing strategies to affirm their identity against the territorial stigma attached to the neighbourhoods where they live (Wacquant, 2023; 2024). This stigma cannot be reduced to the stigma of poverty, class or ethnicity; it has its own dynamic that externally devalues those who live in these areas (Wacquant, 2023; 2024).

In relative terms to Austria, *Vienna* shows a polarized labour market that creates job opportunities for high-skilled workers and precarious labour force at the same time (Hamnett, 2020). While having a solid welfare system and a highly inclusive housing market (Kazepov & Verwiebe, 2022), Vienna's social structure, with people from migrant background presenting a significant share of the population, reveals the existing disparities, with minorities occupying low-paid positions and being tracked into non-academic courses (Lindner et al., 2023). This tendency strengthens path dependencies and impinges on the quality of

educational outcomes. Despite Austria's famous dual education system high-quality apprenticeships in Vienna are extremely competitive. This creates an urban-rural dichotomy where youth are sometimes forced to leave the capital to find training positions. For newcomers, the barriers are further intensified through the tightened eligibility for social housing which disproportionately affects non-EU migrants and young people. Adding to that, the early tracking systems at age 10 tends to funnel migrant and lower-income students into non-academic tracks, yet the evidence shows that young people often blame themselves for poor choices made at age 10, failing to recognize the systemic rigidity that makes correcting those choices later considerably more difficult. Vienna is a site of both health and social stratification in which familial influence remains a powerful—and sometimes limiting—factor in occupational pathways (the intergenerational transmission of jobs) and where access to green spaces and public safety is becoming stratified by socioeconomic status (Haselbacher et al., 2024).

The four selected urban spaces show high variation across various domains and demonstrate the uniqueness of multi-disadvantaged life contexts. They also bring to the fore different core conflicts in the production of the contexts. In Vienna and Hamburg, the early tracking system forces high-stakes decisions at an early age before young people's potentials can fully unfold, which contributes to disproportionate conditions for youth from migrant background. In Hamburg and Lisbon, a qualification gap can be observed in that higher levels of education do not automatically translate into better labour opportunities, since the bar for entry into well-paid, highly technological jobs rises even faster. The disappearance of middle-tier jobs is particularly visible in Lisbon and Barcelona, which leaves the young people faced with the decision to either acquire high-skilled qualifications or end up in precarious positions in tourism. Furthermore, most of the urban contexts contribute to the peripherization of young people due to high housing prices, although the hidden costs for their displacement (e.g., losing informal support networks or affording transportation prices) might considerably differ. Finally, young people develop different spatial attachment in different urban spaces. In Lisbon and Barcelona, living in deprived or segregated neighbourhoods creates an ambivalent (both appreciative and stigmatising) relation to the urban spaces, in Vienna and Hamburg, responsabilization and self-blaming of individuals for their educational failures might assume a more diversified relation to their living and learning spaces. As the brief summary demonstrates, contrasting the multi-disadvantaged contexts of the selected urban spaces offers a nuanced view on the conditions that affect the quality of LOs. The next section presents the analysis of empirical data on the relation between urban spaces and LOs.

Recurring themes in the relation between urban spaces and learning outcomes

Stakeholders' views on youth in vulnerable positions

Different educational stakeholders approach youth in vulnerable positions differently. Some educational policies are devised at national level and require a more prospective, long-term reasoning. In Portugal and Spain, our study shows that policy experts predict that statistical measurement of LOs will play a significant role in their enhancement. On the contrary, their Austrian and German counterparts see the social environment of young people as a possibly more decisive factor in affecting the quality of LOs. In urban spaces, it is crucial to recognize the specific demands and limits of youth in vulnerable positions as they are the main target of educational policies. Again, policy experts consider different issues to have prevalence: in Portugal, non-achievers remain a key policy issue, in Spain, and particularly in Barcelona, it is the correlation between residential and school segregation that matters, in Austria, the focus is on better acknowledgment of non-formal and informal LOs of young people, while in Germany, policymakers worry about the misuse of statistical data on low achievers by extremist parties for their political agenda.

When considering policymaking at the local level, market demands are the primary source of concern. For professionals in education and training, young people appear to be lacking skills and capabilities, but also motivation and resilience for certain job profiles. In low-skilled occupations, such as health care, the academization of vocational education and training (VET) leads to skills shortage, and those who remain in the programmes often lack practical skills, responsibility, or have to cope with their own challenges, as a local professional in health care in Hamburg reports: "Many of these people are not yet ready for training. This has become very clear in recent years. It's a bit of a question of whether these are still Corona consequences." (local professional on education, Hamburg) In high-skilled occupations, such as IT industry, the graduates of the courses are demanded on the labour market and find an occupation almost immediately. However, further tracking sorts out the excellent students from the rest, as a local professional in IT from Lisbon stresses:

There are those students who stand out, and they do not go directly to companies; most of them continue their studies. Those who enter the labour market directly are usually those who were not very good students and want to work. Therefore... I do not know if they bring much benefit to the companies because they are not excellent students, just good ones. (local professional on education, Lisbon)

In this case, the success on the labour market heavily depends on the grades achieved in formal education and replicates a strong path dependency. What policy practitioners, as a local labour market professional from Barcelona, increasingly point out, however, is the loyalty, responsibility, and work attitude of young people:

When we make a selection process, we have looked at knowledge, logically, [...] but the first questions we ask, or at least in our field, are attitudinal. First, if they are a stable person, emotionally, more or less, if he's

a person, let's say... who wants to work, if he's a person who wants to train, if he's a person who wants to grow professionally... in other words, a whole series of attitudes, let's say, or professional ambitions. (local professional on labour market, Barcelona)

What is demanded by local labour market does not always fit with young people's possible actions. In the Viennese case, young people have experienced institutional detachment when being assigned apprenticeships by the public employment service, as is the case of Mika⁵ during her time in Vienna: "They sent me to a kindergarten that was two hours away. It was exhausting. I lived nearby, but they didn't care." (Mika, non-binary, 20 years, Vienna) Such experiences reflect more than bureaucratic rigidity; they signal a rupture in the young person's relational geography. Spaces that once felt familiar now act upon them with indifference, fostering a sense of alienation and overriding their agency, as is the Toni's case: "AMS [Austrian Public Employment Service] just said, 'We are going to place you here.' I didn't have much say in it." (Toni, non-binary, 22 years, Vienna) Such interventions, misaligned with personal goals and disconnected from dialogue, can derail developmental pathways, leaving lasting effects on how young people perceive institutions and their futures. For some interviewees, these institutional arrangements were experienced as disempowering, particularly when decisions were perceived as disconnected from their own aspirations and circumstances.

In none of the national or local policies are young people, especially those in vulnerable positions, actively engaged. Quite the opposite, various activation policies tend to solve complex structural shortcomings by imposing new demands on employability and competencies on young people (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019). While young people might be perceived by some policymakers as unwilling, unmotivated, or having unrealistic expectations, their urban life trajectories require quick adaptation. What is offered as empowerment, in particular various employment services seeking to activate them, is in fact perceived as a form of surveillance and steering. Demotivation and disengagement are thus more likely attempts to retain autonomy, than a full professional resignation.

Urban spaces as variables

The life courses of young people in vulnerable positions seldom follow a standard educational path. Rather, they are characterized by fragmentation and disruption, detours and comebacks, interruptions and new beginnings. At times, young people lack the ability to choose their preferred spaces, be they physical, institutional, geographic, or administrative. Instead, they learn to adapt to them, find the least resistant pathways, and maintain their limited energy and time necessary to occupy them. In this regard, spaces serve as variables in young people's life courses. During some periods, they offer stability and support, in other circumstances, they provide the opportunity to grow and thrive, and sometimes the individual

⁵ We use pseudonyms when referring to the interviewees; information on gender and age is for contextual purposes only.

success means simply to break out of their constraints, as Toni: "If I ever get financially stable, I will leave Vienna. It's too hard here. Maybe Switzerland or somewhere quieter." (Toni, non-binary, 22 years, Vienna)

Some urban space, when providing safety and refuge, can turn into sources of inspiration and activation, so that young people, as Afia, wish to return to the city what they have obtained from it: "Now, I feel as I've got something to do here, I feel a part of it because now I feel like I can contribute something to the, how do I say, development." (Afia, female, 23 years, Hamburg) This experience underscores the productive site of spaces, the fact that they not only provoke changes, but are themselves subject to change.

For others, like Ricardo, urban spaces establish and maintain their own rules and limitations: "I'm doing year 12 now [in a second-chance programme], but I know that what really matters is who you know. Without contacts, even with a qualification, it's hard. Around here, getting a job is more about who you know." (Ricardo, 29 years, male, Lisbon) The urban spaces, as seen by Ricardo, distribute wealth and opportunities unevenly and even institutional credentials or formal grades cannot guarantee a successful transition to the labour market.

To sum up, rather than determining outcomes, urban spaces appear to provide different combinations of opportunities, constraints and resources that young people mobilise in diverse ways. The less privileged groups, however, are not merely passive victims of spatial inequalities. They are also active agents who construct critical diagnoses of their territories and formulate strategies, real or imagined, for displacement, investment or identity reconstruction, depending on the interplay of the existing spatial, institutional, and structural parameters. Against all odds, they are "able to construct themselves as spatial *insiders* (although against the ever-present charge of being an *outsider*)" (Gray & Manning, 2022, p. 1414). In that regard, one relation that often remains underrated or self-evident is the mutual relationship between young people and urban spaces in the sense that both require each other in order to grow and unfold their potential. When urban spaces experience depopulation or gentrification, it becomes a matter of public concern and active social policies (Anguelovski, 2013) to recreate sustainable and balanced conditions for the prosperity of the community. In its turn, young people might find the constraints in establishing themselves within demanding urban spaces also as a chance to grow and mature, to distinguish themselves from their peers, authorities, or previous role models. Hence, this mutual relationship can be read as a crossing of individual and communal trajectories that, to some extent, profit from each other.

Spatial dispositions of young people

Urban spaces frame the living and learning experiences of young people as well as their structural opportunities and institutional settings. The spatial topology varies among the cities and creates different layers of disposition. In extending Bourdieu's reading of disposition, which resembles a permanent

internalization of external social structures (Bourdieu, 1980), the spatiality of places appears to shape how young people interpret opportunities, constraints, and their own position within urban spaces.

For some, the more ghettoized neighbourhoods (e.g., Amadora in Lisbon) nurture a sense of separation and stigmatization that continues to be performed and lived by young people, even when leaving the district's administrative or physical boundaries. It is also experienced as a view that other people share on them, as Rui points out: "A lot of people think that if you're from this neighbourhood, you'll end up on the streets or doing bad stuff. That gets to us. Sometimes we even lose the will to try." (Rui, male, 29 years, Lisbon) The strong impact of the spaces on self-confidence affects young people's subjective agency, i.e., the will to try and aspire new things irrespectively of the experienced or presumed external constraints. At the same time, the interviews also reveal variation in how young people respond to similar spatial stigmas. While some internalize negative expectations, others actively challenge them, suggesting that spatial disadvantage does not translate uniformly into educational disengagement.

In other cases, the administrative boundaries of deprived neighbourhoods are less decisive or visible in young people's decision making. Hamburg's central borough, for example, barely impacts young people's understanding of their urban space, as it mostly resembles an artificial, that is purely administrative rather than historically established unit. What matters are community spaces, be they institutional (second-chance schools, charities, social projects), public (sportsgrounds, cafés, street markets, squares), confessional (churches, temples, mosques), or even functional (bus and train stations, shopping malls). Especially among refugees and migrants, community spaces serve as identity markers and, at the same time, as possible constraints of their social mobility. As reported from the migrant community in Hamburg, individual success might often be interpreted as breaking out of the *minority* community, and, as a consequence, losing its social and emotional support.

Finally, in more strongly, yet more symbolically segregated urban spaces, such as in Vienna or Barcelona, the competitive urban environment, language proficiency, formal credentials, and socio-cultural capital become the gatekeepers for educational and social success. The findings suggest that mechanisms of social reproduction may facilitate greater access to information, trust, and guidance to students from more privileged, educated families: "There are differences made according to milieu...they are trusted to do more, and are already given different information" (local professional on labour market, Vienna). Thus, their spatial disposition has been granted by, and is intertwined with, their symbolic status, which provides them with an institutional advantage. On the other hand, young people in disadvantaged positions, institutionally labelled as "educationally disconnected" (local professional, Vienna), are disproportionately funnelled into supra-company apprenticeship programs rather than mainstream vocational training or academic tracks. Although these programs are formally inclusive, their peripheral locations and the stigma

attached to them affect the opportunities available to participating youth. For example, accessing more central and prestigious education and employment in the future. In this sense, spatial belonging and disposition play a crucial role in shaping access to and engagement with learning opportunities. As place-based learning ecologies suggest, young people's sense of belonging and attachment to place can significantly foster or constrain educational participation and aspirations (Dudek, 2026).

In summary, spatial disposition results from the interplay of perceived and experienced physical, institutional, and structural spaces, and frames young people's self-identification, behaviour, and educational aspirations. While some young people adjust to their social and spatial environments, others resist being identified with their dispositions. As Beverly Skeggs observed, "[a]djustment may not happen. There may not be a fit between positions and dispositions" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 81).

Ambivalent spatial attachment

Young people develop different perceptions of and attachment to urban spaces throughout their life courses. This depends on the specific period of their life courses they spend in the urban spaces, as well as on its duration.

When born and raised in the urban spaces, some young people perceive them as familiar, natural, and safe. They develop a sense of pride and belonging, even if the city or its district create more constraints than opportunities: "This neighbourhood has given me everything I have, it taught me everything I know. I owe a lot to this neighbourhood, in a positive sense." (Eno, male, 23 years, Lisbon). In this example by Eno, urban space emerges as a place where he feels as home and to which he attributes a decisive role in his personal development. Especially during the transitional periods, the decisions of young people are often informed by the expectation to upscale their economic and social status. Some, as Iqbal, are more successful when moving from one urban space to another:

I lived in Berlin for a year, and unfortunately in one year I had zero percent [progress]. Zero percent. After three months of moving to Hamburg, I found an apprenticeship, a nice apartment, a good job with a good salary and feel really comfortable here in Hamburg. (Iqbal, male, 29 years, Hamburg)

Others move to the cities from rural spaces and foreign countries, which is accompanied by eye-opening, empowering effects, such as the ones experienced by Mercedes: "Here, you have more opportunities to find work, more access to support depending on your situation, help from professionals. You have cultural workshops, art, performance, cinema, theatre. There's a variety of cultures. Of cultures, of art." (Mercedes, female, 25 years, Barcelona) Several narratives challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of urban life. For many participants, cities provided access to educational opportunities, cultural resources, support services and diverse social networks that would have been unavailable elsewhere. Indeed, transitional periods are marked by the recognition of the importance of the spaces they live in: On the one hand, their poor living

and learning conditions result in part from the spatial surroundings. On the other hand, the same spaces that constrain them serve as emotional resorts, with memories of childhood and youth, social bonds, and rooted family structures. Breaking out of the familiarity of the spaces during the transitional period marks the peak of the conflict over the meaning of spaces and their role in sustaining and enhancing their life courses. It also impacts, as the example of Iqbal demonstrates, how spaces influence the ability to progress and aspire educational and life goals: "As I have mentioned, I lived in another state before. That's when I lost all my morals, potential, energy, self-awareness, everything. I just didn't want to live in Berlin, I just wanted to survive." (Iqbal, male, 29 years, Hamburg)

For young people in multi-disadvantaged life contexts, their spatiality serves as an anchor, which stabilizes during times of insecurity, but which at the same time bonds them to and labels them with the space they occupy. Heaving the spatial anchor to sail for new adventures requires both the institutional navigation and the individual clarity about the destination.

Spatial ownership and identity formation

Urban spaces offer living and learning opportunities for diverse groups in multi-disadvantaged positions, who interact with and integrate into the urban spaces with different pace and to a various degree. Some of these groups are residing in the cities since their birth, others are newcomers, be it as internal or international migrants. In this regard, urban spaces emerge as a structuring element in the process of identity formation, which includes the relation to and ownership of the surrounding spaces.

Complementary to the scholarly research on place attachment (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014; Tenzer & Schofield, 2024), we locate spatial ownership at the intersection of cognitive, behavioural, and affective components, but elaborate more strongly on spatial ownership and its function in affecting LOs.

For many, the neighbourhood is not only a physical territory, but an identity marker, a narrative of origin, and, simultaneously, a symbolic boundary with the *outside*. Young people do not merely inhabit their spaces; they are interpellated by them, negotiate meaning, assign value, and actively respond to their material and symbolic configurations. Especially among migrant communities, the former spatial identity enters the new process of spatial identity formation, often both as a stepping stone and a hindrance, as the experience of Thabisa demonstrates: "At the beginning it was difficult. My classmates mocked me because I didn't speak Portuguese well. I was from Cape Verde, but not from the same island. They thought they were superior." (Thabisa, male, 26 years, Lisbon) Thabisa's testimony illustrates how one's place of origin can be experienced both as a source of belonging and as a reason for exclusion, even within migrant communities with similar backgrounds. Territorial identity thus becomes marked by internal power relations and hierarchies. Ellen, on the other hand, expresses the impact of territory on her educational and emotional adaptation following migration: "I moved here, to Quinta do Marrocos. My Portuguese wasn't

good; the teachers had no patience. I couldn't make friends, I felt isolated. The school was close, but it felt distant." (Ellen, male, 28 years, Lisbon) In his case, urban space is experienced as a relational limit, geographically close, yet symbolically distant, revealing the effects of spatiality on the identity formation.

Further on, while urban spaces offer diversity and opportunities, they do not automatically translate into inclusion or recognition. Young people frequently describe their neighbourhoods and educational trajectories as pre-scripted and undervalued. Lena, for example, shares how both her school environment and residential identity combined to diminish institutional expectations about her future: "I had the feeling that the teachers at school didn't take me seriously. They always said, 'Yeah, with you, we don't need to try too hard, you'll end up in one of those courses anyway'." (Lena, female, 18 years, Vienna) In Lena's case, urban space is not simply where disadvantage unfolds, it is part of what constitutes it through repeated misrecognition and lowered expectations by institutional actors. In addition, while some residents are more successful in utilizing their privileged spatiality, others see themselves excluded from their own spaces due to their economic unaffordability, which is a recurring topic in the cities, as experienced by Narco:

Because living here just drains you. My mother is 55 years old, and she can't afford to live alone, she's renting a room with random people. It's a shitty place. [...] For partying, Barcelona is awesome, for sure. If you want to have fun and go wild, it's amazing. But living here seriously, I don't think it's very doable. (Narco, male, 28 years, Barcelona)

Thus, for the urban spaces to be accepted and valued by young people in multi-disadvantaged positions, they must provide them with the sense of recognition, openness to change, and accessibility for their needs and desires. This spatial ownership, the notion of being a part and partaking in the urban space, strengthens identity formation of young people as learners, achievers, future decision-makers, etc.

Spatial ownership also helps explain variations in learning outcomes. Across the interviews, young people who described stronger feelings of belonging, recognition, and attachment to their local environments often reported greater engagement with educational and community-based opportunities. Conversely, experiences of exclusion or symbolic distance from one's neighborhood or school environment could weaken educational participation and future aspirations. In this sense, learning outcomes are linked not only to educational provision itself, but also to the extent to which young people experience urban spaces as places in which they can legitimately participate, learn, and envision a future.

Multi-disadvantaged life contexts in urban spaces

In this section, we briefly summarize the analysis of selected urban spaces and elaborate on their multi-disadvantaged life contexts. We draw three main observations from our analysis.

The first observation considers the relation between *the spatial and the social components of learning and*

education. As the findings indicate, the compensation of formal educational requirements and qualifications with second-chance programmes and the recognition of non-formal/informal skills takes into consideration only the institutional level of disadvantages. However, re-entering the formal educational and career pathways is closely tied to spatial mobility as well. According to recent studies, spatial mobility among VET applicants significantly increases with longer search durations and adaptation in their decision-making processes. Especially young people "with lower status aspirations adjust their willingness to be mobile depending on regional opportunities." (Hoffmann, 2025, p. 18) However, the spatial mobility in urban settings unfolds differently. While it might be assumed that shorter spatial distances promote social mobility, the socio-cultural distances (Kalalahti, 2023) as well as the exposure to differently institutionalised contexts (Wicht et al., 2025) may paradoxically complicate the social upward mobility.

The second observation relates to *the spatial dispersion of educational landscapes and social inequalities*. As Willem Boterman and colleagues observe, "[e]ducational landscapes are highly differentiated, as they bring together the historically grown geography of education of a city with the multi-layered institutional context in which it is embedded" (Boterman et al., 2019, p.3070). In line with recent studies, the chapter argues that residential and school segregation differ both within and across urban contexts (El-Mafaalani & Kemper, 2017), with school segregation exceeding residential segregation (Boterman et al., 2019). In more deprived and low-income neighbourhoods, as the research on US cities illustrates, "schools enrol more disadvantaged students, experience greater absences and disciplinary measures, have fewer experienced or certified teachers, pay teachers lower salaries, and have lower achievement and achievement growth" (Owens & Candipan, 2019, p. 3192). Similarly, in the chapter's city sample, the urban contexts consist of sedimented institutional, architectural, and socio-cultural layers of (dis)advantage, which can hardly be countered with educational measures only and which, at least to some extent, randomly attribute different dispositions to different groups of population.

The third observation relates to *the development of urban youth subjectivities*. Current economies and the allocation of wealth and life opportunities in the cities have "concentrated *youth-fulness* within urban spaces and produced youth as an urban subject position" (Farrugia, 2015, p. 848). Urban spaces are thus experienced as youth spaces and associated with power, joyfulness, productivity, and a sense of centrality in relation to the more remote parts of the country. Young people from the chapter's sample construct their subjectivity using various temporal and spatial components: their fragmented life histories, anticipated, at time idealised life prospects, insecure and unstable current occupations, intimate and familiarised neighbourhoods, as well as institutional offers. All combined, urban youth symbolically meanders through the city with an uncompleted subjectivity that is still under construction. Such openness and exposure to vulnerability reveals the ambivalence of the concept of disadvantage—its tendency to label young people as passive victims and passive agents at the same time, ignoring the productive

potential of adaptive techniques and sensitivity to spatial and social injustices that young people develop along their pathways (McLeod, 2012).

Our observations suggest that urban spaces shape youth trajectories unpredictably. For youth in privileged positions, spaces provide stabilizing infrastructure to thrive. Conversely, youth in vulnerable positions experience spaces as immobilizing, alienating, and highly contested, which forces them to constantly justify their actions, increase their mobility, and reshape their spatial identities, all while fighting to maintain their personal dignity and life projects.

Conclusion

In the paper, we have attempted to analyse and compare multi-disadvantaged life contexts in order to understand what learning and living conditions do urban spaces offer and how do such contexts affect the quality of LOs. We can conclude that a stronger sense of belonging and recognition seems to correlate with greater engagement and motivation of young people. Those attached to marginalised neighbourhoods often perceive education as exclusive and stratified, a filtering mechanism privileging groups with the *right* background. Conversely, when education is embedded in supportive, locally situated networks and recognises diverse life experiences, it regains value as a potential pathway to dignity and self-realisation. This is particularly visible when institutions incorporate young people's voices and value non-formal and informal competences. However, the analysis also reveals that educational engagement is not only shaped by integration, but by young people's individual and collective aspirations, sometimes influenced by *migrant optimism*, where higher expectations lead to stronger efforts to succeed. In this respect, vertical (e.g., second-chance schools, supra-company training, coaching) and horizontal networks (friends, siblings, youth workers) play a crucial role in supporting youth navigation and reinforcing bounded aspirations.

Our findings also suggest that the amplification of social and spatial inequalities in the selected cities has marginal provable impact on the quality of LOs. While they are marked by deep spatial, institutional, and symbolic inequalities and divisions, the latter do not automatically translate into poorer educational achievements. Rather, the coexistence of intensified inequality and rich institutional provision challenges the systemic failure to accommodate fragmented life courses and plural learner identities. In some cases, the education system is symbolically selective, favouring those who conform to institutional norms and penalising those with non-linear or fragmented life trajectories. Other examples show that cities can also enable quick recovery, professional and educational re-entry, as well as social/civic re-engagement. Thus, urbanity amplifies both risk and potential—it does not predetermine under-achievement.

Furthermore, the navigational capabilities of urban youth tend to be under-represented in their educational achievements. Navigating urban life contexts requires young people to develop sophisticated

strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and resilience. Educational achievement in this context reflects not only academic skill but also navigational competence, the ability to decode rules, build relational anchors, and manage instability. Educational success thus often depends not only on academic performance but also on young people's capacity to navigate fragmented institutional frameworks and spatial environments. The paper highlights that success in education cannot be separated from the broader capability to navigate in dynamic and instable life situations. Young people's ability to move through the physical, social, and symbolic spaces is not only a condition for, but also a result of (formal or informal) educational achievement. Thus, the latter cannot be reduced to individual effort or merit, but rather calibrated with the structural and institutional plasticity to absorb and promote diverse educational trajectories. Importantly, the findings also point to the productive dimensions of urban life, including opportunities for social participation, identity formation, educational re-engagement and the development of adaptive competencies among young people facing adversity.

Finally, the concept of context has been fruitful in analyzing the relation between urban spaces and young people's LOs. The urban spaces of the selected cities can create different multi-disadvantaged life contexts that in turn enable the production of different LOs. Barcelona's context shapes the understanding of LOs in relation to the seasonally oriented labor market and the policy calls for more social inclusion and cohesion. Hamburg's context, in turn, frames LOs as an economic incentive that prevents young people from marginalization. Lisbon's context relates LOs more strongly to young people's material affordability and community networks. Vienna's context sees LOs in close relation to the institutional stratification and path dependencies. Thus, comparing LOs across such diverse contexts risks neglecting a complex set of relations and interdependencies that traverse urban spaces. More research is needed to understand how multi-disadvantaged life contexts not only intensify and install dominant meanings and understandings of LOs but are themselves shaped by conflicting modes of knowledge production.

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