Disregarded epistemologies in education? Critical approaches to Sociologies and Histories of Education in Central and Eastern Europe: Introduction to the Special Issue[1]

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Abstract

This special issue takes stock of current developments in the critical study of sociologies and histories of education in the Central and Eastern European region. It demarginalizes the intersection of marginalized disciplines within the field of educational sciences that is dominated by psychological and pedagogical approaches within a marginalized region within a global and planetary context. In this vein, the special issue brings together contributions that engage with conceptualizing the social in education, epistemological inequalities, ruptures and continuities within the field of education and social reproduction, governance and social justice in education.

Keywords: sociology of education; history of education; Central and Eastern Europe; epistemological inequalities

Why this special issue?

Sociologies and histories of education from Central and Eastern Europe are doubly disregarded. On the one hand, within the field of education, they are pushed to the margins by psychological and pedagogical approaches that center the individual and their personal development trajectories and analyze systems in terms of their abilities to promote competency development. In these disciplinary contexts, the social and the temporal are background noise that may help in discerning the 'actual' educational

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questions. On the other hand, in terms of regional studies, Central and Eastern Europe is in turn a marginalized region for social research: beyond the Cold War and its follow-up epistemology of transitology, the region is now neither fully understandable with the epistemological apparati applied routinely to the Global North nor to the Global South. This special issue seeks to intervene in this state of affairs and in intellectual intersectional terms 'demarginalize the intersection' of these processes of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989) by exploring the questions of time and social in education in and beyond the CEE region.

The marginalization of sociology of education within education is especially evident when examined through its place in the teacher training curriculum. For example, in Romania, after the end of state socialism in 1989, sociology became an integral part of teacher training. In the 1990s, the curriculum for initial teacher training included courses such as general sociology, family sociology, and sociology of education. Soon after, the sociology of education was included only as an optional course in the curriculum for initial training of secondary education teachers (starting in 2012) and was omitted from most universities' initial training for early and primary education teachers. Only recently, beginning in 2024, the new (envisioned) curriculum for initial training of early and primary education teachers reintroduced the study of the sociology of education; however, these changes have not yet been implemented. Romania`s case is not unique, despite its proven formative value (Ferguson & Carbonaro, 2016; Rockwell et al., 2019), sociology of education has been increasingly marginalized in initial teacher training curricula, as more output-oriented education has gained dominance (Doherty, 2013).

Nevertheless, sociologies of education from the CEE region have brought to the fore critical studies of upward and downward social mobility and educational trajectories (Árendás & Messing, 2022; Árendás et al., 2022; Durst & Bereményi, 2021, 2024; Bereményi et al 2024; Erőss, 2018; Tomoiagă & Safta-Zecheria, 2024; Szalai, 2014; Jecan & Pop, 2012), persistent educational inequalities (Tufiş, 2008; Hatos, 2008; Ţoc, 2018; Bădescu, 2019; Gheba, 2021), ethnographic inquiries into childhood (Ulrich Hygum & Hygum, 2021; Hygum & Ulrich Hygum, 2025; Savu et al., 2020) and critical inquiries into policies, their transnational circulation and embeddedness in local conditions of possibility and power relations (Neumann, 2023; Wirthová, 2025; Solonean, 2023; Mitescu Manea et al 2021, Safta-Zecheria et al 2022; Ulrich Hygum & Hygum, 2023; Zentai 2014; Hosszu & Rughiniş 2020), alongside critical investigations of the nation in education (Neuman 2025; Piattoeva et al., 2024), transnational educational actors (Zakariás & Al-Awami, 2023) and studies of educational segregation (Toma, 2011; Messing, 2017; Borş, 2020; Hatos 2008; Costache et al, 2024) and gender inequality (Rughiniş et al., 2025), as well as contexts of learning in contexts of displacement (Neumann et al., 2025; Cook et al 2023; Cantat et al 2022; Feinschmidt & Zakariás, 2018) and social reproduction in contexts outside of schooling (Savu et al. 2020). Socio-material epistemologies have also grown in importance bringing critical perspectives to understanding practices in education (Iacob, 2025; Wirthová, 2022). Histories of

education in the region remain a small, yet growing field that employs a local (Deaconu, 2024; Zysiak, 2015; 2019) or transnational perspective (Gulczyńska et al. 2023), while critical perspective of the study of disability related segregation and inclusion policies in and through education is also a growing field (Bucur, 2026/forthcoming; Dinu, 2022; 2026/forthcoming; Safta-Zecheria, 2018; 2023).

Moreover, studies of the CEE region in a transnational and comparative sociological and genealogical perspective have been on the rise and the European Educational Research Associations, especially the Sociologies of Education (NW28), Social Justice and Intercultural Education (NW7) and Research on Citizenship Education (NW34) networks have been important venues for pushing these agendas forward. In Romania, the Romanian Association for Educational Research's (ARCE) network on Ethnography Education, initiated by Cătălina Ulrich-Hygum, as part of a larger team that includes the editors of this issue, has been a significant venue for pushing this agenda forward. Practices of transnational research beyond the boundaries of Europe through critical inquiries into democratizing transformations of higher education in Latin America (Ivancheva, 2023; see also the Ecosystems for Higher Education Inclusion project) have also been emerging in broad connection with the region's social and post-socialist intellectual traditions, complementing a research agenda on transformative practices (Cantat et al., 2022), disability inclusion in higher education (Trancă et al., 2022; 2024) and transformative learning relations starting from the university but going beyond it (Safta-Zecheria et al., 2020; 2021).

Yet, while these epistemological approaches are maturing into a field of growing transnational and transdisciplinary interest, they remain on the epistemological sidelines both in regional and disciplinary terms. In this special issue, we seek to bring them to the center. Moreover, since we have launched the call for papers, as the impact of austerity measures in Romanian education has increased, the teaching profession, as well as social measures in education have been under constant public scrutiny bordering on discreditation. Struggles over socio-material aspects of education have yet again come to the fore in a move akin to the debates surrounding the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis management policies (Safta-Zecheria et al., forthcoming/2026). Moreover, epistemological struggles over the national curriculum have yet again exposed inter-generational conflicts about learning, as well as educational inequities connected to socio-economic and gender related inequalities. It is a context in which we are more than ever in need of sociological and genealogical knowledge about education in the region.

From the call to the contributions: revisiting the agenda

The initial call for this special issue emerged from a growing unease with the ways in which educational research in Central and Eastern Europe has increasingly been shaped by psychologically and pedagogically informed approaches, often to the detriment of sociological, historical, and genealogical perspectives. We invited contributions that engaged critically with educational practices, policies, and settings in the region, with

particular attention to how the social is conceptualised in education, how epistemological legacies continue to shape research agendas, and how education participates in processes of social reproduction and social justice.

The response to our call was general and diverse, the articles assembled in this issue are grounded in a wide range of empirical settings and geographical locations across Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, Hungary, Poland, and the Republic of Moldova, and span multiple levels of education, from early childhood and compulsory schooling to teacher education, higher education, and professional training. The studies are situated in diverse contexts, ranging from kindergartens in ethnically mixed communities and local schools embedded in specific territorial configurations, to national policy discourses, higher education governance frameworks, and academic publication infrastructures. Attending to these situated sites allows the contributions to trace how educational processes are shaped differently across institutional levels and locales, while remaining attentive to the broader political, historical, and governance conditions within which these settings are embedded.

Conceptualising the social in education

Several contributions respond directly to our invitation to reconsider how the social is conceptualised in educational settings, particularly against the background of the growing psychologisation of educational research and practice. Rather than approaching learning, professional training, or integration as individualised or technical processes, these articles treat the social as relational, and as institutionally mediated process. In doing so, they draw attention to the ways in which educational practices participate in the formation of subjectivities, collective identities, and ethical orientations.

Simona Adam's analysis of the intergenerational transmission of teacher habitus conceptualises the social as embodied and narratively sustained across generations. Drawing on autobiographical accounts of pre-service teachers raised in teaching families, the article shows how professional identities take shape through primary socialisation, everyday observation, and inherited representations of the teaching profession, rather than being produced exclusively within formal teacher education. This perspective unsettles individualised and meritocratic accounts of career choice that remain influential in contemporary educational research, foregrounding instead the social conditions through which vocational dispositions are formed and recognised.

Zsuzsanna Árendás, Vera Messing, and Agnes Kende similarly approach the social as an institutional and interactional accomplishment. Focusing on early childhood education in ethnically mixed communities, they examine how kindergartens function as sites in which middle-class norms are normalised and enacted through everyday practices of care, authority, and integration. Their analysis highlights how subjectivities and collective identities are shaped through boundary-making processes that are simultaneously pedagogical and moral, carrying ethical and political implications that

complicate instrumentalist understandings of education as neutral skills acquisition or socialisation into taken-for-granted norms.

Epistemologies in educational research

A second cluster of articles engages centrally with the epistemological questions articulated in the call, particularly those concerning the multiple legacies of state socialist and post-socialist educational thought, as well as the contemporary reconfiguration of educational research under conditions of datafication, performativity, and managerialisation.

Leyla Safta-Zecheria's historical analysis of late socialist Romanian sociology of education revisits debates on the "crisis of schooling" as they unfolded across the Iron Curtain. By examining how Romanian sociologists and futurologists engaged with global critical discourses associated with Coombs, Freire, and Illich, the article offers a situated account of how schooling was defended as a socially central yet reformable institution within state socialism. In doing so, it complicates post-Cold War narratives that frame socialist educational thought primarily through failure or ideological closure, and brings into view alternative epistemological imaginaries that continue to inform contemporary debates on education and reform.

Mihaela Mitescu-Manea's Actor–Network Theory - informed genealogy of teacher mentoring similarly foregrounds epistemological continuity and instability across reform contexts. Conceptualising mentoring as a contingent assemblage of legislation, professional discourses, institutional actors, and material arrangements, the article shows how past epistemic configurations persist and are translated within present reforms. This approach unsettles linear accounts of policy change and professional development, drawing attention to the temporal layering and material-discursive complexity of educational practices.

Dana Solonean's analysis of textbook reform in post-communist Romania places epistemology at the centre of educational reform processes. By examining how textbooks were mobilised as instruments for disseminating "legitimate knowledge" aligned with emerging neoliberal rationalities, the article shows how knowledge, authority, and expertise were reconfigured through market mechanisms. Her analysis also highlights the role played by Romanian education specialists in legitimising these transformations, pointing to the entanglement of epistemic authority and institutional power in moments of reform.

Radu Dumitrescu's bibliometric and critical analysis of medical education extends this epistemic critique into a domain strongly shaped by data-driven research cultures. Through an analysis of large-scale publication patterns, the study provides empirical evidence of how epistemological concerns such as uncertainty, reflection, and epistemic justice are systematically marginalised within performative research regimes. In making visible the absences and silences produced by dominant data practices, the article raises

broader questions about what forms of knowledge are rendered visible, credible, or irrelevant in contemporary educational research.

Social reproduction, governance, and social justice

The third set of concerns articulated in the call regarding social reproduction, power, and social justice in contexts marked by historical rupture, crisis, and reform finds strong resonance across this special issue. In these contributions, social reproduction is approached not only as a cultural process, but also as one shaped by governance arrangements, institutional differentiation, and political rationalities that structure educational opportunity and inequality over time.

Robert Avram's critical discourse analysis of austerity in Romanian education examines how crisis narratives and moralised scarcity discourses operate as modes of governance that legitimate budgetary cuts and policy restructuring. By framing austerity as inevitable and morally responsible, these discourses normalise the reproduction of inequality while narrowing the space for contestation and alternative educational futures, revealing the affective and moral dimensions through which policy decisions are rendered acceptable.

Ştefan Marius Deaconu and Alina Roiniță approach social reproduction from a structural and territorial perspective, analysing how educational inequality in post-socialist Romania is produced through the interaction of spatial configurations, institutional autonomy, and historically accumulated human development. Drawing on nationwide data from lower secondary examinations, they show that educational outcomes are deeply path-dependent, and that institutional differentiation, particularly between autonomous schools and satellite structures, reinforces divergence between localities even under comparable socioeconomic conditions. Their findings foreground governance capacity and institutional design as key mechanisms through which inequality is sustained and reproduced.

Anna Becker and Florin Salajan's comparative study of higher education governance in Poland and Romania situates these dynamics within a broader historical and geopolitical frame. Conceptualising governance as an epistemic regime, they show how evaluation infrastructures, language hierarchies, and internationalisation agendas function as filters of academic legitimacy, producing new forms of exclusion while marginalising locally rooted and alternative epistemologies. Their explicit engagement with epistemic justice connects questions of power, inequality, and recognition to the organisation and valuation of academic knowledge itself.

Disciplinary traditions, analytical genres, and epistemic visibility

While contemporary educational research and policy debates frequently foreground skills, competencies, innovation, and efficiency, the epistemic foundations of education, what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and whose knowledge matters, remain surprisingly under-theorised. As Ungureanu (2024) argues, educational

policy and research over recent decades have progressively pushed questions of knowledge into the background, treating them as implicit or secondary to performative outcomes shaped by competency-based curricula, managerial and performative reforms.

Epistemic concerns are not peripheral but central to how education is practiced. Knowledge is not simply presented in research texts but is actively represented, framed, and made visible through specific discursive and epistemic practices as it reflects and challenges power relations and confers legitimacy to ways of knowing and transforming educational practice. This is why, our understanding of educational inquiry in this special issue is predicated on attending to how knowledge is produced, organised, and legitimised and enacted.

While this special issue is situated within the field of educational sciences, the contributions it brings together draw upon a plurality of disciplinary traditions, including several strands of critical sociology. These include Bourdieu-informed analyses of habitus, reproduction, and symbolic violence (e.g. Bourdieu, 1973; 1977), critical discourse and policy sociology (e.g. Fairclough, 1995), Actor–Network Theory (Latour, 2005), and critical epistemologies attentive to epistemic injustice and knowledge hierarchies (e.g. Fricker, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2014), as mobilised across the articles in this issue. These traditions do not necessarily share the same conventions regarding what counts as analysis, evidence, or results; consequently, differences in disciplinary traditions are also differences in how knowledge is made legible to readers.

In qualitative research in education, analytical insights are frequently articulated through clearly delineated themes or discursive categories, supported by illustrative data extracts. Such forms of representation respond to dominant and often normative expectations regarding transparency, traceability, and methodological accountability. By contrast, much critical sociological work, particularly that inspired by policy sociology, governmentality studies, post-structuralist discourse theory, or macro-textual approaches to critical discourse analysis, mobilises empirical material differently. In these traditions, interpretation often unfolds through extended argumentative narratives, within which empirical excerpts function as moments of conceptual anchoring rather than as discrete, bounded "findings."

The articles gathered in this special issue adopt diverse strategies for presenting findings, ranging from thematic organisation to discursive, narrative, and argumentative structures, while remaining attentive to analytical coherence. In doing so, they make visible not only their objects of analysis, but also their underlying representations of what knowledge is and how it can be known.

Editorial reflexivity and intellectual traditions in the Romanian context

Engaging with these contributions has prompted us, as editors, to reflect on the norms of academic writing that shape our own fields and reading practices. Encountering unfamiliar analytical structures required a deliberate slowing down: rereading the texts, situating them within broader intellectual conversations, and allowing ourselves time to

inhabit different genres of sociological and historical writing. In this sense, the editorial process itself became an exercise of epistemic learning and even reconsidering our own assumptions about what constitutes knowledge in education.

This process also raised more uncomfortable questions about the literatures we tend to read and those we may read less often. To what extent are our engagements with sociology already mediated through educational frameworks, concepts, and methodological norms? As one colleague remarked during our discussions, educational research itself is frequently psychologised and positivised, even when it adopts critical or qualitative vocabularies, a tendency that has been widely critiqued for narrowing the epistemic and normative scope of educational inquiry (Biesta, 2007; 2010; 2014).

Several scholars based in Romania and working at the intersection of sociology and education exemplify alternative narrative approaches to analytical representation. The foundational contributions in Romanian pedagogy, such as those of Emil Păun (2006, 2017, 2022) illustrate how questions of knowledge, equity, and institutional purpose have long been debated within local and national intellectual traditions. Elisabeta Stănciulescu (1996), Traian Rotariu (2004) and Adrian Hatos (2006) contributed important overview works that together with the anthology of theoretical texts engaging with the sociology of education edited by Fred Mahler (1977) at the end of the 1970s make up the cannon of fundamental readings in sociology of education academic classrooms until today.

At the same time, empirical work that builds on close ethnographic study and sociological theorizing is giving rise to a growing field. The sociological framing of classroom interaction, equity, and educational processes found in the work of Cătălina Ulrich (2021, 2023) points to relational and contextual dimensions that extend beyond procedural coding, while Sebastian Țoc's (2016; 2018; 2020) analyses of class and educational stratification situate empirical patterns within structural and historical narratives. In a similar vein, Octavia Borș-Georgescu's (2018; 2020) research, grounded in the sociology of education and informed by ethnographic and macro-microsocial perspectives on pedagogical practice, foregrounds how educational inequalities are lived and narrated within everyday school contexts, expanding on national debates about access, agency, and democratic educational practices. Finally, Safta-Zecheria (2018; 2023) has looked at how education and biopolitics intersect in everyday life in post-institutional settings.

From agenda to collective intervention

By making room for the social, the authors` contributions enrich our understanding of education in CEE settings. We are being shown how, in a context of morally legitimized austerity and persistent educational inequalities, middle-class norms are normalised and enacted through everyday practices, beginning in kindergartens up until university, and shape even early representations of the teaching profession. Additionally, the authors demonstrate that recent educational discourses originate from both socialist ideas about

schooling, in terms of crisis and reform, and early neoliberal rationalities that reconfigure knowledge, authority, and expertise within the logic of the market.

In dialogue, the contributions collected here substantiate the core premises of the initial call while also revealing a shared concern that cuts across empirical sites and methodological approaches: the progressive marginalisation of epistemic and political questions in education. Whether examining habitus, institutional practices, policy discourse, reform instruments, professional education, or academic governance, the articles show how what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts is shaped by historical legacies, political rationalities, and institutional arrangements.

Rather than attempting to resolve these tensions, this special issue chooses to stay with them. The juxtaposition of different analytical genres, evidentiary practices, and writing conventions is not treated as a problem to be harmonised but as a productive condition for interdisciplinary dialogue. For readers more closely anchored in educational research traditions, attending to these differences may offer a lens not only for engaging with the contributions that follow, but also for reflecting on the often-unspoken norms through which qualitative (and quantitative) evidence is expected to speak, persuade, and ultimately count as knowledge.

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