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Working the boundaries of spaces for agency in adult education

How European social inclusion policy challenges
adult educators' creativity

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Abstract

The paper will elaborate on the tension field of power and creativity by examining the relationship between supranational – that is, European – governance, and regionally or locally situated educational practice. Over the past 30 years, European governance has increasingly influenced how adult education is provided, thanks to increasingly intensive strategies of governance (Schemmann 2007). The European Social Fund is one instrument through which the EU has become a powerful actor in the field of education. At first sight, educational policy appear as mechanisms of power, being heavily focused on control, as evidenced through the increasing funding regulations which limit the space for agency for adult educators and for adult learners. A closer look, however, reveals how regional actors employ creative strategies to carry out the complex business of European project work.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the connection between supranational (European) governance of adult education and the regional realities of adult learning, by analysing how educators and program planners negotiate, develop, maintain and change their space for autonomous agency within the tight conditions set out by European funding regulations of social inclusion programs for unemployed school leavers. For our analysis of the impact and usage of the European Social Fund in the specific sector of adult education, we build on the findings of a recent research project, “Europäisierungseffekte in der Übergangsgestaltung – Effects of Europeanisation on school-to-work-transition programming”, funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation.¹ The project uses a multi-level analysis and historical comparison covering the last 30 years to reconstruct the games of power inherent to European social inclusion policy as a complex relation between supranational governance and local practice. Building on the heuristic model of actor-centred institutionalism (Mayntz/Scharpf 1995), we analyse funding regulations, EU-social inclusion documents, and employment strategy papers and contrast the resultant findings with those from our analysis of expert interviews conducted with actors in the regional field. This contrasting mixed-methods approach allows us to reconstruct how ESF-funded youth unemployment programs are developing into a transition regime that can be viewed as one construction element of the European education space (Lawn/Novoa 2002).

From a policy perspective, the increasing tendency to regulate educational work in the field of ESF-funded school-to-work transitions may be read as a specific EU knowledge policy, one that targets the management of youth unemployment and the governance of transitions. According to this logic, quality equals funding and funding equals quality. However, actors in the field are challenged to reflect, re-consider and reformulate their educational approach and reconcile it with “social inclusion talk” (Steiner-Khamsi 2012). The expert interviews thus reveal the creative potential of negotiating work ethics and educational mandates within this tension field.

1 The project “Europäisierungseffekte in der Übergangsgestaltung”, project number S-2014-701-5, was funded by the Hans Böckler Foundation from August 2014 to January 2017.

2. Creativity and power

To approach the complex relationship between supranational governance and regionally or locally situated educational practice, we suggest that the link between power and creativity² should be conceptualised as a tension field. While the tension field metaphor can provide a better understanding of relations, it includes the idea that neither one of the poles in such a tension field can predominate the other, nor can such a situation be resolved by only focusing on one of the sides. In our context – the tension field of power and creativity – two implications follow from this. On the one hand, spaces without any power structures or boundaries do not allow for creativity, as powerful structures build the conditions under which creative action can become imaginable and feasible. On the other hand, it also logically follows that there is no power without “meshes of power” (Foucault 2005), and thus no power without subjective scopes and their potential for creativity. A concentration on a poststructuralist understanding of power prevents being distracted by questions of origin or type of power, but to closer investigate its mode of action, as Gilles Deleuze stated referring to Foucault:

“It shouldn’t be asked ‘What is power? And where does it come from?’ but rather ‘How is it operating?’” (Deleuze 1992, 100 [Translation SZ])

What, from that perspective, can be defined as “creativity” is therefore inseparably connected to this perspective on power. This does not mean that creativity only consists of what power allows one to do; it may also be understood as the ability to make use of, work in, or adopt spaces that have been coined into being through power structures. We suggest calling these spaces, in which actors at different levels must choose between different possibilities of action, “spaces of orientation” (Seddon 2016).

Thus, putting the issue of power and creativity into the context of the European governance of local (educational) practice shows that the EU cannot be seen as THE power in the sense of an omnipotent ruling force, but rather as a powerful actor in the political field delimited by the discourse on youth unemployment³, which the EU tries to grasp, steer

2 This paper is a revised version of a presentation held at the ESREA Triennial Conference 2016 in Maynooth, Ireland, which focused on the link between power and creativity through the conference theme “Imagining diverse futures for adult education: questions of power and resources of creativity”.

3 One should bear in mind that the EU must not be seen as the “origin” or starting point of power; rather, European politics are in themselves the result of a negotiation process involving regional, national and supranational actors.

and regulate. Considering Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, this implies that understanding the population as the central object of the government is a necessary prerequisite for this striving for governance.

"This means that the population will be the object that government will have to take into account in its observations and knowledge, in order to govern effectively in a rationally reflected manner" (Foucault 2007, 142).

In order to be able to grasp the issue of the population, the government must be able to draw on a broad knowledge of the topic. With respect to our study, this is apparent in the creation of a statistical apparatus (for example, Eurostat) as well as in normative directives on the topic, such as those laid out in the European strategical papers, e.g. the Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2000).

These factors of knowledge production reveal the foundation of a discursive space that, due to the EU's hegemonic position of a privileged speaker resonance in (pedagogic) practice. First and foremost, such artificial spaces are established by the exterior frame and thus leave sufficient room for the creation and "design" of the interior. Thus, the arrangement of (pedagogic) practice is up to institutional, organizational and individual actors. These actors are highly aware of and dependent upon the discursive space, but still have the active power to appropriate and adapt it. Different modes of appropriation are possible here: the potential to resist, evade, or creatively play with guidelines.

3. Youth unemployment as a subject of European knowledge policy

Youth unemployment has been a hot topic in the EU gaining even more emphasis since the European financial crisis developed into the European economic and government debt crisis in 2008. News on the developments in Greece have rarely failed to point to the extraordinarily high rate of adolescents who are not employed, not in school, and not undergoing vocational training (*NEETs*). Similarly, journalistic analyses of the 'crisis' states of Europe usually name the current key figures of other "problem-states" such as Spain, Italy, Ireland or France. Almost every EU document has addressed the issue of reducing youth unemployment. In other words, youth unemployment seems to have become a key indicator for identifying crisis.

When looking at the history of European employment policy, however, it soon becomes obvious that youth unemployment not only was one of the key subjects during the last crisis, but was also an important topic in strategy documents already during the 1990s. For instance, a glance at the 1993 White Paper of the European Commission "Growth, Competitiveness and Employment" (European Commission 1993) shows that, with respect to youth unemployment, it was developed in a historical context similar to that of the "crisis", when the EU's commission statement addressed the need of "moving youth into employment" (European Commission 2012). In the White Paper, the commission noted that 17.3% of the EU-population under the age of 25 was without work or education in 1993. This number had increased to 18.2% by 2012. In the "crisis states" of Spain, Italy and Ireland, there was a small increase, while in France the number even decreased by 2%. These documents also show that, even in 1993, there was a clear awareness that youth unemployment is not just a matter of unemployed young people. It follows its own rules, emerges from specific situations, and therefore requires specific solutions in order to manage such a crisis. This is due to the fact that, within the EU discourses, youth (alongside with other groups at the risk of social exclusion) needs to be addressed as an independent problem group, and reflected in how the problem is described:

"In order to ensure a smoother and more effective transition from education to working life, formulas of apprenticeship and in-service training in businesses which allow people to gain skills in the world of work should be developed and systematized. Alongside the normal apprenticeship schemes, considerable effort should be devoted to developing initial vocational training in special training centres as a possible alternative to university. Shorter and more practically oriented forms of training should be encouraged, but students should still be pro-

vided with enough general knowledge to ensure a sufficient degree of adaptability and to avoid excessive specialization” (European Commission 1993, 120).

Even though we do not want to further investigate or evaluate specific economic or pedagogic statutes on the subject, this short excerpt nevertheless clearly demonstrates two points:

First, engaging with youth unemployment on a European scale is not a newly developed trend within the crisis. Indeed, the issue was addressed from a much earlier point during the process of European integration, even before the European Employment Strategy passed in 1997. Europe’s engagement with this issue reveals a specific perception and knowledge (in a Foucauldian sense) about the problem of youth unemployment, which included the matter of transitioning from school to work.

Second, by engaging with the matter of youth unemployment in this specific way, the EU produces a form of knowledge on the subject of “youth unemployment”. At that, the subject matter is inseparably connected with the EU’s normative determining and describing. From this standpoint, the discourse on youth unemployment in fact creates the subject of youth unemployment itself, in a specific manner. This process of building knowledge by the strategic development and establishment of new discursive fields or spaces reflects how – within the European discourse – the EU takes up and re-creates the empirical problem of youth unemployment (Zick 2018). Referring back to Foucault at this point, this specific process of knowledge building reveals how the discursive space of youth unemployment is made governable.

Apart from its influence through knowledge policy, the EU’s influence on the area of youth unemployment becomes especially apparent in the *European Social Fund*, which controls essential policies governing the European funding of projects in the transition field.

Since its founding in 1957, the ESF has become a key element of European structural policy as well as the most important element of the promotion of employment within Europe. The fund has been growing continuously since its establishment, rising from 420 million euros in 1957 to 80 billion euros in the current funding period (Menz 2018). The allocation of single funding periods is one of the most important characteristics of the ESF. The funding process is organized in accordance with four specific principles, which determine both application requirements and the form of the support that can be offered to specific applicants. These four principles are:

- **Partnership**, i.e. including social partners and stakeholders in newly established steering bodies.

- **Additionality**, i.e. defining under-regulated fields in the educational system, such as the gap between the spheres of school and work.
- **Program planning**, i.e. designing an operational program for the 6-year ESF funding period.
- **Concentration**, i.e. prioritizing school-to-work transition as field of intervention.

Accordingly, every region applying for ESF-funding has to *plan a special program*, which must then be approved and confirmed by the European Commission; the projects envisaged must be *in addition* to the established educational instruments, and are not meant to replace national or regional duties; the use of any funding and the organization of the funded projects, must build on *partnership networks* between social stakeholders; and the allocation of funds should focus on the most urgent *priorities*.

Among other measures, the ESF administrative apparatus also conducts a formative and conclusive evaluation of each individual program, identifies the criteria for success, and establishes binding structures in the form of requirements set by three institutions: the administrative authority, the certifying authority and the auditing authority. The establishing of funding periods led to new ESF regulations in which the primary objectives of each individual funding period were laid out in accordance with the concentration principle of the ESF. This process enables those involved to decide which projects or target groups are entitled to receive support, and which are not. Consequently, the ESF not only establishes regulations but also promote the establishing of programmatic and content-related matters. If a state, federal state, local authority district or educational provider wants to participate in programs supported by the ESF, it must outline a course of action that follows the specific criteria set forth by the ESF. Even though these criteria provide no detailed guidelines on what pedagogic practices should look like (since the pre-conditions within Europe are too diverse to make the application of such guidelines practicable), they do create spaces for agency, the boundaries of which are determined by the ESF. How these spaces are designed from within is subject to local action and depends on various subjective, institutional, cultural, and national factors. Under these conditions, spaces of orientation are constructed which challenge local actors' creativity.

4. Boundary zones as spaces of orientation

In Germany, we can follow the corresponding processes since the early 1990s, when youth unemployment rates reached a first peak with the collapse of the East German apprenticeship system after the reunification of Germany. Support programs, which were financed to a large extent by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the policy for employment and social inclusion, addressed the needs of students identified as at risk of dropping out or failing to complete their school leaving examinations. At an organizational level, all of these programs changed the established routine of daily schooling for so-called “disadvantaged” students into one that combined two or three days of work experience per week with an accordingly reduced classroom schedule. The reformed programs created closer links between learning and work, encouraging schools, companies, labour agencies, and training institutions to build networks and collaborate closely with each other (Niemeyer 2014). To that end, new institutions and organisations were founded. As a result, the boundaries of schools – general or vocational – became increasingly permeable. Schools are no longer the one and only place where learning takes place, nor are they an exclusive workplace for teachers and classroom teaching is no longer educators’ first didactic method of choice. As the boundaries between school and work fall, a new workforce, charged with the task of helping to mediate between the spheres of working and learning, economy and education, is entering the realm of teaching. At the same time, students are encouraged to leave the so far exclusive location of general learning to improve their “employability”.

While research in this field often focuses on topics that will ultimately improve teaching practices, it barely addresses structural and institutional changes resulting from EU-national/regional interaction. Reading them in a broader European context, however, calls into evidence the ways in which these reforms are inscribed into a wider European policy of lifelong learning and social inclusion.

The concept of “educational boundary work” (Newman et. al. 2014) refers (a) to the emergent new fields of educational practice and the resulting processes of (re)defining occupational territories, professional licensing and educational mandates, and (b) to educational practices within these new territories. It extends in two directions, organising the space for professional education on an institutional or structural level and developing specific types of practice within this space. In the field of school-to-work transition as well as in adult education – the sectors of

education that in Germany are highly flexible and directly exposed to marketization – it is possible to observe how defined educational territories are questioned and reconfigured. The life course transition from school to apprenticeship and employment is gradually framed by and guided through a specific space, one that is opening in the German education system (lately referred to as a “transition system”). This space is less regulated and more directly exposed to marketization than are schools. It is open to so-called innovative approaches in education and allows for private organisations and new types of educational professionals to enter the field. On the macro-level, these reconfigurations of formal education in Germany can be related to supranational European policies on social inclusion, since they are largely dependent on European funding and funding regulations.

How do the actors in the field deal with political reforms that affect their practice? How do they contribute to a reconfiguration of their profession? How do they negotiate occupational boundaries? What are the tools and procedures for constructing professional communities across institutional boundaries?

The concepts of “educational boundary work” or “boundary work of professional territories” have been in the focus of our earlier work, when we claimed that changes in work practice and disturbances with respect to occupational orders and identities would open up spaces of orientation in which their wider significance to oneself and others is reflected, adapted or rejected (Newman et al 2014; Niemeyer/Hinrichsen 2015)

In this paper, however, we concentrate on the politics of constructing the framework conditions for bringing about change with respect to social inclusion and lifelong learning practices. We shifted the research focus from work place politics to the interactive process of engaging with European (ESF) funding.

5. “Effects of Europeanization in school-to-work transition programming”: Research design and methodology

At Europa-University Flensburg, we worked on the tension field of European governance and regionally situated educational practice in the research project “effects of Europeanization in school-to-work transition programming”, funded by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation, a German trade union foundation, from June 2014 to January 2017.

We divided the issue of European influences on regional transition practices into two work packages: one focused on the changes of transition policy in Europe, and the other on their influences on the (re)construction of a transitional space in Schleswig-Holstein.

The main goal of the project was to identify how European funding policy has influenced the formation and organization of school-to-work transitions for disadvantaged youths in the German Bundesland “Schleswig-Holstein”. The development of European influence was analysed for a period of 30 years, starting in the mid-1980s. To trace this, we analysed ESF funding regulations for a period of 30 years, starting in the mid-1980s. Our analysis used a multi-level approach based on the heuristic model of actor-centred institutionalism (Mayntz/Scharpf 1995) to provide a framework for examining the effects of organizational system change, both at and between different policy levels (Niemeyer 2018b).

At the European level, the main objective was to identify central changes and developments with respect to how the European Union seeks to support young people who experience problems when making the transition from school to work. Our research question was:

“When, where and how have strategies and structures of foundation for youths with problems on school-to-work transition been developed on a European level since the middle of the 1980s?”

To gain insight into this particular aspect of European politics, we analysed two sorts of European documents. Our main sources were ESF-funding regulations, which regulate the conditions surrounding European funding in this sector (Menz 2018). Changes in the ESF regulations are not simply new bureaucratic hurdles for regional stakeholders; they are also initiatives that tend to challenge national, regional, institutional and individual routines and understandings of this boundary zone between work and education. In this way, they are a major instrument in the local

application of transition realities. We supplemented our analysis of these regulatory trends with an analysis of European “soft power” documents such as the 1993 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment and the 2000 Lisbon Strategy (Zick 2018). While ESF regulations give a very detailed view of which programs and target groups can be funded during specific ESF funding periods, the “soft power documents” give access to the overall strategies that drive European (un)employment politics. This analysis of two different sources allowed us to see the establishment of a specific kind of political knowledge about youth unemployment and how it informs European funding policy.

In the second phase of the project, we contrasted and complemented these insights by a case study in order to analyse the impacts of European funding on regional transition spaces. “Our” regional space, the German Bundesland Schleswig-Holstein, was our case study during the research project (Niemeyer 2018a).

We conducted 10 expert interviews with persons that have, on different levels, been involved in shaping politics and developing practices of school-to-work transition in Schleswig-Holstein for several years. The interviews covered a wide range of perspectives. They included key persons responsible for decision taking in the ministries of education and labour, heads of departments for European funding administration, as well as directors of training companies that have profited from it. These expert interviews gave insight into the many ways that the tension field of power and creativity may be navigated, and enabled us to trace how spaces of orientation open up and are constructed by establishing a framework of boundaries for a political space of orientation. Hence, the theoretical sample frames the field of political action, which expands under the condition of ESF-funding in the region of Schleswig-Holstein, as follows:

Table 1: Overview of expert interviews

	Working at	Responsible for ... in relation to school-to-work-transition	Stance with respect to ESF-funding, key quotation
Expert 1	Ministry of Education, formerly Ministry of Employment	Elaboration of first programs in close connection with practice partners	<i>Without ES funding, S-H would look different</i>
Expert 2	Independent counsellor	Training of practitioners, organisational development of transition structures	<i>Green Book as strategic support for arguments</i>
Expert 3	Head of training institute 1	Implement vocational programs as part of youth unemployment policy in the S-H region	<i>"System of fear"; "crappy tenders"</i>
Expert 4	Practitioner	EU program organisation and implementation	Introduction of new support instruments (such as coaching); project died at end of ESF funding period
Expert 5	Ministry of Education	Structural integration of disadvantaged youth into education and employment systems	<i>"ESF helped, but is one part of a broader landscape"</i>
Expert 6	Ministry of Economics, Head of Administration unit for ESF	Drafting and administering the OP	Very complex, not always appropriate to regional conditions, ever-growing administrative body; <i>"ESF is vital"</i>
Expert 7	Head of training institute 2	Running regional training institute, involved in building transition system	Complaining that ESF is complicating the interviewee's own work responsibilities, missing logics
Expert 8	Head of vocational school, formerly employed at Ministry of Education	In collaboration with Ministry of Employment (expert 1), developing innovative program to ease transitions; important milestone to establish transition system	Pedagogical perspective; stresses tensions and dilemmas between economy and education; ESF logics are not in the foreground
Expert 9	Head of controlling unit, service institution for administering ESF and other EU funds	Controlling ESF and other funding programmes for over 20 years	Differentiated perspective on EU logics and challenges to bring it in line with regional demands; critical towards regional policy to finance regional and national tasks with EU money and replace necessary own action by EU funded projects; ESF funding is relatively little
Expert 10	Head of training institute 3	Running regional training institute, involved in building transition system	Implementation of funding program as a milestone in professionalising and perpetuating support; <i>"I think that if ESF funding were eliminated, the whole system would collapse"</i>

Source: original illustration

In the following analysis, we will mainly concentrate on the interview with Expert 9, who has been responsible for administering ESF funds for over 20 years. Due to this long experience in the field, he was able to see the development of ESF funding from a historical perspective and point out the major changes in this initiative over time and their effects on regional milestones. At the same time, he was not directly involved in regional funding or education politics, but rather took on the task of observing the policies developed in association with ESF funding over the years.

6. ESF funding – how does it work?

The general procedure for applying for ESF funding requires that the regional government develop an operational program (OP), which must be negotiated and approved by the European Commission. The process of developing an OP is overseen at an administrative level by a designated department in the Ministry of Economics, the administration authority (Verwaltungsbehörde) that had to be established following the reform of ESF funding regulations in the wake of the global financial crisis. In our case, which focuses on the establishment of a transition system for unemployed youth, this department collaborated with the responsible departments in the ministries of education and employment to draw up an action program to improve students' transition from school to employment. The program focused on preventive activities, like vocational guidance and individual coaching. While these institutions were responsible for overseeing content-related matters that needed to be put into practice in schools and other vocational institutions, the OP in its entirety was confirmed and agreed upon by a special committee (the ESF-Begleitausschuss) made up of regional stakeholders and social partners, which had been specially appointed for that purpose by the government of Schleswig-Holstein.

For the case of Schleswig-Holstein, we observed dramatically changes in the field of school-to-work-transition during the thirty years covered by this research project. From a marginal educational space handled by a few semi-public training institutions and a colourful array of self-organized, self-help projects, it developed into an institutionalised, publicly regulated area of educational intervention shaped by the established, institutionalized collaboration between the representatives of educational and labour policy. It also saw the emergence of several new actors operating at different levels: various newly installed agencies and authorities (Austellungs-, Prüf-, Bescheinigungsbehörde and ESF-Begleitausschuss) for coordinating the administration of ESF funds; a regional steering group (Landeslenkungsausschuss) and corresponding steering committees at the community and county levels for overseeing the collaboration between the ministries of education and labour; and—last but not least—training companies that developed out of the formerly semi-public training institutes, as self-help and self-organised projects disappeared.

This historical trajectory makes clear that the administration and regulation of ESF funds in the Schleswig-Holstein region reflected the increasingly detailed EU-funding regulations and the target-oriented funding policy. For example, the ideas of prevention, networking, and region-

alisation introduced in the key regulatory documents for ESF can be re-discovered in regional transition politics. The EU's increasing demand for effectiveness and control, which lead to the implementing of separate institutions for the control, administration and distribution of ESF funding, is mirrored in the establishment of three different institutions within or affiliated with the regional government. The experts we interviewed described and legitimised these developments with reference to wider EU policy principles, highlighting the idea of transparency:

"... end of the 80s the little ESF money was distributed by the regional charity organisation. Funny enough it were exclusively member institutions of this charity organisation that profited from ESF, so that the foundation of the regional employment society (BSH) was actually the beginning of transparency of ESF, the possibilities provided by the ESF."

Expert 9 identified a further milestone, which refers to the EU principle of regionalisation. Until 2006, the federal level provided operational programs for all 16 lands (regions).

"The total responsibility towards Brussels was in the hand of the federal government. (...) I found this quite convenient, because those targets or benchmarks of a federal program were hardly measurable for a land like Schleswig-Holstein. That's to say; changes of the program here in Schleswig-Holstein had almost no effects on the total federal program, so this whole procedure actually was much more flexible. (...) In 2006 this has been changed, 50% of the ESF funding has been referred to the lands (Länder/regions) and each region has made its own OP. It has become more detailed, it has become more transparent, but it has also become more complex for the lands. On the one hand there is more flexibility, because the federal level has not to be asked if the OP is changed but then this is very complex and I don't know if this is really an advantage."

One aspect of the complexity mentioned during the same interview is that EU regulations and policy targets are developed and written down on a general level in order to address all member states, while at the level of execution or implementation national, regional or local specifications regulate and define the spaces for agency in conflict or in accordance with the general ideas and requirements. Hence, ESF funding regulations provide a rather broad framework, shaped by the four principles of partnership, additionality, program planning and concentration.

In our case, the using of the ESF funds for establishing a consolidated concept of collaboration and targeted support for school-to-work-transition in secondary schools and learning institutions in the region of Schleswig-Holstein, included general and vocational schools as well as private, out-of-school training institutions. The implementation of this action program has changed the practical field of learning, as vocational orientation and counselling fall under the responsibility of schools and

collaboration between schools and companies increased. Special classes for disadvantaged learners in general schools combine working and learning, i.e. classroom teaching and in-company internships, for an extended outgoing phase (grades 8 to 10). Vocational guidance by counsellors and coaches working in schools has been increased and intensified, complemented by comprehensive competence assessment activities. These activities have been carried out with financial support from ESF. The spending of ESF funds is clearly regulated, closely monitored, controlled, and evaluated, which adds up to a complex and complicated bureaucracy of documentation. Many pedagogues complain about the extra work resulting from it. However, expert 9 emphasized the logic that public funds should be spent in the interests of the public, and therefore be subject to special controls. He also describes the changes in practice:

“And school is opening to the topic of work environment, well, that’s the idea of our program, it is realised within schools but by training institutions. this means, schools are opening for further training institutes, which actually has been a huge problem in the beginning, because teachers naturally don’t like externals in their classes or working with their pupils, who have a totally different perspective, meaning now you have teachers and educators at the same table, who approach topics from different perspectives.”

It is worth noticing that these significant reconfigurations of the educational system, which aimed to improve the school-to-work-transition, were carried out despite the relatively small absolute amount of financial support received. As expert 9 explains:

“Schleswig-Holstein holds a part of 2, 6% of the all the ESF funds in Germany, considering the size and area and the number of inhabitants this is the significance of S-H in Brussels.”

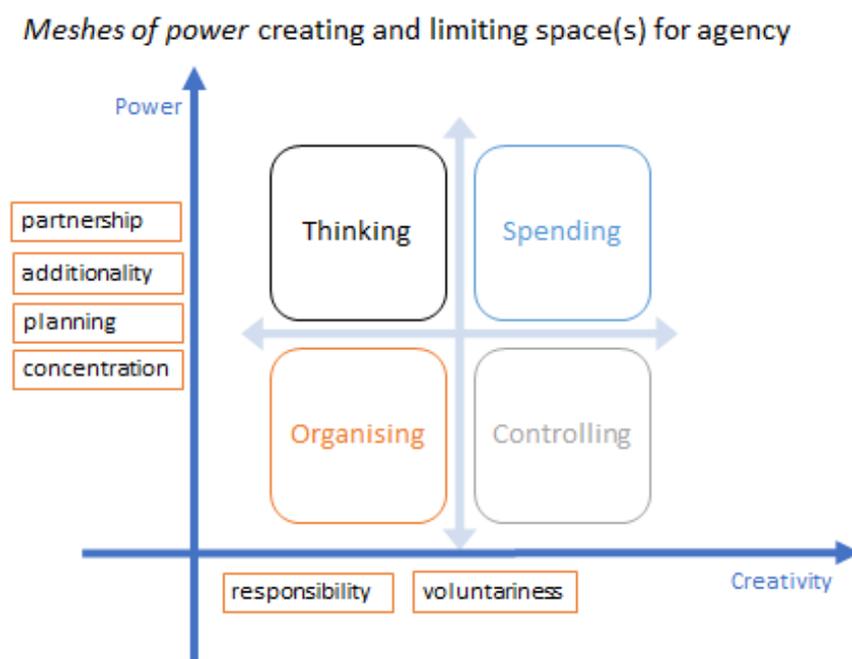
7. Spaces of orientation between power and creativity

When referring to spaces of orientation, we observe the opening up of new possibilities. At the same time, the boundaries of these emerging spaces for agency are determined and established through governance. These boundaries extend in four dimensions, framing the conceptualization, spending, organising and controlling of spaces of agency, which are created by funding opportunities.

For example, these spaces are constructed by agreeing on targets and benchmarks. In our case, the critical indicator of 10% of early school leavers provides the crucial target against which successful transition strategies are evaluated. On the one hand, the procedures for applying, planning, spending and monitoring the usage of European funds have become increasingly detailed, following the rationale of effectiveness and transparency with regard to public spending. On the other hand, these regulations can be interpreted as “meshes of power”, as they provide a rather flexible framework to be adapted and transferred according to regional or local needs. Processes of bureaucratization *and* growing autonomy can be observed as going hand in hand during this step. The EU demand to implement extra regional institutions for the control, administration and issuing of ESF funds holds these regional authorities responsible for the correct use of the money. However, it is up to the regional authorities to decide how to put EU-demands into practice, as expert 9 points out: “it then is in the responsibility of the region, if controls or evaluation instruments are disturbing or conflicting with local practices.”

Youth unemployment or social inclusion policy is put into regional or local practice and translated into cultural contexts and applied to given conditions. It is in this process of translation, we argue, where spaces of orientation expand, in which creativity is enabled and limited at the same time. Planning, negotiating, translating and programming are the activities by which the space for agency is appropriated. This includes engaging with a certain knowledge policy, as well as applying modes of governance, which set forth the framework conditions but leave open how these frameworks may be filled. A second effective mode of governance is voluntariness. No actor or agency is entitled to receive ESF funds; all applications are voluntary. Hence, submitting to funding regulations and instruments of control is considered to be voluntary as well.

Figure 1: Meshes of power and limiting space(s) for agency



Source: original illustration

In this way, funding regulations work as both hard and soft power. Conflicting logic leads to paradoxes and dilemmas for local actors, and are solved in creative ways. Applying for ESF funding requires a flexible adoption of funding regulations and a broad interpretation of EU principles, as the following stories may illustrate. They relate to the principle of additionality, and point to the paradox or inner contradiction that occurs during the process of translating EU demands into regional conditions.

Within the educational system of general schools and vocational training in Germany, the space for additional intervention is rather limited. The space between school and employment therefore represents a suitable and necessary field in which additional activities, such as vocational guidance, orientation and pre-vocational training, can be introduced. One recently implemented instrument is individual coaching which targets young people who are at risk of social and vocational exclusion. This coaching was introduced in Schleswig-Holstein with support from ESF funds, used for the salary of additional pedagogues who have been specially trained to coach the target group in general schools.

As ESF funding is always complementary, institutions that apply for support must provide evidence of their equity capital. In practice, this easily turns out as a severe challenge, as expert 3 points out in his interview:

“The normal case is, that I have to put in own money and with some projects I’m asking myself, why should I do so? ... Where should this money come from, well, these [institutes] are no, no companies, who are profit-oriented acting on the market, aren’t they?”

Although the space for agency opened up by ESF funds in the sector of school-to-work transition seems to be controlled by soft law mechanisms of governance and regulated by an illegible regime of power, the expert interviews collected in the course of the research project gave evidence to the creative ways in which regional institutions make use of ESF funding. In line with the governing principles of additionality, partnership, program planning, and concentration, the actors in the region managed to implement structures and organise an effective and successful system of transition that matches local needs and regional demands. To conceptualise the tension field of power and creativity as a hierarchical, one-dimensional top-down relationship therefore would be a simplification. Power is not only allocated at the level of the commission, nor is it exclusively issued by means of control. The region’s creative way of using European funds, meeting the requirements of funding regulations, and adopting the wording of policy orientations, suggests that there is space for agency, although “the whole thing is hardly manageable anymore”, as one of the experts summarized.

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Over the past 30 years, European governance has increasingly influenced how adult education is provided, thanks to more intensive strategies of governance. The paper will elaborate on the tension between power and creativity by examining the relationship between supranational – that is, European – governance, and regional or local educational practice. At first sight, educational policy appears as a mechanism of power, being heavily focused on control, as evidenced through tightening funding regulations. A closer look, however, reveals how regional actors employ creative strategies to carry out the complex business of European project work.
