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# Differentiation versus homogenisation of education systems in Europe: Political aims and welfare regimes

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## 1. Introduction

This article analyses how specificities of education policies in Europe and normative organisation guidelines underlying education systems articulate with European welfare regimes and discusses the extent to which they differ. This analysis is part of a broader reflection on the function of international organisations, such as the European Union (EU), and their role in national education policy (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008, p. 736). The aim is to contribute to the debate on the emergence of a “global education policy field” (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008, p. 736) and State guidelines on this matter. We claim that this emergence is also a political project to which the work of both the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the indicators of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008, p. 737) have contributed. Ayed (2009) even proposes the expression “educational liberalism” regulated by the dissemination of normative beliefs by international organisations that associate the purpose of the school with that of economic development (Ayed, 2009, p. 11).

When we compare the Welfare State with the EU’s influence in the education field, educational policies can be addressed by discussing the relationship between two levels of decision-making, national and supra-national. Moreover, education has become a major political issue. It is framed in a political and ideological discourse that promotes education and learning as essential to the achievement of a model of economic productivity and competitiveness (Ball, 2008), thus contributing to the resolution of the problems of contemporary capitalist systems. This trend is one of the potential scenarios resulting from the

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historical convergence process of State policies. The current crisis could lead to increasing differences between the countries, a homogenisation of education policy measures, or both, although the latter would essentially prevail in the politico-ideological discourse.

The present article is divided into the following sections: theoretical framework, analysis of the indicators that highlight the differences and similarities of the European education systems and conclusion.

## 2. School and access to the labour market: mobility and reproduction

Education is the cornerstone of social inclusion processes. It offers young people a form of integration as students. This is acknowledged to be the prevailing ideological premise of the education policy in all Member-States of the EU and the OECD. Moreover, school is considered to be an opportunity to develop knowledge that can be decisive to students' futures and provides a framework for the range of opportunities that they will encounter in the social, economic and cultural spheres. Accordingly, Muller and Karle note that "societies have developed different early solutions to career preparation and the early solutions have influenced later adaptations" (Muller & Karle, 1993, p. 2). However, and in contrast to the premise of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1983), there is no linear relationship between a specific level of education and access to a job that corresponds to that level. A whole set of additional factors contributes to the explanation of the relationship between the education system and the labour market.

Grácio (1992) stresses that social origin gives rise to serious inequalities of opportunity at school, although the longer a student remains in the education system, the more these social inequalities are mitigated. Although education has increasingly become a channel of upward social mobility, the cultural gap triggered with the start of school mainly affects students from lower social groups and those less familiar with the school culture.

The normative ideological assumption of the economic value of schooling, as advocated by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1983), has contributed to the dissemination of this perception. This assumption is supported by the fact that the lack of educational qualifications is the main variable that explains unemployment and insecurity (Alves, 2008). While not denying the importance of educational capital and its relationship with access to a qualified and secure position in the labour market, other influential factors such as social origin and economic capital should not be overlooked (Bourdieu, 1980, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). The possession and structure of different types of capital are key features in the school socialisation process, which is regulated by demands that not all families and students can meet in the same way. The cultural and material resources available are a tool used in the management of the school trajectory and are undoubtedly among the most important factors differentiating students' relationships with the educational process (Sebastião, 2009).

A discussion of the democratisation of access to school, a central objective of education policies, involves determining whether social equalisation of opportunities to access education exists.

Underachievement and early school leaving must also be carefully analysed so that changes can be made to policy measures that address the underlying causes. Abrantes notes that "increasingly, early school leaving, a condition of chronic underachievement and marginalisation, reflects a dual social disengagement which affects day-to-day experiences and can last throughout a person's life, closing off significantly their field of possibilities" (Abrantes, 2008, p. 6).

The provision of equal and universal schooling is central to the progressive democratisation of education. It was therefore perceived and implemented as the diffusion of an asset among the entire population, for whom effective access was indispensable. It was thought that the provision of equal opportunity in education would enable all individuals to gain access to culture and greater social justice. In fact, attendance in higher secondary education in Europe is no longer restricted to elite, privileged social minorities. Currently, it is viewed as a natural continuation of basic schooling (Prats & Raventós, 2005). Nevertheless, a significant percentage of the population in some EU countries has only 6 or 9 years of schooling. Malta stands out in this context. In 2009, it had the highest percentage of 15- to 24-year-olds with no more than lower secondary education (67%), followed immediately by Portugal (64.1%). The EU average is 48.1% (Eurostat, 2009. Online at [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat\\_ifs\\_9904&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_ifs_9904&lang=en)).

The variety of reasons for early school leaving is contingent upon the specificities of national and even local circumstances. Generally speaking, the relevant factors are the lack of economic capital and family investment in children's education, abuse and violence at home, the tension between the values youth hold and their experiences and the way in which schools are run. These factors ultimately result in the rejection of school discipline, underachievement and chronic absenteeism. Dropping out of school is an outcome of social inequalities. As such, it nearly always contributes to reproducing the unfavourable starting conditions (Alves, 2008).

The analysis of such specificities is part of a broader discussion on the role of the education system in the reproduction of social inequalities in which a person's options are largely determined by their social class and the practices encompassing a "field of possibilities" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 122).

Sebastião (2009), for example, notes that the various studies conducted on the democratisation of the Portuguese education system reveal that it continues to reproduce significant social inequalities, despite some changing trends and positive social repercussions. Many students who were not in the school system for a variety of reasons have gained access to education; this is an important achievement for a democratic society. The first two cycles of education (6 years of schooling) are effectively universal, and the third cycle (9 years of schooling) is now nearly universal. Nevertheless, this process has developed slowly, the levels of schooling acquired tend to be low, and there are high drop-out and underachievement rates. Educating the more marginalised social classes, for whom school is a strange world, remains problematic. Without

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