



Intergenerational transmission of education in Europe: Do more comprehensive education systems reduce social gradients in student achievement?



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ABSTRACT

Research has examined how education systems affect student achievement. Much of this research has compared comprehensive systems of schooling with tracked (selective) systems with regard to the degree to which they influence social class gradients in educational achievement. This study looks at comprehensive schooling in a broader way. Using standardised cross-national data for 31 European countries, it examines whether the comprehensiveness of education systems – in terms of pre-primary education, public/private sectors, educational tracking, and annual instruction time – contributes to explain the transmission of educational advantage from parents to children. Results suggest that the effect of parental education on a child's educational achievement is stronger in highly tracked education systems and in systems with a shorter annual instruction time. However, the social composition of a school's student population also affects the intergenerational transmission of education, and it interacts with the annual instruction time, such that the effect of school social composition on a child's achievement is stronger in education systems with a longer instruction time. This challenges the theory that by extending the school year policymakers could minimise social inequality in education (a theory that would be confirmed if we looked only at micro-level data). The findings inform debates about the influence of education policies on social stratification and mobility in Europe.

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1. Introduction

Governments all over Europe have agreed that children have a right to education on the basis of equal opportunity (UN General Assembly, 1989). Education shall allow children to develop their personality, talents and abilities, and the principle of equal opportunity shall ensure the eradication of discrimination (e.g., related to gender, beliefs or social origins). Meritocratic education systems aim to guarantee equal educational opportunity. In these systems, children's educational attainments should be in direct proportion to their merit. However, formal equality of opportunity does not readily translate into substantive equality of opportunity. Research has demonstrated social disparities in educational attainment; children of less educated parents tend to end up being less educated themselves (Hertz et al., 2007). On average across OECD countries, for example, only one in five students, whose parents have low levels of education, attains a degree in tertiary education, compared to two thirds of students who have at least one parent

with tertiary education (OECD, 2012a). Hence parental education tends to determine that of their children; moreover the degree of intergenerational transmission of educational attainment may be considered a measure of inequality of opportunity in a society.

In contrast to the inequality of opportunity interpretation, it could be argued that differences in educational attainment reflect differences in natural abilities (i.e., genetics), transmitted from parents to children. However, growing up poor significantly decreases the chances of escaping poverty, irrespective of individuals' actual intellectual ability (Fischer et al., 1996). Similarly, children's educational attainments frequently vary by social, cultural and economic characteristics of the household in which they are raised, even if their cognitive skills are assumed to be comparable (Jerrim, Vignoles, Lingam, & Friend, 2015; Pfeffer, 2008).

To date, there seems to be no country without a social gradient in educational attainment. However, significant differences exist between countries with respect to the magnitude of this gradient (Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollak, 2009). This indicates that country-specific contexts influence how parents can transmit school-related knowledge and skills and shape their children's educational opportunities. A considerable body of comparative research has examined macro foundations of children's educational

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opportunities (e.g., Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Kerckhoff, 2001; Müller & Karle, 1993; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Treiman & Ganzeboom, 2000)¹, and research has also specifically addressed the question of how education systems and policies influence educational inequalities (e.g., Kerckhoff, 1995; Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; see also Section 2). Arguably, one of the most intensely studied characteristics of education systems in this context has been tracking, or allocation of students to different types of schools or educational programmes, structured hierarchically by student performance and usually differing by the curriculum offered (Hanushek & Wössmann, 2006; Lucas, 2001; Robinson, 2008). Typically, this research has compared tracked (selective) systems with comprehensive systems (where low- and high-performing students are schooled together during most or all of secondary education) with regard to the degree to which these systems influence social gradients in educational outcomes. This is an important question as comprehensive school reform has been a popular approach to school improvement in several countries in Europe and beyond (Desimone, 2002; Hall, 2012; Iannelli & Paterson, 2007; Leschinsky & Mayer, 1999; Machin, Salvanes, & Pelkonen, 2012), and the question of whether comprehensive systems are more or less equitable than selective systems remains a subject of debate in many countries and among international organisations (OECD, 2013; and Section 2.3).

One of the shortcomings of much research on tracked versus comprehensive education systems is that it tends to neglect other important dimensions relating to the selectivity or comprehensiveness of education systems—or to the extent to which individual students receive different (or the same) types and amounts of education. Drawing on a broader theoretical framework, the current study goes beyond previous work by assessing how four dimensions of education systems influence the intergenerational transmission of education in 31 European countries: (1) pre-primary education enrolment rates, (2) public/private school sectors, (3) tracking during compulsory education, and (4) the annual instruction time, or the amount of time that children spend at school annually. These four dimensions – hereafter also referred to as education policies – reflect different aspects of the comprehensiveness of education systems. Theory suggests that they can affect the transmission of education across generations (see Section 2). Furthermore, in several countries, policymakers have implemented reforms relating to these policy dimensions with the objective of improving equity in education (OECD, 2015).

First, access to pre-primary education has been expanded in most European countries. For instance, a marked increase in enrolment rates has been observed between 1999 and 2009 in countries such as Lithuania (from 48.3% to 73.3%), Estonia (75.7% vs. 91.7%), Sweden (75.7% vs. 94.2%), and Norway (74.8% vs. 97.3%), to name but a few (ILO, 2012). It has been argued that an extensive system of preschool education is a *sine qua non* to minimise the ‘social inheritance’ of educational advantage and of social status, but only few studies have examined this claim empirically (Esping-Andersen, 2008; Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007).

Second, a number of countries have increased public funding for private schools – through school vouchers, tuition tax credits, or direct subsidies to private schools – to partially offset the impact of family background on educational attainment (OECD, 2012b; Toma, 1996). For example, public funding for private schools has been increased in the 1990s in Sweden (Björklund, Edin, Fredriksson, & Krueger, 2004), England (Whitty, 1997), Hungary, and the Czech

Republic (Filer & Münich, 2000). It has been argued that combining private management of schools with public funding may be conducive to student performance and equity in education systems, but empirical evidence in this regard is still scarce (Schütz, Ursprung, & Wössmann, 2008; Wössmann, 2008).

A third policy strategy aimed at reducing social gradients in education has been to de-track schools (Rubin, 2006). Many European countries have delayed the start of tracking in their education systems, beginning with Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom and Italy in the 1960s, and continuing with Finland in the 1970s, France in the 1980s, and Spain and Portugal in the 1990s (Brunello, Rocco, Ariga, & Iwahashi, 2012). However, significant differences still exist with regard to the onset of tracking in European education systems and it remains unclear to what extent these differences influence the intergenerational transmission of education, when examined in a comparative framework.

Finally, policymakers have focused attention on extending the length of the school day or year as a means to enhance student achievement (Pittman, Cox, & Burchfiel, 1986). Such policies have been implemented over the last years, for instance, in Germany (Freitag & Schlicht, 2009), the Netherlands (Meyer & van Klaveren, 2013), and Denmark (Jensen, 2013). While the evidence of effects of instruction time on overall student achievement is mixed, research suggests that the intergenerational reproduction of social classes can be minimised in education systems that intensify exposure to formal schooling through an increase in the amount of schooling that children receive in a given school year (Patall, Cooper, & Allen, 2010; Schütz et al., 2008). A longer annual instruction time reduces the influence of family effects on children’s education to some extent, which may primarily benefit children from lower classes who are at higher risk of school failure. What is missing in the literature, however, is a comparative analysis of the effects of the length of the school year on educational inequality (for an exception see Long, 2014).

Considering these open questions, the influences of education policies on educational inequality merit study. Besides, detailed knowledge of the transmission of education across generations is important for at least two further reasons. First, parental education is among the primary predictors of children’s educational attainment (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Second, since the first generation of mobility research (Ganzeboom, Treiman, & Ultee, 1991), education has been considered as the main factor in both social mobility and the reproduction of social status across generations (Hout & DiPrete, 2006). Against this background, this study extends research on social stratification and mobility by analysing whether cross-national differences in the comprehensiveness of education systems – in terms of pre-primary enrolment rates, public/private sectors, tracking, and annual instruction time – contribute to explain associations between parental education and children’s educational achievement².

2. Dimensions of comprehensive education and their influences on the intergenerational transmission of education

‘Comprehensiveness’ has been regarded as “the leading idea in implementing the basic values of equity in education” (Sahlberg,

¹ Research also exists on the question of how institutional structures of education systems determine labour market outcomes and occupational destinations (e.g., Andersen & Van de Werfhorst, 2010; Kerckhoff, 2001). However, this research is beyond the scope of this paper.

² The paper distinguishes between educational achievement (performance as measured by standardised tests) and attainment (typically measured by school graduation or highest level of education completed). As opposed to much prior research on educational inequalities, this study does not consider how a composite measure such as socioeconomic status affects children’s education. Instead, it isolates and disentangles the role of parental education in the intergenerational transmission of educational advantage.

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