

The individual and societal effects of the European education systems

How does structure influence the tasks of education?

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Abstract

Nel corso del ventesimo secolo, in tutti i paesi europei, la diffusione dell'istruzione di massa ha provocato un considerevole aumento della scolarizzazione anche tra i giovani delle classi meno abbienti, ma non ha ridotto le disuguaglianze socio-economiche e culturali, sia in termini di ingresso del mercato del lavoro, sia per ciò che concerne la democratica partecipazione alla vita pubblica. Il presente articolo propone un'analisi sui diversi modi in cui i sistemi di istruzione sono stati istituzionalizzati in Europa e sugli effetti che questa istituzionalizzazione ha avuto su disuguaglianza educativa, ingresso dei giovani nel mercato del lavoro e promozione della loro cittadinanza attiva: si tratta di tre temi caldi in un'agenda europea che punta a implementare e potenziare società della conoscenza. Le disuguaglianze educative diventano particolarmente evidenti durante la transizione dall'istruzione secondaria inferiore a quella secondaria superiore poiché, durante questo passaggio, i giovani si trovano a confrontarsi con nuove aspettative, status e pratiche che progressivamente li proiettano nella dimensione adulta; si tratta quindi di un momento di fatale importanza per il loro futuro posizionamento in un mercato del lavoro segmentato e in una società diseguale. In particolare, l'attenzione sarà posta sul tipo di transizioni previste nei sistemi di istruzione degli otto paesi partecipanti a un progetto di ricerca finanziato dall'UE sul tema della governance delle traiettorie d'istruzione in Europa (Goete). L'obiettivo è quello di evidenziare come i diversi compiti educativi sono interpretati dalle varie istituzioni che compongono i sistemi di istruzione nazionali.

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Across European countries, the expansion of education has increased during the 20th century the opportunities of young people's access to and within schooling, but it has not reduced socioeconomic and cultural inequality both in term of labour market's entry and participation to the democratic public life. This paper proposes an analysis of the ways in which education systems are institutionalised in Europe and the effects of this institutionalisation on educational inequality, young people' labor market entry and the promotion of their active citizenship: three hot topics in the EU agenda framing the implementation of the European knowledge societies. Educational inequality becomes particularly evident at the transition point from lower to upper secondary education as this passage confronts young people with new (adult) expectations, status and practices and contributes to their positioning in a segmented labor market and an unequal society. Therefore, our special focus is set on the kinds of transitions foreseen in the education systems of the eight countries participating to an EU-funded research project on the Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE). The aim is to highlight how different the tasks of education are interpreted through the systemic structure of the different national education systems.

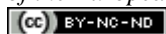
Parole chiave: sistemi scolastici, diseguaglianze educative, transizioni scuola-lavoro, cittadinanza attiva

Keywords: school systems, educational inequality, school to work transitions, active citizenship

Introduction

Scholars from very different field's studies agree with the statement that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds have less chances of achievement and face higher difficulties in coping with educational demands and accessing the labour market. For more than forty years, educational comparative research has been analyzing across Europe the features of educational inequality, educational outputs, and the smoothness of the transition from school to work as central functions of education. Given the aims of education systems to improve both equal opportunities, the individ-

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ual attained skill level, and their relevance for the labor market, these represent three important correlates on which considering the impact of the institutional assets of the European education systems. In addition to these three functions that have been repeatedly researched before, in this paper we try to derive the effect of the education systems on the socialization process of the young people into society at large, in term of educating active citizens who contribute to social development and cohesion. This task is particularly hot in the European societies that are losing the capacity to interest the youngster generations for politics and public questions. In this theoretical paper, we address both issues. First, we give an overview of the European educations system adopting the Allmendinger's model (1989) as heuristic tool enabling cross-national comparisons.

In the EU countries, young people have different possibilities of accessing to and coping with educational paths of different status (educational inequality), to enter the labor market (economic reward of education) and to participate in the life of their community, expressing their identity and interests (individual and social relevance of education). This seems particularly evident at the transition's point from lower to upper secondary education as this passage confronts young people with new (adult) expectations, status and practices and contributes to their positioning in a segmented labor market and an unequal society. After presenting the transition structures of the national education and training systems of the eight European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and the UK) participating in an EU- funded project on Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (GOETE), we formulate some hypotheses on the relation between the systemic asset of the education system and social inequality, labor market entry and promotion of active citizenship. In the last section of the article, we propose some concluding remarks.

The different countries' ways of regulating transition: a comparative conceptualisation

The number and severity of educational transitions vary according to country and education system but, in principle, there are transitions between all educational levels. However, in some systems, the transition points occur earlier than in others and are less reversible (selective systems). In others, there are fewer transitions at a later stage and less drastic (comprehensive systems).

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In addition to this differentiation of the transition's points, countries can be classified according to the levels of stratification and standardisation of the education systems. The importance of these last two dimensions has already emerged in a large number of comparative studies focusing on institutional differences. A typology clustering countries on this basis has been proposed by Allmendinger (1989; see table 1). The level of stratification is determined by the degree of differentiation within given educational levels, i.e. tracking, and by the proportion of a students' cohort attaining the maximum number of school years provided by the education system. The larger the proportion of a cohort, and the lower the degree of differentiation within educational levels, the lower is the level of stratification of the system. In a highly stratified, selective school system, children are separated into different schools or programs according to their ability, socioeconomic and cultural-ethnic backgrounds. In many cases, their attitudes and interests are completely neglected. There is little or no mobility between schools or programs, which differ greatly in curricula. The levels of academic offers are associated with different degrees of access to opportunities for additional, more advanced, schooling. Therefore, stratification refers to both the status of different educational programs and the unequal chances of reaching high levels of academic attainment (Kerckhoff, 2000; 2001.) In less stratified educational systems, there are no dead-end tracks and tracking begins at a later age; their curricula are less differentiated and this permits more mobility between them. Therefore, the chances of continuing to tertiary education are higher independently from the tracking (Shavit and Müller, 2000).

Standardisation refers to the degree to which the quality and contents of education, such as teacher training, school budgets, curricula and school-leaving examinations, meet the same standards nationwide. The more the central government is involved in regulating the workings of schools, the more standardised the system usually is (Horn, 2009). Institutional arrangements, such as the level of standardisation, have a crucial effect on the country-level differences in the efficacy of education and educational equality (OECD, 2005), and on the future labour market entering. The standardisation dimension is linked to the role of schools and companies in vocational education and training and to the dominant model of school leavers' labour market entry (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011). According to Allmendinger (1989), occupational status is closely determined by educational attainment in countries with stratified education systems, but much less so when the system is not stratified.

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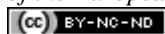


Table 1. Categorisation of GOETE countries; based on Allmendinger's typology (1989)

STANDARDISATION	Low	High
STRATIFICATION		
Low	Italy, Poland, UK	Finland, Slovenia
High	–	France, Germany, the Netherlands

It needs to be emphasised that the classification of the countries presented in Table 1 is not descriptive, but should be seen as a heuristic tool for presenting and analysing the differences in the organisation of schooling by illustrating the relative positions of the countries on these two dimensions. In employing this classification, also the change that are taking place in contemporary education systems needs to be acknowledged. In Germany, the level of standardisation of education is high and the system selects pupils to different tracks already at the end of primary school. Duration and content of schooling differ between schools. Hence, also the level of stratification is high. Also in the Dutch education system, levels of both standardisation and stratification are high as tracking starts at the transition from primary to lower secondary education. France also belongs to this category; even though, at first glance, the French system appears to be comprehensive, it can nonetheless be defined as highly unequal. In addition to the spatial segregation of schooling, whereby de facto qualifications from schools of the same level have different value depending on the area in which the school is located, the officially comprehensive system of non-compulsory and university education co-exists with selective and discriminating tracking. In Finland and Slovenia, on the other hand, the level of standardisation is high. All students go through the same basic education, which covers the whole period of compulsory education and therefore the level of stratification is low. In Italy, Poland and the UK, both the level of stratification and the degree of standardisation are low.

The different institutional arrangements of education systems have effects on the life courses of individuals. In stratified systems, in which tracking starts already at the transition to lower secondary education, the educational

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trajectories, and hence the life courses, are affected at an early stage compared to less differentiated systems and those with later first transition points. A late first transition point implies a low overall number of transitions. The earlier tracking starts, the more significant are parents' educational level and socioeconomic status on the children's educational trajectories (Dustmann, 2004; Marks, 2005), which has significant impact on social mobility and educational equality. Relevant here is also the fact that in stratified education systems, the transitions between different education levels and programmes are often rather irreversible, and the systems are in this sense rigid.

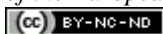
Schooling and transitions in eight European countries: Different assets for different aims

Transition to lower secondary school

At the end of primary school, pupils usually move on to lower secondary school but there are some variations. In the Netherlands, different routes are possible according to the performance level of the pupil, and in Northern Ireland, there is an entrance test for those wishing to compete for a grammar school place, while in Germany, transition to lower secondary education differs between the Regions (*Länder*). In general, the key dimensions of access to lower secondary education are school autonomy, free school choice, performance level of the pupil and the recruitment policies of schools.

As both Finland and Slovenia have a common structure for primary and lower secondary schools, i.e. comprehensive education, there is no distinct transition between these school levels. In the other six countries, there is a transition. In France, all children who have completed primary school are automatically admitted into lower secondary school. In Italy, pupils who have obtained the final admission certificate at the end of primary school enrol in lower secondary education, and in Poland, the admission criterion for secondary school is the leaving certificate received at the end of primary school. In the UK, formal admission requirements are rare; for the majority of pupils, recruitment and school selection is largely based on the catchments area. Parents usually have the right to express a school's preference, but admission is dependent on the number of children applying for places, the individual school's admission criteria and the physical capacity of the school.

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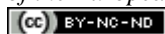


In the Netherlands, there are several options at the lower secondary level: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO, 4 years) comprising a basic vocational programme, a middle management programme, a combined vocational and theoretical programme, and a theoretical programme, general secondary education (HAVO, 5 years) and pre-university education (VWO, 6 years), and pupils can also attend a practical training (PT). Also in Germany, the organisation of the lower secondary school is characterised through the division into various educational tracks with different leaving certificates and qualifications, for which different school types are responsible. Depending on the regions, there are up to five different schools' type at secondary level: *Gymnasium* (grammar school), *Realschule* (technical general education), *Hauptschule* (lower secondary school), and two types of *Gesamtschulen* (comprehensive school either with different school types in the same building or with high, middle, and lower levels in the same school). Allocation depends primarily on pupils' grades and is in principle a joint decision between parents and their child's school. Hence, students need to cope with an earlier transition in Germany and the Netherlands, while in Finland and Slovenia, due to the single structure of primary and lower secondary education, first institutionalised transition occurs at a much later stage and also the overall transition intensity is lower. In countries with a differentiated system of lower secondary education, transitions – mostly downward – may occur also during lower secondary education.

Transition to upper secondary school or vocational training

Each of the eight countries has a formal process of assessment and certification at the end of lower secondary education. The end of compulsory full-time education, which occurs at the age of sixteen in most countries, often coincides with the transition between lower and upper secondary education. However, in some countries (France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, particularly Scotland), the transition between lower and upper secondary education takes place one or two years before the end of full-time compulsory schooling. In Poland and the Netherlands, young people are obliged to undergo at least part-time training for two or three years after 15 or 16 years of age. In Germany, the obligation to part-time training is one year in case the student is not in any full-time apprenticeship training. In these countries, compulsory schooling is followed by upper secondary education, by dual vocational training or it finishes at the end of this level of education.

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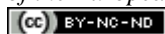


Different institutionalisations of vocational training in different education and training systems can be explained to a certain extent by different historically grown structures of national labour markets, especially by mechanisms of labour recruitment through companies and individual pathways into employment.

In upper secondary education, there are different educational programmes within each of the analysed countries. In general, it is possible to distinguish between two common branches: general education, which prepares pupils for tertiary education, and vocational education, which prepares pupils for both further studies and working life. In some countries, these different options are organised in separated programs; and students must opt for one of them, while in others, general education and vocational paths are offered within the same structure and sometimes even in the same building.

In some countries, the previous transition depends also on students' performance, but entrance to the upper secondary level represents the first transition step that is regulated by achievement level in all eight countries. The regulation is formal in all countries excepting in France and Italy, where upper secondary schools do not have official selection criteria; however, there is an invisible process of selection. Officially, in the French system, all students who have completed their lower secondary education may enter the upper secondary level but students' orientation is partly determined by their performance level. The school head, following the advice of the class council and taking into account the parents' wishes, is responsible for the orientation's decision. In Finland, all students who have completed basic education may continue into upper secondary education; there is a national application system, whose main criterion based on the grades achieved in the basic education certificate. In Poland and Slovenia, the grades obtained at the end of lower secondary education determine the students' admission to an upper secondary school. In the Italian system, students who have passed the state exam at the end of the first cycle of education are obliged to enrol in schools of the second cycle. Formally, they can choose the school they want, but teachers try to track them according to their grades: The best achievers in grammar schools, average achievers in technical schools, low achievers in professional schools. In Germany, the precondition for entering a general upper secondary school is to have passed grade ten, when not already in Gymnasium. In the dual system, the entrance into upper vocational training depends on the recruitment policies of training companies or organisations, while school-based training depends on age and marks. In the

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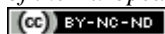
Netherlands, upper vocational secondary education depends on the previous orientation made in the course of the first years of VMBO; upper vocational education (MBO) has various levels of theory and length (between two and four years). Transition from vocational to general secondary education (HAVO) is possible at the end of VMBO (highest level) and from MBO high levels. There are no centralised entry requirements in the UK, the individual schools and colleges set their own requirements.

It is common for students with higher academic achievement levels and grades to go into general upper secondary schools, while those with lower achievement records tend to enter vocational education and training. In the eight countries, vocational education is provided in school-based (Italy, Slovenia, Finland, France, Poland), work-based (United Kingdom) or in dual systems (Germany) – or mixed systems (NL), which combine professional schools and apprenticeship training within a company. All the systems have a national examination that provides certificates at the end of upper secondary education. In general, all these systems are organised in similar ways concerning student orientation at the end of this level; each caters for higher or further education institutes, universities or vocational education systems, or alternatively young people may leave education and enter the labour market at this stage.

Transition to tertiary education

The minimum requirement for securing access to tertiary education is an upper secondary education certificate or its equivalent in all the eight countries. In most of the countries, other admission procedures are also required, such as passing an entrance examination, submitting a personal record of achievement or attending an interview with the desired higher education institution. There are three main levels of access' regulation to tertiary education: central or regional *numerus clausus*, institutional regulation, and free access. In certain countries, different combinations of these categories are utilised. The entry criteria may be applied to all fields of study or just to some of them. Higher education is free of charge in Finland and Slovenia, and mostly free of charge in Poland, while the other five countries have varying tuition fees. There are differences with regard to the extent to which vocational education and training certificates provide access to higher education. While this is possible in Italy, Finland and Poland, through certain

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routes in France, the Netherlands and the UK, and with completed additional education in Slovenia, this is not the case in Germany.

Transitions to the labour market

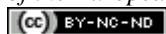
As highlighted by Parreira do Amaral et al. (2011), school to work transitions are not only the end goal but also an integral part of educational trajectories, especially when these transitions include training in vocational schools or apprenticeship training organised between companies and school. These transitions coincide with one particular goal of education, namely preparing young people to enter the labour market and be active contributors of societal functioning. The extent to which these routes successfully equip individuals with knowledge and competencies that can be ‘spent’ in the labour market is important for their future trajectories and life prospects. This issue should be contextualised in the framework of the central functions of education in contemporary societies (Fend, 1974; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs, 2010): allocating students to the labor market, optimizing skills, promoting equality of opportunity, and socializing youth into society as a whole.

An educational system is expected to adequately allocate students to the labor market, developing and optimizing their skills for working life, promoting at the same time equality of opportunity. This issue is particularly important, if we consider the increasing school attendance of children with different socio economic and cultural family and ethnic backgrounds. Educational systems are ideally expected to minimize inequality of educational opportunity also for what concerns the positioning on the labor market.

Of course, it is impossible to eliminate fully educational inequalities through schooling, as they partly result both from family processes in which educational policy cannot interfere and from the support policies foreseen at national or regional level. However, across Europe school systems still differ in the extent to which they either reproduce or reduce educational inequality. Some scholars highlight that while this function of school highlight equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes, both forms of equality are strongly linked (Duru-Bellat and Suchaut 2005).

For the past twenty years, one of the central aims of youth policy in Europe has been to prevent the marginalisation and social exclusion of the so called youth at-risk; either those who are outside education, training and employment (NEET) or those with lower educational achievement (Järvinen and

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Vanttaja 2006; Pohl and Walther, 2007). Early leavers from education and training¹ (ESL) are supposed to face high difficulties in entering the labour market; however, young people neither in employment nor in any education and training² (NEET) are seen as being at the greatest risk of social marginalization. In the analysed countries, the ESL rate is the highest in Italy closely followed by the UK, while is the lowest in Slovenia and Poland. For what concern the NEET: the highest share in Italy and the UK, while the lowest in the Netherlands, whose labour market is still able to integrate the new enters due to the low level of average and youth unemployment.

Table 2. Percentages of early school leavers (ESL), young people neither in employment nor in any education and training (NEET) and unemployed in 2011 (source of data: Eurostat 2012)

Country	ESL	NEET	UNEMPLOYMENT Total average and by educational level (all and 15–24-year-olds)							
	Age	Age	Average		ISCED 0–2		ISCED 3–4		ISCED 5–6	
	18–24	18–24	All	15–24	All	15–24	All	15–24	All	15–24
FIN	9.8	11.7	7.9	20.1	16.7	31.5	8.3	14.9	4.0	N.A.
FR	12.0	15.9	9.3	22.0	15.2	35.2	8.9	19.4	5.4	13.4
DE	11.5	10.2	6.0	8.6	13.3	12.0	5.8	6.0	2.5	N.A.
IT	18.2	25.2	8.5	29.1	10.8	32.8	7.9	27.3	5.5	27.1
PL	5.6	15.5	9.8	25.8	19.2	31.8	10.5	25.5	5.3	22.0
SI	4.2	8.8	8.3	15.7	14.4	24.8	8.7	13.3	5.0	N.A.
NL	9.1	5.0	4.4	7.6	6.9	10.7	4.1	5.3	2.8	4.4
UK	15.0	18.4	8.2	21.1	14.6	36.2	8.7	18.9	4.4	12.0
GOETE average	10.7	13.8	7.8	18.8	13.9	26.9	7.9	16.3	4.4	(15.8)

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The increase of youth unemployment across the EU has been a major concern with regard to young peoples' transition from school to work. Youth unemployment is, on average, over double as high as the overall unemployment rate. The composition of both general and youth unemployment (here 15–24-year-olds) differ across educational levels; in most countries, early leavers from education and training are the group most affected by unemployment. However, when comparing the youth unemployment rates in different countries paying attention to educational qualification, it can be seen that this is not the case for Italy or, to a major extent, for Germany, Poland and the Netherlands. The differences in youth unemployment rates between different levels of education are the highest in Finland, France and the UK. These different patterns of youth unemployment may imply differences in the biographical and career relevance that young people ascribe to education. The relevance of the attained educational level for the labour market entrance and as protector against unemployment seems low in Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and to be increasing in Germany (for low-trackers), while it appears to be high in the UK, the Netherlands, France and Finland (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2011).

Youth labour market integration differs considerably across Europe; the cross-national differences are considerable not only in terms of youth unemployment, but also in terms of the quality of the jobs in which young people are employed. According to Wolbers (2007), the cross-national differences in labour market entry patterns are affected by factors such as the national institutional differences regarding employment protection legislation and the vocational specificity of the education system (Kogan and Müller, 2003).

A distinction can be made between occupational and organisational labour markets. While the former rely on standardised vocational qualifications with rather stable careers depending on standardised occupational profiles, recruitment in the latter can be characterised by learning on the job and testing job seekers whose early careers consist of many job changes and the level of education plays a greater role (Shavit and Müller, 1998; Müller and Gangl, 2003). Models of labour market entry and characteristic routes from education into the labour market of the analysed countries are presented in Table 3.

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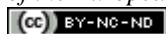


Table 3. Characteristics of routes into the labour market by educational levels (Parreira do Amaral et al. 2011)

	Low (ISCED 0-2)	Middle (ISCED 3-4)	High (ISCED 5-6)	Model of labour market entry
FI	Early school leavers with high risk of unemployment	VET with good mid-term prospects	HE degrees (often side jobs) with rather secure careers	Occupational
FR	Early school leavers with high risks of unemployment and long-term precarity	School-based VET with rather low status and precarious early careers	HE degrees with long trajectories and precarious early careers, share increasing	Occupational
DE	Early school leavers (only pre-vocational measures) with increasing risk of long-term precarity	Dual apprenticeship and school-based VET with good prospects but increasingly flexible careers	HE degrees (often side jobs) with low risk, no increase due to selective school system	Occupational
IT	Early school leavers often with direct but precarious labour market rears	VET and post-compulsory education with long transitions and precarity	HE degrees with long and precarious trajectories	Organisational (but segmented)
PL	Early school leavers (only training schemes) with highest risks	School-based VET security depends on type of school	HE degrees with partly precarious careers, share increasing, emigration as option	Organisational (but segmented)
SI	Early school leavers with options due to low productivity but precarious careers	School-based VET prospects depend on type of course	He degrees (often side jobs) with long waiting period and precarious careers	Organisational (but segmented)
NL	Early school leavers (only pre-vocational qualifications) with high risks	Dual or school-based VET with stable labour market entry	HE degrees (often with side jobs) with rather secure careers	Occupational

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UK	Early school leavers and NEET with high risk of unemployment	School and work-based VET prospects depend on level and type of course	HE degrees with comparatively short trajectories, prospects generally more secure but precarious early careers dependent on degree subject	Organisational
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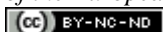
Transition into society

Finally, a very important function of educational institutions is to socialize students into society, thereby promoting active citizenship. Thus, far only limited evidence exists for the relation between this central function and the educational institutional structure. Furthermore, this knowledge is based on quantitative findings produced in the framework of sociological and economic researches, while comparative qualitative educational field research is missing and therefore urgent needed. By socialization, we refer to the process of increasing the commitment to and involvement with societal matters of the younger generations. Attending schools, students have the possibility to get in touch with regional, national and supranational institutions (e.g. legal or political), discuss about the emerging issue of the community in which they live and develop democratic attitudes improving their social skills. These practices are supposed to help them to participate in the life of their community and to be interested in public affairs.

Education systems are expected not only to enhance these skills individually, but also to close the gap between the different students populating their classroom. Political philosophers have remarked how the only legitimate justice criterion in the relationship between the state and its citizens is equality (Verba et al., 1995). Therefore, an education system that socializes ‘selectively’ by increasing inequalities in civic and political engagement is thus harmful to democratic society.

Analyzing the structures of the European education systems, it seems plausible that tracking plays a negative impact on young people’ commitment to active citizenship. As students are early selected on the basis of socioeconomic, cultural and ethnic background influencing their school achievement level, there is a poor communication between peer’s social groups and it is well known that communication is central to the development of critical citizens. Among others, Hyland (2006) argues that a more heterogeneous composition of school classes lead to more equality in democratic attitudes

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and values on political participation. Janmaat and Mons (2011) demonstrate that the variance in civic skills is larger in countries with a tracked educational system. It is likely that students in the general education are confronted with subjects that required and develop critical thinking, communication skills and societal engagement, while students in the vocational school are less educated to skills that are relevant for political awareness, and knowledge on democratic institutions (Ten Dam and Volman, 2003). Furthermore, in countries with a differentiated educational system the participation in voluntary associations is lower than in countries where educational programs are not stratified (Hadjar and Gross, 2016). Therefore, we could expect that tracking lead to lower levels of active citizen.

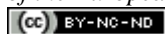
Conclusions

The relation between education and the three main tasks of education has been examined by focusing on the regulation of students' trajectories through different levels of education and their transition from school to work and to society as a whole. This analysis has shown that young people's educational trajectories are structured differently across Europe with varying numbers of transitions to be coped with, and varying levels of permeability and status differences between different educational tracks and levels. The design of the school systems seems to mirror the main function that the different national societies attribute to education: some seems to promote more than others equality of opportunity and active citizenship, while others are more interested in reproducing the segmented structure of their labor market allocating young people in working positions of different status.

Parreira do Amaral et al. (2011, p. 189) highlight the relevance of these differences as follows: "the way in which different education systems rely on the cultural foundations of different assumptions regarding the 'normality' of individual life courses – while at the same time producing and reproducing such normalities – is reflected by the number of transitions children and young people have to overcome within their educational trajectories as well as by the selectivity of these transitions".

All the eight education systems distinguish between general and vocational or technical education at upper secondary level and further. At overall level, it seems that most education systems reserve general education for the best achieving students while the access to vocational education is open for larger groups. However, countries differ substantially in the proportion between

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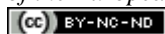


general and vocational education. From a CEDEFOP report on Initial vocational education and training (IVET) in Europe (2008) it emerges that among the eight considered countries Italy has a low level of participation in vocational education (less than 30% participation in ISCED 3-voc), a medium level (between 30 and 60%) is to be found in Finland, France and Poland, while Germany, the Netherland, Slovenia and United Kingdom show a relatively high level (between 50 and more than 60%). In all the countries, the transition from IVET to tertiary education is less than straightforward, therefore a growing number of young people try to get into general education in the first place.

In Germany, France and the Netherlands, where occupational labor markets rely on strongly tracked education and vocational training systems, selection takes place at an early age and pupils are taught in separate school environments for the whole curriculum. Usually, several tracks are available for the same age group, and, consequently, access to higher education is limited. Tracking implies severe consequences for social stratification and social mobility, especially in countries where vocational education does not enable student to enroll in tertiary education. Therefore, it can be argued that in strongly selective systems inequality of educational opportunity is generally larger than in comprehensive systems (Brunello and Checchi, 2007) and the individual agency is more limited.

In terms of an overall picture, the overview of the education systems of the eight countries shows, on the one hand, that there are clear differences between the numbers of transitions, which are foreseen by education systems and which need to be dealt and coped with by children and young people during their educational trajectories. On the other hand, there is also a difference regarding the scope of choice young people and their parents have at the different transition points due to different entrance regulation of lower and upper secondary education. In some countries, progression is strictly regulated by achievement, in others by school-based or national entrance exams, while in others institutional actors give only recommendations. From the institutional descriptions presented in this paper one may develop a hypothesis that children and young people in Finland and Slovenia are confronted with less transitions to be coped with and their scope of choice is wider. In contrast, educational trajectories in Germany and the Netherlands are structured by more transitions and less possibilities to choose according to one's own preference. The other four countries lie in between with different variations at one point or the other.

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The goal of this paper was to detect whether and how the influence of socio-economic, cultural and ethnic background on students' educational, labour market and socialisation outcomes is influenced by the education system's structure. Supposing that comprehensive schooling reduces the influence of family background on educational outcomes, we can conclude that educational governance which aims at increasing equality and active citizenship before labour market entry should prefer such system to a system that early tracks students into different educational paths.

In fact, the wave of comprehensive school reforms that have been enacted in Europe since the early 1960s – first in the UK and Italy, then in Scandinavia and most recently in Spain – was apparently inspired through the need of closing the students' educational gaps among the different social classes. Unfortunately, nowadays, the rhetoric embedded in the discourse on lifelong learning seem to water down this ideal with a deluge of words about the individual responsibility for learning outcomes: blaming the students and reproducing the inequality on which are bases the European knowledge societies.

Notes

¹ Early leavers from education and training (formerly early school leavers, ESL) is the part of the population aged 18–24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education and training (Eurostat 2012).

² The indicator on young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) corresponds to the percentage of the population of a given age (here 18–24) who is not employed and not involved in further education and training (Eurostat 2012).

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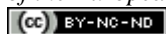
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