

The effect of the structure of secondary education in Europe: A perspective in terms of effectiveness and equity

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The paper we are presenting contributes to the debate on educational inequalities and the structures of educational systems, as well as the resulting policy choices in interaction with social dynamics. It is well known in the literature that within the European education space, there have been attempts to standardize educational systems (Ertl, 2006). This has happened to reduce the variety between systems, especially concerning the tertiary education level. What remains most differentiated between countries is the ornamental organization of upper secondary level of education (Volante et al., 2022). It is widely acknowledged that the structure of educational systems significantly influences individual choices, performance and school careers. Sometimes, educational systems protect from inequalities inherited from families, while at other times, they reinforce them (Duru Bellah e Suchaut, 2006). As in Benadusi and Giancola (2014), by differentiating educational systems into comprehensive and selective, we create an index of selectivity, based on structural variables of the educational system provided by the Eurydice reports (2013; 2023). A system is defined as more selective the higher is the number of tracks within the upper secondary system and the earlier is the choice between these tracks and based on the percentage of repeating students. In addition, the different separation between primary and lower secondary levels (Single Structure, Differentiated and Common Core Curriculum) contributes to the degree of vertical selectivity of the system. Our primary objective is to determine whether educational systems are indeed moving towards greater comprehensiveness in the last decade. Alongside this, it is crucial to observe the impact of structure on synthetic measures of individual (primary effects, i.e, impact of the family status on performance, ecc.) and aggregate inequalities (variance of performance between and within schools) and the differences among various systems based on the selectivity index we will build. To conclude, our last aim is to observe the relation of the country's educational system structure in relation to different measures of equity. To achieve this goal, we will use a sample of 17 countries based on the classification by Esping-Andersen (1991) and its upgrading. These are France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, intended as continental countries, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland, intended as Scandinavian and/or social democratic countries, the United Kingdom, the only Anglo-Saxon system comparable in our sample between 2014 and 2024, and finally, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, as Mediterranean countries, and Ireland. We intend to present an international comparative analysis by constructing a dedicated database using the latest Eurydice report (2023) and the OECD PISA 2022 database and official national documents. What we expect to find is, first, that not in all countries are education systems moving toward greater comprehensiveness, and indeed, that some systems are moving toward greater levels of selectiveness. In addition, we expect that countries in the same welfare categorization have similar levels of selectivity. Along

with this, what we expect 10 years later from the former analysis of this kind is that inequalities will persist over time. Lastly, the systems we consider selective are more unequal in terms of primary effects and performance segregation. The set of results we will show, as well as updating the analysis on the structure of education systems, the associations with inequalities and changes over 10 years, provide us with a clear indication of the best practices to enhance effectiveness and equity used in the sample of selected countries. This kind of analysis also helps the identification of outlier countries, integrating the knowledge of the influence of structure on inequalities. The results of this work can indicate the most suitable policy strategies for an educational system aimed at reducing disparities and improving the welfare state. This supports the idea that educational institutions are integral parts of the welfare system, not separate entities (Saraceno, 2024).