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Comprehensive Schooling and Educational Inequality

The major argument of this book is that educational inequality matters in terms of the social effects of education and may, indeed, be one of its major determinants. This chapter focuses on the production of inequality in school systems, reviewing the evidence on the differences in levels of educational equality across countries, and assessing the school system factors which may explain these variations. The chapter concludes by asking whether one can identify different (supra-national) regional patterns in the characteristics of national school systems and their distributional outcomes.

The debate over comprehensive schools and educational inequality

Reducing educational inequality has been one of the organizing agendas of educational reform in the past half-century and, until quite recently at least, probably the dominant force in the most developed countries. To this end, various forms of comprehensive – or non-selective – education have been developed in the compulsory school systems in different developed countries, so that now the vast majority are, at least formally, comprehensive. North America (the USA and Canada) has had common compulsory school systems for a long time; since the 1960s most of the current European Union states have followed suit, with only a handful (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and, arguably, the Netherlands) remaining predominantly selective in the lower secondary phase. The majority of developed East Asian states, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, also have comprehensive systems in the state sector.
This development of multiple forms of comprehensive schooling, alongside the few remaining selective systems, should, in theory, have provided ample opportunity for comparative study to analyse the genealogy and regional distribution of different models of compulsory schooling. Given the increasing availability of comparable international data, it should also have made possible comparative assessment of the validity of the claims that comprehensivization would lead to reduction in inequality of educational opportunity. However, until recently, comparative analysis has been surprisingly mute about the different forms of non-selective schooling and their effects on class reproduction.

This situation may now be changing. Two recent and ongoing international surveys by the OECD – the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – provide much-improved, cross-national comparative data on learning outcomes and have already produced a groundswell of reassessment among policy makers of the effects of different educational policies, particularly in relation to educational inequality. The surveys are important because they provide direct measures of skills among adults (IALS) and young people (the 15-year-olds surveyed by PISA) in literacy, numeracy and basic science (in the case of PISA) which are considerably more reliable than previously used proxy measures such as years of schooling, levels completed and qualifications attained (UNDP 2002). They allow better estimation of the effects of different school systems on educational inequality across countries. Taken together, the data show rather clear patterns of variation in levels of inequality across countries, which cluster both in terms of regions and system types.

International research has been unable to date to show conclusively that comprehensive reform does increase educational equality. In fact, most surveys until recently have shown relatively stable rates of educational inequality through the first six or seven decades of the twentieth century, including through the first years of comprehensive systems (Bothenius, Lehman and Peshcar 1983; Garnier and Raffalovich 1984; Handl 1986; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980). Shavit and Blossfeld’s classic 1983 study, *Persistent Inequality*, includes the findings from 13 separate country studies, seven of which are for western developed countries. Each of the studies analyses the impact of social origin (in terms of parental occupation and education) on both years of schooling and survival rates at key educational transition points, for successive cohorts between the early 1900s and 1960. The editorial conclusion is that ‘despite the marked expansion of all educational systems under study, in most countries there was little