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Educational Inequalities in a Comparative Perspective

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**A comparison between SWEDEN, SPAIN
and the UNITED KINGDOM**

In *La Reproduction* (1966), the french sociologist Pierre Bourdieu said that "*blindness to social inequalities condemns and allows to explain all inequalities, especially in terms of academic success, as natural inequalities, inequalities of gifts.*" That is why nowadays the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) tries to highlight social inequalities at school, especially through its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA is an international survey which take place every three years and evaluate education systems through the evaluation of the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. As a result, the PISA can influence the OECD's countries to make some educational reforms in order to reduce social inequalities. Some other transnational organisations try to do the same just like Eurostats.

This paper focuses on three European countries: **Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom**. These countries were chosen because of their differential state structure which shaped differential educational systems.

First, Sweden is a country of Northern Europe of 10 millions inhabitants occupying the eastern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula. Member of the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Sweden is often cited as a model in the field of education. It is considered as a social-democratic state because of the low influence of the market and the generous social coverage. Then, Spain is a Mediterranean country with 46 millions inhabitants, also member of the EU and the OECD. Spain corresponds to the conservative model : an intermediate influence of the market and a coverage which reflects wages differences. Finally, the United Kingdom is the most populated of the three countries with more than 65 millions inhabitants. It is separated from Occidental Europe by the Channel and it is made of four nations: England, North Ireland, Wales and Scotland. It is a liberal state with a high influence of the market a residual social coverage. The three countries are constitutional monarchies.

This paper will thus compare these three countries, trying to find out in what extent does these three educational systems deals with social inequalities.

- **Empirical Comparisons**

In this section, we will present and comment tables concerning the average levels and the social inequalities in educational achievement and their variations across Sweden, the United Kingdom and Spain.

Tab. 1 : *Early leavers from 18 to 24 years old from education and training by sex in 2016.*

	Males	Females
European Union (28 countries)	12.2	9.2
Sweden	8.2	6.4
United Kingdom	12.8	9.5
Spain	22.7	15.1

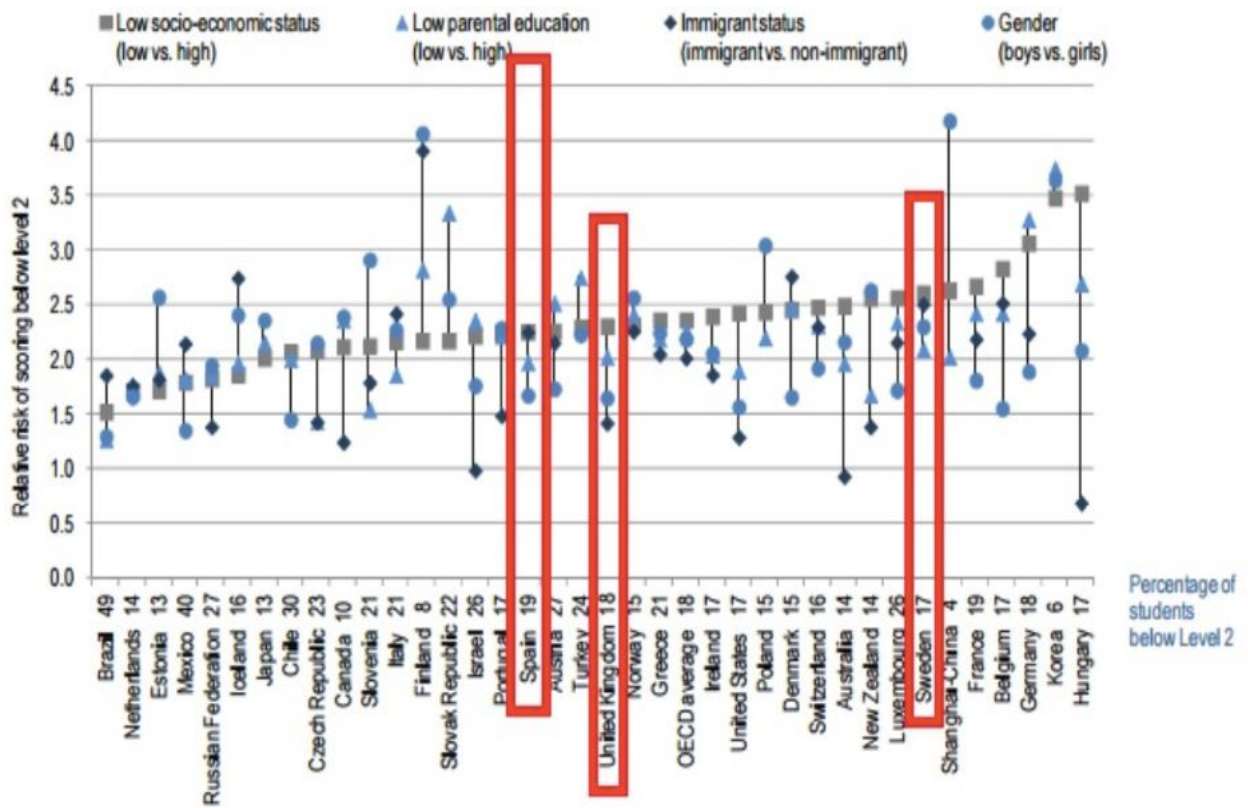
Source : Eurostat

The table 1 shows the rate of early leavers from 18 to 24 years old from education and training before completing compulsory education in 2016. In Spain, 22.7% of males and 15.1% of females drop out school before completing compulsory education, in United Kingdom, 12.8% of males and 9.5% of females, and, in Sweden, 8.2% of males and 6.4% of females.

The rate of early leavers in Spain is one the highest rates in the European Union whereas the rate of United Kingdom is in the average of the European Union and the rate of Sweden is one of the lowest rates of the European Union.

These important rates can be explained by social inequalities existing between children and their families:

Tab. 2 : PISA scores below Level 2 and relative risk of certain student-subgroups in 2009.



Source : *Equity and Quality in Education Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, OECD, 2012.

Here, we can see that in the United Kingdom, students with low socio-economic status have a risk between 2 and 2.5 times higher to score below Level 2. The result is similar to the one in Spain whereas in Sweden the risk is higher (2.5). However, students with low parental education have higher risk to score below Level 2 in Sweden than in the UK, which have a higher risk than Spain. The results are though pretty similar (the risk is around two times higher).

Inequalities exist between children depending on their social environment.

Tab. 3 : average score in mathematics tests by parental education and by parental occupation among 15 years old students in Sweden, United Kingdom and Spain.

	Average in mathematics	Parental education	Parental occupation
OECD average	494	77	85
Sweden	478	61	76
United Kingdom	494	61	70
Spain	484	57	82

Source : PISA 2012 Results in Focus: What 15-year-olds know and what they can do with what they know: Key results from PISA 2012.

Sweden, United Kingdom and Spain are approximately in the OECD average : United Kingdom has the same score, Spain has 10 points less and Sweden has 16 points less.

The advantage of children of tertiary educated parents over children of parents with primary/lower secondary education is more important in the OECD average than in Sweden, Spain and United Kingdom. On average, children of tertiary educated parents have 61 points more than children of parents with primary/lower secondary education in Sweden and in United Kingdom and 57 more in Spain.

Moreover, the advantage children of managers/professionals over children of manual workers is more important in the OECD average than is Sweden, Spain and United Kingdom. On average, children of managers/professionals have 82 points more than children of manual workers in Spain, 76 points more in Sweden and 70 points more in United Kingdom.

However, it can be seen that differences in average performance are lower by parental occupation than by parental education. This observation could already be seen in PISA data of 2003 which said in its conclusions: *‘Theoretically, it has been argued that parental education is a more relevant influence on student’s outcomes than is parental occupation’*. If we compare the two figures, we can see that the difference between the role of parental

occupation and the parental education one is lower in the UK (9pts), intermediate in Sweden (15 pts) and higher in Spain (25 pts). This can be explained because parental education does not immediately refer to an economic situation whereas parental occupation does. As a consequence, parents with a higher salary can afford for example to pay a private or reputed school, to hire a personal teacher... to increase their children's performance.

So, inequalities are important in these countries but they are less important than in the OECD average.

Inequalities exist also between boys and girls.

Let's go back to the table 1. It shows also gender inequalities in education. In 2016, male early leavers from 18 to 24 years old from education and training are more important than female early leavers. In Sweden, there are 8.2% of males who drop out school too early against 6.4% to the females, in United Kingdom, 12.8% to the males against 9.5% to the females, and, in Spain, 22.7% to the males against 15.1% to the females. So females succeed more academically than males.

Tab. 4 : *Graduates at doctoral level in science, mathematics, computing, engineering, manufacturing or also construction by sex, per 1000 of population aged from 25 to 34 years old in 2014.*

	Males	Females
Sweden	2.0	0.9
United Kingdom	1.7	1.1
Spain	0.8	0.7

Source : Eurostat

This table illustrate the fact that gender inequalities are reversed in doctoral level, the last level of high school. This phenomenon is more important in scientific doctoral level. In Sweden, there are 0.9% females who are graduated at doctoral level in science, mathematics,

computing, engineering, manufacturing or also construction against 2‰ to the males, in United Kingdom, 1.1‰ to the females against 1.7‰ to the males, and, in Spain, 0.7‰ to the females against 0.8‰ to the males.

In doctoral level, gender inequalities are persistent.

- **How to explain these inequalities?**

- a) School failure*

In a systemic perspective, school failure occurs when the education system does not provide fair and inclusive education services. At the school level, it can be defined as the fail of the school to provide fair and inclusive education and a good learning environment. In an individual perspective, it is the failure of the student to obtain a minimum level of knowledge and skills. This failure can lead to dropping out of school.

For example, school failure is high in Spain. Yet, not having the certificate of compulsory education does not allow a student to continue to post-compulsory education and has negative consequences for their participation in the labour market.

When we read these tables, it's clearly that success and failure at school are linked to students' personal and social characteristics.

In many sociological studies (Grañeras et al. in 1998 or Calero in 2007...) it is shown that with equal grades, decisions to drop out are more frequent among students with certain social origins.

In the two studies quoted, the authors demonstrate the importance of the parent's profession in the risk of school failure or orientation.

Moreover, we should underline that a study by Breen and Al in 2009¹ demonstrate the inequity of educational attainment by parental class have declined for Germany, Ireland, France, Italy, the Netherlands... throughout the 20th century.

We can also quote the position of Raymond Boudon, who think that inequalities are the product of a decision making process, which can be described as a 'cost-benefit strategy'. Indeed, it would be normal that working-class families encourage their children to make short-time studies : the cost of long-time studies should be more important, and unprofitable in the short term. For example, Mellizo-Soto and Martinez-Garcia have demonstrated the extended compulsory education from 14 to 16 in Spain increasing the costs of education for the families, and more particularly the opportunity costs : 'the wage foregone in the labour market'.

b) Social inequalities and educational inequalities

Moreover, in 2010, three scholars : Enguita, Mena Martínez y Riviere Gómez have shown that school failure is a big problem in Spain, where the rate of failure is above the European and OECD averages.

This study is very interesting, because in addition to establish causality, the authors demonstrates the existence of common characteristics which characterized the trajectories of young students who are in situation of school failure. For example, the authors demonstrate that student's social class is the main factor of school failure. The link with the school results, orientation is an evidence. The role of social and cultural capital is crucial.

This study is in accord with the views of Pierre Bourdieu in France : the existence of a cultural capital is a clear evidence.

It's consistent with the first table : between the students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the students from advantaged family background, the percentage of repeaters can vary as much as 100 percent.

¹ "Non-Persistent Inequality in Educational Attainment: Evidence from Eight European Countries" (with Ruud Luijkx, Walter Müller and Reinhard Pollak), American Journal of Sociology. Vol. 114, No. 5, 2009, pp. 1475-1521.

Overall, inequalities caused by the social background can be seen in the UK within the different nations that constitute it. Indeed, Wales, Scotland, North Ireland and England do not have the same results in terms of students achievements. England and Scotland have better results than North Ireland and Wales because of the socio-economic disparities between these nations.²

In the UK, inequalities regarding social class can be explained by the highly privatized system which allow parents with an upper class occupation to pay high school fees for their children. The private sector represents 7% of the British schools and this percentage increases in the tertiary (universities) to 11,2%.

If this structure allow a large supply of schools, it also enhance the relation between socio-economic background and the resources and quality of the school. As a result, a OECD study of 2013 showed that the influence of parents income in the school results of children has increased. It exists an important competition between schools, due to the decentralised structure of the educational system. Schools have a lot of autonomy. This structure has been set up during the eighties by the neoliberal movement. This is what Brown and Carasso call “the *marketisation*” of education. This marketisation of schools inspired by the New Public Management movement tried to enhance schools performativity. However, social inequalities remain, and sometimes have increased (Gorard, See and Davies, 2012)³.

In fact, competition between schools seems to encourage them to prepare students for the tests and to increase their score, neglecting the development of non cognitive skills. By the valorisation of meritocracy and good students, the British system neglects students from more popular social class. As a consequence, school dropout is high with 18 percent of young people who fail to remain in education beyond the standard school leaving age. This figure is only slightly lower than the average of OECD, which stands at 19 per cent: Britain is 25th out of 35 countries in terms of number of students who failed to stay in education up to the age of 18.

The influence of socio-economic background on PISA scores is higher in the United Kingdom than in most OECD countries (OECD, 2011, Causa and Chapuis, 2009), suggesting

² Results by region in the UK, PISA 2012 (Bradshaw, 2014).

³ *Performativity and accountability in the UK education system : a case for humanness*. Ursula Edgington, University of Waikato, 2015.

that skills acquired by a large proportion of those who leave compulsory education are insufficient, which implies negative implications for drop-out rates, job prospects and income inequalities. In Britain, at least 15% of youngsters who dropout school before attaining upper secondary education are unemployed (OECD, 2011). Social mobility is the movement of individuals, within or between social strata in a society, a change in social status relative to his social background (parental occupation class for example). Hence, it can be said that these inequalities reduce social mobility.

Another factor can explicate this phenomenon of early leavers : the phenomenon of loss-aversion. According to research of Eric J. Johnson, Simon Gaechter and Andreas Herrmann, individuals attach more importance to potential losses than to potential gains and have less education resultants in an increase of the phenomenon of loss-aversion. The primary purpose for each social class is to avoid downward mobility. Therefore, some students prefer drop out school in order to find a job to earn money and to avoid social displacement.

c) Gender inequalities in educational systems

Gender inequalities are explained by stereotypes of society and traditional values of patriarchy.

Patriarchy is a specific form of male dominance in which fathers exercise authority over women and children and over young men. It is based on the principle that the power and influence of men increase with age. Patriarchy affects not only the dynamics of family life, but also broader socio-economic and cultural forms of living. It affects socialization of children.

The socialization is a set of processes by which the individual is constructed by society in which he lives and during which he acquires a way of doing, of thinking and of being which are socially situated. The socialization constructs genders. The gender is a social relationship which produces and organises the differentiation and the prioritization of individuals into two groups : males and females.

Therefore, Georges Felouzis explain that females are socialized to be calm, to be wise, to do good work wisely and to not deviate from the right path. So, as females are socialized to be

wise and to do good work, they succeed more at primary and secondary levels of educations because they learned how to work. For example, in the United Kingdom, women are 36% more likely to apply to university⁴. In Spain they represent 54% of students at university.

Nevertheless, more education level increase, more females are missing. Actually, females are also socialized to take care of the house, they are not encouraged to study longer. Moreover, they are not encouraged to study some subjects which are socially reserved for men. For example, females are under-represented into scientific studies because society consider these are studies for males and females are socialized to study preferably the Humanities. So, in Sweden for example, twice as many men as women have a PhD in scientific disciplines.

- **Particularities and differences between the three countries**

In light of these results, we wan examine the structure of the educational system in Spain, Sweden and Ireland and identify what work and what does not.

- We can start with **the age of compulsory education.**

Overall, primary school is a key moment. It's during this period that children acquire fundamental literacy but also numeracy skills. In addition, student also learn the fundamental values and the civic duties. These skills are essential for all citizen and for a country with the ambition of being competitive. For this reason, primary education is compulsory and free and in almost all countries.

Moreover, the age of this compulsory education vary considerably between the three countries examined. It's important because in a single year we can learn a lot, but an education which is compulsory until the age of 18 can foster the school failure.

In Spain, the compulsory education is between 6 and 16.

⁴<https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/university-and-college-applicant-numbers-rise-02-ucas-reports>

In Sweden, this is a little different. Compulsory school covers nine years. Between the ages of seven and sixteen, Swedish children are obliged to go to school. Before to this, most children have the right to attend preschool between the ages of one and five.

Firstly, we can discuss the limit at 16. In Spain, The group of 16-18 years represents about 45%⁵ of failures and at this age students leave most of the time without a diploma or qualification: their social and professional integration is prejudiced. On the contrary, United Kingdom has increased the age at 18. The first effects of this reform demonstrate that the the number of unskilled jobs diminished in the country.

Secondly, we can discuss the opportunity to expand at 3 the compulsory education. Indeed, many studies have shown that students who begin earlier school have more facilities afterwards (Joigneaux, 2009).

The United Kingdom, unlike Spain and Sweden, has made a step in this direction : its compulsory education start at 5.

- The start of the Vocational Education :

The debate about the vocational education is important. For a long time, the vocational school has been discredited : the general branch was considered as the most noble career.

Nowadays, mentalities has changed : the students demanding better vocational education which can directly lead them to jobs. In many countries, the apprenticeship is more and more valued.

Nevertheless, many people think a premature specialization may lead many inequalities : lack of general and civic culture, deficiencies in spelling or mathematics.

Indeed, until adolescence, the intellectual abilities are constantly changing for many reasons (context, personality, environment, etc.). This is why an overly premature analysis of skills can quickly become catastrophic for many scientists.

In Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom, the comparison demonstrate the minimum age for going to vocational stream is 16. This age is the more relevant for many studies.

⁵ Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte de España.

In Sweden, over 98% of compulsory school leavers proceed to the three-year upper secondary school. Furthermore, 49,5% of students of upper secondary school study in vocational curriculums. The vocational track gives access to Degrees of Bachelor, called Kandidatexamen, but to Professional Degrees, called Yrkesexamina. This allows a massive participation of Swedish students to higher education.

However, it's important to underline the common lack of social diversity in the vocational stream between the three countries.

For instance, in 1981, a rapport released to the Spain minister of Education noted that worker's sons represented 61 % of vocational stream students whereas they represented 33 % of the students of general program.⁶

In the same way, In United Kingdom there are two times less worker's sons among the general branch students.

- **The level of standardisation**

Education in the UK is under two ministries : the Department for Education (responsible for compulsory education) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (take care of the university formation and scientific research). The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills is in charge of standardisation. All schools have to follow the *National Curriculum*. Standardisation is also provided by national exams: the Key-Stage 1 at seven years old, the Key-stage 2 at eleven years old (end of primary school), then the Key-stage 3 at fourteen years old. Then, they chose their subjects for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (or Key-stage 4) they have to take at the age of sixteen. Then, they have to chose if they want to make an apprenticeship, take the A-levels (two years of general formation in which students have to chose 3 or 4 subjects) or go to a Further Education College which provide professional diplomas but can also prepare the the A-Levels. The A-levels can be taken at the age of eighteen and then students can chose to go to a university.

In the same way, In Spain, the educational system is very decentralized. Indeed, 85% of the spending of education are assumed by the autonomous communities (against 23 % on average in the OECD countries).

⁶ https://www.uam.es/personal_pdi/stmaria/jmurillo/documentos/Desigualdades.pdf

Nevertheless, in many countries (in England for example) a few scientists have shown that a lot of local autonomy could bring segregation and competition between educational establishments⁷. Then, it's important to have diplomas which have the same value in the country.

In Sweden, like in Spain, the educational system is also decentralized. The 290 municipalities and their institutions provide operation and financing of educational system. Their only constraint is to respect the broad lines of the national program. They focus on proposing an education adapted to local conditions and to needs of students (Meistermann, 2013).

Schools are also free to adapt their working methods to needs of their students for a better educational system.

Moreover, financing of vocational training is shared between the State and municipalities.

Higher education, as opposed to compulsory school and upper secondary school, is the responsibility of the Swedish State which finances it at the rate of 88%.

Nevertheless, nowadays, this educational system is criticized enough. Its economic model is not sustainable. One school out of four has a deficit. Managers of these schools seek to reduce expenditure on educational materials, on facilities and on salaries paid to teachers whereas they continue to remunerate the shareholders (Feyfant, 2014).

- **The proportion of private/confessional education**

In the UK, there is an important tradition of private and confessional education. However, public subsidies in private education expenditure are more important than the average of OECD : 12,4% in the UK against 2% in OECD's average (OECD, 2014). It exists public confessional schools called *voluntary aided schools* or *faith schools*.

The statistics are similar in Spain. The confessional education represents about half of educational institutions. A logical result in this state still strongly under the influence of the Catholic Church.

⁷ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/090EN.pdf

There is a logic causality between the Confessional/Private education. In 1980, Robert Ballion, a french sociologist demonstrate that the choice of the confessional education is more linked with the will of distinction and separation than the religious causality.

Nowadays, in Spain and the United Kingdom, the educational inequalities between the two systems are an evidence. We can simply mention the ‘‘Oxbridge’’ example : symbol of the social apartheid in England between the private colleges and the public education, where there is a more important social diversity. The ‘independent schools’ often make a selection at the entrance by their very high tuition fees and with admission exams. In consequence only accept the elite of society.

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