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**The Impact of Educational Systems on
Inequalities**

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Introduction

Why is it important to study educational inequalities?

The COVID-19, among its different consequences, has had at least the merit – or what many would probably define as such – to have put the spotlight again on the matter of inequalities in education. Indeed, during the pandemic the remote learning experience brought about various questions on whether the right to education, as described in the different binding international treaties¹, has been practically breached. Indeed, the equal access to education has been threatened by the already present inequalities in the globe, especially the ones determining the access to internet and online infrastructures, whereas the latter were necessary tools to pursue the practice of e-learning (Fredman, 2021). Thus, it results clear that the impossibilities for many students to engage into the scholastic² activities are in opposition with the duty that the ratifying states have to guarantee education, without enforcing any sort of discrimination (Fredman, 2021). Delving more into the issue, it becomes evident how the new modalities of learning highlighted and strengthened the socio-economic and cultural differences among the pupils (Daher et al., 2023). These considerations find their relevance in the data released by UNESCO in 2020, according to which 43% of the learners who were prohibited from attending their institution during the pandemic did not have internet at home, while half of them did not own a household computer (UNESCO, 2020, as cited in Fredman, 2021). The relevance of these aspects can be found also in the numerous demonstrations in Italy, that took place by the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 (Daher et al., 2023). In particular, students started a movement of protests after the implementation of the hybrid learning³ to clearly report how DaD – the acronym for remote learning in Italian, which stands for *Didattica a distanza* - was exacerbating the pre-existing inequalities in the scholastic realm and to

¹ As showed in Fredman (2021) the above-mentioned right can be found in slightly different formulations mainly in three international binding treaties on human rights: the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (ratified by 196 countries, excluding the USA), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (with 171 ratifications), and in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006 (ratified by 182 states) (Fredman, 2021).

² In this paper scholastic is often used as a synonym of educational, in relation to educational systems. In general, referring to whatever concerns schools and education.

³The classes were split: one half was attending in presence and the rest online (Daher et al., 2023); in other cases, the classes were not attending the school fully in presence.

raise awareness on the impact of the absence of sociality on the students (Daher et al., 2023). The former principle was backed up by the UN as well, in its report on the impact of the pandemic on the right to education drafted by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education (Fredman, 2021). Indeed, it was stated that even if the governments around the world tried to come up with measures to guarantee some sort of education, compatible with the needs imposed by the health emergency, the efforts did not manage to counterbalance the “past failures to build strong and resilient education systems and to fight entrenched inequalities” (Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, 2020, as cited in Fredman, 2021). In the contemporary discourse, that showed how disparities can easily get exacerbated, it is imperative to research the topics of educational inequalities, and how they are intertwined with the reproduction of inequalities, especially in relation to the institutional settings. The interest in this relationship derives from the fact that educational systems have been considered, especially starting from the World War II, as the structures through which the possibilities of people are determined (Allmendinger, 1989; Kerckhoff, 2001; Veselý, 2012, as cited in Begu, 2017), and education gets embedded (Weber, 1949; Granovetter, 1985; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Meyer, 2011, as cited in Gross et al., 2016), leading to the reproduction of inequalities in the society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Gross et al., 2016; Stiglitz, 1973; Triventi, Skopek, et al., 2016). Thus, the main question that this work wants to examine is whether educational systems can impact educational inequalities, and later on inequalities in educational returns. The establishment of such relationships could be a guide for tailored policies to fill the present gaps.

The structure of this thesis

Thus, the first chapter of this work will explore the first variable in the relationships that it aims to establish: the educational systems. Delving more into the matter, in the introductory sections (1.1 “An introduction to the matter – drawing a link between scholastic systems and inequalities”, and “1.2 The historical evolution of educational systems”) an historical overview on the growing importance given to the field of education, together with the evolution of the educational systems, in a comparative perspective, will be analyzed. The body of the chapter (“1.3 The classifications of educational systems”) will elaborate on the more technical aspects,

including the different classifications of educational systems present in the literature, but also the issues related to the absence of a common and widespread terminology to implement in comparative studies, and the specific characteristics of the systems, considered to impact the reproduction of inequalities. In the last section (“1.4 Key Takeaways on Educational Systems and their relationship with Inequalities”), the main findings will be summarized and the basis for the next chapter will be set.

The literature review will be extensively presented in the second chapter. Drawing on the first relationship established between educational systems and educational inequalities, the dependent and independent variables will be identified (“2.1 Concepts and Terminology: Defining the independent and the dependent variables”). In the same section, a new relationship between educational inequalities and inequalities of educational returns, and a clarification of the terminology will then be explored. The central part of this chapter (“2.2 The macro-meso-micro-model: more on Educational systems and educational inequalities” and “2.3 Educational inequalities on inequalities at the societal level”) will be devoted to the elaboration of these two identified relationships, in order to find the foundations in the literature for the arguments introduced. Finally, the fourth and last section will include a recap of the main findings “2.4 Drawing Conclusions on the Relationship Between Educational Systems and Inequalities”.

The last chapter of this work presents the application of the literature to the case study of Norway, a country considered to be a model in the pursuit of reducing educational inequality, and that has a long history of being committed to the values of equality and integration in the educational sector (“3.1 Setting the stage: an introduction to the case study of Norway”). Thus, first the evolution of the Norwegian educational system, analyzing the relationship between church, and school, but also how nationalism and social democracy have been intermingled with education, will be given (“3.2 The historical evolution of the Norwegian system”). Furthermore, the motives and needs guiding this development will be put at the center of the discourse. The third and fourth sections (“3.3 Characteristics of an (almost) perfect-looking model” and “3.4 Data on inequalities”) will represent a personal attempt to put the Norwegian educational system in the theoretical framework previously analyzed, following the description of the policies, as they appear in the official sources. In addition, reasonings

and considerations, dictated by what has been established in the literature, and elaborated on the available empirical data will be developed. Finally, a summary of the strengths and flaws of the Norwegian Educational system, together with recommendations for further research, will be carried on (“3.5 Concluding remarks: is the Norwegian system as perfect as it seems? What can be learnt from the Norwegian experience and what can be rethought”).

Ultimately, the main findings of this research will be extensively reviewed in the conclusion section.

Chapter 1: Understanding Educational Systems and Inequalities - Historical Evolution, Classification, and Implications

1.1 An introduction to the matter – drawing a link between scholastic systems and inequalities

Education – which has been at the center of the last century’s sociological debates – remains to be a crucial social issue (Becker, 2016). The trace of the fundamental role given to the education realm can be found back in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which states:

“1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all based on merit.

2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” (UN, 1948)

It is necessary to bear in mind that the above-mentioned Declaration has no legal force, even though its authority is considered unmet, to the point that it inspired many binding international documents (De Baets, 2009). Nonetheless, this article appears to be extremely interesting, since it represents the first contemporary attempt to put education in a global discourse and to properly establish a shared definition of the right to education worldwide (James, 2021). The preliminary draft of the Universal Declaration contained two different articles about education: Article 21, which was concerned with

the establishment of education as a personal freedom, and Article 36, whose aim was to recognize education as a universal right and whose text was more similar to paragraph 1 of the current Article 26. These two articles were then revised by Professor Cassin who renumbered Article 36 into 31, by including for the first time the word *compulsory*, as it appears in now Article 26, and by deleting all the references to educational institutions, included in the ex-Article 21. However, concerns about the article – not being able to capture completely the essence of education – were revealed and part of what is in the second paragraph in now-Article 26 was added. Despite the revision, the article was still considered incomplete, since for the Lebanese part the nature of education was not clearly defined, and only a clear statement could avoid that the next generations would have been educated according to principles detrimental to the United Nations and its goals. In this regard, the current Article 26 has been considered one of the Articles in the Declaration most representative of the war's experience. Indeed, the inclusion of the second and third paragraphs has been interpreted as a way to actively and directly condemn Hitler's impact on youth and to avoid that education could be used again by the political forces to promote intolerance (Morsink, 2000, as cited in James, 2021). Moreover, a long debate on the meaning of the word compulsory was carried out, since it was believed that it hinted at a coercion that was difficult to reconcile with a right and that it could lead to the idea of the state exercising a monopoly on education (James, 2021). However, reassurances on these matters were presented in the debate: the word compulsory could be looked at as a way to add a degree of protection for those children, whose parents could not agree with education's transformative power in their life and on society. On the other hand, reassurances on the monopoly matter were also disclosed, by stating that such a word was not added to infringe the right to choose the scholastic institution and that the existence of many different schools – also not directly linked to the state – was encouraged. In the end, the word compulsory was not erased, and further debates and drafting works led to the current enunciation. Even if specific directives on educational systems⁴ or ways of funding have not been given, it becomes clear how the involvement of the national governments is assumed to be necessary, while introducing

⁴ By Educational system it is meant how Education is organized and provided, usually at the national level where formal education is regulated (Hatos, 2014). In Hadjar and Gross' words, it is the set of institutional settings where the educational processes get embedded (Gross et al., 2016)

limitations to the state's power and maintaining the parents' responsibility, making this Article a powerful statement.

Other examples of this international interest in the educational process, in which non-state actors are encouraged to participate, can be derived from the goals set by various development agencies at the beginning of the 21st century. For instance, in the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG), drafted by the United Nations, it is possible to find the establishment of the aim to reach the universalization of primary schooling (Jacob & Holsinger, 2009).

Even if from World War II onwards the field of education has been characterized by a significant expansion – led also by the growing international interest and efforts to put it in a global debate - and educational systems have gone through various reforms, social inequality of educational opportunities did not disappear. When matters of educational inequalities⁵ and their supposed impact on societal inequality are discussed, it becomes fundamental to put the educational systems under the spotlight. Indeed, many studies have confirmed the crucial role of scholastic systems in the debate, because of the power that institutional settings have to determine the possibilities of people (Allmendinger, 1989; Kerckhoff, 2001; Veselý, 2012, as cited in Begu, 2017). In these regards, the educational system has been investigated specifically for being one of the main contributors to the reproduction of inequalities and class structures (Gross et al., 2016; Stiglitz, 1973; Triventi, Skopek, et al., 2016). Furthermore, many scholars agree that education should be looked at as an embedded, or institutionalized process (Weber, 1949; Granovetter, 1985; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Meyer, 2011, as cited in Gross et al., 2016), which takes place in education systems (Gross et al., 2016). The factors that determine the institutionalization of the matter cannot be found only in the policies and formal laws of societies, but also in more “informal aspects”, such as shared beliefs, but also traditions, and historical events. Thus, education may result in being different from country to country, according to the different opportunities, challenges, and social forces it encountered during its development. Hence, an

⁵ The term educational inequalities can be used to refer to a multitude of aspects regarding the theme of inequality in the educational setting (it can refer to the unequal distribution of academic resources, as well as the unequal access to educational opportunities, but also to the unequal outcomes, academically speaking). In this sentence, it is used to refer to inequalities in educational outcomes, influenced also by gender, migration, and socioeconomic status (SES) (Zapfe & Gross, 2021)

institutional path is set, as a result of this process, meaning that solid institutions, expected to stay in place for a long time, establish a direction drawing on the initial social forces, making a change of route more difficult (Meyer, 2011, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Similarly, to Lipset each society starts from a neutral position, and then it builds its path through every choice it makes, becoming progressively more biased in the past direction (Lipset, 1996, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). As a consequence, lock-in effects, that “lock” practices, behaviors, and beliefs (Gross et al., 2016), enter into the picture (Shapiro & Varian, 1999, as cited in Gross et al., 2016), making it extremely complicated to switch to another set of values, especially if that framework is exploited to legitimize an institution (Meyer, 2009, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Thus, if the path leading towards inequalities in education is established, whether because it has been decided to pursue such a direction or as an indirect consequence, it could be difficult to exercise a change, especially if those lock-in effects are used as a legitimization of the institutions in place. The question that arises from this is what types of practices and behaviors bring to the reproduction of educational inequalities.

Assuming more of a Weberian⁶ viewpoint on the clashes among social classes, the reproduction of class inequalities finds its way through the differentiation of higher schools, for example following the tradition of the tripartite system, which will be developed later (Becker, 2016). Thus, under this perspective, it becomes evident how the lower secondary school (linked more to training in industry and handicraft) ends up welcoming more of the lower class, while the intermediate (opening the doors to more bureaucratic jobs), and the upper (leading to academic or managerial occupations) higher schools find themselves in the same mechanism with the middle and upper classes. The differentiation can take place in hidden ways, including the school’s sector (if they are religious or private schools), but also their geographical allocation, whether students are divided in ability groups, or if it is possible to choose different subjects within the system. Even the countries that adopt different types of educational systems, like the Nordics with the comprehensive model, are not exempt from informal differentiation that allows inequalities to persist. Indeed, the composition of the students vary in all educational systems, and schools, since clusters of students attending different schools tend to be socially segregated (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005, as cited in

⁶ who sees education as directly intertwined with social status and power (Rao & Singh, 2018)

Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), ending up in exposing students with different socio-economic background to different learning contexts even in a comprehensive model (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016).

Adopting more of a functionalist paradigm, the scholastic system's has to aim at trying to reach a balance between equity and efficiency. In this context, the possible inequalities that arise result to be a functional necessity, without which the formation of differentiated experts for the various sectors in the labor market, as well as in the socio-political systems, would not be possible. The question that comes from reasoning on this theoretical framework is whether such a differentiation has the unwanted consequence of sectorizing knowledge leading to more disparities, or if it allows to reach a greater aggregate educational output, that would align with the expectations of policymakers (Becker, 2016).

Thus, it is fundamental to gain an understanding of the historical evolution of educational systems in the world, in order to find out what brought such variety in the scholastic systems, especially regarding the secondary education field. Hence, the following paragraph will explore the foundations of the national school systems around the world.

1.2 The historical evolution of educational systems

The development of the various secondary education systems, which appear to be less uniform than the primary education ones (Boli et al., 1985; Benavot & Resnik, 2006, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), has undergone a long and complex process (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). It was deeply influenced by historical contingencies, but also by different theories and concepts, that have been adopted to the different educational settings, at least until a global standardization trend started taking place post-World War II.

The scholastic systems aimed at fulfilling different needs across countries, and actively engaged with the dominant culture and values, including the economic and political realms, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, while some countries adopted from the beginning a more democratic and meritocratic approach in the construction of secondary schools, like the United States (Benavot & Resnik, 2006, as

cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), others used elitist perspectives as a guide (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). This practice was linked more to the European countries, whose schools' goal was supposed to be the formation of upper-class children for higher levels of studies, and ultimately more prestigious occupations. It is the case of the Gymnasium in Germany, but also of the Lycée in France, the Licei in Italy, and even of the English public schools, whose curriculum included humanities and classical studies taught for the elite (Benavot & Resnik, 2006, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016).

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the first major change in the educational field and its expansion, led by the process of industrialization along with a demographic increase, took place (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). From this transformation, two main rival historical types emerged: the English model, based on the elitist approach favoring classical studies, and the German vocational training system (Blossfeld, 1992, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016).

According to Hadjar and Gross, following World War II, two historical events have had the merit of influencing educational policy choices: the *Sputnik shock*, which refers to public fear that characterized the moments post-USSR's first satellite launch in 1957, and the *PISA*⁷ *shock*, that followed the introduction of testing conducted by the OECD⁸ (Hadjar & Gross, 2016b). In both these occasions, the societies' economic potential was perceived to be in danger. In the case of the Sputnik shock, the Western countries were moved specifically by the risk of being outperformed by the Soviet Union; while in the second situation, the number of students aged 15 who scored less than the worldwide average - even in many highly industrialized countries - alarmed the public, threatening the idea that the educational system in place was able to provide what was needed to maintain the economic order, or even to make it more prosperous (Hadjar & Gross, 2016b).

It is possible to make a first broad classification based on the three general models of scholastic systems that resulted to exist after World War II in Europe (Schneider, 1982; Benavot & Resnik, 2006, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016): the Scandinavian model of comprehensive schooling (which included Denmark, Finland,

⁷ Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD)

⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Norway, and Sweden), the Tripartite system (adopted by Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), and the Mixed systems (that can be found in France, Great Britain, and Italy, for example) (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). However, these three ideal types have been adopted by different countries in diverse declinations and have experienced various reforms and policies throughout the decades, also influenced by the historical events mentioned.

To properly delve into the scope of the research question of this work, which is the impact of the educational systems on inequalities, a more detailed characterization of the models presented will be developed in the following paragraph. Later on, the main characteristics of educational systems identified in the research will be described, as well as how they are linked to educational inequalities and societal inequalities.

1.3 The classifications of educational systems

The classification of educational systems is a multifaceted matter, which can be carried out by taking into account different variables. It can be possible to develop a differentiation starting from the historical evolution of the systems, but also from a social inequality perspective, hence identifying the characteristics that appear to generate inequalities.

It seems clear, from what has been stated until now, how in the historical division the scholastic systems are to be grouped into three general boxes: Comprehensive schooling, the Tripartite system, and the Mixed system (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016).

When it is decided to divide scholastic systems according to their characteristics, an example of a model that puts at the center the relationship between system, educational inequalities, and societal inequalities is the classical Stratification – Standardization – Vocation Specificity model (Gross et al., 2016; Hadjar & Gross, 2016b), which often presents slight changes in the definitions or in the terminology among the different authors. In this regard, Zapfe and Gross, according to whom the previous literature had been focusing too much on the matters of standardization and stratification, highlighted the idea that other aspects like input, as theorized by Esser, did not have to be disregarded, since they could aid in providing a more comprehensive

idea of the issue (Zapfe & Gross, 2021). Among the other dimensions that could complete the analysis also the theorization of the importance of instruction time (Gross et al., 2022) should be taken into account.

Another classification of educational systems through their characteristics considered to be effective, is Turner's "sponsorship-contest" dichotomy. This typology analyzes how upward mobility is granted by the educational systems, and it was further expanded by Hopper (Hopper, 1968). According to Turner, through the observation of educational systems two main models can be identified: the sponsorship system of education, and the contest system of education; whereas the former refers to a system in which recruits are selected according to the elite's choices, which should be motivated by perceived merit (mode of sponsorship mobility); the latter, instead, means that the system is led by the principle that sees becoming part of the elite as the final prize of an open and fair competition (mode of contest mobility). Hopper managed to provide a more comprehensive classification, by identifying three functions of the scholastic systems, that will later be presented and discussed in relation to the Stratification discourse.

It must be kept in mind that these classifications develop often overlapping aspects, while analyzing the matter and its connections with inequalities from slightly different perspectives. Moreover, the terminology used often differs from country to country, making it more difficult to compare statistics, for instance, or to provide general classifications (Smyth, 2008). The issue was already described years ago by the comparative educationist Hans, who suggested using an:

“Artificial terminology which can be applied uniformly to all countries”

(Hans, 1993, as cited in Smyth, 2008)

A long history, starting after World War II, to more recent years, testifies to the attempts to establish criteria to make comparative studies in the field and to adopt a comprehensive classification. An artificial terminology, in Hans' terms, was established thanks to the works of UNESCO⁹ and ISCED¹⁰, only by the end of the '90s (Smyth, 2008). However, this solution still appears to have problems in terms of comparability,

⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UN)

¹⁰ International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO)

making the study of the relationship between educational systems and inequalities – both of social and economic kind – more difficult.

1.3.1 Exploring the Historical Categorization

The existence of three main types of education systems has been evident since the end of World War II (Schneider, 1982; Benavot & Resnik, 2006, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). The model of comprehensive schooling was used to refer to the practices adopted mainly by the Scandinavian countries, thus Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), with the addition of Iceland, according to some (Elstad, 2023; Frønes et al., 2020). Its main characteristic consists of the fusion of primary and lower secondary schools into only one program (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). The rationale behind this structure lies in the idea that students coming from all the different social groups should be able to have access to the same type of education, despite their socio-ethnic and geographical provenience, or their gender (Elstad, 2023). Thus, students are not divided into differentiated paths (differently from the tripartite model), following the same curriculum. Hence, heterogeneous classes are put in place (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), since division by academic level is forbidden in most Nordic countries to carry the weaker learners and motivate them to reach higher levels of learning, while retention¹¹ is not widespread (Elstad, 2023; Triventi, Skopek, et al., 2016). The idea of the School-for-All is at the center of the model and is properly developed in the policy of mandatory schooling for nine to ten years, which practically means guaranteeing free education for at least all the younger students (Elstad, 2023). Some scholars have criticized the model due to the presence of such heterogeneous classes, which to them could lead to a decline in the quality of teaching. Indeed, following this line of argument, to keep everybody on board, a medium-level type of teaching would be carried out. This would inevitably result in the non-exploitation of stronger learners' potential, while the weaker learners would still find themselves struggling. Whether the latter effect would end up outweighing the potential positive aspect of weaker learners being inspired and motivated or the opposite requires further analysis.

¹¹ It is meant the practice of failing students and making them retake their years of scholastic attainment. Through this mechanism, it is believed that homogeneity is preserved among the classes (Elstad, 2023)

The tripartite system, typical of Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, consisted of the division of students into educational paths that constituted different types of schools: classic, modern, and technical secondary schools (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). In more contemporary discourses on education, the main subject is educational tracking, which characterizes this model. The practice of tracking refers to the differentiations of the paths of students (either through the classes, the school tracks, the individual curricula, or the subjects). This differentiation in the students' studies is argued by its supporters to be highly beneficial, since students are in designed ad hoc environments, ready to answer their specific needs. Thus, the overall quality of learning could appear higher due to the more homogeneous classes. Various critiques have been moved toward this model by different authors. For instance, the inequalities at the individual level and among classes could be of greater extent due to the dispersion in learning and educational outcomes, typical of the systems of separation of students (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), especially when the tracking takes place from an early age (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). Another critique is related to the efficiency of the tracking system, which to be truly such has to provide students with the best track, coherent with their capacities and achievements.

Mixed systems are characterized by features of the comprehensive schooling approach, while still incorporating elements of the second model. In Italy, for example, elementary school and lower-level secondary school – or middle school - teach the students the same subjects and programs, but at the high school level, different typologies of schools, characterized by diverse educational paths, are available.

1.3.2 Identifying educational system characteristics, assuming the social inequality perspective

It is shared among the researchers that a classification of educational systems under a social inequality paradigm is possible through the analysis of three characteristics, at the macro-level: Stratification, Standardization, and Vocational specificity (Allmendinger, 1989; Müller & Shavit, 1998; Pfeffer, 2008; van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

By Stratification, also referred to as “external differentiation” (Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013, as cited in Gross et al., 2016) and analogous to the tracking previously mentioned, is meant the number of different schools existing and how those influence the opportunities to get a higher-level qualification (Gross et al., 2016). A system is considered to be highly stratified if students are differentiated in paths from an early age, and they rarely have the opportunity to switch routes. Furthermore, in a scholastic system that has a high degree of stratification, normally the social background tends to influence the opportunity of access to the different types of schools, ordered hierarchically. To Hopper, who further developed Turner’s original classification based on the sponsorship-contest dichotomy, educational systems in industrial societies have three fundamental functions: the selection of students, according to their abilities; providing students previously categorized with the suitable type of instruction; lastly, directing the trained students to occupations (Hopper, 1968). According to him, since the provision and allocation functions are dependent on the first dimension, it is properly through the selection process that the structure of educational systems can be better understood. Thus, the selection phase can be identified with the stratification dimension since they both refer to the process of dividing students into different tracks, and by observing how students are selected it is possible to gain insights on the variable of stratification, to Hopper. Indeed, the different paths in which the students enroll generate diverse educational and life opportunities (Gross et al., 2016), so this dimension has the power to shape the distribution of opportunities and resources among students, based on their perceived abilities. Regarding this, the selection could be less and less related to the students’ capacities and more to their socio-economic background (the potential of students is more commonly overlooked, in favor of the stereotypes concerning their groups of origin), especially if the stratification takes place early in the life of the students. In systems with high stratification, it is believed that weaker students, coming from disadvantaged conditions, end up choosing lower types of education, in which higher achiever peers often lack and teachers tend to suggest lower aspiration levels, thus reducing the availability of social capital¹². Another important aspect of systems in which stratification is supposed to be high is that in order to make an informed decision, the students need to have access to knowledge on all the different

¹² In this case, it is meant as the resources embedded within social networks, i.e. access to useful contacts for learning activities or motivating settings, as well as parental or peer support (Gross et al., 2016)

tracks. However, children coming from families with restricted access to informational resources, tend to pursue their parents' routes (see Pfeffer, 2008; Hadjar & Berger, 2010; van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Thus, in choice-driven education systems, especially when the parents are involved in the decision, the educational inequalities appear to be higher, as a result of the latter's aspirations (Gross et al., 2016). These types of educational systems create also a stronger bond between educational attainment and returns – i.e. job income and status –by producing educational certificates that testify the students' achievement and potential, reliable in the eyes of the employers (Allmendinger, 1989; Müller & Shavit, 1998, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

Standardization is defined by Allmendinger as:

“the degree to which the quality of education meets the same standards nationwide” (Allmendinger, 1989; Allmendinger, 1989, as cited in Gross et al., 2016)

Thus, it is a variable that describes if the quality of education is highly differentiated among the schools in the same state. Furthermore, it measures if schools' administration is more centrally located, or locally governed, whether the levels of educational spending are homogenous among the different schools in a nation, and finally, it establishes the presence of teacher training programs that are both standardized and centralized (Gross et al., 2016). It is believed that building more standardized systems could lead to fewer educational inequalities. The explanation of this finding is rooted in the idea that through higher standardization the schools would be equipped with more equal resources, meaning that the level of education that students receive would be most likely homogenous, generating less inequalities related to the opportunity of access. Furthermore, this characteristic should also manage to neutralize more personal differences in the job market. Indeed, in these systems, educational certificates become more reliable and central, because of the similar practices and curricula adopted by the schools, resulting also in the use of more similar assessment methods. However, it could be argued that by giving such credit to the educational certificates, disadvantaged students could still find themselves in a worse-off condition because they could encounter obstacles in accessing higher education and in performing brilliantly,

especially in comparison to their richer peers (Allmendinger, 1989; Müller and Shavit, 1998, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). This could be explained by the fact that the advantaged students, possessing additional resources, would then manage to achieve higher levels of education, and to complete their studies with better achievements, which would result most likely in giving them better possibilities in the job market, making the reproduction of inequalities a reality.

Moving to Vocational specificity - referred to as “vocational orientation” by other scholars (Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013, as cited in Gross et al., 2016) - it is meant the characteristic that establishes a relationship between educational institutions and the professional realm (Gross et al., 2016). In systems in which this characteristic is particularly relevant, institutions are expected to provide students with adequate knowledge and skills specifically for certain jobs. On the other hand, in systems that possess such a characteristic at a low degree, students tend to acquire more general knowledge and to achieve more specific skills while working, instead. There are normally two ways to design vocational training: either by providing students with the necessary skills through broad schools, like technical schools; or by adopting a dual system, in which students acquire knowledge and skills both at school and on the field. This characteristic has been studied from two different dimensions: its level of institutionalization, registered by the percentage of students attending vocational schools, and how the training is structured, which is measured through the percentage of students attending a dual system (Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). The relationship between systems with high vocational specificity and inequalities can also be analyzed in two different ways (Gross et al., 2016). From one perspective, these types of systems are normally highly stratified, meaning that from a social inequality perspective, they encounter all the issues presented for stratified education. Alternatively, students coming from less privileged backgrounds have the opportunity to get a specific qualification, which in systems lacking vocational specificity could be more difficult to obtain, since they would be forced to compete even with more privileged students (Müller & Shavit, 1998, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

A characteristic that could be added to this discussion is the one of input, introduced by Esser (Zapfe & Gross, 2021). It is described as related to the length of

compulsory schooling, together with qualitative and quantitative institutional demands, including spending, size of the class, and teacher qualifications (Gross et al., 2022; Zapfe & Gross, 2021). It has been found in the systematic review carried out by Zapfe and Gross, that input influences gender and migration inequalities (Zapfe & Gross, 2021, as cited in Gross et al., 2022; Zapfe & Gross, 2021). Considering the gender-related findings first, it has been observed that high input - here defined as the presence of low variability in school size, proportion of enrolled 15-years old students, number in percentage of qualified teachers, and years of preschool - increases the number of high achiever girls in mathematics, reducing the present gender gap (Gross et al., 2022). Additionally, when the size of educational systems is described in the function of the educational opportunities at the upper secondary school level, it has been registered that larger size leads to lower gender inequalities (Hadjjar & Buchmann, 2016, as cited in Gross et al., 2022). Looking more closely at inequalities generated from different backgrounds, input is also supposed to decrease migration inequalities (Zapfe & Gross, 2021). More specifically, the input dimension of early entry into educational institutions should have a significant impact (Gross et al., 2022). Indeed, such a practice often brings a longer length of compulsory education, which results in benefitting migrants. Moreover, the present gap in mathematics between migrants and local students decreases (Borgna & Contini, 2014, as cited in Gross et al., 2022). Also, input in the form of quality of the educational system as a whole seems to increase the migrant students' reading skills. Finally, similar considerations related to the size of education carried out for gender inequalities can be stated for socioeconomic educational inequalities (Gross et al., 2022).

Instruction time has also been identified as a characteristic that can have a relevant impact on educational inequalities. Indeed, it is shared that a higher value of instruction time, in the form of all-day schooling, leads to less inequalities. This effect can be explained by the fact that students coming from disadvantaged groups would be provided with greater support, by spending more time at school. Indeed, it is believed that properly through higher exposition to educational environments some deficiencies can be compensated, generating an increase in educational opportunities and a consequent reduction in educational inequalities. Another way to implement more instruction time would be through guaranteeing early access to education, a policy in

place in Luxembourg and Switzerland where pre-schooling is mandatory. Thus, by putting together early access and increase of school hours there could be an equalization of educational opportunities that would lead to a decrease in educational inequalities (Hattie, 2008, as cited in Gross et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the studies reveal the central role assumed by educational systems' characteristics in gaining a deep understanding of the relationship between educational systems and educational inequalities, with the consequential reproduction of societal inequalities.

1.4 Key Takeaways on Educational systems and their relationship with inequalities

The historical events and the evolution education has gone through in the last decades, together with the growing interest that different actors have been manifesting, show the centrality of the educational discourse.

In this chapter, a reconstruction of the historical events that have shaped educational policies has been presented and the three post-World War II emerging models have been described. The Comprehensive model, typical of the Nordics, puts at the center the importance of providing School-for-All by offering unified curricula, heterogenous classes, and making education compulsory for 9 to 10 years (Elstad, 2023; Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). On the polar opposite, the Tripartite model supports the role of tracking: dividing students into educational paths, and creating more homogenous classes, according to the levels of students (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). Finally, a mixed model presenting characteristics of the Comprehensive model, but adopting some kind of tracking at the higher levels of education, emerged.

In order to properly explore the relationship between educational systems and education inequalities, and the consequence of this link on societal inequalities the presentation of the different characteristics identified in the literature has been carried out. First of all, the Stratification, Standardization, and Vocational Specificity characteristics have been explained, following their links with inequalities. Stratification refers to the number of diversified schools, offering different curricula and providing students with different skills (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). It is shared that highly

stratified systems could influence the reproduction of inequalities because the selection process could be led by stereotypes on the group of origin of the pupils, or be significantly influenced by the parents' wants, and access to the necessary knowledge to make a decision is not guaranteed fully. The Tripartite model is the representation of a stratified system, while the opposite could be stated for the Comprehensive model. Standardization describes the quality of education and assesses to what extent it is homogenous across nations. More standardized systems are supposed to lead to less educational inequalities but to the reproduction of inequalities in society. Vocational specificity examines more whether the schools are able to guarantee to the students specific skills and knowledge to access certain occupations, or if they tend to give broader skills. In the Tripartite model, the more technical schools should be able to reach a high level of vocational specificity. The impact that such a factor has on inequalities should be analyzed from two perspectives: on the one hand, it is connected to stratification so it presents the same issues that stratification leads to; on the other hand, it allows students to specialize in a sector and obtain relevant certificates, a practice that could benefit students coming from less advantaged backgrounds. In addition to these factors, input and instruction time can be able to measure inequalities as well. Indeed, relationships between the latter and gender, socio-economic, and migration inequalities have been established (Gross et al., 2022; Zapfe & Gross, 2021).

In essence, all the matters described have been functional to put the basis for delving deeper into the relationship between scholastic systems and inequalities, both at the educational and the societal levels. Hence, the next chapter will be devoted to the proper exploration of the literature review, together with the presentation of interesting empirical findings, and the description of the variables identified.

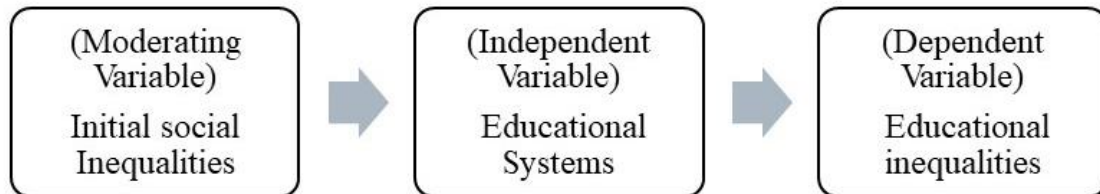
Chapter 2: Literature Review – what is the line of the relationship between scholastic system, educational inequalities, and further inequalities in society?

2.1 Concepts and Terminology: Defining the independent and the dependent variables

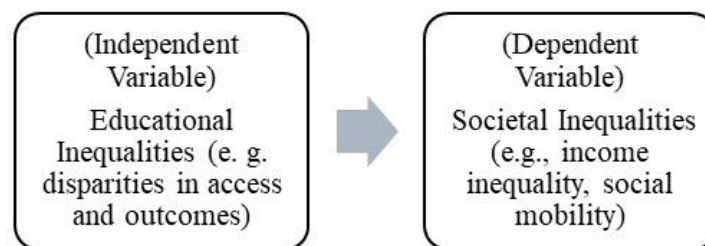
In the previous chapter a general overview of the educational systems – and their main characteristics functional to establish a connection with inequalities – has been given. References to support the argument of the link between the scholastic systems and educational inequalities have been provided. This chapter will be devoted to the definition of all the variables involved in the relation that this study aims to prove, together with the proper literature review. Thus, in order to better explore the research question, whose goal is to understand whether the scholastic systems have an impact on different dimensions of inequalities, two lines of reasoning will be explored. The first one, which has already been outlined and developed in the first chapter, concerns the relation between the educational systems (independent variable) and educational inequalities (dependent variable), a dimension that needs to be further explored to grasp all its nuances, especially in relation to a possible moderating variable, that could be identified in the initial social inequalities that characterize the circumstances; finally, the second one concerns the exploration of the link between the educational inequalities (in this second relation, it is the independent variable) and other dimensions of inequalities, at a societal level (dependent variables).

Figure 1 - Schematization of the relationships identified, created with Microsoft Power Point

Relationship 1: Educational Systems and Educational Inequalities



Relationship 2: Educational Inequalities and Social Inequalities



2.1.1 Describing and measuring Educational inequalities

To carry on the literature review for the topics previously unfolded, it is pivotal to better explore the variables in question. Considering that the description and classification of educational systems have been investigated in the first chapter of this work, the first variable that will be defined in this section is the one of educational inequalities. In the 70's Bourdieu and Passeron had already referred to education as the social institution that has the power to mirror and even reproduce the initial socio-economic and cultural inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), that characterize the moderating variable in this work. This practice gets crystallized through different aspects, for example by directing low-income students towards hierarchically lower types of schools, which will provide less social and cultural capital, and could generate lower learning outcomes (since, most likely, the more motivated and educated peers will

attend more prestigious infrastructures) (Antoninis et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2016). The above-mentioned aspects properly express the existence of inequalities in education, but those are just some of the dimensions that constitute educational inequalities.

In the sociological tradition, educational inequalities have been referred to as the extent to which individuals' educational achievements are influenced by their social background, examining mainly the connection between the socioeconomic status of parents and children's acquisition of skills or specific educational qualifications (Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). In particular, three dimensions of the socioeconomic status of parents have been explored in the literature: their economic, educational, and migration status (Sewell & Shah, 1967; DiMaggio, 1982; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). The first aspect, which includes the parents' income, their occupation and their possessions, is considered to be able to shape an environment aligned with positive educational outcomes (Ehmke & Siegle, 2005, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). Indeed, parents who dispose of economic resources have an interest in supporting their children in achieving high qualifications, in order to maintain their status (Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993; Sewell & Shah, 1967; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Sullivan, 2001, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). It is properly the familial economic background that constitutes the economic capital, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu, 1983, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012), which remains fundamental for the definition of socio-economic status (Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). Concerning the second variable, it is believed that children raised in families that own a high level of educational resources (normally measured through the parents' qualifications) tend to develop skills and values that make their educational careers competitive (Bourdieu, 1983; Robinson & Garnier, 1985; Sullivan, 2001, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). This aspect is also included in the second out of the three forms of capital outlined by Bourdieu, namely the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). Moving onto the third aspect, different studies agree that the migration status has a negative impact on outcomes, academically speaking (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Alba et al., 1994, Tolsma et al., 2007, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). It has to be understood whether this result may be linked to a lack of social capital (Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012), since such negative impact persists when a control for the parents' educational status as a

dimension of cultural capital is applied (Schlicht-Schmälzle & Möller, 2011, as cited in Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012), and it appears to be independent from economic background (Schlicht & Ackermann, 2012). Thus, educational inequalities refer to systemic differences regarding various aspects of educational attainment, influenced by the inherent characteristics of students (including their social group position that comprehends the gender, ethnicity, migrational status, and cultural and socioeconomic origin) (Gross et al., 2016). When these factors of educational inequalities are considered, the question to be investigated is whether educational systems contribute to the reproduction of the initial inequalities and if they can eventually compensate for these disadvantages.

Assuming Jacob's theorization of educational inequalities, the latter can be measured through different indicators that encompass various facets of the matter, including access (to educational institutions, generally speaking, education as a whole), learning process (experience in school, learning environment), and outcomes (the proper educational achievements, that include, for example, formal qualifications) (Jacobs 1996, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). The variable of educational achievement could also be measured through the percentage of students that achieved a particular degree of education, or via the total years of completed education (Morrison & Murtin, 2013; Meschi & Scervini, 2014, as cited in Antoninis et al., 2016). Regarding the measurement of the outcomes, the available national and international surveys could be taken into account to assess the inequalities in academic performance (Antoninis et al., 2016).

To the already mentioned dimensions, it is possible to add the following aspects: resources (which could refer to the available collective funds), participation (measured, for example, according to the enrollment rates) (Morrison & Murtin, 2013; Meschi & Scervini, 2014, as cited in Antoninis et al., 2016), and opportunity (when the outcomes do not depend on the circumstances, which could be directly linked to access) (Ferreira & Gignoux, 2014). However, it is important to bear in mind that various inequality measures could be employed to summarize the level of variation in a given indicator, and that each measure could bring about different conclusions on the level of inequality

and its trends over time for the very same indicator¹³. In outlining educational inequalities is worth mentioning that both a global inequality database on education (WIDE¹⁴) and an index to measure inequality (the parity index) in education have been developed, in the attempt to illustrate the matter (Antoninis et al., 2016).

Thus, in order to be more precise in the definition of the relation between scholastic systems and educational inequalities these different aspects must be considered. A macro-meso-micro analysis could result in being useful to better understand the creation of educational inequalities.

2.1.2 Other dimensions of Inequality

The second relationship that this work wants to explore is the one between educational inequalities and inequalities at a societal level. The direction of this argument has been established by reviewing the extensive literature on the role of education on social mobility (or the relationship between educational inequalities and intergenerational persistence), between different generations (Goldthorpe, 2014; Corak, 2013; Blanden, 2013; OECD, 2018; as cited in Blanden et al., 2023; Mayer, 2005, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016; Veselý, 2012). Thus, a clarification of what is meant by social mobility in the literature, which will be used as the operational definition in this work, needs to be carried out.

Social mobility is a term that refers to the ability to move among the different societal levels, with the result of altering one's socio-economic status (Collins dictionary, as cited in Inversen et al., 2019, as cited in Funjika & Gisselquist, 2020, 2021; OECD). Mobility can occur either across generations, thus in comparison to the parental status (inter-generational mobility), or within an individual's own life (intra-generational mobility) (OECD). The concept of social mobility is intrinsically linked to inequalities, which can be vertical or horizontal (Funjika & Gisselquist, 2020). Vertical inequalities are defined as the inequalities present at the individual level, or among households; whereas by horizontal inequalities it is meant the inequalities – occurring in different dimensions, including the social, political and economic spheres – present

¹³ The indicators vary according to the individual characteristics (which include, among the most significant, gender, geographical placement, the already-mentioned income and ethnic origin, and whether a disability is present)

¹⁴ World Inequality Database on Education

among different and defined groups (Stewart, 2008, as cited in Funjika & Gisselquist, 2020). Such a relationship can be easily found in the economic concept that was called “The Great Gatsby Curve”. This phenomenon finds a negative relation between economic inequality and intergenerational mobility, at least income-wise (or a positive relationship with intergenerational persistence) (Hassler, et al., 2007; Corak, 2013; Blanden, 2013, as cited in Blanden et al., 2023). Thus, in areas or countries experiencing high levels of economic inequality low intergenerational income mobility has been found, proving an empirical proof of the direct link between the two variables. Finally, the matter is also linked to inequalities in returns on education, which describe the transposal of the social groups’ educational investments into occupation, income, or well-being (Gross et al., 2016).

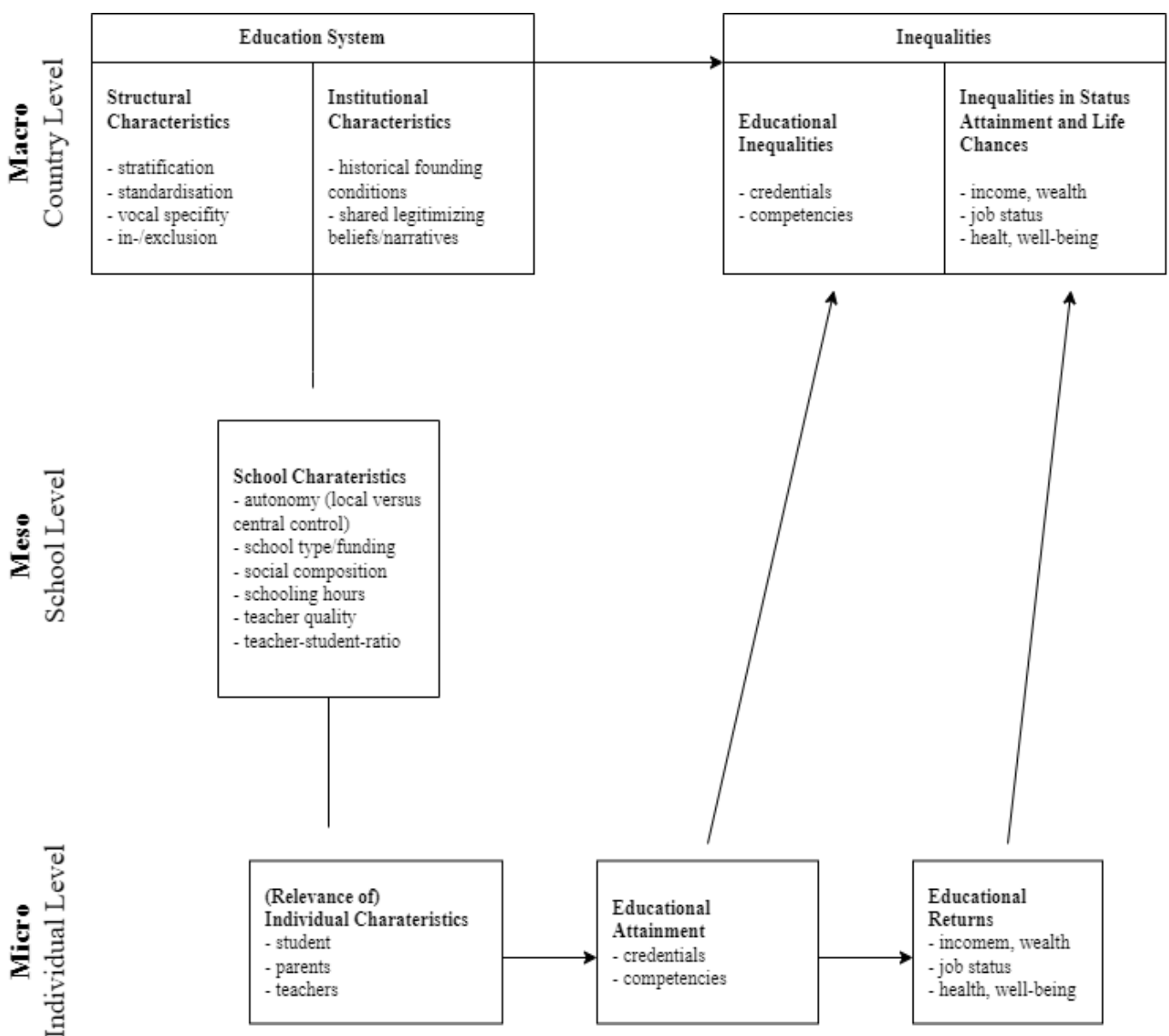
2.2 The macro-meso-micro-model: more on Educational systems and educational inequalities

Even if educational systems are not the only factor influencing educational inequalities, they are definitely able to reproduce and properly shape the latter (Coleman, 1990, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). In the research sector, it is shared that specifically the already described characteristics of Stratification – or tracking – standardization and vocational specificity are the main ones to explain educational inequalities (Gross et al., 2016). However, the matter of the impact of scholastic systems on inequalities results to be a complex matter, that needs to be analyzed by considering the institutional, but also individual and single school’s characteristics dimensions. This multi-level perspective has been developed by Coleman, who further elaborated McClelland’s original models (Coleman, 1990; McClelland, 1961, as cited in Gross et al., 2016), and it is based on the idea that phenomena at a societal level have an impact on individual conditions, which in turn impact the societal level (Gross et al., 2016). The interactions between the macro and micro dimensions – so the society and individual – are facilitated through the meso-level (the institutions).

Applying this model to the link between educational systems and inequalities, it is possible to position the educational system, with its structural and institutional characteristics, and inequalities at the macro level. At the meso-level, the schools’

characteristics are located, and the procedures through which policies are adopted by the different scholastic institutions are explained. Finally, the micro-level corresponds to the significance of the individual characteristics on the educational outcomes and on the inequalities of educational returns. Thus, the macro-level exercises an influence on the individual's position through the meso-level, by implying resources and determining the different educational paths (established by the policies), that direct the individual's decisions. The micro-level ends up influencing again the social structure since the sum of the single decisions and consequences has the power to change the values and occupational trends. In paragraphs 2.2.1, 2.2.2, and 2.2.3 each aspect of this model will be further developed.

Figure 2 – “Education system and Inequalities: macro-meso-micro-model” (Gross et al., 2016), created with draw.io



2.2.1 Addressing the macro-level: The systems' impact on educational inequalities.

Since the theoretical frameworks related to this aspect have been extensively developed in the first chapter, this section will be devoted to presenting the more important theoretical remarks and to the exploration of additional empirical findings, confirming what has been previously stated.

2.2.1.1 *Important Theoretical Remarks*

Among the characteristics of the educational systems that can explain educational inequalities, it is believed that stratification is the one generating more educational inequalities (van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). It is possible to find an explanation to this by identifying two aspects of highly stratified systems: the early allocation of students in differentiated and rigid paths – with low possibilities to switch - and the presence of a number of points of differentiation (including in curricula and learning environments, less present in the Nordics) that cannot be found in comprehensive systems (Gross et al., 2016). The biggest consequence of early selection is the fact that social origin exercises a much more coercive role, since students have been too little in school to compensate for the social and cultural capital deficiencies in their parental home (primary effect). Furthermore, in these instances, parents tend to be directly involved in the decision-making, and not owning enough knowledge on the system in its entirety, they end up choosing the institution they have attended (secondary effect of social origin, which could also partially explain the blocked educational mobility) (Pfeffer, 2008, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). When the teachers are included in the selection, the results do not appear to be better: the presence of stereotypes regarding the origins of the students tends to direct the students towards less challenging, “hierarchically lower”, institutions (Gross et al., 2016). Thus, the selection of the paths is subject to social selectivity, making it less probable for students coming from lower backgrounds to attend higher secondary school (Müller et al, 1997; von Below, 2009, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). The effects explained take place in the discourse also because, the earlier the tracking occurs, the less accurately the parents or teachers will be able to predict the students' skill development (Becker, 2003, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016), resulting in

relying more on stereotypes (Esser, 2000, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). Moving onto the presence of several points of differentiation, the first aspect can be found in the different learning surroundings, i.e. schools, classrooms or other scholastic institutions (Hadjar & Becker, 2016). Indeed, in such a system the learning environment can either be a place favoring socialization (and in more heterogenous classes, it would present higher levels of social capital), or a place where differences get exacerbated (Baumert et al, 2006, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). This is due to the fact that the scholastic environment – mostly homogenous – is often populated by unmotivated and poorly skilled students (Hadjar & Berger, 2010, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). However, even if such an effect is more prominent in highly stratified systems, due to the system’s organizational nature that requires the presence of differences among the facilities in the various school types, it has to be noted that it could be found also in Comprehensive Schooling (for example, the geographical location could impact significantly the learning environment’s composition) (Bol and van de Werfhorst, 2013, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016; Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). In addition to this, the differences among the learning environments find an explanation also in the role of the teacher, who may set lower expectations and accept the existing conditions without aiming at changing them, a practice that could further widen the performance gaps between the different paths (Gross et al., 2016; Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

2.2.1.2 Empirical findings on the role of educational systems on inequalities

First empirical evidence of the impact of stratification on educational inequalities, specifically the dimension of educational attainment, comes from Müller et al. (1997). In this study, it is revealed that in highly stratified countries, like Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, there exists a strong effect of social origin on educational attainment, differently from the Nordics (Müller et al., 1997, as cited in Hadjar & Gross, 2016a). In particular, when stratification is looked at in terms of external differentiation, meaning that students are allocated to different formally recognized programs provided in separate schools¹⁵ (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016), a negative correlation with equality of opportunity is found (Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

¹⁵ Hence, here students’ differentiation is not practiced, for example, through the distribution of students in advanced groups or specific course pathways within the same schools (Dupriez et al., 2008, as cited in Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016)

Interesting results, even if more uncertain, have been retrieved for standardization. Following Allmendinger's theoretical arguments, a low level of standardization should be associated with a greater level of inequality (Allmendinger, 1989). However, according to Pfeffer, standardization appears to have no significant impact on educational inequalities (Pfeffer, 2008, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). On the other hand, other studies confirm the theoretical framework that sees standardization as pivotal to reducing educational inequalities, at least in the educational achievement dimension (van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010; Park, 2013, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). For example, since Japan and Korea adopted measures to reduce standardization, inequalities raised (Park, 2013, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

As seen in the first chapter, many of the considerations drawn for stratified systems apply to the countries with a tradition of vocational-specificity, since the same systems are normally also stratified (Müller and Shavit, 1998, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Empirical findings confirm what has been explored in the previous section regarding parental involvement in the decision on the type of school the students should attend, but with a twist. While it has been highlighted how the teachers can have a role in the reproduction of inequalities related to social origin, it has been observed that the latter are greater in choice-driven systems where the parents have to choose, in comparison to the systems in which teachers have the whole task of selecting (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2012, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

Finally, a persistent link between the social origin (at least in terms of parental educational level) and educational inequalities, described as educational attainment, has been found by Pfeffer, drawn on data on the mobility of 20 countries, recorded in the course of the 20th century (Pfeffer, 2008, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

2.2.2 Addressing the Meso-level: Schools' characteristics on educational inequalities

The impact of school's characteristics on educational inequalities can be looked at from different perspectives. The socioeconomic and ethnic composition of schools has been found to have a huge impact on educational inequalities, defined as achievement (Dunne, 2010, as cited in Dronkers & Korthals, 2016). It has also been

established that school characteristics have a significant impact on educational inequalities, in terms of achievement related to the parental background (Gross et al., 2016). However, other characteristics are believed to have an impact on inequalities, including school autonomy (reforms¹⁶ that aim at increasing this aspect result in being positively correlated with educational attainment – measured in terms of the mean of years completed - but, negatively correlated with equality and intergenerational mobility) (Braga et al., 2013); teacher level of education; governance (how the funds are handled, and evaluations are carried on); whether specific programs thought to reduce inequalities are in place (such as, tutoring, etc.) (Gross et al., 2016). Another fundamental characteristic regards the school's type, i.e. if it is public or private. In these regards, in the literature, it was widespread the idea that private schools were advantageous for disadvantaged students (in terms of socioeconomic status, low results in tests, or behavioral problems) (Coleman, 1982; Greeley, 1985, Hoffer, 1985 as cited in Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011). The theoretical explanation presented for such findings was found in the higher presence of social capital in Private Catholic schools (Coleman, 1988, as cited in Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011). Furthermore, these schools own a lower amount of funds, in comparison to public schools, and have to compete with other institutions, thus they tend to allocate their resources in a way that could ideally promote the quality of their education. A consequence of this is the fact that students are more followed and the ones that in a stratified system would be immediately directed towards a vocational or general track, in this context, are more likely to be allocated in academic tracks (Hoffer, 1985, as cited in Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011), creating a more supportive and encouraging educational environment that could benefit especially less-advantaged students (Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011). Looking at other empirical studies, the results appear to be more ambivalent. In a study on 19 PISA countries, which differentiates among private independent schools, private government-dependent, and public schools, it has been established that the second manages to outperform the latter (in terms of educational achievement, measured through selected PISA data), while private independent schools are less performing than

¹⁶ The set of reforms that are positively correlated with educational attainment, but also negatively related to equality and inter-generational social mobility are called selective (Braga et al., 2013). On the other hand, the ones positively correlated with educational attainment, but associated negatively with intergenerational persistence (which corresponds to a positive correlation with social mobility), and with inequality are called inclusive.

public ones (Donkers & Robert, 2003, 2008a, 2008b, as cited in Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011). However, other studies do not identify particularly significant advantages in private schools in all the countries, contradicting the findings above-mentioned that established a similarity in the private school effect in all the countries analyzed (Vandenberghe & Robin, 2004, as cited in Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2011). Nonetheless, whether the school is public or different kinds of private can generate different effects on educational inequalities.

2.2.3 Addressing the micro-level: the individual aspects on educational inequalities

Analyzing the micro-level results to be fundamental, since in the theoretical framework adopted certain processes of the reproduction of inequalities – which get embedded in the scholastic systems - occur at the individual level (Gross et al., 2016). Starting with Boudon's theorization on social origin, and its primary and secondary effects, it is possible to find an explanation for the impact of individual aspects on educational inequalities, described as educational attainment (Boudon, 1974, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). With primary effects it is meant the differences in educational achievement tied to the resources owned by specific groups. In Bourdieu's terms, these inequalities could be explained by the lack of the three forms of capital – cultural (availability of books or materials required from the school, parental's degree of education), social (possibility and capability to install networks, supportive environment coming from peers and parents), and economic (including the monetary resources available) (Bourdieu, 2011, 1986, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). On the other hand, secondary effects are described as the specific groups' decisions based on their perceptions, resources, constraints, motivations, and investment risk in a transitional moment of their educational career (for example, when it comes to choosing what type of upper secondary school to attend, or whether the students should enroll to tertiary education) (Becker, 2003; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Stocké, 2007, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Whereas motivations represent the perceived benefit of a specific track, and the consideration on whether choosing that specific path would lead to a decline in status or not; while investment risk refers to the costs needed to access that track, related to the predicted probability of successfully finishing it (Becker, 2003, as cited in Gross

et al., 2016). In this model, the perception is pivotal to understand the secondary effects of social origin on educational inequalities, especially considering that it is linked to institutional knowledge¹⁷, which has been found to vary depending on the class or migrant status (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). However, it is not only through institutional knowledge that educational decisions are taken. Indeed, they may also be influenced by their peers' choices (a practice that could end up amplifying the impact of social origin, since there is a tendency to form social networks with similar individuals, coming from similar environments) (McPherson et al., 2001, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

Another characteristic at the individual level that has been extensively studied is the role of expectations on educational performances. The Pygmalion effect, which is a further elaboration of the Mertonian Self-fulfilling prophecy, proves the impact of teachers' expectations on educational inequalities, defined as academic achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). In a field experiment elaborated by Rosenthal and Jacobson, the teachers at a public elementary school were informed of the fact that some of their students had resulted from a Harvard study to be quick developers. In fact, those students had been selected randomly for the experiment. After one year, the students that had been chosen to be part of the "growth spurters" group resulted to have had a higher increase in IQ in comparison to the other students. Furthermore, it was observed that younger students – together with their teachers - were more sensitive to the influence of the manipulation of expectations. This last result could also explain why early tracking leads to higher inequalities coming from social origin, since they would be more sensitive to the weight of class and group-specific expectations (Gross et al., 2016).

Finally, the role of stereotypes, already outlined in the previous sections of this work, has been thoroughly covered in recent studies. In particular, it has been developed the Stereotype Threat effect, which deals with the risk of adhering to the negative stereotypes of one's group of origin (Steele & Aronson, 1995, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Another study showed how such an effect can occur, independently from the oppressed status of the group (Aronson et al., 1999, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

¹⁷ The knowledge that leads educational decisions (Hadjar & Gross, 2016)

Indeed, it has been seen that a group of American white males, that had been previously informed of the fact that their maths tests would have been compared with Asian students' ones, performed worse. This can be explained by the fact that they felt pressure in being compared to other students, probably in their perception even more skilled than them (there is a tendency in the US to think positively about Asians' academic preparation) (Gross et al., 2016). However, such a theorization has been criticized by a study, that considered the effect to be a product of publication biases (Ganley et al., 2013, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). In contrast, a meta-analysis, conducted on published and unpublished works, revealed a strong Stereotype threat effect, whose intensity had no significant correlation with publication status (Appel et al., 2015, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

In the next section, it will be presented the literature review that explores the relationship between educational inequalities and inequalities, at a societal level.

2.3 Educational inequalities on inequalities at the societal level

Economic inequalities are one dimension of inequalities at the societal level, and the link between educational inequalities, in the form of educational attainment, and educational returns, in terms of economic returns, results to be fundamental to explore the causal relationship between education and disparities. In addition, the consequential unequal educational returns in the labor market, that come from the educational inequalities, result to be the base of low social mobility, or of higher inter-generational persistence (Blanden et al., 2023; Bloome et al., 2018). Thus, first educational inequalities are shaped, also thanks to the educational systems, which mostly act as accomplices to the reproduction of social origin's inequalities (Bloome et al., 2018; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Subsequently, inequalities in the job market occur, as a reflection of the (unequal) education that has a predicting role on the students' adult income. The foundation of this argument can be found in the human capital theory (Becker, 1964, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Under this framework, the dimension of educational attainment is seen as crucial, in terms of educational return. Indeed, every year of education is believed to increase income, due to the education's ability to improve cognitive abilities (cognitive capital) (Gross et al., 2016). In turn, cognitive skills get transformed into productivity and are correlated with a higher level

of worth in the process of production. Another model that theorizes the link between education and labor market returns is the Signalling and filter theories (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1974, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). According to this theoretical framework, higher educational qualifications attract employers, who look at them as indicators of an individual's productivity, motivation, and success (Gross et al., 2016). However, if there were an increase in candidates who have higher educational qualifications, the importance given to those qualifications would decrease, giving more space to more personal characteristics. In the job competition model, theorized by Thurow, the individuals who possess higher qualifications end up occupying better positions in the job market (Thurow, 1979, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). This is due to the signaling effect of the acquired qualifications: they both testify to the applicant's motivation and abilities, in the eyes of the recruiter, but they also tell the employer to what extent they will have to spend on their training. Following this line, the labour queue thesis of Thurow supports the claim that the applicants can enhance their chances of securing better jobs positions by obtaining higher educational certificates.

Focusing more on the role of educational systems in the relation between educational inequalities and inequalities in the labour market, the manner in which the institutional settings govern the shift from school to employment must be analyzed (Kerckhoff, 1995, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). Specifically, the way in which vocational training is organized – which is also the product of the historical evolution of the educational systems – is considered to play a fundamental role in the matter (Maurice et al, 1982, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). As already outlined, vocational training can be either organized within the education (qualification-oriented), or it can be developed through the assistance of external organizations that take care of the field training (organization-oriented). In qualification-oriented systems, the link between education and labour results in being stronger, due to the signalling effect of educational qualifications. Furthermore, the reproduction of inequalities through status attainment is stronger in these systems, due also to their stratified nature (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002; Buchmann & Park, 2002; Shavit & Müller, 1998, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). Indeed, stratified systems, as seen, present a differentiation of upper secondary schools, with institutions hierarchically ordered (Becker, 2016; Gross et al., 2016). In these systems, access to higher levels of education is restricted, emphasizing

the signalling effect of the educational qualifications (thanks to the strong level of differentiation, they are considered to be a reliable instrument to prove the students' skills; secondly, its restricted access makes them more valuable, becoming a sign of motivation of the applicant, as well). In these regards, it is also important to recollect the fact that highly stratified systems do not only restrict access to secondary education through different selective mechanisms, but they also tend to block students in fixed paths. Thus, switching track, or accessing tertiary education, especially coming from a more technical institution, will be more complicated, and even discouraged. However, such systems, especially the one disposing of a strong vocational field, help the students in the school-work transitions, for the reasons above-mentioned. On the other hand, the initial paths and influence of social origin on the differentiation lead to educational inequalities, enlarging the class differences in life chances.

Moving onto less standardized systems, here qualifications will result in being less reliable (due to the huge differences between schools, maybe offering also the same curriculum, even in the same educational system), making the link between education and labour market weaker (Allmendinger, 1989; Shavit & Müller, 1998, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). Building on these considerations, it would be logical to expect the reproduction of inequalities to be lower in these systems (Hadjar & Becker, 2016). However, educational inequalities remain higher than in the more standardized systems: the differences in resources, opportunities, quality of education etc., will generate different educational outcomes. Thus, even if the reliability of qualifications decreases, other mechanisms influenced by social origin could enter into place, influencing the reproduction of inequalities. It is worth mentioning that another characteristic of school systems – the size, described as the percentage of students with a tertiary education – could lead to a weaker link between education and labour market returns (Shavit & Müller, 1998, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016), influencing also social mobility¹⁸ (or stabilizing intergenerational persistence) (Bloome et al., 2018). The reasoning behind this could be traced back to Thurow's labour queue thesis: a market that is not as big as the tertiary-educated students would reach educational inflation, making also the competition for higher positions tougher and generating less reproduction of inequalities

¹⁸ It is important to notice that in the paper mentioned, it is stressed how educational expansion – especially if specific policies addressing low-income students are not developed – is not that effective on social mobility.

(in line, with what has already been stated, this would probably be due to the fact that high-qualified candidate would end up adjusting to the market and working in less desirable positions) (Thurow, 1979, as cited in Gross et al., 2016).

Even if the economic dimension of educational returns appears to be the most relevant, since it creates a direct link between education and life chances, other types of educational returns exist (Gross et al., 2016). There are mainly two processes that explain the phenomenon: first, the cognitive skills, acquired through education, make everyday life easier (and it gives the individual the opportunity to participate in the social and political life in a more informed way, for example); in the second place, as already elaborated, educational qualifications have an impact on status attainment and income, which rise life chances, under different aspects. However, this work will limit itself to the economic dimension of educational returns.

2.4 Drawing Conclusions on the Relationship Between Educational Systems and Inequalities

In this chapter a multi-dimensional understanding of educational inequalities, and how they are intertwined with scholastic systems, social origin, and educational returns in life chances has been explored. First, the two lines of relationships between the considered variables have been defined, together with the identification of the type of variable that they represent. Thus, the impact of the educational systems (independent variable) on educational inequalities (dependent variable), moderated by the role of social origin has been established. Later on, a second relationship has been identified and described: the impact of educational inequalities (in this second relationship independent variable) on Inequalities at a societal level (the dependent variable). Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 have been devoted to the clarification of the variables identified and to the further exploration of related aspects.

The second main paragraph of the chapter has introduced the necessity to delve into the matter by adopting a multi-level approach, following Coleman's macro-meso-micro model (Coleman, 1990, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). Applying the theoretical paradigm to the research question, the educational systems are put at the macro-level (societal level). At the meso-level (institution's layer) the school's characteristics, the

way they implement the policies, and the regulations are located (Gross et al., 2016). Finally, the individual's qualities constitute the micro-level (individual level) in the analysis of educational inequalities and inequalities of educational returns. Thus, the educational system is considered to influence the individual through the school's characteristics and its implementation of general educational policies. In turn, the aggregate individual positions, that are shaped by the individuals' choices and their consequences, manage to influence society. It can be derived – by looking at both the theoretical standpoints and the empirical results - that educational inequalities are not simply the product of individual efforts or abilities, but they are also embedded in institutional and societal settings. A description of each aspect of the model (the macro, micro, and meso levels) can be found in the sub-sections of paragraph 2.2, including the theoretical remarks and the empirical data.

Finally, the literature review of the second relationship established has been presented in section 2.3, with a specific focus on the economic dimension of inequalities. Thus, a clear connection between educational inequalities and returns in the labour market has been identified (Blanden et al., 2023; Bloome et al., 2018; Gross et al., 2016). Hence, educational inequalities get shaped through the educational systems that mostly do not manage to compensate for the social origin's inequalities, acting as a mechanism for the reproduction of social disparities (influencing also social mobility). Certain characteristics of the educational systems are taken into account again to describe how educational inequalities are generated and end up influencing educational returns- and life chances, in broader terms.

The next chapter will explore the case study of Norway, which has adopted a comprehensive school system, considered to have a more equalizing effect. Through the analysis of Norwegian educational policies and practices, it could be possible to gain insights into how an educational system - that mostly does not present the main characteristics that have been considered to have a role in the reproduction of inequalities in the society - could manage to mitigate educational inequalities and promote social mobility.

Chapter 3: The Norwegian Educational system - picture of an equalizing model?

3.1 Setting the stage: an introduction to the case study of Norway

The Norwegian educational system has a long history of commitment to equality of educational opportunities and social integration. This has also been confirmed by an OECD study, carried on in the 2000s (Mortimore et al., 2004; Opheim, 2004, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). According to the latter, the Norwegian system is highly effective and has clearly put at the center the values of equality (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Indeed, Norway has a long history of exercising this practice, using it as a tool for the development of society. In these regards, Education has always been intermingled with the topics of Norwegian nationalism – with the aim of creating a unitary identity – and the development of the welfare state (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Wiborg, 2004; Wiig, 2023).

However, the more recent policies of decentralization, which initially aimed mainly at increasing social integration among minorities and compensating for geographical differences, resulted to be an interesting challenge for the country (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Indeed, this more individual-based approach, despite having good intentions, appears as a threat for the goal of safeguarding the right to high-quality education for All, independently from the socio-economic background or geographical position. However, an equity-equality paradigm could manage to provide an explanation of how differentiation, if used to create equality of opportunity, can co-exist with equalitarian standpoints. Despite the possibility of reconciling these two aspects, the Norwegian educational decentralization led to a different path, actually increasing disparities in equality of opportunities.

Nonetheless, a strong National Curriculum policy represents a statement of Norway's goal to achieve equity in educational settings. The policy could be theorized to have had a mitigating effect on inequalities in the new decentralized system since its adoption grants the provision of more or less equal education. In addition, the low stratification present in the Norwegian Educational system, at least at lower educational

levels, could have influenced educational inequalities, in terms of outcomes and enrollment, even if they did not disappear. However, the relationship between these characteristics, as they appear in the literature, and the data available on the Norwegian system needs to be confirmed by further research.

This chapter aims to establish the links between the classification that emerged from the literature, from which stratification and standardization emerged as essential characteristics of the systems to develop discourses on social equality, and the empirical findings, based on the data on the system coming from official sources. It will explore the matter by first revising the historical evolution of the system, together with the reasons that inspired it. Through this analysis, it will be possible to determine the qualities and the flaws characterizing what appears as an (almost) perfect system, offering possible lessons even for other countries struggling with similar challenges.

3.2 The historical evolution of the Norwegian system

In order to properly understand how the Norwegian educational system affects educational inequalities, and later on the disparities in life, it is of utmost importance to outline the characteristics of the system. In this context, it results necessary to grasp how the latter evolved and why it took a certain path, to answer to which needs? Hence, the next paragraph will try to provide replies to the questions that arose.

3.2.1 An historical background of the Norwegian educational system's development: from the 18th century to recent days

Two main topics can be considered to be directly intermingled with the evolution of the Norwegian educational system: Christianity and the development of the welfare state (Wiig, 2023). During the 18th century, Christian IV – the king of Denmark and Norway – aspired to have subjects with a solid religious belief and good morals. In relation to this, baptism was considered a fundamental practice for human development, to the extent that without that practice the citizens were prevented from working or marrying (Opplandsarkivet, 2023, as cited in Wiig, 2023). Thus, school was interpreted as the practice through which the citizens could retrieve the necessary knowledge to properly understand baptism and to correctly read the bible, among the various aspects of the Christian IV's state-managed pietism (thus, ensuring that everyone had an

adequate foundation for living according to pietistic Lutheran principles) (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Wiig, 2023). It is for these reasons - and mainly with the goal in mind to link education to the church - that the king passed two laws in 1739, which introduced the public schools in the countryside (“allmueskolen”), and regulations on the previously called “the Latin school” (then under the name of “scholar’s school”, or “den lærde skolen”). This event established mandatory education for the ones who were not already attending private schools (Volckmar, 2018). The beginning of social reforms, that then shaped the Nordic welfare state as it is known today, can be properly traced back to this period (Thorkildsen, 2010, as cited in Wiig, 2023). Indeed, pietism, the Christian Lutheran current that was widespread in the area at the time, played a pivotal role in the affirmation of universalism, as a religious movement (Wiig, 2023). The latter believed in the opportunity for all human beings to eventually reach the salvation, that could be achieved – among the other things - by helping the ones in need and reserving the same treatment to everybody, since God was believed to look at any person in the same way. Under this paradigm, it becomes clear how people start thinking at inclusive and just policies, not only for them, but to fulfill the others’ needs, as well. It is from the 1830s onwards that Christianity started exercising less of an important role in education (Volckmar, 2018; Wiig, 2023). Thus, a wave of liberalism encouraged a reform of the educational system, now focusing more on the values of democracy and Norwegian nationalism (Wiig, 2023). Two main goals can be found in this new urge to change the system: on one side, the idea of creating a feeling of unity, and on the other hand the wish to cultivate every talent since they could potentially lead to socio-economic returns. This is how the concept of School for All started to be shaped: looking towards France the first public school that could guarantee access to all, independently from social position, was established (Thuen, 2017, as cited in Wiig, 2023). Thus, in 1848 the first law on proper public schooling in the cities was developed. Under this law, the city councils were required to provide financial resources to help the ones in need to access schooling. From more or less the middle of this century, until the ‘30s of the following one, it is possible to start speaking about nation-state schools because of the link between scholastic reforms and nationalism (that influenced schools in highlighting national culture, history, and language) (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014).

Only in 1869, it is possible to properly talk about the dawns of comprehensive schooling (Wiig, 2023). This reform aimed at providing a continuous and interconnected educational experience (Thuen, 2017, as cited in Wiig, 2023), by splitting the system into “allmueskole” (primary school), “middelskole” (lower secondary school), and “gymnas” (upper secondary school) (Wiig, 2023). A date of great importance in the history of the evolution of the Norwegian educational system is 1889. Through the “Primary School Act” – also referred to as “The Folk School Act of 1889” – free comprehensive schools of 5 years for children coming from all different socio-economic backgrounds, were put in place (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Volckmar, 2018). These schools are finally managed by municipal politicians, loosening the church’s domain on education (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Furthermore, Norway witnessed a replacement of the old Latin and bourgeois schools in the cities with middle schools, while the Latin curricula present in gymnasiums were substituted to develop the latter as general education institutions. It is not completely correct to consider this the end of the church's involvement in educational matters in Norway because Christianity kept being a focus point in the Folk school, but this aspect started to be accompanied more and more by the need to prepare the students also for professional careers, and the secular life in society (Bull, 2011, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Different reforms moved the educational system towards the Comprehensive school model that is known today. Starting with the implementation of the policy that designated 7-years primary schools for all as the sole recipients of state funding in 1920, bringing the 7-years Folk School for All into existence (thus reducing the middle schools from 4 to 2 years) (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Wiborg, 2004). Another benchmark in the evolution of the Norwegian educational system can be recognized in the year 1936, with the establishment of “The Folk School Act of 1936” (which abolished middle school), highly wanted by the Labour Party, to find a solution to the issue of unequal access to high-quality primary education (Rust, 1989, as cited in Acemoglu et al., 2021; Wiborg, 2004). Later, the Labour Party focused on merging the previously established continuation schools into a comprehensive school, 9-years long (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This became a reality with “The Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act of 1969”, while in 1997 compulsory schooling was extended to 10 years (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Volckmar, 2018; Wiborg, 2004). Going a little

back in time, it is important to notice that among the '70s and the '80s, ideas that seemed to support a liberal shift in educational policies started to spread (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Indeed, even within the Labour Party¹⁹, that had put Norwegian educational system at the center of the reconstruction process of the nation as a welfare state, the idea that the Norwegian welfare state could not survive the globalized world started to be highly shared. Two main points characterized this shift: first, the need to modify the governance of the field, moving towards a management by goals and no longer by regulation, to loosen the state's control, and give more power at the local level, paving the way to decentralization (Slagstad, 1998 ; St.meld.nr. 37, 1990 –1991; Telhaug & Mediås, 2003 ; Volckmar, 2005, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). The second aspect regards the general criticisms towards the western countries' system (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Indeed, the latter was considered not to be able to efficiently provide students with the skills required by this new global and knowledge-based economy. In these regards, in the '70s a first policy introduced the merging of both vocational courses and academic paths into a singular institution. Despite this, the protection of the comprehensive system kept being a fundamental aspect of the Labour Party's agenda, to the point that Norway, differently from Sweden, did not open the doors to private institutions (Volckmar, 2010, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Indeed, while in 1993 Sweden was passing the "Free School Act", Norway reinforced the limitations of the "Private School Act of 1985"²⁰ (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Later, in 1994 a regulation was put in place on the right to upper secondary school. The latter, lasting 3 years, had to provide students either with the necessary knowledge to pursue further studies, or with skills acquired through the vocational specific path. In 1997, the age to enter primary education was reduced to 6 years old, the previously mentioned policy that extended the comprehensive schooling to 10 years. In addition, it introduced

¹⁹ The Labour Party stayed in office during the crucial years of Norway's reconstruction, as a new welfare state (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This was achieved also thanks to the transformation from a workers' party to a party with social democratic values, which it had gone through during the interwar years. It got in office mainly from 1935 (the first time it entered the government) to 1965, with almost no interruption.

²⁰ This tradition almost risked to be broken in 2003, with a Norwegian "Free School Act", pushed by the right-wing government (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Differently from Sweden, this regulation prohibited to profit from running schools (Volckmar, 2010, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). However, the government- coalition including the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Centre Party (red-green coalition), that entered in-office in 2005, found it highly controversial (Dieudè, 2023; Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), and replied by implementing a more restrictive regulation of private schools, closer to the one approved in 1985 (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014).

a national curriculum²¹, which was supposed to be the base of the idea of a common program for all students (Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, 1996, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This aspect appears extremely interesting, because it has not only been considered peculiar of Norway (Ahonen, 2001, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), but it has also breached the principle of the governance by goals, imposed by the new liberal standpoint (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). The “Education Act of 1998” was the culmination of these new policies, whose aim was to shape a cohesive and integrated system for students being part of the 16-19-year-old group. Thus, this regulation reinforced the already in-place decentralization policies, highlighting the rights and responsibilities of single students. The extensive legislative efforts to safeguard individual rights, also in other aspects of the welfare state, resulted perfectly aligned with these new directives in the educational sector. Approaching recent years, the last fundamental policy in the history of the evolution of the Norwegian system is the “Knowledge Promotion Reform of 2006”, in which the focus was to prevent educational inequalities, hence reducing inequalities in returns and life chances (St.meld.nr. 16, 2006-2007, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This policy was highly wanted because it was supposed to be an answer to the failures registered in OECD’s national reports, regarding inequalities in outcomes, in relation to the students’ socio-economic background. Indeed, despite the fact that Norway’s policies have a long history of putting at the center the necessity to achieve equality, the educational inequalities, in terms of outcomes, resulted to be higher than in any comparable country (Mortimore et al., 2004; Opheim, 2004, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). The next section will briefly explain the engine behind these policies striving for equality, together with possible arguments to understand this original evolution.

3.2.2 Addressing Educational Needs: A system striving for equality

The rationale behind these policies can be found in the post-Second World War’s context (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Exactly like it is possible to find traces of the history of such an atrocious era in Art. 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Morsink, 2000, as cited in James, 2021), also the Norwegian educational policies post-war testify to the horrors committed in the past (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This is

²¹ This new curriculum, was described in detail, providing clear instructions on what should be taught and at which level (Volckmar, 2005, 2008, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014)

visible in the strive for equality and social integration, that is incarnated in certain policies. It is the example of the recognition of the right to access primary and secondary school either in Sami or Kven languages to Sami or Kven-Finnish origins children (implementation that can be dated back to the '70s). The same search for equality and wish to achieve social integration can also be found in later reforms, even more recent ones. A clear example of this practice can be identified in the “Knowledge Promotion Reform” of 2006, which aimed at increasing the system's decentralization, making the schools and the municipalities more responsible. Indeed, decentralization has always been seen as a tool to reach greater equality by Norwegian policymakers, since it allows the local authorities – who know in detail the needs of the areas they administer - to manage schooling using a personalized to-the-necessities approach. Thus, this practice aims at reducing geographical differences and increasing integration, through the allocation of resources in an equitable way (more to the disadvantaged ones to reach the level of the others, which would allow the system to align with the goal of high-quality education for All). However, the growing decentralization moved rather to a different path: the scholastic sector started to compete with other areas of administration within the municipalities, and the differences in funds allocation in geographical areas increased, favoring the already privileged regions (In 2010, the richest municipalities spent on the pupils two times the national average distributed per student) (KOSTRA, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014).

However, the reasons for the creation of a system so committed to the dimensions of equality, inclusivity, and integration can be explained also through three other different arguments, that have deeper roots than the post-world War (Wiborg, 2004). The fact that the state started having a more and more prominent involvement in education – which led to the shaping of a public educational system – was considered to be an important precondition to the merging of the primary and lower secondary schools. This point results to be incomplete in explaining the peculiarities of the Norwegian system because it is a characteristic of other systems that are not identifiable with the Nordics, or not even comparable. The second reasoning comes in aid to complete the analysis: it asserts the presence of an egalitarian class, to the point that there was no elite to push towards the maintenance of an extensive private sector of education. With the broadening of primary and secondary school, and the increasing

social intake diversity, politicians aiming to eliminate lower secondary education had a clear path ahead because a comprehensive structure started to be needed to prevent segregation. The third argument finds its origins in the political background, present at the end of the 19th century. The Norwegian sparse population, together with a weak academic tradition and elite, and the presence of an organized peasantry that managed to influence the liberal politicians, helped in creating a radical political scene, in which the shaping of a continuous linear academic structure became possible. In particular, the power of the peasantry was considered to be pivotal in the creation of strong social democratic movements that managed to lead these changes (Esping-Andersen, 1985, as cited in Wiborg, 2004). Finally, an additional fourth motivation is represented by the already-mentioned importance of the aftermath of the World War II (Wiborg, 2004).

3.3 Characteristics of an (almost) perfect-looking model

The Norwegian educational system is often praised for its commitment to the fight against inequalities and for its satisfying outcomes. Indeed, according to the data published by the OECD, Norway appears to be the country with the lowest educational inequalities, in terms of outcomes linked to the different dimensions of socioeconomic background (OECD, 2012, as cited in Volckmar, 2018). Thus, it seems fundamental to analyze the major characteristics of the system and to put them in a social inequality framework. Allmendinger's seminal work on the link between educational systems and outcomes in the labor market presents a typology for educational systems' classification that has been largely used and further developed by later works (see Allmendinger, 1989; Gross et al., 2022; Gross et al., 2016; Zapfe & Gross, 2021). In her study, dated 1989, Norway is extensively analyzed, and its system is put within an early stratification – standardization paradigm. However, the previous section of this work, that analyzed the evolution of the Norwegian educational system, showed how important reforms located later in time, in relation to the paper mentioned, took place. In the literature review process no paper or suitable material presenting an updated evaluation of the Norwegian system within the theoretical framework adopted in this work (overlapping with Allmendinger's typology) was found. Hence, this section will first present the actual structure of the Norwegian educational system, as described by official sources, and will serve as an attempt to position it in the stratification-standardization paradigm

already presented. The next, instead, will incorporate empirical data, linked to the characteristics that will be elaborated.

The Norwegian educational system is characterized by the presence of preschool, accessible to all children aged between 0 to 6 years old (Eurydice; Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Even if this type of schooling is not mandatory, 91.1%²² of children attend it (Maxwell & Bakke, 2019), a policy that has been theoretically evaluated as effective in the fight against educational inequalities, at least regarding gender gap-related outcomes and migration-related disparities (Gross et al., 2022). Furthermore, preschool is one of the possible policy directions to increase instruction time, which is considered to have an equalizing power over educational opportunities – consequently on educational inequalities of outcomes – since it would allow students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds to be more followed, so to potentially compensate for the lack of cultural and social capitals.

Moving towards the compulsory education block: it comprehends both primary and lower secondary education, spanning 10 years in total (as established in the policy of 1997) (Eurydice; Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). So, it welcomes students going from the age of 6 to 16 years old, who will attend 7 years of proper primary school and 3 years of lower secondary school (Eurydice; OECD, 2023). The comprehensive schooling, but also upper secondary education, are regulated by a national curriculum (Eurydice). The National Curriculum, which was supposed to build the foundations for a common program (Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, 1996, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), was already introduced with the reform of 1997, but a more updated version is dated 2020 (Eurydice). This policy is divided in “Core curriculum”, “Subject curricula” and “Framework regulating the distribution of teaching hours per subject” (Eurydice). The first one is supposed to describe the values, together with the goals of schooling – primary, lower, upper secondary, and training – and the knowledge-related factors at the basis of the educational system. In the second instructions on the subjects that the schools have to provide and how they have to be taught are described. The third one represents a technical section, in which the hours to be devoted to each subject are included, a policy that can be associated with a high level of standardization, in

²² According to OECD national report, the percentage of enrollment for 2-years old is 94%, which increases to 97% for 3-year-old, and to 98% for 4 and 5 years-old pupils (OECD, 2023).

Allmendinger's terms (Allmendinger, 1989). Thus, it represents the attempt to provide students with comparable high-quality education, independently from the physical institution they end up attending. However, it is important to consider that with the new policies on decentralization, the level of standardization measured on centralization status is rather low. Indeed, local authorities are the ones managing schools, a policy choice dictated by the idea of allowing them to intervene in specific situations with a tailored approach, especially in scenarios characterized by more disparities (Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Another difference among schools in the comprehensive system regards the possibility of accessing education also in Sami languages, an opportunity that aims at giving equal chances and dignity to minorities. Indeed, with the previous attention given to centralization, trying to reduce the educational inequalities linked to SES, some policies had been considered to be oppressive towards the right of the minorities to preserve their cultural identity (the so-called Sami's Norwegianisation, which was present also in other dimensions of the society). It becomes clear from these considerations how the Norwegian system is constantly looking for an equilibrium between the urge to provide an equitable system – in terms of equalization of input – and an inclusive system that could require more differentiated policies (that can also be found in the 2006 Knowledge Promotion Reform²³). However, to properly understand how equality of educational opportunities and differentiation can coexist, the equity-equality framework in the educational field will be adopted (see Appendix). Summing up, equality is connected to the equalization of treatment, while equity is linked to fairness, only in the moment in which equality of opportunity is a reality (Espinoza, 2007). Thus, assuming this perspective, it becomes clear that the equalization of educational opportunities requires differentiation, especially in the cases in which the circumstances extensively vary. Indeed, the sameness of treatment in a context with students starting from different points will end up – most likely - in the reproduction of the initial conditions (hence, to the reproduction of inequalities). Thus, adopting this paradigm, differentiation and equality in educational opportunities result to be able to co-exist, moderated by equity.

Delving deeper into upper secondary school, the latter is not mandatory, however the enrolment percentage is extremely high (98.1% of students move towards

²³ Which introduced a more tailored on the individual type of education (Blossing et al., 2014)

upper secondary school directly) (Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Here the system, which until now has not presented differentiation per level or curriculum (while still presenting differentiation in the language, and the decentralized governance that should not directly affect the tracking dimension), presents a degree of stratification. However, the fact that stratification does not take place early in the life of students – since comprehensive schooling lasts until they reach 16 years old – prevents certain mechanisms exacerbating educational inequalities from emerging. Indeed, it is believed that when tracking takes place from an early age, it could be less related to their capacities and more to their background (Gross et al., 2016; Hadjar & Becker, 2016). This happens due to a series of reasons, that span from the presence of biases linked to the stereotypes of the students' group of origin, that the educational system does not manage to compensate for (the less time spent in education, the less the latter will manage to overthrow the lacks linked to the socio-economic background), to the lack of knowledge towards the different opportunities (for a more detailed elaboration, see sections “1.3.2 Identifying educational system characteristics, assuming the social inequality perspective”, and “2.2.1 Addressing the macro-level: The systems' impact on educational inequalities.”). Going back to the Norwegian stratification in upper secondary school, students can either choose to enroll in General Upper Secondary education or Vocational training (Eurydice; Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Whereas the first one lasts 3 years, the second one could last between 3-5 years, depending on the specific program (Eurydice; Eurydice). However, access to university remains possible also in the case of enrolment in a vocational path: taking one more year in upper secondary school, once completed the vocational training, would provide the students with the certification to access to university (Eurydice). In the case of the general path, a more or less homogenous education is provided (there is the possibility to choose among five areas, and each program has both Core subjects – common to all paths - and Core curriculum options. The latter can be chosen from different areas, as well) (Eurydice). On the other hand, the vocational path presents 10 specializations to choose from (Norway is one of those countries in which both types of vocational training – school-based and field-training – are highly present) (Eurydice; Traini, 2019).

In conclusion, Norway presents an educational model deeply committed to fighting educational inequalities – and further inequalities in society – incorporating

both the comprehensive school system up to the lower secondary school and a stratified upper secondary type of education. Decentralization and differentiation, taking place in a still highly standardized system – at least in certain dimensions – play their role in the achievement of this balance between equality of opportunity and integration.

3.4 Data on inequalities

Empirical evidence on the functioning of the educational systems across the globe, emerged in a consistent way from the '90s onwards, due to the increased international interest in the matter, and the rise of a new urgency to adopt an international orientation of educational policies (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). The proof of this widespread interest is rooted in the importance that international bodies, including the EU and OECD, have been giving to the educational field. Thus, different studies, ranging from the assessment of the performance of the students, in an international comparative perspective, to the evaluation of the level of different types of educational inequalities within the system have been developed.

Starting on the data on Standardisation, empirical evidence proved the existence of regional differences between schools, both in terms of outcomes, but also of well-being and motivation (Hægeland & Kirkebøen, 2007; Imsen, 2003; Kjærnsli & al., 2007; Olsen & Turmo, 2010; Utdanningsdirektoratet; 2011, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), consistently with the literature and the related empirical findings that see low level of standardization associated with more inequalities. However, according to PISA the Norwegian situation could still be looked at as a victory, since the disparities among schools are limited, if compared with the ones in other countries (and the differences among students occur more within the singular schools than among the different schools themselves) (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). A possible policy that could be considered to have had a mitigating effect on differences, at least in relation to the other countries – even if empirical evidence has yet to be found - could be the one of the National Curriculum that identifies clear objectives and strict instructions on educational provision, in order to offer quality education all over the country. Despite this, looking at the Norwegian more recent policies and the data available it seems clear that the concept of School for All, independently from the geographical allocation, has not been fully reached (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014).

When it comes to analyzing the data on the effect of low stratification, which is an intrinsic characteristic of comprehensive systems of primary and lower secondary schooling, they appear to be a success for the Norwegian system. Indeed, in the middle of the 20th century, when the Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act of 1969 had still not been promulgated, educational outcomes linked to socioeconomic background were high. For example, in 1963, just 3% of fishermen's children had the competencies required for the exam that gave access to university. In the same years, 60% of children coming from families of academics or high-ranking government authorities received the required education to attend academic tertiary education (Vangsnes, 1967, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). However, even if the reforms of the '60s and '70s, focused on the expansion of comprehensive schooling, deeply changed the situation, educational inequalities are still present, even in the lower levels – almost non-stratified - of education. In these regards, a national study carried on in 2010, proved the correlation between the parental level of education and the children's results, already at the 5th and 8th grade (and the students that have low outcomes at the 5th level, maintain the trend at the 8th) (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2011, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Moving to higher levels, there are little changes in their academic performance (with the same students systemically achieving worse results than their higher-achieving peers). According to PISA 2009, educational inequalities in terms of reading outcomes have been found, even though such disparities have resulted to be lower in the Nordics, in comparison to other OECD countries (Olsen & Turmo 2010, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). When inequalities in educational outcomes are correlated to the migration status, the children of immigrants achieve lower results than the Norwegians. However, it results that second-generation immigrants manage to overcome – at least in part – the disadvantage (Hægeland & Kirkebøen, 2007; Bachmann et al., 2010, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). These results could still be understood under the paradigm of high decentralization, which does not allow to provide an equal – but not even equitable (because the disadvantaged schools are the ones that suffer the most from these policies, in terms of funds allocation) – education. However, empirical studies still ought to establish such a relationship, which will imply that the dimension of decentralization would extensively outweigh the positive effects of a low-stratified system, at least in the phase of comprehensive schooling.

In this context, it seems fair to state that even if challenges for the Norwegian educational system as a whole persist, comprehensive schooling produced interesting changes, effectively - even if not fully – reducing the educational inequalities (described by the socioeconomic background), in terms of enrolment and outcomes. A possible topic that the research field could aim to investigate would be which characteristics and specific policies of the system end up exacerbating and reproducing inequalities, and how they influence each other (which ones have a more prominent effect, outweighing the impact of the others).

3.5 Concluding remarks: is the Norwegian system as perfect as it seems? What can be learnt from the Norwegian experience and what can be rethought

Even if Norwegian educational system is looked at as a model for reaching equality in education, it presents important challenges. Starting with its strengths, the comprehensive schooling allows children from 6 to 16 years old to receive good-quality education, more or less homogenous (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). With the stratification taking place later in life, issues related to early tracking are avoided, or significantly reduced (Gross et al., 2016; Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

Moving towards its Achilles' heel, the decentralization that the system has more recently gone through, managed to accentuate the differences among the regions, instead of reducing them, due to the unequal allocation of funds (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Despite this, the system has shown success in social integration and in meeting the needs of minorities, partly due to its organizational structure.

Comparatively, Norway presents low regional differences among schools, which could maybe be justified by the presence of a National Curriculum policy. The latter gives strict instructions on the common knowledge the schools have to provide the students with, including how the programs have to be taught (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Thus, even if spending among schools and governance differ – with richer municipalities investing way more than the disadvantaged areas (KOSTRA, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014) – there is an attempt to provide the same academic

knowledge, with the only difference being the choice of language to attend primary and lower secondary education (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014).

While Norway incarnates an interesting example of a model with relatively low socioeconomic educational inequalities, there is still work to be done to face its challenges (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). In the future efforts on reducing the impact of decentralization on educational opportunities and creating policies to ensure a distribution of resources could be carried out. Even if the Norwegian educational system is not perfect, it provides lessons for countries striving for equitable schooling systems. A path towards reducing educational inequalities could be established through a careful adaptation of the strong characteristics of the Norwegian system, together with the needed modifications.

Conclusion

The topic of education, from World War II onwards, has gained back its importance, since it has started to be considered, among the various things, as a powerful way to prevent the horrors the globe had just undergone (James, 2021). Traces of this renewed importance can be found in a variety of international documents, ranging from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, from which other binding treaties took inspiration – including, for example, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (De Baets, 2009) – to the Millennium Development Goals (Jacob & Holsinger, 2009). However, the theme of educational inequalities, and the consequent disparities in educational returns, has been a recurring topic linked to the contemporary educational discourse. A common denominator, that is often accused of acting as a catalyzer for the reproduction of inequalities, through the affirmation of educational inequalities, is the educational system (Allmendinger, 1989; Kerckhoff, 2001; Veselý, 2012, as cited in Begu, 2017; Gross et al., 2016; Stiglitz, 1973; Triventi, Skopek, et al., 2016). Thus, in Weberian's terms, the clash among classes starts with the differentiation among schools: students get allocated in the different institutions in a hierarchical way, having consistently low opportunities to mobilize from their original socio-economic status (Becker, 2016). Once this relationship is considered to exist, it is possible to: either adopt a functionalist perspective that sees the disparities as a consequence of an efficient balance between equity and efficiency, since the differentiation – even if not fair in many circumstances – is necessary to educate the needed experts for the different sectors of the labor market; or to challenge this idea and try to better understand how, and to what extent the scholastic systems end up influencing inequalities in education and in returns, with the aim to reach a more equitable society, where knowledge is not prohibited to anybody. This work, with its research question on whether the educational systems affect inequalities (both educational and at a societal level), and the related queries that want to investigate for which historical reasons, and in which way, chose the latter.

When it comes to understanding the reasons that alimented the creation of a specific type of educational system, it is sufficient to look at their historical experience: which needs did the educational systems have to address? Through which policies did

they try to develop the answers to these needs? Did the latter have the desired effect? The answers to each one of these questions can only be found in the historical path of each separate country, taking into account the influence that global effect and international comparisons had on any nation (Triventi, Kulic, et al., 2016). In the case of Norway multiple reasons, despite the chaos and the strive for equality and integration that the war left led to the creation of a comprehensive system, i.e. of a system that seeks the union of primary and lower secondary school, that is governed by a uniform National curriculum and comprehending heterogenous-level classes (Eurydice; Eurydice; Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Among these, also the presence of an organized and powerful peasantry, together with the growing need for the state to get more involved in the governance of schools, serve as an explanation for the Norwegian experience (Wiborg, 2004).

The discussion related to the ways in which educational systems manage to influence educational inequalities and inequalities in educational return results, instead, more complex. An interesting model to explain these phenomena, found in the literature, is the macro-meso-micro approach (Coleman, 1990, as cited in Gross et al., 2016). According to this, educational systems are posited at the societal level (the macro-level) (Gross et al., 2016). Instead, how the policies and regulations are implemented through the scholastic characteristics constitute the institutional level (meso-level). Finally, the individual level is characterized by the aggregated individual positions, that in turn influence the society. Hence, it is the system that has an impact on the individual-level, through the implementation of the policies and the characteristics at the meso-level. From this framework, it becomes clear how certain characteristics of the educational systems result in being fundamental to analyze the educational inequalities. Stratification, standardization and vocational specificity are the most studied elements in the literature, regarding the exploration of the above-mentioned relationship.

Stratification is considered to have the fault of leading to higher educational inequalities (van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016). This is due mainly to early selection (in which social origin exercises a stronger power in driving choices, both due to stereotypes, and lack of knowledge) and differentiation among several aspects (such as schools, environments, and curricula, that could lead to acquiring less social and cultural capital) (Gross et al., 2016; Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

In these regards, an empirical study demonstrates that in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland - highly stratified countries – social origin strongly affects educational attainment (Müller et al., 1997, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

Standardization is defined as the extent to which the quality of education is homogenously spread in the nation (Allmendinger, 1989). On one side, highly standardized systems could lead to mild personal differences in the job market, while, on the other hand, it could still be problematic for the less-advantaged students (because they would encounter more competition in the job market, since the educational certificates would matter more and the pupils coming from a less-advantaged background would have less opportunities to outperform their peers)(Gross et al., 2016). Empirically, not everybody agrees on the validity of Allmendinger's hypothesis that more standardized systems generate less educational inequalities.

Vocational specific systems share the considerations made for stratified – or highly differentiated – systems, since they generally overlap with the latter. This variable simply tells more about the relationship between schools and the labor market, and it is fundamental to understand how inequalities in educational returns are shaped (Maurice et al, 1982, as cited in Hadjar & Becker, 2016).

Norway, for example, presents a relatively non-stratified system, at least at lower levels of education, while being highly standardized and lowly centralized at the same time. It is standardized in terms of quality of education because of the policy of National Curriculum (Eurydice), aiming at giving the foundation for a common program to allow any student from any socio-economic background to access the same quality and level of schools (Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, 1996, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Lowly centralized (and in this sense also standardized) because more recent reforms led to a decentralization of the system – now more governed by the local authorities – having in mind the idea to provide the different critical situations with an ad hoc approach, and to guarantee higher social integration (Maxwell & Bakke, 2019). Thus, Norway is constantly looking for a balance between the desire to provide equal – in terms of sameness – education and an inclusive, differentiated system, still struggling to find the right variable to mediate the two. Indeed, empirically, it is clear that there are differences among the schools of the

various areas (Hægeland & Kirkebøen, 2007; Imsen, 2003; Kjærnsli & al., 2007; Olsen & Turmo, 2010; Utdanningsdirektoratet; 2011, as cited in Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), but they are comparatively lower (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Hence, Norway could be a case to take inspiration from, even if it still has to face its own challenges.

Taking in mind these aspects, finally, it is possible to establish a relationship between educational inequalities and inequalities in educational returns. Human capital theory starts from the idea that education enhances cognitive abilities and productivity, while signalling and filter theories recognize the value of educational qualifications in the job market (Gross et al., 2016). In stratified systems, since access to education is restricted, the signaling effect of the qualifications is emphasized, exacerbating educational inequalities linked to social origin. Instead, the low reliability of educational qualifications in less standardized systems could lead to less educational inequalities, even though other mechanisms linked to social origin could enter in place perpetuating disparities (Hadjar & Becker, 2016). In conclusion, vocational systems contribute in strengthening inequalities, as they are often found in highly stratified systems. On the other hand, they have the merit of allowing students to specialize in a given sector, equipping them with the necessary abilities to be positioned in the job market.

Gaining a deep understanding of these dynamics is essential for building a more equitable society, through fair and inclusive educational policies. The Norwegian model, known for its equalizing effect, can serve as a guide for achieving fairness in the educational setting, and with it a more just society. However, it seems clear that further research and adjustments will be necessary. The path to educational equality is challenging, yet by taking inspiration from the positive examples the globe disposes of, it does not appear impossible to aim at the reduction of inequalities – educationally-wise and, in broader terms, at the societal level.

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Appendix - Defining Equality and Equity in the educational discourse

This appendix will be devoted to analyzing further in detail the differentiation between Equity and Equality in the educational setting. These concepts could be particularly useful to complete the elaboration on the topic of the coexistence of equality of educational opportunities and differentiation. The words equity and equality are often considered to be synonyms, however it does not appear to be the case (Lerner, 1974; Warner, 1985, as cited in Espinoza, 2007). To provide a general definition, in the term “equity” certain types of individual considerations are taken into account, and it is linked more with the concept of fairness (Corson, 2001, as cited in Espinoza, 2007). On the other hand, “equality” defines the behavior of treating every individual in the same way. Thus, in the concept of equality only the quantitative assessment plays a pivotal role, while in equity both the quantitative assessment and a moral component have a weight, to the extent that the specific notions of a law could even be overlooked, in favor of the “spirit of the law” (Bronfenbrenner, 1973; Gans, 1973; Konvitz, 1973; Jones-Wilson, 1986, as cited in Espinoza, 2007). It follows that equity could lead to more problematic considerations, since individuals have different conceptions of justice and their knowledge on the matters appears to be often limited (Harvey & Klein, 1985, as cited in Espinoza, 2007). According to Espinoza, equity is normally adopted by the human capital theorists and is based on utilitarian reasonings (Bentham, 1948; Rawls, 1971; Strike, 1979; House, 1980, as cited in Espinoza, 2007), meaning that it advocates for fairness in competition, but it accepts the possibility to reach different results (Espinoza, 2007). Equality, instead, is more related to the concept of equality of outputs (Strike, 1985, as cited in Espinoza, 2007), key component of the social-democratic ideal. What results clear from the relationship between these two aspects is that it is an indirect one: achieving more equity will mean reaching less equality, since it will be put more attention on the individual needs of the disadvantaged and this will imply a differentiation in treatment (Rawls, 1971; Gans, 1973, as cited in Espinoza, 2007).