MODULE 1 - Education inequalities and social cohesion

Education inequalities have to be understood in a broader frame of social inequalities. How are societies stratified? What makes some differences become inequalities? Why are some of these inequalities considered fair while others are not? How education inequalities are linked to social stratification?

In order to address these questions, the first module of this course introduces some elements that are key to understand how contemporary societies are stratified according to some individual and group characteristics of the population. In addition, it also focuses on the role of education in the production, reproduction and eventual breakup of the social mechanisms that lead to social inequalities. This initial module is relevant for understanding the other modules, as it will set the scene for analysing the causes and the potential solutions of school segregation. The module provides a common basis for following the overall course, regardless of the previous training/education of participants.

Objectives of the module: This Unit provides some basic theoretical and analytical tools to understand the role of education in the reproduction of social inequalities. In particular, the module objectives are:

- To reflect on the relationship between justice, equity and education.
- To explore the role of education in the reproduction of (social) inequalities.

Outline of the module: This module is structured in two units, which are related to the abovementioned objectives.

Unit 1. Education, justice and equality of opportunities offers an overview of the general approach to the Social Structure analysis and the main axis of social inequalities. It also broadly presents the main theoretical debates around social justice following the contributions of political philosophy. In addition, it presents three key dimensions to assess education inequalities: the access to, the process of, and the outcomes from education.

Unit 2. The reproduction of education inequalities specifically explores the role of education in the reproduction of social inequalities by highlighting the political component of equity. It uses the analytical dimensions of access, process and outcomes to reflect on the role of the education system, schools, teachers, students and their families to provide a wider understanding of the dimensions where education inequalities are produced, and the mechanisms that operate in each of them.

Unit 1. Education, justice and equality of opportunities

In this unit we will delve into the main aspects of the social structure, paying special attention to the connection between difference and inequality.

Thus, this unit explores how some differences among the population constitute structural axis of inequality that end up having an impact on the opportunities that the different social groups possess, and on the fairness of society.

We address the following questions:

- When does difference become inequality?
- When is inequality (un)fair?
- How can educational inequality be analysed?

In order to structure the material, we split this Unit into three main topics:

Social Structure and social inequalities; Theories of justice; and Analysing educational inequalities: access, process and outcomes of education.

1.1.   Social Structure and social inequalities

Advanced societies have reached high levels of organizational complexity. Rules, norms, customs, habits, all of them contribute to shaping structured social institutions and social relations. Social sciences have long addressed questions such as: How these structures are

defined? Or why and how are they maintained?

Some **differences** among people are the basis of the definition of **structures of inequality**. This is, for instance, the case of the differences between men and women, on which the structure of inequality, that is the patriarchy, is built. In this case, biological or morphological differences become inequalities when rules, norms, customs and habits -among others- that are based on these differences, lead to unequal rights and opportunities depending on which group people belongs to.

> **Know more about this topic**
>
> Warwick-Booth, Louise. (2013). Social Inequality. London: SAGE (available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272148216_Social_Inequality, last accessed 12 May 2020).

A well-known example is the gender pay gap. As it can be seen in the following infographic, for all European countries, it continues to be a wide salary difference between men and women for the same labour sector.

Differences in the ethnicity could also lead to unequal opportunities in society. The unequal treatment by social institutions based on ethnicity, namely, racism, defines a second axis of structural inequality.

A third axis, social class, is defined by the position that each person occupies in the labour market structure, and his/her social relations of production and reproduction. Classism is the uneven treatment of some person or social group based on his/her/their class position in the social structure. The lower the position the higher the discrimination that the person suffers.

Class inequalities do not only affect the income level, but the type of profession developed, the level of studies attained, cultural practices or the type of social relations a person may have. Furthermore, this affects future opportunities. The following graph shows some indicators of inequality according to the family socioeconomic background.

People from richer backgrounds outperform those from poorer families (%)

■ Higher income
■ Lower income
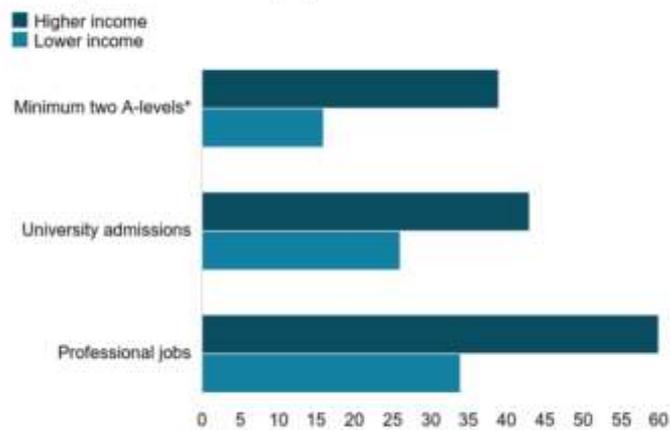
*Low income students are those on free school meals

Source: Social Mobility Commission

1.2.   Theories of Justice

Discussing about inequalities implies a certain understanding of what equality is and, above all, when and why differences among individuals or groups become unfair. Inequality is, in that way, a form of difference that is considered unfair. Assessing the fairness of a system is a normative act based on moral principles, that can or cannot be explicitly recognised. In the same vein, designing and implementing education policies—or any kind of policies—is not a technical issue but has to do with considerations about what fairness and unfairness is.

To provide **equal opportunities** to all children was the paradigmatic function assigned to schools during the expansion of schooling in western countries. It was assumed that by guaranteeing **formal equality** to all

students their educational opportunities would be ensured and, thus, the outcomes of their educational process would be the result of their own effort and merit. Investing in education was therefore considered profitable in utilitarian terms. It was worth to invest public resources in education as the benefits of this investment were higher than its costs and had positive private and social returns.

In the 1970 decade, the publication of A Theory of Justice (Rawls, 1971), questioned the ethical validity of the utilitarian statements. In brief, it discussed the moral value of the benefit for the majority of the population if it was not a benefit for those in most disadvantaged situations. Rawls' book introduced the redistribution principles in the discussion about the fairness of the social system and on the need to invest in primary goods such as education. At the same time, research on the life trajectories of western countries' citizens demonstrated that accessing school was not enough to compensate for initial disparities, and that inequalities were durable despite the expansion of education. There are many discussions and different positions regarding the theories of justice (REF). However, we think that introducing Rawls' contributions is particularly useful for the debates on school segregation, as it specifically addresses topics around redistribution to maximize the benefit of those who are worst off. Under this perspective, for instance, altering the rules of school admission would be fair if it improves the situation of the most disadvantaged students. Likewise, it would also be justified to invest more resources—both material and human—in those schools enrolling higher percentages of vulnerable students than in those that do not. That is why, under Rawls' approach, equity is not achieved by the equal treatment but by the differential treatment that benefit those in the worst situation.

Since then, debates around the fairness of education system have incorporated new dimensions that reflect the increasing recognition and awareness about inequalities that are not only reproduced by the education system but also produced within it. In brief, these debates wonder which should be the conditions to make education systems compensating for initial inequalities.

In this vein, the recognition and visibility of differences, as well as their value in the education systems, have been a major concern for those focused on the equality of conditions. It is not enough to compensate for situations of initial inequality, trying to homogenise—and normalise—all children's abilities, tastes, and cultural assets. To value all children equally, and to incorporate them into the commonness of the educational process, education systems need to account for different dimensions of inequality, including the (lack of) representation of disadvantaged groups both in the contents of education and in decision structures of the education system (Fraser, 1995; Lynch & Baker, 2005).

1.3.   Analysing educational inequalities: access, process, and outcomes of education

So far, we have seen that there are three main axes around which inequalities are structured (class, gender, race); and that assessing -and addressing- the (un)fairness of any situation implies normative or moral statements.

In the field of education, there are different approaches to analyse inequalities, that are related to the different dimensions of social -or educational- justice. In this module we use the dimensions of access, process, and outcomes.

Know more about this topic

Tomasevski, T. *Human Rights Obligations: Making Education Available, Accessible, Acceptable and Adaptable–the Right to Education*.

However, there is not a unique approach, and authors such as Katerina Tomasevski (2006) elaborated sound alternatives that can be complementary.

Access to education is related to formal equity. Guaranteeing that all children can have access to education responds to the principle of **equal opportunities**. In order to analyse the extent to which access is guaranteed, it is not enough to know the percentage of enrolment at different levels of education but it is also relevant to assess the type of schools -public or private; academic or vocational-, the educational levels and other out-of-school educational resources that are available for the different social groups.

The **process** within the education system is central to understand how and why some inequalities prevail. **Learning conditions** are the focus of the analysis of this dimension insofar as there are features of education systems and schools that unevenly affect students depending on their social, economic, or cultural characteristics. Elements such as the impact of teacherstudent ratios, or the school equivalence in terms of quality are relevant to assess and address inequalities in education processes. Tomasevski talks about the importance of dimensions such as adaptability (to diverse and different students with specific needs); affordability (costs of schooling); and acceptability (quality of school processes), which are all aspects of what can be understood as central aspects of equality in education processes.

Outputs of education such as the grades obtained at the end of each education level, or the length of each educational trajectory have impacts on other social spheres as employment or economy. In this vein, **inequalities of knowledge** among different social groups at the end of their educational trajectories impact on the **outcomes** in terms of inclusion in the labour market, of social cohesion, of economic sustainability, and so on.

Unit 2. The reproduction of education inequalities

In this unit we introduce the most important explanations that the sociology of education has provided about the role of education in the reproduction of social -and educational- inequalities. Thus, we summarise the way different theoretical trends have addressed this issue by focusing on different dimensions and actors of the educational process.

In this unit we address the following questions:

- How can educational inequalities be explained?
- Which are the main theoretical approaches to education inequalities from the sociology of education?

The Block is split in two broad sections:

1) Schools as neutral spaces. Individualism, effort, and merit,
2) Beyond access. Critical theories.

2.1. Schools as neutral spaces. Individualism, effort, and merit

The raise of massive education in the post-WWII period enhanced **meritocracy** as the guiding principle of a system aiming to provide equal opportunities to all children, and to reward their efforts and merits. Meritocratic approaches in social sciences and, in particular, in sociology of education, argue that individuals' characteristics and behaviours are the most relevant factors to explain and justify educational inequalities once access is guaranteed for all.

These approaches carry three main assumptions.

- First, they believe that each individual educational situation is the result of a combination of each one's abilities, interests, and efforts.
- Second, they consider that schools are neutral and distribute their rewards impartially, according to each student's abilities and efforts.
- Third, they also assume that there is a correspondence between the educational trajectory of each student and his/her social position.

Within this scheme, schools have two main functions, which reflect the broad understanding of functionalist theories in education. **Functionalists** consider that each social institution must satisfy specific social needs, and that they have to be articulated with the rest of social institutions. First, schools have to educate social norms and values and, as such, they have a socialisation function. They have also to prepare individuals for occupying differentiated social positions in the labour market, so they must also develop a selective function. In order to work fairly and properly, schools need to guarantee that all students share their starting point, and thus all are provided with the same opportunities to take advantage of their potential assets. This in turn will benefit the overall society.

As we already mentioned, according to this perspective, the differences among educational outputs can be explained by the different attitudes and aspirations, abilities and interests, and effort of the students. Consequently, functionalist theories do not look inside the schools to delve into the factors that make some students obtain better results than others. These approaches assume that schools are neutral in distributing rewards, that the values they transmit are objective, and that all students are equally treated by the institution.

Considering that the different social institutions are articulated in such a way that are functional to each other, these approaches sustain that there is almost a perfect parallelism between the education system, the labour market and the social structure.

In a nutshell, the main argument is that considering the fact that each person acquires his/her position in the social structure due to his/her success in the education system (he/she has taken advantage of the opportunities), then social inequalities cannot be considered unfair, as they will be only the result of effort, motivation and merit.

Education system → Labour market → Social structure
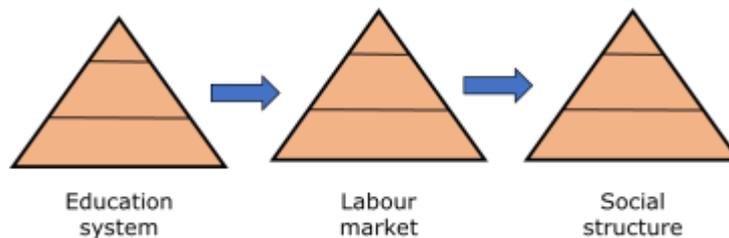
These approaches have received **criticisms** since the 1970 decade, based on their limits to explain **the durability of inequalities** and the biased distribution of rewards in the education system (see next section). Despite these criticisms, individualistic explanations are still central for many politicians, economists or even teachers to justify education inequalities.

2.2. Beyond access. Critical theories

In the 1970s decade, many academics started questioning the limitations of the explanations given by functionalist theories and the meritocratic approaches to understand the reproduction of education inequalities. Critical theories stressed different aspects of education that could contribute to better understand educational inequalities and their translation into social inequalities.

From the **correspondence theory (Bowles and Gintis)**, different authors have revealed that, even guaranteeing access, inequalities prevail in the transition from education to work that reflect both the different starting points of the students in terms of social class and the uneven distribution of the students in the different segments of the education system (also highly related to social class). From this perspective, it is understood that the **education system** has been designed to satisfy **employment** needs while maintaining social inequalities. Thus,

different educational trajectories, which are not randomly distributed among social groups, are translated into different -and uneven- positions in the labour market. This correspondence between the way different and related segments of education and employment are organized explains the reproduction of social inequalities.

The Reproduction theory (Bourdieu) considers that the role of schools and the education system are to ensure, by means of symbolic violence, that dominant culture (bourgeois culture) is imposed to all students, no matter their social, cultural or territorial origin. Belonging to dominant or dominated social groups is crucial in order to take advantage of the system and succeed at school. Schools operate by means of an arbitrary pedagogy that presents the culture of the upper-middle class as the only one, and discriminates other cultural expressions. Thus, it is not only economic capital what reproduces inequality, but mainly other forms of capital, such as social, cultural, and symbolic capital.
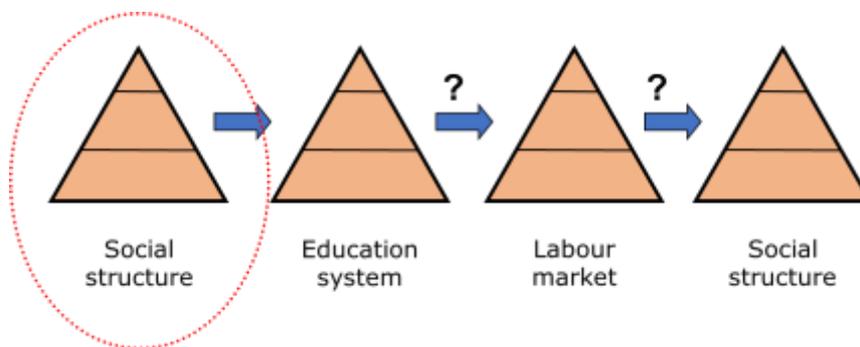
The analysis proposed by this theory opened the floor for many researchers to delve into different dimensions and mechanisms through which education contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. While Bourdieu focused on the structure of inequalities -and on the different capitals and their articulations- other authors looked at other dimensions of the education process that question the assumptions posed by meritocratic approaches.

Focusing in the role of the **schools and the curriculum**, Bernstein revealed that prevalent education codes and pedagogic models are closer to middle-class students than to working-class students. The distance between the content and the sociolinguistic codes used by students at home is very large in the case of working-class students. Schools use the sociolinguistic and the pedagogic codes of the middle class, and as such they undermine the opportunities of workingclass kids.

Teachers have an active role in the production of educational opportunities. With this assumption in mind, Ray Rist analysed the impact of the daily interactions in the classrooms on students' success or failure. In particular, he paid attention to the teachers' labelling practices, which reflect their own -and biased- expectations about different students. These labels, that are unconsciously transmitted by teachers, depend on the social and educational profile of the students, by the experience of teachers themselves, by the characteristics of each students' group and the type of school. Once again, the image of the "ideal pupil" that teachers have is

based on a middle-class model that sets the "normality", to which all students need to fit and against which they are compared.

Finally, **students** are not mere recipients of the social structure, the schools' characteristics, and the teachers' expectations. Contrary, their own attitudes are of crucial importance to understand their educational experiences and trajectories. Weather they are attached to the school culture or resist it in different ways can be also analysed as a mechanism of potential reproduction of educational inequalities (Willis). Students can feel more or less attached to the school depending on their social origins and the meaning and value they give to education. Lack of identification with the values and the objectives of schooling turns into resistance attitudes and several forms of detachment from what schools expect from students.

Activities – Module 1
Education Inequalities and Social Cohesion

Play with the interactive application: 'Inequality is real' (http://inequality.is/real). Try to reflect on the different questions that arise throughout the experience.

1.   What do you think of the income distribution presented in the first graph? Did you expect less, equal or more difference?

2.   What are the main social dimensions or characteristics identified in the example that allow establishing 'personal differences' in relation to the social profile, in general, and the economic salary, specifically?

3.   At the end of this interactive journey, it is concluded that inequality is a 'fixable' aspect. With this objective in mind, 8 central issues are proposed on which to prioritize political intervention if we want to improve equity and reduce the perverse effects of social stratification. Now, try to think about the following questions related to these 8 issues:

   a.   What do you consider priority/central from your specific field of intervention?
   b.   Think of an example, whether of an intervention that is being carried out or one that could be carried out, whose objective is to improve the reduction of social inequality based on any of the 8 areas mentioned.

4.   Finally, the message articulated through this activity is that economic inequality is 'real, personal, expensive, created and fixable'. Make a reflection (maximum half a page) around this central idea that allows you to defend or criticize it in an argumentative way.

Activities – Module 1
Education Inequalities and Social Cohesion

Follow the indications below, step by step, to estimate the presence of inequalities in first person. For the correct performance of this exercise you must add or subtract points according to your personal socio-educational experience. Once the indications have been ended, add up the points earned. Finally, check your result in terms of experienced 'social inequality'.

List of steps:
1. If you are a man: +1 point
2. If you are native: +2 points
3. If you were born abroad: –1 point
4. If your family has university studies: +2 points
5. If you do not speak any co-official language at home: –1 point
6. If you have attended education 0-3: +1 point
    a. If you were also born abroad: +1 point more
    b. If your parents also do not have university studies: +1 point more
7. If you attended a segregated school or with a mostly low social profile: –2 point
8. If you attended a heterogeneous school: +1 point
    a. If your parents also do not have university studies: +1 point more
9. If you attended school trips (only those that include sleeping out): +1 point
10. If you did extracurricular activities: +1 point
    a. If the extracurricular activities were sports: +0 points
    b. If the extracurricular activities were to learn foreign languages: +1 point
    c. If the extracurricular activities were music or art/theatre: +1 point
11. If you did cultural activities as a family: +1 point
12. If you did family trips: +1 point
13. If your parents helped you with your 'homework': +1 point
    a. If your parents also do not have university studies: +1 point more
14. If your parents didn't help you with your 'homework': –1 point
15. If you spent more than 1 hour a day in front of the TV, computer or mobile: –1 point
16. If you did extracurricular summer activities: +1 point
    a. If your parents also do not have university studies: +1 point more
17. If you did school reinforcement classes: +1 point
18. If you have been diagnosed with 'special educational needs': –3 points
    a. If you were diagnosed during early childhood education and you were treated: +2 points
    b. If you were diagnosed during early childhood education but you were NOT treated: +0 points
    c. If you were diagnosed during primary education and you were treated: +1 point
    d. If you were diagnosed during primary education but you were NOT treated: +0 points

Now is the time to calculate your score…

 Once the activity is finished: do you think you are <u>more aware</u> of the subtle presence of situations of social, cultural and educational inequality?
Finally, <u>try to replicate this dynamic</u> with a group of people (students, technicians, other job mates, etc.). Observe and comment with them their reactions.

RESOURCES

READ : [The expert in social mobility who says education cannot make it happen](#) -Reflections by John Goldthorpe

WATCH : [A Thought Experiment: John Rawls](#) ()

[How would you have government intervene on behalf of economic inequality](#)?

Social stratification : Crash Course Sociology#21

[Poverty in Indonesia   : World Bank](#)

PLAY [: Inequality is real](#)