Preventing social segregation to improve equity in education

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In recent years, levels of social segregation have increased in several European capital cities (see here[1]). Against this background, a recent study[2] analyzed to what extent education systems in European countries are socially segregated, and whether social segregation between schools is related to social inequality in student achievement.

Social segregation in education systems

In socially segregated systems, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are unevenly distributed across schools. That is, a disproportionate share of disadvantaged students is clustered in specific schools and hence separated from their advantaged counterparts who attend other schools. Where students are highly socially segregated between schools, resources that contribute to students' educational progression and success are more unequally distributed. An unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources among student populations may lead to inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes, because schools draw on such resources informally in educating students.

This study[2] shows that social segregation in education systems varied substantially across European countries. Segregation was relatively low in Norway, Finland, and Sweden, but considerably higher, for instance, in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Table 1 provides a ranking of countries according to the level of social segregation

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[1] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02723638.2016.1228371
[2] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191491X18303444

in their education system.

The link between social segregation and social inequality in student achievement

The study also examined to what extent social segregation is associated with social inequality in student achievement, that is, the strength of the link between socioeconomic status and student achievement in a given country. Figure 1 shows that there was a moderate positive relationship between segregation and social inequality in achievement. This supports theory in respect to social class inequalities in education being more pronounced in those systems where socially diverse students are

Table 1 Levels of social segregation in European education systems

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Norway	0.090
Finland	0.101
Sweden	0.139
Switzerland	0.146
Iceland	0.150
Great Britain	0.182
Netherlands	0.183
Denmark	0.187
Estonia	0.197
Ireland	0.211
Serbia	0.218
Croatia	0.229
Spain	0.232
Slovenia	0.242
Lithuania	0.246
Average	0.248
Latvia	0.254
Czech Republic	0.276
Germany	0.277
France	0.278
Luxembourg	0.280
Belgium	0.282
Portugal	0.288
Greece	0.292
Austria	0.311
Poland	0.312
Slovakia	0.357
Hungary	0.379
Romania	0.401
Bulgaria	0.456

Note. Greater figures indicate greater social segregation between schools and therefore greater within-school similarity of students along socioeconomic lines. Own calculations, based on PISA 2012 data.

less evenly distributed across schools.

Conclusion

The findings from this cross-national study provide evidence of an important correlate of social segregation in education systems, indicating that social segregation may contribute to the perpetuation of inequality across generations.

Fig. 1 Scatter plot of the index of social segregation and the index of social inequality in achievement.
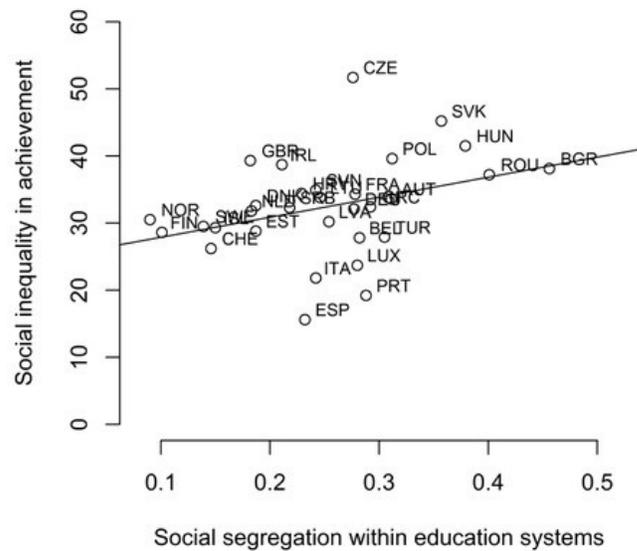
Notes. Abbreviations: AUT: Austria; BEL: Belgium; BGR: Bulgaria; CHE: Switzerland; CZE: Czech Republic; DEU: Germany; DNK: Denmark; ESP: Spain; EST: Estonia; FIN: Finland; FRA: France; GBR: Great Britain; GRC: Greece; HRV: Croatia; HUN: Hungary; IRL: Ireland; ISL: Iceland; LTU: Lithuania; LUX: Luxembourg; LVA: Latvia; NLD: Netherlands; NOR: Norway; POL: Poland; PRT: Portugal; ROU: Romania; SRB: Serbia; SVK: Slovakia; SVN: Slovenia; SWE: Sweden.

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[3] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191491X18303444