

Unified schools and equal opportunity in Europe during the twentieth century

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ABSTRACT

While the principle of equitable schools for all is no longer the subject of debate today, this was not always the case. The Great War played a foundational role in the development of the *école unique* (unified school) in Germany and France, yet it was the Soviet Union that implemented it in 1918, in the service of the Revolution. New educational movements subsequently provided pedagogical models adapted to the democratic reform of schools. However, it was during the three decades following the Second World War that structural reforms changed the landscape of education, with the compulsory schooling age being raised in elementary schools as well as coeducational *collèges* (secondary schools). With its economic crises, the late twentieth century saw the development of training for elites and policies in favor of disadvantaged youth. Cooperation between member states helped to spread a liberal form of management. A key question remains: can today's schools contend with the many differences between children, for instance with respect to gender, social class, culture, language, religion, or academic level?



A poster by Elizaveta Kruglikova advocating female literacy, 1923.

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Blackwell Secondary Modern School, Great Britain, circa 1950. Credit : [Crown copyright.](#)

Compulsory schooling in Europe, different conceptions

In today's Europe, the principle of compulsory schooling that aims to promote equal educational opportunity for all students is a self-evident fact. It is accepted that schools have two missions: to provide the knowledge required to live in our societies, and to prepare individuals to assume specialized duties. Yet there are considerable differences across countries in how these missions are accomplished, for which only history can provide an account.

The point of origin: the First World War

In pre-1914 Europe, there were free elementary schools for children of the people—still largely entrusted to the Church in certain countries—as well as secondary institution that often included elementary classes and were the only path to higher learning, but that charged a fee and were reserved for a minority of the privileged urban youth. The First World War played a foundational role in providing schooling to all children, one that sought to found national unity and provide universal access to the knowledge crucial for social life and the pursuit of subsequent studies for the best students, with no class distinctions.

While France had its share of responsibility in the origins of the conflict, its government successfully gave credence to the notion that it was waging a just war, one that imposed the “Sacred Union” on all the French. In the aftermath of the First Battle of the Marne, the Michelet committee called for free high school for children of the people, which had united to defend the “homeland in danger.” At the end of the war, the Compagnons de l'Université nouvelle (Partners for a New University)—seven still-mobilized military officers who all held degrees in higher education—gave the name of *école unique* to this project, which they presented as the translation of the German *Einheitsschule*. Germany saw the founding in 1919 of the Bund Entschiedener Schulreformer (League of Radical School Reformers), which spread the notion that a unified school was required to revive the German educational system. It nevertheless took until 1920 to see its implementation.

While Germany and France served as outposts, the idea of remedying inequalities in education had been developed by prewar Spain through La Institución Libre de Enseñanza (The Free Institution of Education), which called for an active, non-denominational form of education within a unified and co-educational institution. While in

the United Kingdom grammar schools managed by churches, charitable foundations, or cities continued to provide education for youth after elementary school, it was in the Soviet Union that unified school reforms were pursued with the greatest vigor. In October 1918, Lenin issued an order to implement the “Unified Labor School,” which welcomed students for 9 years, between the ages of 8 and 17. Despite considerable material difficulties, Soviet schools became a model for a large reform movement in Western Europe, as demonstrated by the Cercle de la Russie neuve (Circle of the New Russia), of which Paul Langevin was a founder.

Unified schools and new education

Quite early on, the question of unified schools surpassed the framework of institutional reform and raised questions regarding the type of pedagogical method that should be used if such schools were instituted. Active educators seemed to agree regarding emancipatory policies, which is why the Compagnons de l’Université nouvelle turned to l’École des Roches in France, whose methods were inspired by new English schools. This school, which would later influence Gustave Monod and Jean Zay, was presided over by “captains,” which is to say more advanced students who served as tutors for younger ones. It is important to recall that tutoring derived from the mutual teaching that was practiced during the nineteenth century in Protestant and Anglican Northern Europe.

When the Swiss Adolphe Ferrière internationalized new educational movements in Europe, parties of the reforming left seized upon the goal of society’s democratic revival through school.

Unified schools and equal opportunity during the interwar period

Led by the institutional and pedagogical reform movement, European democratic governments adopted policies designed to broaden youth access to secondary education. For example, the compulsory schooling age was extended to 15 years old in England, and 14 in Italy and France. These measures had greater consequences for girls than boys, for their access to secondary studies had been more restricted.

Running counter to this movement was the 1923 Gentile reform in fascist Italy, which penalized young girls by limiting the education of qualified professionals, while Nazi Germany did not encourage them to nurture such ambitions. On the contrary, in Spain the first two years of the Republican government were a step forward for school construction and the promotion of new pedagogy, to go with the objective of implementing unified and secular schools.

The postwar period, a time of structural reforms

The thirty years following 1945 saw broadened access to higher learning through three driving factors: economic growth, the baby boom, and the technological revolution. The reforms initiated at the time, which were conditioned by the need to adapt the educational system to the system of production, changed the landscape of education in Europe.

The compulsory schooling age in most countries was raised to 15 or 16 years old. Single-sex schools gradually disappeared, such that the educational difference between boys and girls became less evident. Educational systems saw the institution of secondary establishments stripped of both internal tracks and the socially-determined recruitment of their student body. The Soviet Union opened the way, while the first in Western Europe was the United Kingdom’s comprehensive school in 1954. It was only in 1975 that France put an end to its track-based *collège* through reforms for a unified system. Germany preserved its track-based schools until the 2000s.

The situation in postwar Francoist Spain was influenced by educational investment, which was henceforth correlated with socioeconomic development. It was important to combat illiteracy, build schools, extend compulsory schooling, democratize secondary education, and develop professional training and higher technical education.

The effects of economic crises on equal opportunity policies

Two trends redefined the objective of equal educational opportunity in the late twentieth century, substituting the principle of equality of offer with equality of results. First, the consideration given to repetitive economic crises has led to policies that develop elite education and that help underprivileged youth escape a precarious existence. Second, while education remains the prerogative of states, the objectives of convergence among educational systems, which are regularly evaluated using the benchmarking method ("comparison of standardized performance," based on a method from the business world), have spread competition between school establishments, as well as a liberal and decentralized form of management for the "school market." Certain differences, which are the legacy of national histories, remain despite these movements of convergence.

In a first model, all students pursue their compulsory schooling within the same establishment, with no gaps between levels, and without repeating a year. This could be found in Nordic countries—but also in Portugal since 1986—countries that have a low percentage of weak students. The second model, present in German-speaking countries and Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, is characterized by an orientation stage after the elementary level, with different types of education according to the student's level of success. Finally, a third model consists of a common curriculum followed by a division between levels. This model, which is present in Latin and Mediterranean countries, has been the subject of often-lively debates about its structural aspects.

How should the diversity of students be managed?

Whatever the model, a recurring problem emerged in all European countries, one that calls into question the very foundations of a unified school for all. How can schools contend with the many differences between children, including those of gender, social class, culture, language, religion, and academic level? Should the heterogeneity of students be conserved in institutions and classes? Or should homogeneity of groups be organized instead?

It is generally accepted today that the track system produces or exacerbates inequality, although it also appears that unified schools cannot achieve good results without genuine pedagogical differentiation. Teachers should be trained to follow highly different students in their class, and to have them work in small groups beginning with the elementary school level. In Germany, track-based institutions have adopted an organization that is similar to that of unified elementary schools, although they lack up-to-date programs and personalized pedagogical systems based on student evaluation.

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