

# The Polarisation of Educational Outcomes in Spain

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## Resumen

Con un 41%, España tiene una de las tasas más altas de graduación universitaria, entre las personas de 30 a 34 años, en Europa. Al mismo tiempo, el 24% de los estudiantes españoles abandona la educación sin terminar la segunda etapa, teniendo uno de los niveles más altos de fracasos académicos en Europa. Superficialmente al menos, esta yuxtaposición sugiere que el sistema educativo español está fallando y está teniendo éxito al mismo tiempo. El objetivo de esta tesis doctoral es examinar estos resultados polarizados con referencia específica a la estructura de tres pilares de la educación no universitaria, es decir, las escuelas públicas, concertadas y privadas y discernir el peso de la influencia de esta estructura en los resultados educativos. Con elementos tanto cuantitativos como cualitativos, este estudio analiza el perfil de los graduados universitarios e intenta determinar hasta qué punto el tipo de escuela al que asistieron influyó en su trayectoria y por extensión, en resultados tan polarizados. Según este análisis, la estructura de la educación en España, tal como se ha desarrollado en circunstancias socio históricas únicas, refleja un modelo neoliberal y por lo tanto amplifica los resultados observados bajo tal sistema, específicamente la desigualdad y la reproducción social, que resultan del desfavorecimiento social que se muestra a las clases trabajadoras y se ejemplifican en la polarización de los resultados educativos. Los datos y, de hecho, el análisis sobre este tema en general, están limitados, por lo que esta tesis se enmarca en otras estructuras escolares a nivel internacional para comprender por qué los resultados españoles están mucho más polarizados que en otros países, considerando temas como clase socioeconómica, elección de escuela, desigualdad y capital cultural.

## Abstract

At Forty-one percent, Spain has one of the highest rates of third level graduation among 30 to 34 year olds in Europe. At the same time, twenty-four percent of Spanish students drop out of secondary school without finishing, one of the highest levels of academic failure in Europe. Superficially at least, this juxtaposition would suggest that the Spanish education system is both failing and high achieving at the same time. The objective of this PhD thesis is to examine these polarized outcomes with specific reference to the three-pillar structure of non-university education, namely, Public, Concertado and Private schools, and discern the weight of influence this structure is having on educational outcomes. With both quantitative and qualitative elements, this study analyzes the profile of university graduates and attempts to determine to what extent the type of school they attended influenced their trajectory and by extension such polarized outcomes. It is the contention of this analysis that the structure of education in Spain, as it has developed in unique socio-historical circumstances, reflects a neoliberal capitalist model of sorts, and so amplifies the outcomes seen under such a system, specifically, inequality and social reproduction, which result from disfavour shown to the working classes and are exemplified in the polarisation of educational outcomes. The data, and indeed analysis, around this topic are limited and so this thesis is framed against other school structures internationally in an attempt to understand why Spanish outcomes are so much more polarised than they are in other countries, considering such topics as class, school choice, inequality and cultural capital.

**Palabras clave:** Reproducción social, Desigualdad educativa, Capital cultural, Polarización, Resultados educativos

**Keywords:** Social Reproduction, Educational inequality, Cultural Capital, Polarisation, Educational Outcomes, School Choice, Credentialism

## Introduction

There are two striking statistics that emerge from any analysis of Spanish education, whether it be nationally with 'Datos y Cifras', as released annually by the Ministry of Education Culture and Sport ([www.mecd.gob.es](http://www.mecd.gob.es)) or internationally PISA and the OECD. They are the extremely high level of high school dropout which over the last number of years has hovered around the 25% mark. And, the relatively impressive level of third level graduation which, among thirty-somethings is between 34 and 40%. This level of University graduation is amongst the best in Europe but the dropout rate puts Spain next to last among its European counterparts. So, the obvious question arises, why is it that the Spanish education system seems to be doing so well for some and yet failing a quarter of the population?

Stating the obvious, every education system is unique and reflects the sociohistorical trajectory of any given country, and Spain is no different, and so we must reflect on the social and historical contexts which have contributed to creating an education system which produces such polarized results. In terms of structure the most obvious difference between the Spanish system and most of its European counterparts is the three-pillar structure of education, specifically Public, Concertado and Private which was created during the transition to democracy in the 1980's and while there are undoubtedly many factors which go into producing polarized educational outcomes the basis of this doctoral thesis will be to assess, to what extent the structure of the Spanish education system contributes to this problem?

*'All our kids go to University, if they don't get in somewhere on merit, their parents will pay for a private one.'* A Secondary School Concertado Teacher

From the outset, the main hypothesis has been that the structure we have developed here in Spain since the transition to democracy, due to complex socio-cultural circumstances, reflects a neoliberal capitalist model of sorts. The system was not conceived under neoliberal open market ideals, but has developed, due to a confluence of circumstances, to provide choice in education in a way that neoliberals around the world have spent the last forty years trying to impose. We have a system which amplifies characteristics shown under such system, specifically, the provision of choice to parents in terms of where their children are educated. The positioning of the Concertado as a middle ground between public and private, has fostered strong elements of social reproduction and has become representative of identity and culture as they are linked to economics and social class. The provision of choice, particularly when the concept of choice is promoted as part of neoliberal policies, has been shown on an international level to amplify inequality and by extension polarizes educational outcomes. As the quote from the concertado teacher above suggests these schools have become something of a bastion of middle-class Spain, where parents exhibit socially defensive behaviours in order to keep their children on the traditional educational track and by extension protect their social status.

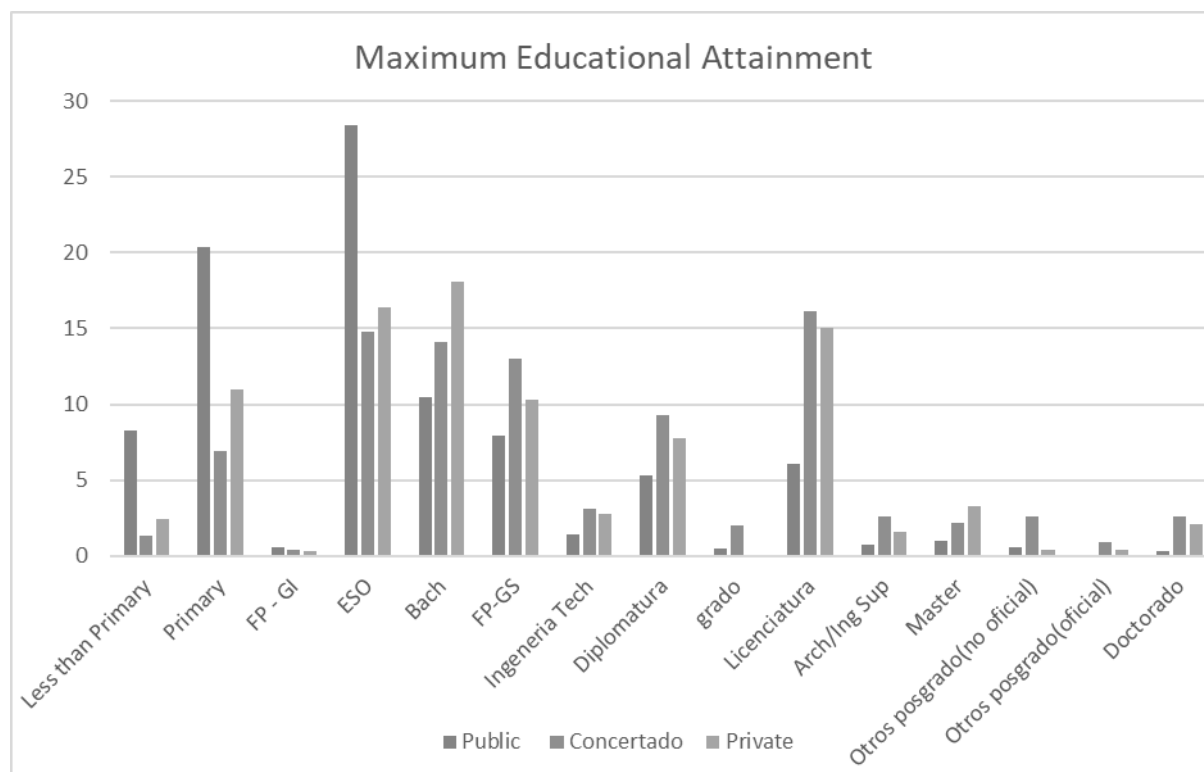
There are two main challenges to be faced in terms of this investigation, firstly to find the empirical evidence and supplementary qualitative data to support the above thesis and secondly to attempt to weigh the importance of such data against other factors on a greater societal level in order to contribute to the debate as regards education, particularly in terms of social reproduction, social mobility, school choice and inequality.

The scarcity of data was initially the main challenge. There are a lot of statistics available through PISA and the OECD as well as the Ministry of Education as regards such variables as graduation rates, dropout rates and educational outcomes by gender and region and these are easily compared and analyzed on a European or OECD level, however, there was little data available which would allow for analysis of students and graduates in terms of what type of school they attended prior to entering University. This would be a key variable in terms of determining if Concertado going students were somehow being favoured by the system. Initial research also posed an immediate challenge, as regards educational outcomes. The fact that children who come from more favorable socio-economic backgrounds do better in school has been proven again and again, and the conventional wisdom in Spain is that regardless of them being free to attend, Concertado schools

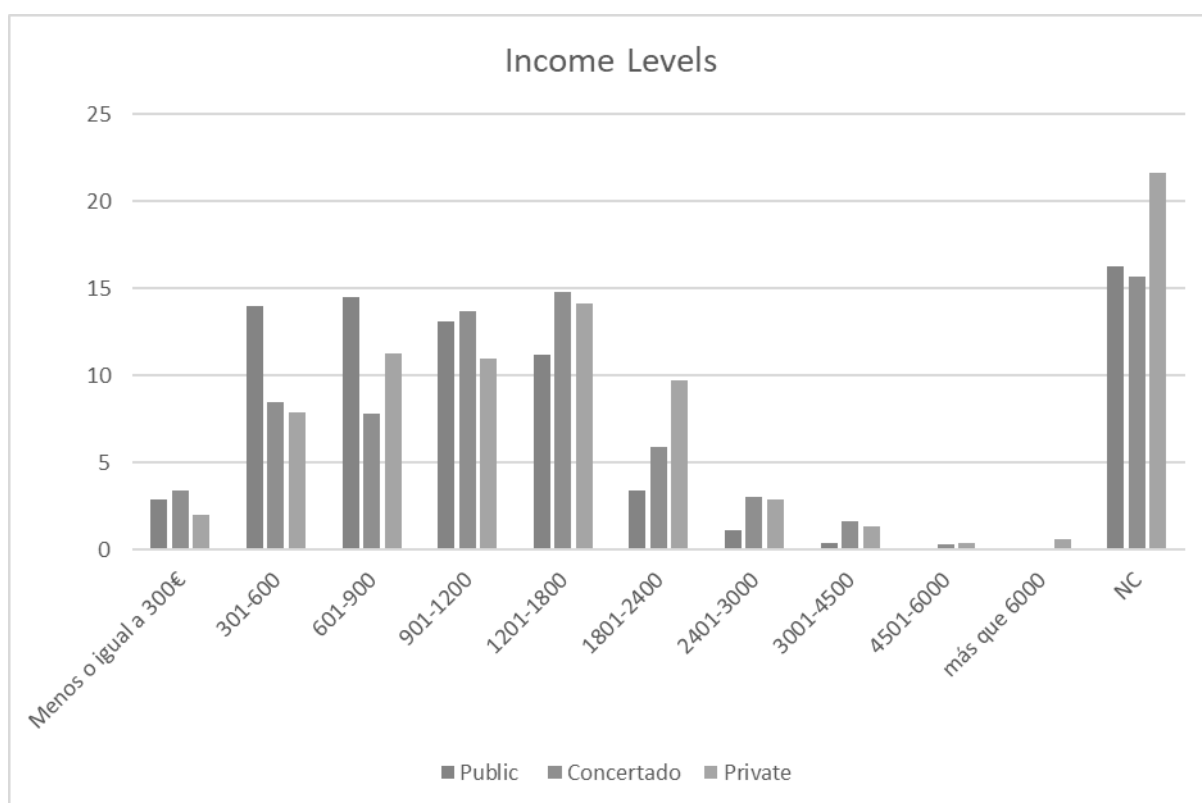
tend to cater more to children from middle-class families and so by extension they tend to be better off and so do better in school and generally go on to university. So, the first step in this investigation was to find out if this supposition was indeed true. As these statistics were not readily available, an element of quantitative research was required.

## Analysis

In 2013, the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* on behalf of CIS (*Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas*) carried out a survey called, 'Prestigio Ocupacional y Estructura Social' (Occupational Prestige and Social Structure). From this sample of 5962 people, the maximum level of education attained was cross referenced with type of school attended in order to give us a snap shot of the profile of student who reach each stage in education.



At a glance, we can see that the higher the level of educational attainment, the stronger the presence is of Concertado and Private schools and the weaker that of the Public. This would seem to confirm the theory that Concertado students do better, but does it go so far as to confirm what advocates of school choice would suggest, that exercising market preferences gets better results or that private education is superior? The contention of this paper is that this is not the case but rather that the data suggests that the key factor in educational attainment remains the socio-economic conditions from which the student comes. With this in mind, we ran another analysis from the Occupational Prestige survey, this time cross-referencing school attended with household income.



Once again, the analysis confirms the supposition that lower income families tend to send their kids to public schools rather than Concertados, despite the fact that Concertados are theoretically free to attend. This was not the goal of the government which created the system with the LODE in 1985, according to Lawler and Rigby, 'The LODE sought to resolve the contradictions between the public and private systems of education and move away from a situation where the typical clientele of private schools consisted of the children of middle and upper-class parents, while the children of working class parents attended state schools. It did not seek to suppress private education, it sought to establish a situation in which all schools receiving government subsidies, whether private or state, offered free education and were governed by more democratic councils, involving parents, teachers and students. Schools were also required to adhere to the same admissions requirements for all students and require minimum academic standards on entry, in order to guarantee the quality of education they provided.' (Lawler and Rigby, pg 202) While beyond the scope of this paper, the PH.d thesis will go into why this objective has failed and looking at the mechanisms that have kept the concertado schools the providence of the middle and upper-classes.

It may be argued that the data available doesn't allow us to weigh the influence of the structure of education on polarizing outcome we are experiencing, they simply confirm the conventional wisdom that concertado students come from a higher socio-economic class and get better results. The issue of who attends concertado schools relates to such as things legacy access – children attending the same schools as their family, inequality in access to housing, high unemployment, immigration and religion. For that reason, the empirical analysis must be supported by a strong theoretical framework taking reference both nationally and internationally and supplemented with additional qualitative research, drawing on the perspectives and experiences of those both living and studying the system.

## Discussion

The framework for this study starts with sociological theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, specifically his work on Cultural Capital and Social Reproduction, but also on more contemporary researchers such as Diane Reay, Michael Apple, Stephen J. Ball and Mariano Fernandez Enguita, who have researched educational structures, inequality and class in educational settings and the marketization of education. This study will also consider the issue of identity and the role it plays in the debate around Spanish education, specifically as regards issue based (operational) ideology and Identity

based (symbolic) ideology. As Liliana Mason puts it, 'Identity does not require values and policy structure, it simply requires ... a sense of inclusion and a sense of exclusion.' (Mason, pg2)

Also, key to this analysis will be the issue of inequality in education and by extension, in Spain in general, and so the fact that Spain remains at the high end of the scale on an OECD and European level at 0.34 on GINI index rating suggests educational inequality as representative of a greater problem on a societal level. As is the case with much of the longitudinal data, this must be considered from two perspectives, firstly, where Spain has come from and secondly where Spain is in comparison with its European and OECD peers.

There is a somewhat circular nature to this type of investigation in the sense that as investigators it is hard to determine a starting point (if there is one) in a sociological phenomenon. And, so when questions arise like, Is the knock-on effect of polarisation in education increased polarisation in society? And, Is the structure of our educational system influencing the ghettoization of society or is it the ghettoization of society which is causing the education system to produce such polarized results? This is clearly a very complex issue but what is evident, is that within this paradigm there is certainly a strong element of the Matthew Effect, whereby those who are already advantaged are receiving more opportunity while those who are starting from a disadvantaged position are receiving less.

Inequality in general is on the rise in developed countries. The UK is a great example of this. In the late 70s, as Thatcher was about to come into power, the UK was one of the most equal countries in the world, it is now one of the most unequal in the OECD (0.36 on the GINI scale). The United States is showing particularly worrying trends towards increased inequality (0.39 on the GINI scale). In both cases, they have pursued neoliberal economic and educational policies since the 1980s and so educational outcomes have become increasingly related to economic status. The contexts of course are different, Diane Reay would argue that the segregation of the educational system in the UK is primarily related to the legacy of class division while the American context among other issues is still largely segregated along racial lines. Spain does not have the same socio-historical contexts as these two countries but the legacy of Fascism is that of division and of a certain type of classism. Conservative Spain and the policy makers who serve this large and influential constituency, as the label suggests, want to 'conserve' elements of the society which work in their favour. This, by definition, is social reproduction and does not serve the ideals of equality and equity in education. Recent research as referenced extensively by Keith Payne in his book *Broken Ladder*, would suggest that unequal societies tend to be unhappier and more dangerous.

Coupled with this desire to conserve structures and traditions in education, as has also been the case in countries like the USA and the UK, is the commodification of education. In the USA, the confluence of Conservative politics and neoliberal economics came to be labeled Neoconservative and reflects the use of conservative rhetoric and identity politics to create a market in education, or what Frank (2000) referred to as 'Market Populism', whereby education becomes a battle ground where neoliberals harness the support of conservatives and populist rhetoric in order to push an agenda whereby education becomes about producing commodities rather than people and schools become about competition and profit rather than tools for the creation of a more enlightened and equal society. In Spain, this confluence of economics and conservatism came to influence education greatly under the Aznar government in the 1990's and drove educational legislation into the 2000s which pushed education towards a business model. Hyper completion in primary and secondary education may not yet exist to the same extent in Spain as it does in the US or UK, but there are published league tables and clearly, middle-class parents are exercising market response behaviours, in terms of where they send their children to school, but the proliferation of private universities, suggests that we are already there at the third level. The promotion of the knowledge economy as a driver of private education and the explosion of credentialism (titulitus) illustrates the increased marketization of education. This is problematic in terms of a cohesive and equal society, as well as incorrectly assuming that education can be treated like any other commodity or good in a market setting.

'Stiglitz (1999) views the idea of a knowledge economy as one that runs contrary to the normal characteristics of a desirable good in an open economy. In contrast to the normal pattern of

economic progress, in which the value of a good increases as supply decreases, education behaves differently, because the spreading and sharing of education and ideas may add to their value rather than diminish it. A public good has two critical properties, non-rivalry consumption – the consumption of one individual does not detract from that of another, and non-excludability – it is difficult if not impossible to exclude an individual from enjoying the good.’ (Masterson, 2006)

The fact that Spain continues to invest less in terms of GDP percentage in education than most of its European partners would suggest that there is a continued willingness to allow ‘the market’ to address the shortcomings in the system and/or perhaps a hangover from the Franco era in terms of an acceptance that children from certain social classes are less deserving of educational opportunity.

Another issue which needs addressing in the context of this analysis is the issue of immigration and the role the educational structure plays in terms of integration and segregation of immigrant populations and the impact this has on the aforementioned polarized educational outcomes. In this sense, the study will look the disproportionately high concentration of immigrant children within the public sector and the potential disadvantages this entails. The study will reference other school systems in relation to this, specifically, the French system which has been dealing with mass immigration much longer than Spain and the Irish system which has had to deal with immigration over roughly the same time period as Spain. Of particular interest as regards the Irish system has been the proliferation of Irish Language schools and the suggestion that the fact that this phenomenon has coincided with the first period of large scale immigration into Ireland and the profile of the students attending these schools suggests elements of social class protectionism and xenophobia.

## Conclusion

To this point in the investigation of this theme, it has become clear that the polarized educational outcomes reflect a polarized society in general, it is striking for example, that the secondary school dropout rate mirrors almost exactly the unemployment rate nationally, perhaps coincidental, but certainly alarming in both cases. The data supports the supposition that those achieving university graduation tend to come disproportionately from Private/Concertado schools and by extension a higher socio-economic class. Analysis of the structure of the educational system seems to point to a paradigm which tends to promote social reproduction rather than social mobility but the weight of influence of this structure against other sociological, economic and cultural issues remains unclear.

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