Introduction

The politics of education shape the lives of millions of schoolchildren, teachers, and families all over the world. They are related to the quality of a country’s democracy, to the character of its welfare state regime, and to the structure and development of the economy. Yet, comparative-historical knowledge about why school systems developed differently in different places remains limited. This holds especially for primary and lower-secondary education – possibly the most relevant and formative parts of the education system (Moe/Wiborg, 2016b, 11).

This book thus sheds light on an under-researched field. It provides a comparative-historical analysis of comprehensive school reform processes in Norway and Germany and proposes a Rokkanian theoretical framework to make sense of the conflicts and compromises that have shaped such reforms. By doing so, it explores the roots of a major difference between Nordic and continental school systems: their unequal degree of comprehensiveness. The term comprehensiveness refers to the extent to which all students of an age cohort attend the same educational institutions, independent of their abilities or social background. The more comprehensive a school system is, the less separation of students by means of parallel schooling, tracking, or ability grouping takes place. Because school systems always differentiate between students somehow, it makes sense to see comprehensiveness as a continuum, with the most comprehensive systems differentiating late and little and the least comprehensive systems differentiating early and in multiple ways. The opposite of comprehensiveness is segmentation, “the division of educational systems into parallel segments or ‘tracks,’ which differ both in their curriculum and in the social origins of their pupils,” as defined by Ringer (1987, 7; 1979). The degree of
comprehensiveness is related to systems of evaluation. Grades are often used for selection to parallel schools, tracks, or ability groups, while more comprehensive systems require less grading in primary and lower-secondary schools. Another criterion for the degree of comprehensiveness is the age of first selection of students to parallel schools or tracks (Figure 1.1). From sociological and educationalist research, we know that earlier selection increases the reproduction of social inequality (OECD, 2010a, 35f). However, we know little about why school systems’ comprehensiveness varies so greatly among developed countries.

The Nordic countries have been forerunners with regard to comprehensivization of their school systems. Over time, highly comprehensive school systems were formed in which children of all backgrounds attend primary and lower-secondary schools together until they are sixteen years old (Wiborg, 2009). Norway was the first country to introduce five years of comprehensive education in 1896 and seven years in 1920. During the 1950s to 1970s, comprehensive schooling was prolonged to nine years with the introduction of the youth school (ungdomsskole). This lower-secondary school type replaced two former parallel school types, the middle school (realskole) and the continuation school (framhaldsskole).

**Figure 1.1** Age of first selection of students to parallel schools or tracks in selected countries
(Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020.)
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The youth school initially consisted of two tracks, which resembled these older school types. Gradually, tracking was replaced with more flexible ability grouping and finally with mixed-ability classes. The reform was connected to the introduction of nine years of obligatory schooling and to the abolition of grades in the first six years, which were called children’s school. The Norwegian Labor Party also wanted to abolish grades in the youth school, but this proposal incited much opposition and failed. In the 1990s, the school enrolment age was lowered by one year, prolonging comprehensive education further. The Norwegian school system today provides ten years of comprehensive and obligatory schooling in the seven-year children’s school (barneskole), followed by the three-year youth school (ungdomsskole). Tracking sets in at the upper-secondary level.

In the continental welfare states, selection and separation continue to be exercised earlier in children’s life courses. They have comprehensive lower-secondary schooling to a certain

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1 English-speaking and Mediterranean countries are placed in between these two poles (see West/Nikolai, 2013). They have comprehensive lower-secondary schooling to a certain
among the least comprehensive. In 1920, four years of comprehensive primary schooling was introduced in the Weimar Republic. In the 1950s, the comprehensive primary school (Grundschule) still made up the lower stage of the so-called people’s school (Volksschule). The majority of students continued to the upper stage of the Volksschule and then to vocational training or the labor market. Only a minority received secondary schooling either in a middle school (Realschule) or in the prestigious academic secondary school, the Gymnasium. In the 1960s, the number of Realschulen and Gymnasien was increased in many West German federal states, including the largest federal state of North Rhine–Westphalia (NRW). In addition, a new school type was introduced: the integrated comprehensive school (Integrierte Gesamtschule). Despite its name and the intentions of reformers, it was not comprehensive because the other school types were not abolished. The primary school was separated from the upper stage of the Volksschule, which was turned into an independent lower-secondary school type, the Hauptschule. Nine, and later ten, years of obligatory schooling were introduced (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5). During the late 1970s, the social democratic–liberal government coalition of NRW suggested the introduction of a so-called cooperative school, meant to be a combination of the three traditional school types as tracks under one roof. In 1978, this reform was stopped by an alliance of reform antagonists, who collected over 3.6 million signatures. Today, most federal states in Germany still separate students to

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**Figure 1.4** The North Rhine–Westphalian general public school system in 1954

extent, but this is often undermined by ability grouping, school choice, or private schooling.
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**Figure 1.5** The North Rhine-Westphalian general public school system in 1979

hierarchically ordered secondary school types at age ten.\(^2\) Grading is usually introduced at the end of the second grade of primary school.

This book analyzes the political processes behind these school reforms comparatively and historically. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the development of the Norwegian and the German school systems up to the 1950s. The book then proceeds to analyze in detail the period from around 1954 to 1979. During this period, educational expansion reached an unprecedented peak all over the world, as increasing numbers of youths stayed on in the school system after having completed obligatory schooling (Meyer et al., 1977). In Western Germany, it was the last period when the creation of a ten-year comprehensive school system briefly seemed possible, at least in the eyes of social democratic and liberal reformers. In Norway, as in many other countries, the period also saw “detracking” reforms that were more far-reaching than anything attempted later (Österman, 2017a). The period was a critical juncture that shaped school systems until the present day. In Norway, comprehensive schooling until age sixteen became an almost self-evident feature of society, while it was never introduced in Germany but remained a highly contested issue.

The question this book tries to answer is why the paths chosen in education politics during this period were so different in these two cases.

\(^2\) Only three of the sixteen federal states, Berlin, Brandenburg, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, separate students a little later: at age twelve (Helbig/Nikolai, 2015, 81). East Germany reintroduced parallel schooling including the Gymnasium after reunification (Herrlitz et al., 2009, 238ff; Nikolai, 2019).
Why was the abolition of parallel schooling, tracking, ability grouping, and grading effectively carried out in Norway, while comparable reforms attempted in West Germany during the same period remained limited in scope? Why were the reforms strongly contested in Germany but not in Norway? The book provides historically and case specific answers to these questions but also tries to develop our general understanding of cleavage structures and cross-interest coalition-making in education politics.

The main argument of the book is that the differences in historical school development should be attributed to how cleavage structures, in the Rokkanian sense, facilitated or hampered cross-interest coalitions. The rural and religious population, many primary schoolteachers, and sections of the women’s movement were integrated into different kinds of coalitions in education politics: a coalition of social democrats and center parties in the Norwegian case and a Christian conservative coalition in the German case. The book thus advocates Rokkanian cleavage theory as a fruitful theoretical lens for comparative-historical analyses of education politics. Rokkan’s (1999) work provides a multidimensional and historically grounded perspective on political agency and coalition-making that is well worth returning to.

In the following, I first give an overview of the comparative literature on education politics and comprehensive school reforms. In the next section, the theoretical framework of this book is laid out. To this end, I introduce Rokkanian cleavage theory as well as another major perspective often applied in comparative political sociology, power resources theory. I then present the main argument and structure of the book. This introductory chapter ends with a note on the book’s history, including a reflection on case selection and methodology.

THE LITERATURE

Most comparative research in the field of education has focused on the distributional effects of education systems rather than on how reforms have come about. There are good reasons for this. Inequality of educational opportunity and outcomes is an important topic. However, the lack of comparative analyses of education politics is a problem.

Consider, for example, the German case: For decades, German sociologists of education and educationalists have been almost obsessed with

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3 For some examples, see Breen et al. (2010), Haim and Shavit (2013), Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), or the many OECD studies on education.
studying the reproduction of inequality in the German education system.\textsuperscript{4} Much research shows that sorting students into parallel schools at the age of ten (re)creates strong social inequalities (Maaz et al., 2008, 242f). Variation in learning outcomes between schools is high in Germany because the different secondary school types have such unequal curricula and student bodies (OECD, 2016, 226). In contrast, Norway has fared comparatively well in international comparisons of the equity of education systems (OECD, 1972, 2005, 2010a, 2010b, 2016). Its comprehensive school system comprises fewer points of transition. Variation in students’ performance is lower than in Germany and almost all of this variation is within-school variation (OECD, 2016, 226).

These research findings have made little difference for German education politics. Researchers’ conclusion that early selection in the German system is conducive to the reproduction of inequality has not led to comprehensive school reforms. On the contrary, the multi-tier school system has persisted. German politicians and representatives of teachers’ organizations regularly express their desire for equality of opportunity, but few of them support far-reaching comprehensive school reforms. Why is this so? This question has received little scholarly attention. In consequence, we know a lot about the reproduction of inequality in the German education system but little about why the system’s presumably most inequality-enhancing feature – selection and parallel schooling from the age of ten – has never been successfully reformed.

A few studies do try to tackle the question of why comprehensive school reforms were successfully implemented in some places but not in others. Baldi (2012), in his comparison of postwar education policy discourses in Britain and Germany, points out that German academics were slow in revising their ideas about ability, which he attributes to ideational and structural legacies from the Nazi era. An earlier, similar contribution is Heidenheimer’s (1974) work, in which he tries to explain the “different outcomes of school comprehensivization attempts in Sweden and West Germany.” He gives examples of more elitist attitudes prevalent among German experts on pedagogy, teachers, politicians, and parents. He also compares the role of teachers’ associations and finds that the German Gymnasium teachers had greater influence than their Swedish counterparts. This is attributed to the fact that they were part of a strong anti-reform coalition with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU),

\textsuperscript{4} See for example Becker and Lauterbach (2016), Berger and Kahlert (2008), Hopf (2010), or Krüger et al. (2011). This is only a small selection of numerous studies on the topic.
conservative bureaucrats, and middle-class parents’ associations. Heidenheimer (1974) concludes that the German left was not united enough to overcome this challenge and points to internal conflicts. In Sweden, no party ever declared itself clearly against comprehensive reform and the Swedish secondary schoolteachers were left on the sidelines politically. Both Baldi (2012) and Heidenheimer (1974) point out important ideological differences. However, they do not provide an explanation for why conservative ideas on schooling remained so powerful for so long in Germany, even among lower- and middle-class groups who could have profited from comprehensive school reforms.

Another argument that has been brought forward to explain the German case is that the federalist structure is conducive to the institutional stickiness of the school system (Baldi, 2012; Ertl/Philipps, 2000; Hahn, 1998). Federalism can be considered to produce veto points in the decision-making process because it creates an additional institutional level on which reforms must be negotiated (Huber/Stephens, 2001; Immergut, 1992). However, a study by Erk (2003) indicates that German federalism tends to develop unitary characteristics in education and that standardization is high despite federalism. Moreover, the present book focuses on one federal state, NRW. In theory, North Rhine–Westphalian school politicians could have introduced comprehensive lower-secondary schooling even though other federal states did not. This would have been legally possible because school policy falls under the responsibility of federal state governments. It would potentially have entailed conflicts in the bodies in which federal states’ school policies are coordinated. This possibility of conflict with other federal states, however, played no significant role in the reform debates in NRW, as demonstrated in the empirical chapters of this book.

The most important comparative contribution so far is the work of Wiborg (2009, 2010), which focuses on the history of comprehensive schooling in Scandinavia, Germany, and England. Wiborg’s findings are that (1) intensive processes of state-building were related to education reforms but cannot explain why the level of vertical differentiation differs so strongly between Scandinavia and Germany (Wiborg, 2009, 47). She demonstrates further that (2) “the relative homogeneity of Scandinavian societies was propitious for the development of a ladder system of education” from the nineteenth century onward but that the difference in class structures cannot account entirely for the lack of a similar development in Prussia (Wiborg, 2009, 215). She emphasizes (3) the importance of liberal parties in the creation of comprehensive education in Scandinavia,
through the introduction of comprehensive primary schools and middle schools, which were – in theory – open to all (Wiborg, 2009, 75ff; 2010, 546ff). Wiborg’s (2009, 231; 2010) final hypothesis is that (4) “it was ultimately the nature and strength of social democracy that explains the divergent development of comprehensive education in Scandinavia, on one hand, and Germany and England, on the other.” In Scandinavia, social democratic parties forged alliances with the liberal peasantry and later with the emerging white-collar middle class, which allowed them to introduce ten years of comprehensive education. German and English social democracy did not manage to build similarly strong alliances.

These are convincing findings. Wiborg’s historical account is highly sophisticated and useful. However, her claim that German postwar social democrats were ideologically “rooted in the past” and therefore did not manage to convince middle-class voters is not supported by the empirical analysis in the present book (Sass, 2015; Wiborg, 2010, 554). German social democrats were ideologically less radical than Norwegian social democrats, but they were deeply split. Some leading figures in the party never supported comprehensive schooling wholeheartedly. Furthermore, the different roles played by conservatives and Christian democrats in Norway and Germany and the salience of crosscutting cleavages are important factors for the political outcomes, as shown in this book.

Several comparative doctoral theses have focused on aspects of comprehensive “detracking” reforms (Haberstroh, 2016; Österman, 2017b). Österman (2017a, 157f) demonstrates that the age of first selection was reformed in many countries during the 1960s and 1970s and has remained rather stable since then. Based on a quantitative analysis of this development in thirty-one developed countries, he concludes, “social democrats are clearly more likely to carry through detracking reforms than any of the other major parties” (Österman, 2017a, 168). Dominance of Christian democratic governments “is related to heavier tracking through early selection,” while the role of conservatives and liberals remains unclear in his results (Österman, 2017a, 171). As he points out, “detailed case studies” are needed to understand “how political coalitions are formed around tracking reforms” (Österman, 2017a, 172). His main finding that social democrats have been protagonists of comprehensive school reforms, while Christian democrats have opposed such reforms, is valid for many cases. However, one should be careful in concluding that Christian democrats always oppose comprehensive school reforms. In the present book, it is shown that the small Norwegian Christian democratic party (the Christian Democrats) did not. In fact, the Norwegian
minister of education who finalized the introduction of the youth school in 1969 was a Christian democrat, Kjell Bondevik.

One of the newest contributions to the field is Busemeyer et al.’s (2020) study of public opinion and education reform in Western Europe, in which the authors demonstrate, among other things, that public support of comprehensive schooling seems to be high in all their cases. Even in Germany, 84 percent of the study’s respondents agree that “all children, regardless of their social background, should be taught in the same schools so that everyone can learn from each other,” while only 28 percent agree that “children with different social backgrounds should be taught in different schools in order to provide more targeted support.” They also find that voters for left-wing parties are more supportive of comprehensive schooling and that voters for right-wing parties, wealthier, and more highly educated respondents, but also the respondents belonging to the poorest quintile, are more skeptical (Busemeyer et al., 2020, 135 ff).

Besides these few studies, not much comparative work is concerned with the history and politics of comprehensive education. Hörner et al. (2015) provide a useful overview of European education systems, but without analyzing the differences in the politics of comprehensive schooling in detail. Classic studies like those by Ringer (1979), Müller et al. (1987), Archer (2013 [1979]), or Green (2013 [1990]) help us to understand the formative periods of education systems and have laid the foundations for the field but are less explanatory regarding development after the Second World War. There are many excellent historical and sociological single case studies, which are useful also as secondary sources for comparisons but which do not provide explanations for the diverging development in different countries. A range of studies have analyzed education politics in OECD nations comparatively, but with a focus

1 This finding might in part be due to the way comprehensive schooling is operationalized in the survey. Many supporters of the Gymnasium agree that students from lower social backgrounds should in principle have access to this school type and that selection should be based on achievement rather than on social background. Of course, selection to German parallel schools is based on social background to a large extent, but many respondents might not be entirely aware of or acknowledge this fact.