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## COMPARED ANALYSIS OF THE SCHOOL DAY IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

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### Abstract

*This article aims to analyze the school days in European Union countries, systematizing similarities and differences between education systems. The compared analysis involved fifteen member countries and focused on the descriptive and comparative phases of the classical comparative method. School days are socio-historical and cultural constructions, which result in sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent policies in the region. In general, the compulsory school day in European countries is from 5 to 6 hours per day. However, there are many features, including investment in policies that integrate curricular and extracurricular activities, as supervised socio-educational times. Through compared analysis, it was possible to identify perspectives and alternatives to the school day configuration to better answer to the demands and needs of the subjects of education.*

**SCHOOL DAY • EDUCATION SYSTEM • EUROPEAN UNION • EDUCATIONAL POLICY**

## ANÁLISE COMPARADA DA JORNADA ESCOLAR EM PAÍSES DA UNIÃO EUROPEIA

### Resumo

*O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar as jornadas escolares de países da União Europeia, sistematizando semelhanças e diferenças entre os sistemas educativos. A análise comparada envolveu quinze países-membros e focalizou as fases descritiva e comparativa do método comparativo clássico. As jornadas escolares são construções sócio-históricas e culturais, o que resulta em políticas ora convergentes, ora divergentes na região. De forma geral, a jornada escolar compulsória dos países europeus é de 5 a 6 horas diárias. No entanto existem muitas especificidades, entre as quais o investimento em políticas que integram atividades curriculares, extracurriculares e tempos socioeducativos supervisionados. Por meio da análise comparada foi possível identificar perspectivas e alternativas à configuração da jornada escolar para melhor responder às demandas e necessidades dos sujeitos da educação.*

**JORNADA ESCOLAR • SISTEMA EDUCATIVO • UNIÃO EUROPEIA •  
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## ANALYSE COMPARÉE DE LA JOURNÉE SCOLAIRE DES PAYS DE L'UNION EUROPÉENNE

### Résumé

*Cet article vise à analyser la durée de la journée scolaire des pays de l'Union européenne et systématiser les similitudes et les différences entre les systèmes éducatifs. L'analyse comparée a porté sur quinze pays membres et s'est concentrée sur les phases descriptive et comparative de la méthode comparative classique. Les journées scolaires sont des constructions socio-historiques et culturelles, qui entraînent des politiques tantôt convergentes, tantôt divergentes dans la région. En général, la journée scolaire obligatoire dans les pays européens est de 5 à 6 heures par jour. Cependant, il existe de nombreuses spécificités, notamment l'investissement dans des politiques intégrant les programmes d'études, les activités parascolaires et les périodes socio-éducatives supervisées. Grâce à une analyse comparative, il a été possible d'identifier des perspectives et des alternatives à la configuration de la journée scolaire afin de mieux répondre aux demandes et aux besoins des sujets de l'éducation.*

**JOURNÉE SCOLAIRE • SYSTÈME EDUCATIF • UNION EUROPÉENNE • POLITIQUE DE L'EDUCATION**

## ANÁLISIS COMPARADO DE LA JORNADA ESCOLAR EN PAÍSES DE LA UNIÓN EUROPEA

### Resumen

*Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las jornadas escolares de países de la Unión Europea, sistematizando similitudes y diferencias entre los sistemas educativos. El análisis comparado involucró a quince países miembros y se centró en las fases descriptiva y comparativa del método comparativo clásico. Las jornadas escolares son construcciones sociohistóricas y culturales, que resultan en políticas a veces convergentes y otras veces divergentes en la región. En general, la jornada escolar obligatoria en los países europeos es de 5 a 6 horas al día. Sin embargo, hay muchas especificidades, entre ellas la inversión en políticas que integran actividades curriculares, extracurriculares y tiempos socioeducativos supervisados. A través del análisis comparado fue posible identificar perspectivas y alternativas a la configuración de la jornada escolar para responder mejor a las demandas y necesidades de los sujetos de la educación.*

**JORNADA ESCOLAR • SISTEMA EDUCATIVO • UNIÓN EUROPEA • POLÍTICA EDUCATIVA**

**S**CHOOL TIMES ARE SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND ARE materialized through different aspects, among which are the beginning and duration of compulsory school, the instruction time, the school year, the school calendar, the school day, etc. Historical, social, political, economic and cultural changes influence the education systems structure and, consequently, the way the school is organized (ELIAS, 1998; ESCOLANO BENITO, 2000; CANÁRIO, 2005; PARENTE, 2010).

The theme school days gained international prominence at the end of the 20th century. In the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, two American reports were released that affected the international context: the first report recommended the extension of the student's time at school (UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – USA, 1983); the second one indicated that the extended time should be used differently and with higher quality (USA, 1994).

Pereyra (1992) refers to the political and economic changes taking place in the world and that impacted on education systems, requiring educational reforms to better meet the demands in an efficient and effective manner. In this context, it was argued that more time at school could generate better performance, an idea that was never unanimous.

In the European context, Escolano Benito (2000) mentions two researchers, among others, who dedicated to the theme school times: Wolfgang Mitter, a German researcher who started studying the theme in 1987, analyzed innovations in school times in eleven countries (ten European countries and Japan); and Marie-Madeleine Compère, a French researcher who, in 1997, published the

book *Histoire du temps scolaire en Europe*, which gathers studies by researchers from different countries.

Over two decades ago, Mitter (1992) already highlighted that international comparisons among school times in education systems are relevant for several reasons, including the interest in knowing whether there is a relationship between time and learning/school performance and whether the way time is allocated has consequences for learning. In turn, Compère (2000), when making considerations about comparison among education systems, warns of the fact that, in many countries, the organization of school times has been left to regional and local administrations, which leads to increasing the differences among countries, with consequences for the types of school time.

Within the scope of the European Commission, the Eurydice Network<sup>1</sup> aims to systematize and provide information on the education systems from the different member countries, including their various time aspects.

The information from the Eurydice Network has served as a reference for compared studies in education. Pereyra (2005) presents some time aspects of the member countries of the European Union and, additionally, makes considerations about Germany and Denmark. Lázaro Herrero (2007), after comparing different time aspects of the member countries, analyzed the social perspective of the school day in four countries specifically: Spain, France, Italy and Portugal. Kamette (2011) compares school times in the following countries: France, Germany, England, Wales, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands.

As for the configuration of the school day in the different education systems, the focus of this article, there are two movements: on the one hand, globalization guides certain trends, including inducing processes of uniformization and standardization in the field of education (DALE, 2004); on the other hand, due to the historical and cultural specificities of the different countries, there is a movement to build options and specific strategies to each scenario. Therefore, there are some trends in relation to the school day internationally. However, its configuration is the result of the historical process of each country. According to Escolano Benito (2000, p. 155, our translation), “the education systems have maintained the structure and traditions that they have been showing”, but there is a tendency towards convergence, according to the author, “that however is far from [...] uniformization”.

Having exposed these initial considerations, we question: how do European countries organize their school days? In view of this questioning, the main objective of the article is to analyze school days in European Union countries, showing similarities and differences among education systems.

In this article, by analyzing school days in different countries, it is possible to perceive their numerous organizational possibilities. This points out that the school day is a construction and, therefore, must be continually “de/reconstructed” in order to meet the demands and socio-educational needs of the pupils in each historical context.

1 The Eurydice Network is made up of 28 member countries, in addition to: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. Information available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/docs/organisation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/docs/organisation_en.pdf). Access on July 25, 2019.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The article presents some results of a broader research<sup>2</sup> that analyzed the school day and the extended school day policies in European Union member countries. In this article specifically, results will be presented regarding the configuration of the compulsory school day in fifteen member countries: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Scotland, Spain, Finland, France, The Netherlands, England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Sweden.

The school, such as its many time aspects, are social constructions that change over time. These changes have repercussions on the organization of the compulsory school curriculum and, consequently, on the organization of the school day.

In these historical movements, other times and activities that were not part of the school curriculum, for example, extracurricular activities, supervised times, rest breaks and meal times, were incorporated into the compulsory school day in some countries. In other countries, these times remain excluded from the student's compulsory school time, and may have compulsory or optional offer by the education systems. In this article, the focus is specifically on the compulsory school day, although more and more extended school day policies are being formulated and implemented to extend the student's time in school on an optional basis.

Within the scope of the European Commission there are differences in relation to compulsory schooling, such as the age of beginning and its duration, which can interfere in the organization of the school day and in the compared analysis. Therefore, for comparison purposes in the education area, ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) is used. The article focuses on ISCED level 1 (level 1, primary education), that is, the first years of compulsory schooling, generically named "primary education", which can last from 4 to 7 years (UNESCO, 2012).

The school day data of the analyzed countries were collected through the European Commission Eurydice Network (2019). In addition, an analysis of official documents from member countries was carried out, and information was collected from the institutions of the investigated countries.

The analysis favored the descriptive and comparative phases of the classic comparative method (FERRER JULIÁ, 2002) and was theoretically grounded in the field of public policy analysis (MULLER; SUREL, 2002; YANG, 2015; HOWLETT; RAMESH; PERL, 2013), as the school day is part of the education policy of each country and is materialized through the actions of the State expressed, among other ways, in its normative-legal order.

2 Research "Models and experiences of school day in the European Union: contributions to the analysis of integral and full-time education policies in Brazil", carried out at Universidad de Salamanca, Spain, funded by São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp).

## TIME ASPECTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Comparing time aspects of different countries is not an easy task. There are many different school times and they are intrinsically related. In some countries, the compulsory school day is longer than in others. However, these countries may have shorter school years, or their holidays may be longer or the instruction time may be shorter. Thus, before dealing specifically with the school day, it is important to mention, albeit briefly, some other times associated with it.

Taking as a reference recent reports from the European Commission (2018a, 2018b), compulsory schooling in most European countries begins in primary education, between 5 and 7 years of age, generally not before 5 and not after 7 years. This stage lasts between 4 and 7 years (ISCED level 1). On average, compulsory schooling varies between 8 and 12 years, including primary and secondary education.

In terms of school calendar, the vast majority of countries start classes in September and the end of the school year can vary between late May and mid-July. The school year is between 170 and 190 days, and summer holidays range from 6 to 15 weeks.

Regarding the compulsory minimum instruction time, it is generally associated with the number of years of compulsory schooling. In most education systems, the instruction time for compulsory schooling period is less than 7,600 hours (countries with 8 or 9 years of compulsory schooling). In countries with mandatory 10-year schooling, the recommended instruction time is between 7,616 and 9,340 hours. In countries with compulsory schooling between 11 and 12 years, instruction time is between 9,918 and 11,340 hours. However, there are exceptions, for example Denmark, whose instruction time is within this last interval, requires 10 years of compulsory schooling.

With regard specifically to primary education (ISCED level 1), focus of this study, countries have between 4 and 7 years of compulsory schooling with instruction time of 4,000 hours or more.

As for the subjects in primary education, the area of Reading, Writing and Literature takes up the largest proportion of instruction time, on average 26% (946 hours); Mathematics represents the second largest share of instruction time, on average 18% of the total (670 hours).

These and other aspects outline some similarities and differences among the European Union countries. These are extremely articulate school times. Any compared analysis needs to consider these specificities.

## PRIMARY EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES: DEFINING THE COMPARATIVE SCENARIO

To carry out an analysis of the school day, first some characteristics of compulsory primary education in the fifteen investigated countries in this article will be presented, highlighting its beginning and duration.

In the analyzed countries, the duration of compulsory schooling varies between 9 and 12 years, with a prevalence of 10-year duration in seven countries.

Compulsory education, in most countries, begins in primary education. However, in some countries, it starts in early childhood education, such as in Austria, Finland and Sweden.

Primary education starts between 4 and 7 years of age in the analyzed countries. Beginning at 4 is mandatory in Northern Ireland, while in Ireland and the Netherlands, it is optional. Of the fifteen investigated countries: nine set the starting age for compulsory primary education at 6 years of age; three countries, at 5 years; and, in two countries, at 7 years.

The duration of the first level of compulsory education varies between 4 and 10 years. Such variation occurs as some countries (Denmark, Finland, Portugal and Sweden) have a structure that integrates ISCED levels 1 and 2. Initially, we highlight the original structure of each country. However, afterwards, in the analysis of the school day, the article will focus only on the first years of compulsory education (ISCED level 1).

According to Chart 1, in most of Germany, compulsory education lasts for 9 years.<sup>3</sup> Generally primary education (*Grundschule*) comprises children aged from 6 to 10 years, with 4-year duration.

Compulsory education in Austria occurs from 5 to 15 years of age, starting with early childhood education. Primary education (*Volksschule*) comprises 4 years of schooling, from 6 to 10 years old.

In Belgium<sup>4</sup>, compulsory education is from 6 to 18 years of age, comprising primary education (*Lager onderwijs/École primaire/Primarschule*), which lasts for 6 years (from 6 to 12 years old), and secondary education.

The mandatory age group to attend school in Denmark is from 6 to 16 years old. The country has an integrated structure (*Folkeskole*) with 10 years of schooling that comprises ISCED levels 1 and 2.

**CHART 1**  
**PRIMARY EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES (2019)**

COUNTRY	COMPULSORY EDUCATION	PRIMARY EDUCATION			
		LEVEL	STARTING AGE	DURATION (YEARS)	AGE RANGE
Germany	9	<i>Grundschule</i>	6	4	6 to 10
Austria	9	<i>Volksschule</i>	6	4	6 to 10
Belgium	12	<i>Lager onderwijs/ École primaire/ Primarschule</i>	6	6	6 to 12
Denmark	10	<i>Folkeskole</i>	6	10	6 to 16
Scotland	11	<i>Primary education</i>	5	7	5 to 12
Spain	10	<i>Educación primaria</i>	6	6	6 to 12
Finland	10	<i>Perusopetus/ Grundläggande utbildning</i>	7	9	7 to 15
France	10	<i>École élémentaire</i>	6	5	6 to 11
The Netherlands	12	<i>Primair onderwijs</i>	5	7	5 to 12

(To be continue)

<sup>3</sup> In some places, including Berlin, compulsory education lasts for 10 years. The existing differences stem from German federalism, since each federative unit (*Land*) has autonomy for definitions in the field of education.

<sup>4</sup> Considering information related to the three linguistic communities in the country: Flemish community, French community and German-speaking community.

(Continuation)

COUNTRY	COMPULSORY EDUCATION	PRIMARY EDUCATION			
		LEVEL	STARTING AGE	DURATION (YEARS)	AGE RANGE
England	11	<i>Primary education</i>	5	6	5 to 11
Ireland	10	<i>Primary education</i>	6	6	6 to 12
Northern Ireland	12	<i>Primary education</i>	4	7	4 to 11
Italy	10	<i>Scuola primaria</i>	6	5	6 to 11
Portugal	12	<i>Ensino básico</i>	6	9	6 to 14
Sweden	10	<i>Grundskola</i>	7	9	7 to 16

Source: Prepared by the author with data from the European Commission (2019) and research data.

Compulsory education in Scotland covers the ages of 5 to 16 years. Primary education, specifically, comprises 7 years of schooling, from 5 to 12 years old.

In Spain, compulsory education covers the ages of 6 to 16 years, with a duration of 10 years. It includes primary education (6-year duration) and lower secondary education (4-year duration).

In Finland, compulsory education begins in early childhood, at 6 years old. The country has an integrated structure (*Perusopetus/Grundläggande utbildning*<sup>5</sup>) with 9 years of schooling, which begins at 7 years old (ISCED levels 1 and 2).

In France, compulsory education occurs from 6 to 16 years old (10-year duration). Primary education (*École élémentaire*) comprises 5 years, from 6 to 11 years old.

Compulsory education in the Netherlands occurs from 5 to 16 years of age<sup>6</sup>. Primary education (*Primair onderwijs*) lasts for 8 years, since children can start at 4 years of age, although not compulsory. Compulsory education happens from 5 to 12 years of age (7 years, ISCED level 1).

In England, compulsory education is from 5 to 16 years old (eleven years). Primary education comprises 6 years of schooling (5 to 11 years old).

The mandatory age group for attending school in Ireland is from 6 to 16 years (10-year duration). Primary schools serve children aged 4 to 12 years old. However, only 6 years are compulsory, from 6 to 12 years old (ISCED level 1).

In Northern Ireland, compulsory education is from 4 to 16 years old (12-year duration). Primary education usually serves children between 4 and 11 years old and is 7-year duration.

In Italy, compulsory education lasts for 10 years. Primary education (*Scuola primaria*) is aimed at children aged 6 to 11 years old, with a 5-year duration.

In Portugal, compulsory education lasts for 12 years (from 6 to 18 years old) and comprises basic education (9 years, ISCED levels 1 and 2) and secondary education (3 years).

In Sweden, compulsory education is from 6 to 16 years old (10-year duration), starting with early childhood education. The country has a structure (*Grundskola*) that aggregates ISCED levels 1 and 2, starting at 7 years old and lasting for 9 years.

5 In Finnish and Swedish, respectively, the country's official languages.

6 Compulsory education from 5 to 16. From 16 to 18, students are required to have a basic qualification.



Chart 1 shows that there are some convergences among the fifteen analyzed countries, highlighting the fact that the vast majority starts compulsory education in primary education, at the age of 6. However, there are many other specificities, such as the duration of compulsory education and the duration of primary education. These differences have an impact on the distribution of the instruction time for each level of compulsory education and the subjects that make up the school curriculum, which needs to be considered in view of other time elements related to the school day.

## SCHOOL DAY: DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

The school day has been the subject of recent educational policies in different countries, that is, it is on the international political-educational agenda.

It is possible to systematize four factors that have been sustaining discussions about the school day today, as well as boosting the formulation and implementation of public policies in the area. First, the demands related to socio-educational actions for the adjustment between school hours and families' working hours are highlighted (PEREYRA, 2005). The increasing number of women in the labor market, for example, is one of the causes of the growth in this demand. Secondly, there is a growing concern about the pupil's idle time after school, that is, actions that promote greater safety for children and adolescents in their free time, with adult supervision, have been demanded, which reflects in the social role of the school. A third aspect refers to the possibilities of expanding educational opportunities through activities that, traditionally, the school curriculum has not prioritized. Fourthly, there is concern about the efficiency of education systems, which demands that the time spent by students at school – financed with public resources – can be properly assessed, measured and quantified through results in school performance assessments.

These and other aspects bring up issues and proposals related to the school day, to the time the student remains in school, under the school's supervision within the scope of the education system or in conjunction with other public and private institutions.

The school day, such as all school times, produces historical movements; it is the result of policies and actions in progress in different education systems, which, in turn, are based on diverse social, political, pedagogical and/or cultural arguments.

The school day in force in different countries are not the same as in the past and may change in the future. These movements indicate the importance of continuous analysis of the school day in different countries and even within their own geographical space.

Due to its complexity, the configuration of the school day cannot be understood only from the perspective of the time the student spends daily at school. In the analysis of the school day, it is common to mention only the student's daily instruction time. This is rightly the central element of the school day. However, the approximation with the guidelines and practices of the education systems in different countries shows that equal daily times result in different ways of organizing the school day.

In many countries, changes have been taking place regarding the time a student spends at school. However, it should be noted that the so-called extended school day does not always refer to compulsory education. In other words, in the analysis of the school day in each country, it is necessary to identify, first, which times are compulsory and which times are optional. The research that originated this article focuses on these two elements (school day and extended school day). However, in this article, the data refer only to the compulsory school day.

Spanish researchers usually classify the school day into two basic types: school day divided into two sessions (*jornada partida*) and morning-session-only school day (*jornada contínua*) (PEREYRA, 2005; LÁZARO HERRERO, 2007). The *jornada partida* is the one in which the compulsory school day is divided into two periods (morning and afternoon) with a lunch break. It is precisely because of this break (which divides compulsory activities into two moments) that this type of school day is called *partida* (divided). For a long time, this type of school day was in force in most European countries.

However, in recent decades, some countries have invested in a more compact school day. That does not mean a shorter school day, but the elimination of long breaks or their reduction. Thus, some countries concentrate the school day in only one period, usually in the morning (sometimes reaching a few hours in the afternoon). These countries have morning-session-only school day (a continuous day), that is, without interrupting the compulsory school day.

In some countries both types of school day are possible (*partida* and *contínua*), commonly named *mixta* or *combinada* (mixed).

However, the compulsory school day went through movements that impose some limits to the classification exposed above or, at least, demand the constant reclassification of countries, care in definition of terms and consideration of new elements introduced in the school day. That is because lunch is part of the compulsory school day in some countries. In this case, despite lunch dividing the school day into two moments, it is integrated into the curriculum and, therefore, considered as compulsory.

The international literature reports another type of school day classification: partial day (*meia jornada* or half-day school) and full day (*jornada completa* or all-day school/full-time school). Half-day school can be conceptualized as the one in which the compulsory school day is concentrated in only one period (morning or afternoon), that is, half-day/half period/half school day. That is why the concept of half-day school has a certain proximity to the concept of the previously mentioned: *jornada contínua* or morning-session-only school day. However, the morning-session-only school day is not synonymous with half-day school. In several Latin American countries, such as Brazil, half-day school is necessary due to the multiple-shift schooling, a measure used to duplicate or triplicate school places - a situation that does not occur in the fifteen investigated countries<sup>7</sup>.

The full-time school day can be conceptualized as one in which the student is at school all day/full-time on a compulsory basis. During this period,

7 Portuguese law mentions the possibility of double-shifts in the event of a need for school places.

curricular, extracurricular activities, meals and rest breaks are usually included. Often, a full-time school day is confused with school day divided into two sessions (*jornada partida*). This is because both occur in two periods: morning and afternoon. Although in many European countries students stay in school in the morning and afternoon, respectively, it does not mean that they stay in school all day. In some of them, the lunch break, for example, allows the student to go home for lunch. In this case, the break between one period and the next is not mandatory and, therefore, the student's school day may not be named full-time. Few European countries offer a full-time school day, that is, that make the presence of the student at school compulsory for extended periods, between seven and eight hours a day.

For the translation of the term full-time school day, in the European context, the term *all-day school* has been used. The term *full-time school* has been used in the Latin American context as a translation of *educação em tempo integral* and *educación a tiempo completo*. Based on the Eurydice Network, the term *full-time education* has a distinct meaning from *all-day school*. The term *full-time education* is related to a time specifically devoted to compulsory schooling. That is why *part-time education* refers to the moment of schooling when the student can reconcile study time with work time. The term *full-time education*, when translated into Portuguese (from Portugal) becomes *educação a tempo inteiro* and should not be interpreted as a synonym for full-time school.

## SCHOOL DAYS IN EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

For the analysis of the compulsory school day, the following time elements will be considered: school week, weekly instruction time and length of school day. Regarding the daily instruction time, the time for starting and finishing school will also be highlighted, as well as the time for student' lunch, given that, in some countries, these times are compulsory.

The compared analysis is expected to reveal not only similarities and differences among countries, but above all to highlight the many possibilities and time alternatives.

## SCHOOL WEEK

The fifteen investigated countries have between four and six-day-week school, with a prevalence of a five-day-week school, from Monday to Friday. Of the fifteen countries, twelve have an exclusive five-day school week. Although Belgium and the Netherlands also have a five-day school week, these countries have some specificities: in Belgian schools, Wednesday afternoon is free; in the Netherlands, schools have a high degree of autonomy for this type of definition, and they usually also have free Wednesday afternoons.

In France, four or five-day-week schools are found. Current legislation refers to the offer of nine half-day periods of a maximum of 3 ½ hours. Usually on Wednesdays students have classes only in the morning. Despite this, in 2017, 43% of schools operated with eight half-days, generally with a free Wednesday.

In Germany and Italy, school days vary between five to six instruction days a week. In Germany, definitions of school organization occur within each state of the federation. In most German federal states, the school week has five instruction days, but a six-day school week is possible in some states, with two Saturdays per month free of classes. In the case of Italy, schools have a high degree of autonomy to define the school week. Thus, it is possible to have different organization models of weekly school timetable, with five days, from Monday to Friday, or with six days, from Monday to Saturday.

## WEEKLY INSTRUCTION TIME

There are many specificities in the analyzed education systems regarding the weekly instruction time. In some countries, there are general rules related to each level of schooling or the annual instruction time, allowing schools to define the weekly and daily instruction time, which leads to different possibilities for organizing the school day. In other countries, there are specific rules regarding the number of hours per day, the specific times for particular curricular components, the times for breaks and school meals.

Thus, regarding the weekly instruction, some countries define the number of weekly hours and others establish the number of weekly classes, with the time for each class varying between 45 and 60 minutes<sup>8</sup>. Among the investigated countries there is a variation of a minimum of 15 hours/class up to 40 hours/class, including variations depending on the students' age, level of schooling, regional differences and extended school day policies. Despite these variations, in general, the weekly instruction time is, on average, 25 hours/class in many countries. Northern Ireland has the lowest weekly instruction time, with a minimum of 15 class hours per week for students up to 8 years old, and a minimum of 22.5 hours/class in subsequent years.

Just as in Northern Ireland, other countries report fewer hours/class in the initial years of compulsory education per week, expanding in subsequent years of schooling. In Finland, in the first two grades of compulsory education, 19 hours/class per week and 25 hours/class per week in the 5th and 6th grades are offered. In Portugal, 22.5 hours/class are offered in the first two grades of compulsory education and 27 hours/class in the 3rd and 4th grades. In Denmark, depending on the school year, there is a variation between 30 and 33 class hours per week.

In other countries, the variation in the weekly instruction time due to the internal coexistence of different organizational possibilities is observed, some pre-established at national level and others established by local administrations, or resulting from the schools' autonomy. This is the case in three countries: Germany, Austria and Italy. In Germany, in addition to schools with a minimum weekly instruction time between 20 and 29 hours/class, some schools offer all-day school, that is, offering compulsory extended school days reaching both periods, morning and afternoon. The country's legislation makes reference to a minimum of three days a week, when and where this type of offer exists. The

8 As a result, the article will use the term hours/class, indistinctly, even though the variation in class times is known.

research identified regions with schools that offer a school day of up to 36 hours a week, usually with free Friday afternoons, although with many variations in the country.

In Austria, in addition to the possibility of a weekly instruction time between 20 and 25 hours/classes, the country has also been investing in all-day school, which may result in a weekly instruction time of up to 40 hours.

Finally, Italy has to be mentioned. There are four basic curricular structures in terms of weekly instruction: 24 hours, 27 hours, 30 hours and 40 hours. The country, since the 1970s, has offered, in some parts of its education system, the so-called *scuola a tempo pieno*, with a weekly instruction time of 40 hours.

## LENGTH OF SCHOOL DAY

The analysis of school instruction day in the education systems showed important variations in the students' daily time among the investigated countries, as well as differences within the same country. For this reason, in this compared analysis, sometimes generalizations are made – even if internal diversities are known – and in some cases specificities are presented.

In general, the average length of school day in the fifteen investigated countries is between 5 and 6 hours a day. Northern Ireland is the country with the lowest daily instruction time: minimum 3 hours for students up to 8 years old. Germany, Austria and Italy are the countries with up to 8 hours a day. This is because these countries incorporate into the student's school day other types of activities that have become compulsory for part of the students in the education system, such as extracurricular activities and supervised socio-educational times. These types of activities are also verified in other countries, however, they are not compulsory even for a share of the students.

Regarding the time for starting and finishing school, the beginning of the compulsory school day usually occurs between 8 and 9 am. Although there are variations, Germany is the country where school starts earlier, at 7:30 am. As for finishing school, the variation among countries is much greater due to differences in length of school day and breaks for recess and meals.

Regarding the break for meals, in the fifteen analyzed countries the breaks can last between 30 minutes and 2 hours. This period may or may not be part of the compulsory school day, which will indicate whether or not the student should stay at school to eat. Among these countries, the following options are observed: 1) the student can go home for lunch and return in the afternoon; 2) the student can eat on the premises of the school with the meal he brought from home; 3) the student can receive free school meals in the school canteen; 4) the student can pay for the food service compulsorily offered by the school/State (with or without State grant); 5) the student can buy food in canteens in the school.

In many countries there is more than one possibility among the listed options. For example, in Spain, in schools with school days divided into two sessions (*jornada partida*), students can go home for lunch or they can, in advance, sign up for school food services (*comedor escolar*). The service has to be paid for by the families, but which may have a State grant. However, in the Spanish case, as

in many others, lunchtime is not counted as part of the school day and, therefore, is not compulsory.

In some countries, school breaks for meals are integrated into the compulsory school day, such as in Finland and Sweden. In addition to being integrated to the compulsory time, school meals are free in both countries.

As for the three countries with all-day school experiences, some characteristics can be highlighted. In the case of Germany, there is a half-day school, which can take 4 to 6 hours a day, and which, historically, in some regions of the country, were complemented by socio-educational actions promoted by institutions called *Hort*. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the country started to implement actions to extend school time (extended school day). Among these actions is the offer of all-day school. There are three basic types of all-day school offerings in the country, on a compulsory or optional basis to the student. When compulsory, the student must stay in school and participate both in the curricular activities, as well as for extracurricular activities and school meals. Among the many organizational possibilities, the student stays at school from 8 am to 4 pm, that is, 8 hours a day, including one hour for lunch. However, it is not common to offer 8 hours every day of the week. Friday afternoon is usually free.

In Austria there are also half-day schools of at least 4 hours and all-day schools that reach 8 hours a day, in addition to other possibilities to extend the student's time at school on an optional basis, depending on family interests and needs.

In Italy, pioneer country in offering all-day school among the investigated countries, the four possibilities of weekly instruction time result in several organizational formats and a school day that varies between 5 and 8 hours.

As mentioned, the compulsory school day of 8 hours in the three countries with all-day school does not occur in a generalized way, that is, this type of school day exists only in a part of the education system in each of the three countries.

Chart 2 summarizes some general characteristics of the fifteen countries in terms of compulsory school day. Given the specificities and variations that may exist in the context of each country, approximations and generalizations were established.

**CHART 2**  
**COMPULSORY SCHOOL DAY IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (2009)**

COUNTRY	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Germany	School week: 5 or 6 days 20 to 29 class/week, 45 minutes each (minimum), maximum 6 class/day School day: 4 to 8 hours (depending on the format) Type 1: <i>Halbtagsgrundschule</i> - 7:30 to 13:30 (half-day school) Type 2: <i>Ganztagsschulen</i> - 8:00 to 16:00 (all-day school, lunch break 12:30 to 13:30)
Austria	School week: 5 days 20 to 25 class/week (1st to 4th grades), 4 to 6 classes/50 minutes/day School day: 4 to 8 hours (depending on the format) Type 1: <i>Halbtagsschulen</i> - 8:00 to 12:00 <sup>9</sup> Type 2: <i>Ganztagsschule</i> - 8:00 to 16:00 (all-day school, lunch break 12:00 to 13:00)
Belgium	School week: 5 days (Free Wednesday afternoons) 28 to 29 class/week, 50 minutes each School day: 5 hours 8:30 to 15:30 (lunch break 12:00 to 13:30)

(To be continue)

(Continuation)

COUNTRY	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Denmark	School week: 5 days 30 to 33 weekly hours, 1200 to 1320 hours/year (1st to 6th grades of compulsory schooling) School day: 5 to 6 hours 8:00 to 14:00 (lunch break 11:00 to 11:30)
Scotland	School week: 5 days Usually 25 hours/week, 55 minutes each, but no national definitions School day: 5 hours 9:00 to 15:30 (lunch break 12:00 to 13:00)
Spain	School week: 5 days 25 class/week, 60 minutes each (usually) School day: 5 hours Type 1: school day divided into two sessions ( <i>jornada partida</i> ): 9:00 to 16:00 (lunch break 12:30 to 14:30) Type 2: morning-session-only school day ( <i>jornada continua</i> ): 9:00 to 14:00
Finland	School week: 5 days 19 to 25 classes, 45 to 60 minutes (1st to 6th grade of compulsory schooling) School day: 5 hours, on average 9:00 to 15:00 (lunch break 11:00 to 11:30)
France	School week: 4 or 5 days (in general free Wednesday afternoons; in some cases, free Wednesdays) 24 weekly hours, 9 half-days, maximum of 3:30 per period, minimum of 1:30 lunch break School day: 5:30 8:30 to 15:45 (lunch break 11:30 to 13:30)
The Netherlands	School week: 5 days 7520 hours in 8 years of schooling, local autonomy to distribute the instruction time. Many have free Wednesday afternoons School day: 5:30 8:30 to 15:00 (lunch break 12:00 to 13:00)
England	School week: 5 days Morning and afternoon, one-hour lunch break School day: 5 hours 9:00 to 15:30 (lunch break 12:00 to 13:00)
Ireland	School week: 5 days Not fewer than 4 daily hours, with 50-minute classes School day: 5 hours 9:00 to 14:30 (lunch break 12:00 to 12:30)
Northern Ireland	School week: 5 days School day: minimum of 3 hours (younger than 8 years old) and 4.5 hours (8 years or older) Two sessions with at least half an hour break 9:00 to 14:00 or 15:00 (lunch break 12:00 to 12:45)
Italy	School week: 5 or 6 days Four types: 24 hours/week, 27 hours/week, 30 hours/week or 40 hours/week. School day: 4 to 8 hours Type 1: 8:00 to 12:00 (from Monday to Saturday) (4 daily hours) = 24 hours/week Type 2: 8h:00 to 13:00 (from Monday to Friday) + 1 day in the afternoon (2 hours) = 27 hours/week Type 3: 8:00 to 12:00 (from Monday to Friday) + 3 days in the afternoon (10 hours) = 30 hours/week Type 4: 8:00 to 16:00 (from Monday to Friday) (Lunch break 12:00 to 13:00) = 40 hours/week ( <i>Scuola a tempo pieno</i> )
Portugal	School week: 5 days 22.5 and 27 hours/week School day: 5 hours, on average 9:00 to 16:00 (lunch break 12:00 to 13:00)
Sweden	School week: 5 days School day: 6 hours (two first grades of schooling) to 8 hours (other grades), morning and afternoon 8:00 to 14:00 (lunch break 11:00 to 11:30)

Source: Prepared by the author with data from the European Commission (2019) and research data.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article aimed to analyze school day in European Union countries, systematizing similarities and differences among educational systems.

The study of the school day in fifteen countries revealed that there are numerous alternatives and possibilities for organizing the compulsory school day, result of socio-historical and cultural constructions. Therefore, their analysis should not be restricted to the daily instruction time and, whenever possible, the analysis should be related to other time elements, some of which are exposed in this article.

In summary, in most of the investigated countries, compulsory education varies between 9 and 12 years, with a prevalence of 10 years. In the context of primary education, the school week has between four and six days, with a preponderance of five days. The weekly instruction time varies widely and depends on the age, level of schooling, class length and extended school day policies. In many countries, however, the average weekly instruction time is 25 hours. Classes usually starts between 8am and 9 am and, in terms of school day, in general, countries offer between 5 and 6 compulsory hours or classes; although in some countries, concomitantly, the compulsory school day reaches 8 hours/classes daily.

In addition to what was outlined in this article, the compared analysis centered only in the areas of the so-called compulsory school day gives evidence that there are some limits when not considering it in conjunction with the current movements expanding its contours. All education systems are undertaking different policies (extended school day policies) and producing numerous innovations in school times aiming to meet specific demands, which, in turn, has been expanding the time students spend in school, in most cases, on an optional basis, through supervised socio-educational actions. However, these policies are no longer restricted to the scope of compulsory education and have resulted in articulations with other sectors of society. These actions are based on arguments of equity and linked to the interests and needs of students and their families.

In this scenario, from the point of view of comparative education, the “des/reconstruction” of the school day provides a fertile field for further studies and suggests the revision of concepts and classifications that bring up different ways, views and propositions in terms of public policies in the international context.

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