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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

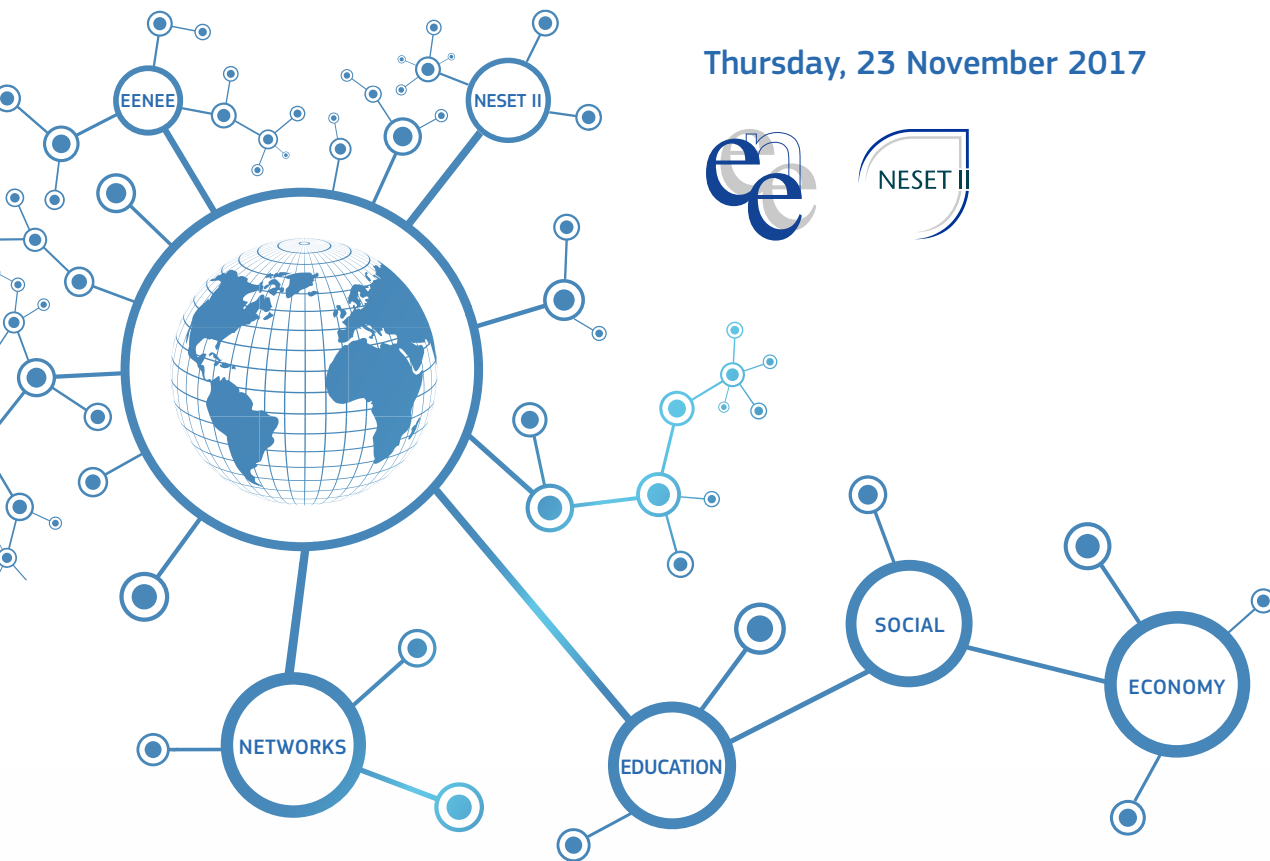
EMPOWERING SCHOOLS

EVIDENCE - INFORMED POLICIES FOR QUALITY EDUCATION

EENEE and NESET II Conference

Brussels, Place du Congrès 1

Thursday, 23 November 2017



Education
and Culture

The conference on “Empowering schools: Evidence-informed policies for quality education” was co-organised by the Network of Experts on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET II), the European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE) and the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). It was held in Brussels, at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Place du Congrès 1, on 23 November 2017. The conference programme and further information are available at <http://eenee-neset2017.onetec.eu/index.html>.

These proceedings were written in December 2017 by the Conference Committee. They are based on the notes taken during the conference by the following rapporteurs from CEPS and the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI):

- Ana Silva, CEPS
- Greta Fedaravičiūtė, PPMI
- Irma Budginaite, PPMI
- Karolien Lenaerts, CEPS
- Zachary Kilhoffer, CEPS

OPENING PLENARY

Moderated by **Mr Jan Pakulski**, Head of Unit, Evidence-based Policy and Evaluation, European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC).

Welcome by the Centre for European Policy Studies

Dr Daniel Gros, Director at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

As the host of the event, CEPS welcomed all participants to the conference and wished them fruitful and engaging discussions. As a leading European think tank and forum for debate on EU affairs, CEPS highlighted two central aspects of the conference: the “evidence-based” aspect of the discussions and the quest for “quality education”. Work at CEPS always strives to be evidence-based and holds a strong belief that quality in education is the key factor that contributes to economic growth. The conference was an excellent forum to further explore these concepts.

Welcome by the Coordinators of the European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE) and the Network of Experts on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET II)

Prof Ludger Woessmann, Scientific Coordinator of EENEE and Director of the Ifo Center for the Economics of Education

Dr Jana Huttova, Scientific Coordinator of NESET II

EENEE and NESET II are two advisory networks of experts funded by the European Commission. EENEE and NESET II aim to contribute to the improvement of decision-making and policy development in education and training in Europe by advising and supporting the European Commission in the analysis of social and economic aspects of education policies and reforms.

Prof Woessmann introduced the conference topic and identified the challenges that schools face today. He mainly discussed the financial crisis, which severely affected some Member States and led to substantial public budget cuts; the great demographic changes faced by the EU, such as ageing and rural-to-urban mobility; the need to integrate migrant and refugee children; and technological developments like digitalisation and automation.

To illustrate the importance of empowering schools, Prof Woessmann made reference to the crucial subject of autonomy and accountability. Recognising that schools are better positioned to understand their students’ needs and how to better educate them, there are strong arguments for giving more autonomy to schools. However, evidence shows that for one aspect of autonomy – teacher salaries – schools with autonomy that are working in an environment with no accountability perform worse than those without autonomy, regardless of the environment. On the other hand, schools with autonomy working in an environment with accountability perform better in all comparable scenarios.

Dr Huttova also shared with the audience a visual tool on the challenges and roles of schools in the educational system, in order to frame the overall discussion at the conference. The way

schools are perceived has changed: they are now often referred to as learning systems and there are high expectations that they will be able to deliver both quality and equitable education. With more freedom (autonomy), schools are expected to provide quality education for all, while facing a progressively more diverse population. Students and the diverse student population are at the core of these learning systems, which call for a holistic approach to learning that takes into consideration both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, as well as social skills. Teachers are the leading actors of these learning systems and their impact is also an important factor in the dynamics of learning. Lastly, the way policies and systems are changing or need to change in order to empower schools to provide quality and equity for all, and the policy recommendations that can be put forward were other aspects that the visual tool encompassed.

Welcome by the Commission¹

Mr Jens Nymand Christensen, Deputy Director-General, European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC)

Empowering schools is not just important but essential. Both the European Union and the Member States have a mission, an obligation, towards the European youth. As confirmed at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth, which took place in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017 and brought together European Heads of State or Government, education is at the top of the political agenda.

The Member States confirmed that education and culture are important pillars of the Union. Without strong educational systems, we are failing the young people and the Union. Strong and well-functioning school systems are needed because they contribute in three ways:

- 1.** Reduce inequality by narrowing the knowledge gap generated by social differences and creating a level playing field for young adults. At the presentation of the 2017 Education and Training Monitor on 9 November, Commissioner Tibor Navracsics said that “Inequality still deprives too many Europeans of the chance to make the most of their lives. It is also a threat to social cohesion and long-term prosperity.” While education is crucial in mitigating inequality, poor education policies can widen social and economic gaps. It is vital that educational systems and especially schools, as the local institutions on the ground, are equipped to help overcome inequalities for every pupil.
- 2.** Encourage civic engagement. Schools are microcosms of society. They can lead by example and create an environment that lays the foundation for a fair, inclusive and democratic Europe. In particular, outreach school programmes that engage with the community enhance not only the students’ sense of responsibility in society, but also their self-confidence and various competencies. The European Solidarity Corps therefore has an immense value for the people who receive support from such programmes, as well as for the volunteers themselves.
- 3.** Strengthen the social fabric in local communities. With the whole school approach, schools become a central player in the local community and contribute to establishing close ties among the different local players (parents, youth clubs and organisations, local businesses, foundations, churches, and various other local institutions). This is particularly important

¹ Listen to the full speech at the conference website: <http://eenee-neset2017.onetec.eu/exhibition.html>.

for the deprived areas of many cities, declining rural areas, and peripheral regions. Good and innovative schools can have a real, positive impact, helping to reverse the trend that is leaving the countryside empty of young people.

With this conference and by focusing on the topic of schools, we want to understand what hampers students and leads to them being left behind. More and more internationally comparable data on education from, for example, the OECD and Eurostat has been published recently, but data alone is not sufficient for policy-making. It is crucial to assess and evaluate the available data and put it into perspective. EENEE and NESET II provide the input needed by policy-makers, preparing evidence-based documents that inform and guide the Commission's work. The two networks thus play a special role that also comes with a special responsibility. This conference provides the possibility to present and discuss their work.

Keynote address²

Dr Abigail McKnight, Associate Professorial Research Fellow, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics

The Education and Training Monitor 2017

The Education and Training Monitor 2017 focuses on inequality, and there are a few key considerations worth noting:

- Inequality has not been solved and in certain cases it has even increased.
- The problem of equity in education and its social implication is still relevant, especially given the impact that educational inequality has on other areas, such as social and economic outcomes.
- Acknowledging the important role still played by socio-economic status in education outcomes is important. Understanding its implications in systems such as shadow education and private tutoring gives a better-informed picture of the education sector.
- The use of teaching assistants was not covered, although in many countries they are increasingly used in the classroom.

Equity in education, social and emotional skills, and streaming and setting in schools

A pressing question concerning inequality is this: Why (according to many measures) is educational inequality falling but economic inequality (income and social mobility inequality) is not following the same path? One would assume that the former would lead to the latter. The fact that economic inequality is rising is odd and its political implications should be assessed.

Evidence proves that children from advantaged family backgrounds do better in the labour market than other children irrespective of their initial skill levels. Parents play a positive role in their children's education – influencing the choice of schools, organising additional help where needed, and providing advice on subject choices and further and higher education options. The problem is that in unequal societies there can be very big differences in the level of the resources that parents have available to assist their children. Better-off parents also improve the social and emotional skills of their children (these skills are important in both academic success and well-being). Pointing out that parents try to obtain the best deals and opportunities for their children is not a criticism of the parents, but only frames a reality that schools and educational systems must be prepared

² Listen to the full speech at the conference website: <http://eenee-neset2017.onetec.eu/exhibition.html>.

to address. For those interested in improving relative social mobility, evidence of limited downward mobility (or a 'glass floor') for children from privileged family backgrounds is cause for concern, as it limits the extent to which it is possible to increase upward mobility for children from less advantaged family backgrounds.

Looking at social and emotional skills, research proves that they have a strong impact on cognitive skills and education outcomes. Low emotional and social skills (of poorer children) manifested in bullying behaviour, and also have a wider impact on the overall well-being of the student population. Thus, more should be done in schools to improve emotional and social skills, contributing to overall cognitive improvements as well.

Concerning the case of streaming and setting in schools, it is also clear that this impacts the equity in education and the quality provided. Countries are not homogenous in the use of streaming or setting in their schools, but schools in most countries use at least some form of setting. The literature proves that setting contributes to the increase of inequalities in education. Setting also changes teachers' perceptions of their students' capacities. However, it is also true that if you have a teaching body with a streaming and setting experience and familiarity, it is hard to make them ignore the consequences (act against their preconceived ideas and judgements) or change behaviour (act against setting and streaming).

An education 'arms race' between families and the government

One of the biggest barriers to changing inequality (not only in education) is inequality itself. Children have very different means supporting themselves to achieve the best outcomes. In a race between the state and wealthy parents, the state will never be able to win – it is hard to imagine any government that could match the level of spending for all children that is available for the children of wealthy parents.

However, governments have been trying to raise educational attainment at the lower end. Improving basic skills, decreasing early school leaving, and increasing participation in higher education for children from less advantaged family backgrounds are often policy priorities. Yet, if these prove effective in improving the situation for those at the bottom, it does not necessarily reduce inequality, as those at the top will still strive to differentiate themselves, through means such as attending the best schools, being taught by the best teachers, graduating from the best universities, and eventually obtaining the best jobs and the best salaries.

Therefore, it is important that one recognises the limits to what schools can do: we cannot expect schools to solve all society's problems. Fighting inequality might require bolder steps, not only in education but also as an overall societal approach.

Policy recommendations

Support can be given to schools in targeting social and emotional skills. In particular, damaging practices should be corrected and abolished. As an example, the fact that classmates are often asked to pick their team members leads to the same students repeatedly being "left behind" and the indirect promotion of bullying.

Schools could improve streaming and setting. It is important that teachers and schools recognise that not all students have highly motivated parents pushing to ensure that they are in the best possible set or stream, and that they find ways to equalise this difference to prevent some children from being disadvantaged. It is equally important that teachers do not pre-judge students' capacities and outcomes based on their backgrounds (which often occurs in setting and streaming scenarios).

From the discussion with the audience, the point was also made that even if governments are not able to improve relative social mobility through education policy it is still important to raise absolute mobility (being better off than your parents) through increasing attainment at the bottom. Increasing absolute mobility would increase the future opportunities for those at the bottom, and that is a valid quest on its own.

A last recommendation concerns monitoring and evaluating: understanding specific reforms is crucial.

SESSION 1

IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS TO ENSURE EQUALITY AND EQUITY

Moderated by **Dr Miroslav Beblavý**, Deputy Scientific Coordinator of EENEE and Associate Senior Research Fellow and Head of Unit at CEPS

Discussants: **Prof Idesbald Nicaise**, HIVA, KU Leuven and **Dr Andreu Arenas**, Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Operations Research and Econometrics, Université Catholique de Louvain

Structural indicators for inclusive systems in and around schools

Prof Erna Nairz-Wirth, Head of Education Sciences Group, Vienna University of Economics and Business and member of NESET II

In the NESET II report Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools, ten key principles for inclusive education systems are discussed. At the conference, only the first principle was addressed – a system-wide focus – as this can largely be regarded as the basis for all other principles.

The principle of system-wide focus calls for a systemic approach to education instead of an individualistic one. Schools, agencies and families are considered connected systems, each having a set of relationships and mutual influence that impact the individual – in both negative (barriers) and positive (supporters) ways. The measures and approach to education are school-wide (sometimes even with the involvement of the community) and not centred on identified individual needs (of one student). The focus should be on supportive learning environments, welcoming schools, and the prevention of discrimination. Students' needs should be addressed in a holistic manner and their opinions, together with those of their parents and the larger community, should be heard. The differentiated needs of marginalised groups should be considered (but also from a systemic perspective and not an individual one).

The report, written by Prof Nairz-Wirth, Paul Downes and Viktorija Rusinaitė, uses a framework of structural indicators to evaluate inclusive (education) systems. This framework has seven dimensions aimed at national policy-makers and practitioners, and is based on international research and a vast number of different EU policy instruments.

The seven dimensions are the system integration of policies and practices, macrostructural issues, a whole school approach, teacher and school leadership, a multidisciplinary focus on health and welfare, vulnerable individuals and groups, and finally parents and family support. For each dimension, a set of sub-dimensions are considered when studying inclusive systems.

A good example is the promotion of arts education. Arts education can contribute to decreasing delinquent behaviour, antisocial attitudes and dropout rates. Arts education stimulates self-expression and offers a creative, free environment for students. However, it is often the first to suffer from budgetary cuts.

The structural indicators can be used for self-assessment as well as for external evaluation. The goal is to understand whether structures are put in place in the system. All indicators are framed in a yes or no form. They are meant to be implemented at both national and school levels. Three different examples of the application of the structural indicators were presented at the conference: on arts education, emotional support and establishing professional communities.

Lastly, a larger research initiative on the issue of early school leaving was introduced (within the framework of the RESL.eu research project funded by the EU) and a link to a school toolkit was provided (www.schooleducationgateway.eu).

The school of opportunity

Dr Jean Hindriks, Full Professor of Economics, Université Catholique de Louvain

The background for research on the school of opportunity are the massive inequalities present in the Belgian educational system. This research seeks to introduce a new methodology and to separate inequality from social mobility.

The school of opportunity can be defined as a school that succeeds in both efficiency (students' rankings) and equity (students' upward mobility). Therefore, the aim of the methodology is to measure both efficiency and equity in schools and to try to find correlation.

Efficiency and equity

Data has proven that different school systems lead to different efficiency rank frontiers. The research consists of (efficiency) rank-to-rank analyses, where the goal is to verify whether the students manage to achieve a higher score than the one attributed to their social rank. If they do, then we are able to verify upward mobility. If they do not, we see downward mobility. This also tells us whether we are faced with an efficient school or not. Research shows that there is a lot of variation among schools.

The research also looks at equity. In this case, equity is dependent on which of the students move (from which social rank) and how much. Impacting those at the bottom (social rank) shows a higher level of equity.

School of opportunity and school practices

There are schools that perform well in efficiency and others that perform well in equity. The final goal is to study the common features of the schools that manage to perform positively in terms of both efficiency and equity. These are the so-called schools of opportunity.

Two interesting conclusions from this study

1. There is no correlation between the average social composition of the schools and their rankings; in fact, the more mixed the school is the more likely it is to be a school of opportunity.
2. Lowering test standards does not contribute to better outcomes: when teachers lower their evaluation standards due to the fact that their classes have lower entry skills, this reduces the chance of the school being a school of opportunity.

Institutions and policies supporting innovation in schools

Mr Rimantas Dumčius, Research Director at the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) and Deputy Scientific Coordinator of NESET II

Innovation is a driver for the improvement of the education system. It has the potential to create favourable learning environments and improve academic and social outcomes. School innovation can happen at the classroom level, school level or system level.

The key drivers of innovation can be both actors and processes that can connect different actors. At the classroom level, we are referring to teaching practices that are new to the particular context and have the potential to improve learners' outcomes. At the school level, innovation refers to the capacity to embed and sustain innovation in teaching and organisational practices. Finally, at the system level, innovation is the capacity of the educational system to manage change as well as create conditions for sustaining innovation in schools.

Innovation needs to happen at all levels in order to be effective. Rules that constrain how schools are organised, and how they teach or how they can motivate and incentivise their staff, hinder innovation. School autonomy and accountability promote innovation. Emphasis should be placed on the professional development of teachers, equipping them to promote change and innovate.

Innovation should be a solid part of education priorities and strategies. This should go hand in hand with consistent objectives, the promotion of system-wide developments, and a better use of resources. In particular, policy-makers should review financial incentives for schools and teachers. Grants to promote innovation tend to be used by the schools that are already performing better because they are aware of the opportunities and their advantages, and invest in it. For example, funding school partnerships and networks is a way to promote system-wide developments. When discussing the role of policy-makers, all levels are important, including municipalities, which play a critical role.

Lastly, evaluation and monitoring are crucial to inform innovation. There is a lot of data available and some level of monitoring of different tools and policies, but little policy evaluation. It is also crucial to make sure that all relevant stakeholders develop the capacity and skills to use and interpret available data.

Discussion

From the discussion initiated by the two discussants and the broader audience, a few additional points or conclusions are presented below.

It is important to make the case – as in Dr Hindriks' presentation – that equity and effectiveness are not in opposition to one another. Moreover, one should note that school competition – which is usually promoted – can improve efficiency but not equity. Only a combination of both efficiency and equity can lead to a “school of opportunity”.

The proposed definition of efficiency that is used by Dr Hindriks seems to offer advantages compared with that used by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), at least

by addressing some of its criticism. It would be interesting to use similar efficiency criteria at the country level for international rankings in PISA or in DG EAC's Education and Training Monitor. On the other hand, the policy conclusions of Dr Hindriks' paper should be interpreted with caution, as (self-)selection effects may affect the analysis.

The application of the set of indicators as developed by Prof Nairz-Wirth and her colleagues would improve the quality of PISA results (by introducing the indicators in the PISA tests).

There was a clear focus on the need for evaluation (evaluating measures, system reforms, spending schemes, etc.). It was added in the discussion that an evaluation culture needs to be promoted (some countries already have it). Sharing and disseminating results together with data availability is a way to promote evaluation, which can contribute to more informed decision-making at different levels.

Relevant sources

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SESSION 2

MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND OTHER MINORITY GROUPS: HOW TO IDENTIFY SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION POLICIES

Moderated by **Dr Jens Schneider**, Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies, University of Osnabrück and member of NESET II

Discussant: **Dr Mehtap Akgüç**, Research Fellow at CEPS

Education as a tool for the economic integration of migrants

Dr Maria De Paola, Associate Professor of Economics at the Department of Economics, Statistics and Finance, University of Calabria

Empirical evidence shows that, on average, immigrants in Europe are less educated than non-immigrants. One of the factors explaining differences in educational outcomes is proficiency in the host country language. Policies that are oriented towards proficiency of the host country language include the provision of extra funds to schools, teacher training aimed at dealing with children who lack competence in the language of instruction, support for out-of-school activities, and the engagement of parents. However, there is an evidence gap in terms of the effectiveness of each policy.

In addition to proficiency in the host country language, school organisation plays an important role in bridging the gap in educational attainment between the native-born population and immigrants. It covers a number of factors, namely pre-school attendance, the recruitment of teachers with an immigrant background, school tracking, and the share of immigrant peers.

Discussant's comment

The discussant raised the point that although the importance of language proficiency is established in literature, being fluent in the language of a host country does not ensure successful integration (e.g. not all immigrants in France who speak the language perform well).

Referring to the optimal size of the share of immigrants in school, after which it is not good to have more immigrants because of the test scores, this notion may be ideologically challenging to accept. School communities may feel differently about diversity and this should be taken into consideration before introducing such a share limit, since diversity can be valuable in terms of productivity increases.

The discussant reflected that diversifying the workforce by employing teachers with an immigrant background is a respectable goal, but it might be difficult to achieve given how broad diversity in Europe is. How to fairly select which origins should be reinforced is a challenge that would need to be resolved first. The speaker reflected that it could be sufficient to have teachers of any type of different origin, since they would all share a similar experience.

The discussant concluded that there are at least two areas where educational systems should aim for improvement: fighting against stereotypes of immigrants and recognising education obtained abroad (reducing skill mismatches).

Continuity of learning for newly arrived refugee children in Europe

Ms Claudia Köhler, SIRIUS Board Member, Executive Director of Farafina Institute, Senior Researcher at the European Forum for Migration Studies (EFMS)

When refugees arrive in Europe, they are highly motivated and ambitious; they see education as a main factor for success in the receiving society. Yet, refugees face a number of obstacles and challenges, including time lags in the provision of education, distant accommodation facilities, frequent reallocation, legal barriers and a lack of structures allowing informed choices, and the connectivity with prior education and knowledge. Member States aim to decrease these adversities by applying a number of policies.

Countries that used to be transit countries (e.g. Greece, Italy and Bulgaria) had to find solutions for integrating refugees into the educational systems by reinforcing parallel or mixed systems. Countries with a longer history of integrating migrants and refugees into their educational systems (e.g. the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Belgium) already had experience and existing structures in place, and therefore only had to adjust to the higher numbers of new arrivals in 2015–16.

Discussant's comment

The discussant raised a question about the incentives: How to offer the right ones to the children and their parents who have no certainty that their asylum application is going to be successful or whether they will be able to stay in the host country. The speaker agreed that it is an important issue and shared an example of good practice, whereby refugees get apprenticeships if they succeed in education.

The discussant also highlighted gender-specific problems, since some of the refugees come from cultures where gender roles differ from European ones. The speaker agreed that women, especially mothers, are the most difficult group to integrate into education, because many of them stay at home. Education providers can only try to motivate them to enroll, e.g. for language classes.

General discussion

The discussion started around the matter of segregation. The participants emphasised that former perceptions of segregation are no longer valid, because if for example, we look at schools in Germany or the Netherlands, we see that 80% of students have a migrant background, and they are not the same foreign background, but 15–20 different backgrounds. That is why we need to have a more differentiated look at what segregation means, also taking into account first- and second-generation migrants, who face different challenges.

Another important aspect that was touched upon during the discussion was an example of good practice of teaching the language of a host country. It was noted that some refugee children will never have an opportunity to speak the language of a host country with anyone except their teachers. One of the participants shared a good practice example from Finland, where the teacher education

curricula was changed a couple of years ago to include the subject of language awareness for teachers of all subjects. This paradigm shift in teacher education is happening in many countries.

The matter of the quality of schools was also discussed. It was noted that schools with a high composition of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrants and Roma children, struggle to achieve high quality. However, there are examples of segregated schools in the suburbs of Stockholm that perform very well and have excellent teachers.

The session concluded with the viewpoint that we should never stop insisting on quality in schools, since it makes a fundamental difference. Referring to the statements of the opening plenary about the glass floor and role of parents, it was said that the true way forward is not disarming parents who want the best for their children, but arming schools.

Relevant sources

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SESSION 3

EMPOWERING TEACHERS: PROMOTING SKILLS AND COMPETENCES FOR 21ST CENTURY LEARNING AND TEACHING

Moderated by Ms Hanna Siarova, Research Manager at PPMI and member of NESET II

Discussants: **Dr Jan Peeters**, Director of Centre for Innovation in the Early Years (VBJK), Ghent University and member of NESET II, and **Dr Karolien Lenaerts**, Researcher at CEPS

Economics of education and skills

Prof Daniel Münich, Professor of Professional Practice at the Centre for Economic Research and Graduate Education – Economics Institute (CERGE-EI) and member of EENEE

There are four key approaches that can be taken to improve the quality of teaching and the attractiveness of the teaching profession among young people: targeting the entry into the teaching profession, enhancing the quality of initial teacher education, assessing the effectiveness of continuing professional development, and working on the retention of good teachers (career system).

There seems to be a point for innovative schooling in an innovative world. Innovation in the economy leads to growth; therefore, one could pose the question of how to use education to improve innovative potential. This could be achieved by providing a variety of skills, introducing new technologies and teaching practices, and introducing changes to the educational system.

Concerning the integration of ICT in teaching practices, e-learning, digital and online teaching seem to provide good examples for the debate. There is a general wisdom that more ICT leads to better academic outcomes. There are research-based examples for and against this. Positive associations are commonly found between more ICT and better cognitive skills, school enrolment and graduation rates, but these are likely biased by not taking into account many unobserved effects, such as student and family backgrounds. Advanced research studies in economics are needed to disentangle causal effects. For example, one study found ICT investments in British primary schools leading to positive effects in English language and science, but not in maths. In the US, computer programmes used for algebra and pre-algebra at colleges showed small positive effects, but notably larger ones for larger classes.

The shortcomings of ICT use in education are that technology changes quickly and so do the impacts. ICT use can affect a range of other outcomes that are not being properly measured; for example, a lack of proper identification of the learning methods, the crowding-out of other important teaching methods, and distraction from other activities. The existence or absence of suitable alternatives determines the ICT effects.

In order to activate the innovation capacity of schools, autonomy and accountability are needed together with the engagement of various stakeholders (teachers, schools, policy-makers, academics, parents and employers).

Transforming european early childhood education and care services and primary schools into professional learning communities

Dr Nima Sharmahd, Researcher at the Centre for Innovation in Early Years (VBJK), Ghent University

The quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and of primary schools (meaning the learning and well-being of children and families) depends on competent and well-educated staff. It also depends on competent systems (and a whole school approach), meaning collaborating individuals, teams, institutions and governance. There is also a need to invest in initial training and continuing professional development for the whole staff. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, as societies and educational systems are different. Negotiation and reflection are essential for practitioners and teachers.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are an important approach to ensuring quality. PLCs are a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practices in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoting way. The speaker presented research that was based on several case studies in different countries across the EU. She explained that PLCs have five characteristics, upon which she elaborated:

1. Reflective and in-depth dialogues with colleagues;
2. De-privatisation of practice (ending the practice of teachers working in isolation, introducing job shadowing and European exchanges, etc.);
3. Investment in 'collective responsibility' (a bottom-up approach, the 'active participation' of staff in their learning process to increase their motivation);
4. A focus on reaching shared values and vision (based on children's rights and respect for diversity, a democratic and communitarian approach); and
5. Investment in leadership (school directors, pedagogical coordinators, etc.).

PLCs face many challenges, such as the continuity in who leads the school or ECEC institution, and the lack of a shared vision. But PLCs value everybody in the school or ECEC setting and education community.

Discussion

The discussion with the audience first focused on the question of how to encourage more innovation and how to start and promote PLCs. These discussion points contributed to the overarching theme of the third session, which was to explore how teachers can be empowered and schools can be transformed, with the ECEC practitioner and teacher as the key agents of change, in an environment that is rapidly transforming and in which new types of skills are called for. Many schools are faced with high turnover rates of teachers and management.

On the topic of PLCs, the audience had a number of specific questions about the four case studies that the researchers had conducted. The discussion benefited from the participation of two directors

(one of a day care centre and one of a school, for children aged 2.5 to 12) who had taken part in the research project. This resulted in interesting insights about how practitioners had established PLCs in practice, how these PLCs operate, and what impact they have. PLCs require vision and passion as well as suitable leaders.

During the discussion, the role of the national context was highlighted. PLCs have already been used for many years in Italy, where this way of working was first used in several cities, and further expanded from there due to their success. Examples of PLCs can also be found in some other countries. Yet, in schools where PLCs are introduced, it is not always the case that they work. Dr Sharmahd emphasised that all five components are important. The starting point for PLCs is shared vision, then critical reflection on problems the teachers are facing and a will to change the existing practice. Leadership also matters: in many of the cases examined, the school head had a strong vision and was able to communicate and share it with all the stakeholders involved. One example that was discussed several times was the availability of child-free hours, and how these contribute to teaching quality.

The second part of the discussion dealt with the topic of innovation in ECEC services and schools. The concept of innovation in teaching was raised, and reference was made to the OECD's research in this regard (more particularly, surveys in which teachers can indicate their challenges). The speaker made the point that more R&D in education is needed (in relation to teaching methods and new technologies). It was also pointed out that ICT is not new (it is 20 years old) and by itself it is not innovation.

As part of the discussion, there was also a question on what to conclude from the mixed research results that emerge from the literature. While some studies document positive effects from the use of e-learning and technologies in class, others find no or even negative results. Prof München highlighted that the local conditions are crucial in co-determining these results. For example, are the new technologies replacing traditional teaching methods that were more effective, or are they used as complements? Also when it comes to the impact that technology may have on disadvantaged students, a similar argument can be made. To make technology in education work well, all stakeholders have to be involved, both situation- and country-specific research findings should be generalised cautiously, and innovations in education should be subject to modern, perpetual research scrutiny in all Member States.

It was also suggested that there is a need to foster the ability of policy-makers to look for, read and understand research findings and to promote reflection on changes and innovation in education. Prof München pointed out that to make it work, experts with a solid research background should be directly involved in the policy-making teams. He also advised more modesty in our expectations concerning education research (understanding that education research is difficult to compare with other types of research). In this regard, the discussion further touched upon the difference between the notion of evidence-based and evidence-informed policy-making.

The discussion was concluded by highlighting the issues that were relevant but had not been addressed, such as how to attract suitable staff into the teaching profession.

Relevant sources

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CLOSING PLENARY

New areas for evidence and research

Moderated by **Mr Adam Tyson**, European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

Dr Jana Huttova, Scientific Coordinator of NESET II

Prof Tobias Ley, Centre of Excellence on Educational Innovation, Tallinn University

Dr Miroslav Beblavý, Deputy Scientific Coordinator of the EENEE and Associate Senior Research Fellow and Head of Unit at CEPS

The closing plenary session started by tackling the issue of the trade-off between excellence and equity in education, which inspired a lively discussion involving both panellists and the audience. The conference participants agreed that commitment to excellence should be inseparable from the commitment to inclusion in and through education. Acknowledging the existence of a (sometimes unspoken) belief that investing in diversity and inclusion means sacrificing quality and excellence, panellists pointed to a number of countries that strive to provide equity and excellence and are successful in doing so, and their achievements show the importance of having these two goals intertwine. Therefore, the focus should be on understanding why these countries succeed rather than pursuing a dangerous dichotomy between excellence and equity. Warning about the risks of focusing on the needs of an average student, some of the audience members highlighted how important it is to recognise different educational needs and to be ready to respond differently without sacrificing any one group of students. The case of Estonia was mentioned as an example where balancing equity and excellence seems to work (a case documented in the 2017 Education and Training Monitor).

When it comes to making schools more inclusive and addressing the needs of different groups, some argued in favour of more school autonomy. Others emphasised that increasing autonomy might be beneficial for better schools that already do well and help them to further boost their innovativeness; however, tackling the issues of quality and equity in other schools might require different measures and approaches. The discussion also touched upon the need to go beyond schools, to reach out to parents and engage local communities.

With regard to the potential catalysts of change in school education, the discussion turned to incentives and capacities. Panellists discussed the need to invest in the capacity of both the system and the teachers. The audience stressed the need to have a sense of emergency, a shared belief that we need to do something. By the same token, a recent study on how to make changes in educational systems was brought up during the discussion, as well as some specific illustrations from the national contexts, including the example of innovative Flemish schools, which were newly created and later on gradually integrated the staff from the old schools into the newly created ones. Systemic change, focused on schools, might lead to better results. Allowing teachers to be innovative and giving them autonomy is important, but so is leadership. In implementing reforms, it is important to start by accessing the state of the art, investing in system capacity, and then keeping

a balance between objectives and accepting less than perfection in the outcomes (otherwise only small-scale projects can be achieved).

The later discussion went on in two directions. First, it looked at the need to take into account teachers' views and avoid importing new solutions from other countries or other contexts without having consulted the teachers and without accounting for the specificities of a particular school environment. The support of the key actors was considered to be particularly important, as well as the need to make sure that pupils, teachers, parents and other actors can clearly see what is in it for them. Second, the panellists briefly touched upon the issue of teacher and school segregation, indicating that even if teachers are equally paid at the national level, they may end up working in very different contexts with dissimilar challenges and opportunities. When testing school performance, it is important to test it across time: a high-performing school might be the one that simply attracts the best students (those who would do well in any case), while a low-performing school might be the one making a big difference in terms of the academic outcomes of students, taking into account their different predispositions compared with those attracted to better-performing schools.

Coming back to the potential catalysts of change in school education, the panellists also discussed the role of digital technologies in making schools more equitable. Technology alone does not change the teaching and learning process and all comes down to how it is used and how pedagogy changes. If the belief common among teachers that digital technologies are the responsibility of the technicians in schools persists, the leading developers of digital technologies will end up defining the needs of children, rather than vice versa. To make a change in school education using technologies and avoid a digital divide, creative spaces ('living labs') and sustainable cooperation among different actors are the key. Digital change can be co-created by bringing researchers and teachers together, by bringing teachers and students together, and so on, and by providing a safe environment for various types of creative collaborations, which can lead to creative use of digital technologies in teaching and learning.

