

# Education, Inequalities and Social Exclusion

A staff development seminar in cooperation with the NESSE network of experts

This was the second of a series of Commission staff development seminars on social aspects of education and training, organized by DG-EAC and delivered by members of the [NESSE network of experts](#). In this seminar, eminent experts argued that educational inequalities persist and have devastating effects on the lives of individuals and social groups. The presentations left little doubt that the European Commission has a crucial role to play in fostering equality, inclusion and social cohesion in European schools and societies.

In this seminar, [Professor Kathleen Lynch](#), from the University College Dublin (IE), was joined by [Professor Marc Demeuse](#), of the University of Mons-Hainaut (BE), to discuss different conceptualisations of equality in relation to education and training and their implications for policy, to present examples of policies and practices that have succeeded or failed, and to engage with burning questions such as:

- *Which education strategies contribute to preventing or overcoming inequalities, exclusion, vulnerability, marginalisation, disengagement and foster equality, inclusion, integration and social cohesion in European schools and societies?*
- *What are the educational policies and practices that do most to promote the wide dispersion of competencies, skills and values which are crucial to achieving these tasks?*
- *What do schools, teachers, trainers, adult educators and other learning support actors need in order to develop an inclusive culture and practice?*
- *What are the supportive conditions (in terms of welfare, labour market, health, housing, migration and other policies) to maximise the impact of education and training measures?*

Drawing on state-of-the-art research in a whole range of disciplines in the social sciences on education (including philosophy, sociology, education policy, psychology and human rights),



[Professor Lynch](#) argued that **the model of equality that we adopt matters**. She argued that the equality objectives that we promote depend on the interpretation of equality that we endorse. If we adhere to a *minimalist basic equality model* in education, she said, we will achieve only minimal rates of attainment for all. If we want to have *substantive* as opposed to formal *equality of opportunity*, she added, we must have **equality of condition**, as students from different backgrounds cannot compete for the more privileged positions in education without equal resources. To avail effectively of education requires a considerable investment of person-specific resources. There is not only a need to equalize educationally relevant resources (be these economic, cultural or social) within schools, but also outside of schools, said the speaker.

Professor Lynch argued that **to have sub-stantive equality of opportunity it is essential to have equality of economic conditions**. There is overwhelming empirical evidence, she said, that the more unequal a society becomes economically, the more unequal it is educationally. What this means is that **socio-economic (social class) based inequalities remain the primary cause of inequality in education** in all societies, even when controlling for other attributes such as ethnic/cultural identity/migrant status. The basic problem, she continued, is that inequalities in wealth enable richer families to use excess wealth to advantage their

children by investing in out-of-school educational activities and resources to maintain their competitive advantages within schools.

In addition, said Professor Lynch, rising inequalities in a society propel middle class parents and other relatively privileged parents to resist egalitarian demands for change as they fear their own children will lose out in an unequal society. A "fear for the future" propels privileged parents to be more competitive in terms of education and to support private education markets. The use of private education "markets" (for cramming, tutoring etc.) then offsets the equality policies enacted by the State. For Professor Lynch, therefore, it is important **to be mindful of the unintended consequences when planning equality policies in education.**

Professor Lynch argued that, while education and training are important building blocks, policy initiatives in this field alone are not enough. As the research shows, said Professor Lynch, education and training policy initiatives alone will have only limited success in removing barriers to inclusion unless they are articulated with wider social and economic reforms linking education and other areas of policy such as migration, employment, welfare, housing and health.

Professor Lynch argued that **achieving equality and promoting inclusion in education is not simply an issue of distributing existing forms of education more equally between groups.** Distributive theories of social justice dominate our thinking in education, she said. We think of schooling as an unmitigated good that must be distributed equally to all people in society. While distributive justice is essential, she argued, we must also recognise that education (more specifically compulsory schooling) is not always experienced positively. **Educational institutions themselves must become internally egalitarian.** There is a need for more egalitarian pedagogical practices, methods of decision-making, forms of management, grouping of students, curriculum design and planning, and modes of assessment. In addition, she said, **schools must be places of care**, not simply places where one is constantly subjected to performance measurement.

For Professor Lynch, equality in education involves four interrelated processes:

- **Equality of Resources** - ensuring that all students are equally resourced economically, socially and culturally (this is the dominant distributive social justice model)
- **Equality of Respect and Recognition** - granting equal respect and recognition to differing abilities and peoples in education
- **Equality of Power** - equalising power relations
- **Affective Equality, Equality of Love, Care and Solidarity; (LCS)** - equality in the doing of love, care and solidarity work and equality in benefiting from care.

**Equality of Respect and Recognition** matter, said professor Lynch, as there is a large body of evidence showing that many of those who experience inequality in education experience it as a lack of respect. This lack of recognition may take different forms: it may be a lack of respect for different abilities; for cultural values and languages, for sexual orientation, age, marital status, gender or social class background. Even social class inequality is not simply an economic injustice, it is also an injustice tied to lack of respect for accent, lifestyle, ways of dressing –it is experienced as moral judgement.

For Professor Lynch, it is especially important to **recognise different abilities** (intelligences) in education. The research from the Harvard Zero project shows that there are multiple human intelligences but that most formal educational systems only formally recognise two of these, namely linguistic and logical mathematical-related intelligences. The failure to recognise the complexity of human abilities, their discrete character and their widely varying manifestations, results in the exclusion and labelling of children in schools. It also provides justification for **tracking**, a practice shown by a large body of research to have negative effects on the achievement levels of disadvantaged children.

**Equality of Power matters**, said Professor Lynch, because there is a good body of research indicating that dialogue-based and democratic forms of education enhance educational engagement and lower drop out rates especially among young people from marginalised communities. Promoting more

egalitarian relations between children and teachers (and across the educational community) also matters because it shows respect for children as persons. Research with children (not on them) shows that they have a voice of their own that they want heard directly rather than mediated by adults. In the eyes of children, she said, **schooling is not just a preparation for life; it is life itself** – 14 years of life in most EU countries.

Professor Lynch argued that promoting dialogue is also effective pedagogically as it enables the student to become an active participant in their own learning. As noted by Paulo Freire, dialogical, power-sharing approaches to teaching make the learner an active participant as opposed to a passive listener. Power sharing is also endemically educational as it advances understanding of democratic practices.

**Affective Equality matters**, said professor Lynch, as human beings are not simply rational (economic) actors on the stage of life. They are also profoundly emotional and sentient beings whose memories and feelings about schooling and education often outlive their cognitive gains (or failures). Traditionally, our school philosophy has been based on Cartesian rationalism. By focusing solely on the rational "I think, therefore I am" philosophy, we ignore the equally important affective dimension of the human condition; "I feel, therefore I am". The affective dimension is too often relegated to the private sphere, despite it clearly playing a crucial role in the public sphere –not least in education. There is a lot of research showing that people do not experience the injustices and inequalities in education simply in terms of low grades or early leaving. Schooling can and does create *affective inequalities by depleting children and young people's sense of educational self worth*. By denying people's care needs in education we can promote affective inequalities, said professor Lynch; we do this, she argued, when we only value students in school on the basis of performance.

If schooling undermines a young person's sense of their educational self worth it is deeply damaging to their attitude to learning and education, argued professor Lynch, and it undermines their confidence in their own abilities to achieve later in life. The undermining of a child's sense of well being (through continued experience of relative educational failure

for example) also raises serious human rights issues for policy makers in the longer term. *Is it an abuse of human rights to make school legally compulsory while simultaneously allowing schools to undermine a child's sense of well being?*, she asked. Prof. Lynch argued that if we are serious about addressing affective equality issues in education we should measure the extent to which a given child or young person's sense of educational self-worth is enhanced by schooling or undermined by it. In other words, care as a value needs to be inscribed in education because children (and adults!) learn best when they feel they are cared about; **education work is also care work**.

In the last part of her presentation, Professor Lynch argued that **the model of the citizen that informs our educational thinking is important as it can either exacerbate exclusion or promote inclusion**. She presented two models of the citizen that are often in tension in education. The *Rational Economic Actor (REA) model* sees the citizen as simply an economic actor whose primary educational needs are economic. In the REA model the child and the adult are simply educated as functionaries of the economy; they are valued in so far as they can perform and contribute to the economy. This inevitably, professor Lynch argued, creates an educationally hostile attitude to educating economically less valuable persons such as people with intellectual disabilities or older people. It also undermines education for care work.

The *Carer Citizen model* sees the person to be educated, as someone who has a value in society and in education simply because they are human. They are valued first in and of themselves, and then as cultural, social and political citizens, irrespective of their economic status. Moreover, everyone is cared for by others at some stage in their life, and likewise, most people become carers themselves at some stage. Care itself is endemic to the work of education.

Educating the carer citizen, professor Lynch argued, is as important a task as educating the economic citizen, given the pre-eminent importance of care not only for all citizens but also for the future of the whole global order and environment. The Carer Citizen model would also promote a more egalitarian society

inside and outside of education, as it would enhance our understanding and commitment to solidarity.



In the second part of the seminar, **Professor Demeuse** argued that all European education systems, to a greater or lesser extent, are marked by widespread educational inequities that reflect, reproduce and compound wider socio-economic inequalities. He joined the first speaker in reminding us that **educational inequalities have devastating effects on the lives of individuals and social groups**. Early school leavers, the poor, the homeless, the disabled, the low-skilled, older workers, the unemployed, people re-entering the labour market, migrants, refugees and people from ethnic minorities are among the most vulnerable and severely affected by educational inequalities. We need to go beyond the superficial slogan-style commitment to equity. To help counter inequity effectively, an acceptable model of justice needs to be developed, according to the specific needs of the different levels of education: (e.g. the equality of results for compulsory education, and equal access into higher education).

Professor Demeuse argued that **efficiency and equity are not mutually exclusive**; they can be combined and be mutually reinforcing.

He also argued that investing in **quality early childhood education and care** is crucial, as it is at this stage that the foundations are laid for subsequent learning and achievements, and also because investing in quality early childhood education and care is shown to be the most effective way of breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Research confirms that early childhood education and care has the highest rates of return of the whole lifelong learning continuum, especially for the most disadvantaged, and that the results of this investment build up over time.

One of the most important factors for equity in education and training, argued Professor Demeuse, is the quality, experience and motivation of **teachers** and the types of pedagogy they use. He suggested that equity can be improved if we **improve the quality of teacher training** (both initial and in-service) and adopt recruitment policies that

encourage experienced teachers to remain in disadvantaged areas.

Drawing on research evidence, Professor Demeuse argued that education and training systems which track at an early age exacerbate the effect of socio-economic background on educational attainment and do not raise efficiency in the long run.

Professor Demeuse insisted that in order to make our education and training systems more equitable, it is crucial for us to invest, reinforce and learn from comparative research in education. The work of Eurydice already contributes greatly to this task, but we need more such studies, as well as the development of specific equity indicators. It is essential that we use such research in Europe, to prevent us from simply importing foreign policy measures (notably from America and Australia) without sufficiently taking the differences in context into consideration.

In conclusion, Professor Demeuse echoed the words of Professor Lynch, by stating that before we can change inequitable practices in education and training systems, we need to understand and change the inequitable logic that drives them.

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### Other NESSE seminars:

[\*Linking Research, Policy and Practice in E&T\*](#)

[\*Fostering Innovation: the role of education and training\*](#)

[\*Education and Migration\*](#)

[\*Achieving equality in practice: challenges for policy-makers\*](#)

[\*New Governance Models for Education and Training and their Implications\*](#)

[\*Priority Education Policies to Combat Inequalities and School Failure\*](#)

[\*Education and the Integration of Migrant Children: lessons from research for policy and practice\*](#)

[\*Cultivating Talent: educating for creativity and innovation\*](#)

[\*Teachers Touch Lives: Improving the quality of teachers and teaching in Europe\*](#)

[\*Education and Children's Well-Being: the role of Sports, Culture, Health and Citizenship\*](#)

[\*Which Citizen for which Europe? Balancing the economic and socio-cultural aims of education and training\*](#)