

# Priority Education Policies to Combat Inequalities and School Failure

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

Positive discrimination in education policies as a way of closing the educational opportunity gap between social classes was first launched in the 1960s. Since then, many countries have put in place policies aimed to benefit the most disadvantaged. A European Commission staff development seminar on this topic was held in the Madou Auditorium on 27/02/08. [Professor Ides Nicaise](#) from the University of Leuven was joined by [Professor Marc Demeuse](#) from the University of Mons-Hainaut to discuss some challenges for policy-makers who are concerned about promoting equality in and through education.

The seminar started with the RTBF documentary Questions à la une: [Echec scolaire: notre enseignement est-il discriminatoire?](#) The first part of this video showed some of the ways in which inequalities are reproduced in and through the education system. Through the comparison of two secondary schools in Brussels, the video illustrated what we already know from research<sup>1</sup>: that **educational inequalities persist and have devastating effects on the lives of individuals and communities**, especially on the lives of the already disadvantaged. The first part of the video demonstrated that inequalities can be found at every facet and level of education systems –in *opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes*. It showed that educational inequalities reflect and often reproduce and compound wider socio-economic inequalities. Filmed in Helsinki, Finland, the second part of the video documented the Finnish experience. It showed that **equitable schooling is possible and it is a matter of public choice**<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See the Commission's 2006 Communication *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems* and especially the related [Staff Working Paper](#).

<sup>2</sup> A related video (not shown at the seminar) discussing what is being done to tackle educational inequalities in the USA is: <http://www.teachers.tv/video/20913>

## "Priority Education Policies": What, why, for whom and with what results?

In his presentation, **Professor Demeuse** provided definitions and helped us improve our understanding of what "Priority Education Policies" PEP are. He spoke about the range of existing policies and their objectives, about the definition of target groups, and also about the experience accumulated so far from the implementation of various types of positive discrimination policies and measures in terms of their efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and impact.



## Are education priority policies effective and efficient?



In the second part of the seminar, **professor Nicaise**, spoke about **the conditions that are necessary to maximise the effectiveness of positive discrimination measures**.

The speaker discussed theoretical arguments in support of implementing Education Priority Policies before turning to a review of conclusions from empirical research on their effectiveness and efficiency. At the end of his presentation he drew some lessons for European and national-level policy making.

Professor Nicaise argued that in evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of Education Priority Policies at least four questions need to be addressed:

- To what extent have policies affect the 'right' groups? (=target effectiveness)
- How wide is their coverage? (=impact)
- What have been the effects on educational outcomes? (=outcome effectiveness)
- Has the investment yielded value for money? (=efficiency)

Professor Nicaise examined these questions in relation to two main types of positive discrimination:

(a) **additional funding** for schools serving disadvantaged students, and

(b) **priority rules in admission criteria** (for the enrolment of disadvantaged students).

### (a) Educational Priority Funding

*Do additional funding schemes reach the right groups? What are the criteria used to define the target groups and their needs? (target effectiveness).* Some countries, said professor Nicaise, target additional funding to schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (called "Educational Priority Areas" or "Educational Priority Zones"), defined on the basis of socio-economic indicators such as the average education level of inhabitants, unemployment,

dependency on social benefits, etc. In addition to the fact that such areas are relatively easy to define, continued the speaker, this approach allows for a more *integrated approach* that may generate synergies between educational and other local development policies and agents.

However, said professor Nicaise, a major drawback of the Education Priority Areas approach, is that **social disadvantage does not fully coincide with local territories**: some beneficiaries in Education Priority Areas are not disadvantaged, whereas several disadvantaged students live outside the target areas. For example, added the speaker, at the end of the 1970s, 68% of all primary schools in the US received subsidies through the "Chapter I" scheme; and yet around 40% of deprived children were not reached by the scheme, while conversely 58% of the children in Chapter I schools were not poor<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, said professor Nicaise, **additional funding schemes need to be more finely-tuned in order to reach the right groups, with criteria based on the proportion of students with particular characteristics within schools** (such as low education or benefit dependency of parents, ethnic background, mother tongue etc.).

*What are the effects of additional funding schemes on education outcomes?* Existing evaluations show moderately positive findings<sup>4</sup>, said professor Nicaise. In most cases, however, he added, the measured effects are positive but do not meet the expectations. **Obstacles that reduce the effectiveness of such policies**, said the speaker, include<sup>5</sup>:

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, Jung and Orland, 1986; Riddle, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Bernardo & Nicaise, 2000; Björklund e.a., 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Jungbluth, 2003; 2005.

(a) the disproportion between the additional funding available and the size of the challenges. The schools receiving disadvantaged students are themselves often disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure, equipment, quality of management and teaching staff, etc., and the additional funding provided through EPF is often a drop in the ocean compared to such structural disadvantages.

(b) the ineffective use of extra funding by schools, due to the lack of "earmarking" of EPF subsidies, the poor quality of the teaching staff or the poor management of the recipient schools.

(c) the reinforcement of segregation often caused by the targeting of extra funding itself. In countries with free school choice, schools that have received EPF and used it in an effective way are in many cases soon overwhelmed by enrollees with an even more disadvantaged profile, due to mouth-to-ear publicity and referrals by other schools or related services.

Experience shows, said Professor Nicaise, that the availability of extra funding to schools needs to be complemented with "technical assistance" measures (such as special training of teachers and school leaders) and with supportive conditions that can maximise the impact of the strategy employed (such as the reduction of class size). Research shows, said professor Nicaise, that the effectiveness of additional funding increases with the amount of funding per student, indicating that a strengthening of the schemes may yield better outcomes. It also appears that schools with a strong management and more experienced teachers achieve better results with their use of additional funding. Finally, external coaching of teams in additional funding schools and additional in-service training for teachers can also reinforce the effectiveness of additional funding schemes.

## **(b) Positive discrimination in admission tests**

Holzer and Neumark (2005), said professor Nicaise, provide an interesting review of the literature relating to **Affirmative Action (AA)**, which is the most prominent example of positive discrimination in admission rules. Although they conclude that some gaps remain to be filled in the evaluation literature, the speaker argued, the overall picture sketched in their paper is rather positive:

- As regards outcomes for the target group, more students from ethnic minorities have enrolled and graduated thanks to AA, which means that the overall impact has been undeniably positive. Minority graduates also tend to earn more, once in the labour market.
- As regards external effects, the benefits of heterogeneous grouping on learning achievement are well documented. Research has also demonstrated positive effects of AA on intercultural skills (such as civic engagement and democratic attitudes) in all racial groups. On the other hand, little evidence is available on role model effects (with successful students from minorities presumably encouraging younger cohorts to participate more).

The overall picture of Affirmative Action thus remains rather convincing, despite the persistent controversy, legal challenges and resistance from white students as well as some educational institutions.

## **Lessons for European education systems**

Despite widespread scepticism about the impact of educational priority funding schemes in the past, said professor Nicaise, our conclusion is that **these schemes can be useful as part of a more comprehensive approach to equality of**

**opportunity in education.** EPF schemes can be made more effective and efficient through better targeting and more "daring" investments, he added.

Also, with regard to positive discrimination in enrolment criteria, said professor Nicaise, **the empirical literature about Affirmative Action in the USA shows a fairly successful record. Moreover, "softer" versions of positive action are feasible in Europe.** The controversy in the US mostly arises around blacks and whites competing for the same, limited number of places. In systems with no *numerus clausus*, the competition between different social groups does not need to be so harsh.

Also, noted professor Nicaise, the issue of (positive) discrimination in enrolment becomes completely irrelevant where admission tests are banned. To begin with, said the speaker, one may argue that the access to upper secondary education is a "right of the child", which has the quality of a human right and should not depend on one's (presumed and imperfectly measurable) ability. **We would therefore, professor Nicaise argued, advocate a radical, legal ban on admission tests altogether in secondary education** (based on anti-discrimination arguments). Positive action would then remain an option in higher education, which is traditionally pervaded by a more meritocratic culture in which selectivity is seen by most people as legitimate.

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[http://centre-alain-savary.inrp.fr/CAS/publications/xyzep/les-dossiers-d-xyzep/archives-1/2005-2006/dossier\\_20\\_pro.pdf](http://centre-alain-savary.inrp.fr/CAS/publications/xyzep/les-dossiers-d-xyzep/archives-1/2005-2006/dossier_20_pro.pdf)

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