Measures to combat educational disadvantage:
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Rapporteur Report

Workshop 1: Hidden Costs and Other Barriers in Compulsory Education and In Initial VET

Chair: Dr Geneviève Defraigne-Tardieu Define, ATD Court Monde
Speaker: Professor Ides Nicaise, University of Leuven
Rapporteur: Professor John Bynner, NESET network of experts

Overview

This report follows the pattern of the workshop beginning with an overview of barriers to equality of access to educational provision and achievement, led by Prof Ides. The initial focus was particularly on economic difficulties as the major barrier disadvantaged families faced followed by the educational, cultural and dispositional barriers that could add to them. As the discussion progressed emphasis shifted towards actions that might be expected to counteract the effects of disadvantage on outcomes by reducing inequalities in educational opportunities and support, including a number of specific initiatives that were reported as successful. The report was also informed by the discussions at the plenary sessions of the symposium and the Commission paper "Council Conclusions on the Social Dimension of Education and Training".

1. Barriers to access and achievement

1.1 Family economics reflects a pervasive set of barriers that hinder the whole of a child's educational career coming to a head towards the end of compulsory schooling when the pressures arising from the decision whether to leave school or stay on to enter further and higher education are at their strongest. Parents on average spend 350 Euros per annum for a child in primary school and 850 Euros per annum for a child in secondary school, mainly on books and equipment. School trips and private tutoring outside school hours will be an additional cost for some. Staying on past the compulsory age will add to living costs, which would otherwise be met through earnings.

1.2 Failure to meet school costs may lead to breakdown in home-school relations isolating the child from his or her peers. Universal or targeted alleviation of costs, including the provision of free school meals helps such families, and together with direct grant aid - especially for those past compulsory schooling - should be the goal supported by social and health services working in partnership with the school. Non-take up, e.g. of free school meals, also has to be tackled because of the stigmatisation that can be attached to those children needing special treatment.

1.3 Education and learning barriers typically reside in parents' own poor educational record. They will be manifested in the child's learning difficulties well before school entry and are likely to continue as an obstacle to achievement throughout the period of schooling. They also reflect a growing mismatch between the normative expectations of teachers of what support parents are providing at home and the reality of often poor housing conditions and little or no help given. The consequence is a growing gap between the well performing children and others that can become increasingly difficult to bridge. This underpins evidence that the earlier intervention takes place, such as in projects like Early Headstart (USA) and Sure Start (UK), the more likely it is to be effective. On the other hand, at every age and every stage of education there is potential for building the motivation that is critical to educational progress. This is especially the case if parents, rather than feeling alienated from formal education, can continue to engage with the school and the teachers around the child's educational development and performance.

1.4 Cultural diversity, coupled with further differentiation by religion and gender, may be a barrier or facilitator depending on whether associated values and behaviour are in harmony with those of the School or in conflict with them. A mismatch between what teachers expect and families value is a key disadvantaging factor often compounded, in the case of immigrants by language difficulties that obstruct educational progress. Cultural priorities, e.g. in the education of girls, may not always be in harmony with school goals and pedagogy, raising questions of gender segregation at the level of the school or subject teaching, thereby challenging the democratic principle of inclusive education.

2. Trajectory of disadvantage

2.1 Disadvantage has cumulative effects on educational performance as reflected in the idea of a 'trajectory of disadvantage' that begins at birth and predicts poor life chances from a relatively early age. On the way are vicious circles where major disruptions like family breakdown may slow progress even further. The challenge for educational policy makers and practitioners is to find the means of countering such effects. The prescription will be a blend of economic, social, family and learning resources

stimulating the child's desire to learn and bolstering his or her own agency to do so thereby enabling the 'virtuous circle' of achievement to be restored.

Capability

2.2 Central to transforming the trajectory of disadvantage into one of achievement is shared educational goals as reflected in development economist Amartya Sen's idea of capability - 'freedom to achieve wellbeing'. This links individual and collective goals to the means of achieving them. Learning thus comes to be seen by families as the means of achieving what they value, not only in the classroom but in the wider world of work, family and community. 'Empowering knowledge' is the result.

2.3 Child poverty lies at the core of the trajectory as manifested in the widening gap in educational performance between poor and better off children. While some children supported by their parents may proceed effortlessly through the system others become increasingly marginalised. The consequence may be failure of the child to acquire even the basic skills of literacy and numeracy with the prospects of leaving school at the earliest stage often without any certification. The drift towards alcohol abuse, mental health problems delinquency and crime may follow and the prospect of long-term social exclusion.

Linked lives

2.4 Social relations in the family and especially outside can be both moderator and re-enforcer of these disadvantaging pressures - part economic, part cultural - along with other factors including the child's own disposition and personality. All will play a part in determining the way each individual's life course is structured in early childhood. This mutual interdependence is encapsulated by the idea of 'linked lives' and is particularly useful in recognising the role of parents, siblings, peers and the community at large, as supportive or inhibiting influences on educational achievement. In addition, for disadvantaged children there may be local social and community workers, health professionals, and as they get older, others such as police and probation officers with whom families are in contact. Critical in this nexus of connections are teachers as supplying the means not only of providing instruction but of countering, or building, on their effects.

Time and Space

2.5 *Time* affects the trajectory of disadvantage in the sense that each new birth cohort (or more broadly, 'generation') faces a different set of circumstances and experiences in which their lives are lived. They are also subject to different policy positions of what education should be seeking to achieve and the curricula best suited to do it. In addition, the effects of poverty and its precipitating causes like unemployment will be experienced differently at different ages and at different times. The current recession can be seen to have a particularly damaging effect on those young people trying to enter the labour market that will not have been felt in the same way by those born earlier or later. The ensuing damage to life chances summed up in the acronym NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) raises the spectre of lost generations, c.f. the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s.

2.6 *The spatial dimension* comes into play in connection with the concentration of disadvantage in some places rather than others as typified by the declining inner city housing estate. There is a tendency for those residents, with the means of doing so, to move the neighbourhood, leaving an increasingly disadvantaged population behind. The

outcome will be physical decline of housing stock and disappearing facilities, ranging from doctors surgeries to shops and banks. Immigrants may then take up the vacant accommodation, while similarly seeking to move at the first opportunity. Such neighbourhoods may face a concentration of problems ranging from antisocial behaviour to drugs and crime - again pressurising those who can leave to do so while others are left to cope with them. The sharing of teaching resources, e.g. with schools in more prosperous neighbourhoods through the formation of collaborative networks, is a valuable way of helping to restore the balance.

Transitions and turning points

2.7 The life course is made up of transitions, which in the case of education are statutorily enforced through chronological age, moderated in varying degrees between countries by grade achieved. Thus, preschool gives way to primary school, which itself gives ways to secondary school and then the range of post-16 options, from university through college to VET varying institutionally from one country to another. At such transition points disadvantaged children are particularly vulnerable to the risk of falling behind even further. Less often they may benefit by encountering new teachers and curricula and new friends who inspire an interest in learning. Such experiences constitute the 'turning points' that reflect the trajectory shift toward educational progress that is needed.

2.8 Parents, through positive interaction with teachers and 'significant other' adults, are also likely to play a critical part in ameliorating educational transitions' worst effects. Engaging families with education at these critical transition points and carrying through the involvement can be crucial. Interventions, such as family literacy and numeracy programmes, have been remarkably effective especially with primary school children, not only by improving the children's skills but even more important, those of their parents.

Population subgroups

2.9 In considering optimum ways of converting failure into achievement, special attention needs to be given to those populations that experience particular difficulty. Children with physically -based special educational needs such as blindness, deafness, physical disability and those with learning disabilities tend to be dispersed fairly uniformly across all societies and clearly require specially tailored individual support. The issue then becomes whether this is supplied in a context of 'special schooling' or is made universally available in classrooms serving the wider population. Although provision in special schools may be necessary for many SEN children at some stage in their lives, as far as possible the inclusive approach is always the preferred option. This offers the best prospects not only for supporting children in the context of interactions with others of their age group throughout their educational careers, but especially in enhancing their quality of life when they leave the education system.

2.10 Minority group children differing by ethnicity and cultural and religious affiliation, and especially those from immigrant families, tend to be concentrated in particular localities where special provision may be needed to enable them to keep up with other children. Mother tongue teaching has been shown in Nordic countries, such as Sweden, to be a particularly effective complement to standard classroom provision relying on communication in the home language. Again strong home-school relations are critical to meet the major challenges faced.

2.11 In multicultural classrooms conflict over the curriculum and pedagogy may be a source of difficulty, especially when minority values appear at variance with those of the dominant culture. A special case is Roma people (15% of the Bulgarian population) among whom the values of children and families are based on a nomadic life style with much importance attached to work with work with and use of horses. An effective curriculum will accommodate cultural diversity by embracing it so that every child with their own story to tell can be equally valued in the communal setting of the classroom i.e. as a complement to the core curriculum rather than as a challenge to it.

Assessment

2.12 Assessment can be seen as an essential part of effective teaching in a 'formative' sense, i.e. to aid individual progress. The 'summative' use of assessment, through which children, and particularly the schools they attend, are judged to produce 'league tables', works against the interests especially of disadvantaged children. Teachers may welcome the absence or dropout of children likely to bring down the school's ranking. Summative assessment also provides the basis of stratification and selection, including 'tracking' towards vocational as opposed to academic programmes. The generally agreed principle - in line with the idea of the Swedish Educationalist *Torsten* Husén - is that the longer such differentiation can be postponed the greater the benefit to all children.

3. Education Actions

3.1 The trajectory conceptualisation of child development through the period of from preschool to post compulsory education emphasises the predictability from early years' circumstances of later educational and behavioural outcomes. At the same time predictability also indicates a degree of elasticity which may be exploited and worked on to shift the direction such a trajectory takes. Some of the practical implications for curriculum and pedagogy have already been examined around the theme of the trajectory of disadvantage. This section provides some final reflections

Surmounting the barriers?

3.2 The very terms *educational barrier* can be questioned as getting in the way of inclusive and effective education by suggesting that doors have to be forced open and walls have to be scaled. Far better, it can be argued, is to dig deeper into the supply side of the education process by challenging some of its most cherished beliefs and assumptions. Those underlying the curriculum and the attitudes and values of teachers, can be identified as perhaps the main source of disadvantaged children's difficulties. Initiatives to surmount them should be developed in the context of a 'Universal Rights' agenda. Regardless of their economic circumstances, families should have equal access to a curriculum that will work for them. The learning outcomes for all will be acquisition of the capabilities that will supply the means of access to well-being in every aspect of their family, working and community lives.

Home –school relations

3.3 Parents need to be involved more as partners with teachers in the processes of education. Sometimes this will involve taking the curriculum resources outside the classroom into the community. Examples include the 'Street libraries' promoted in the, USA where the commitment of the local community supplies the means for ensuring that families and children gain the benefit of educational provision close to their own

homes. For parents this proves an attractive alternative to going to institutions that have so often failed them in their own educational careers. Children's centres where families with preschool children can be exposed to, and take the first steps, towards formal learning have also proved their effectiveness.

VET options

3.4 At the other end of the school career, those approaching the end of compulsory education and faced with a variety of tracks should gain benefits from all of them of equal value. The main goal here should be to ensure that the options offered in post-16 education and training - further and higher education, apprenticeship, vocational schooling, first employment - do not close off opportunities to change track. The means of acquiring the competences needed to gain access to and benefit from the new track should always be available. Post –compulsory education should be viewed as a 'seamless tapestry' of educational opportunities where access to every kind of educational pathway is available and none are closed off too early.

Rolling out success

3.5 At every stage of education, from preschool through primary and secondary and beyond, there is good evidence of excellent innovations and initiatives that have had significant effects on children's opportunities to achieve. Thus experiments on targeted financial and counselling support have been shown to be effective in enabling children to stay engaged in education and progress to levels that would otherwise have been inaccessible to them. But often too little is done to roll-out effective innovations to classrooms where advantage could be taken from them i.e. much more attention should be given to 'mainstreaming' through the whole system. A critical area in which such mainstreaming would be valuable is Home-School relations, emphasising the demonstrable value of partnership between teachers and parents. Educational liaison and social support work are important functions of schools, with teachers taking on a specialised role of regularly visiting the children and their families in their homes.

Monitoring and responding to change

3.6 It is necessary to monitor continually the effects of changing policy scenarios, in all areas of government, on schools and school populations. Each change may be a benefit or a challenge to children and their families and the means of coping with changing policy contexts should become enshrined in good education policy and pedagogical practice.

Teacher training

3.7 Parents should be encouraged to help their children by participating in classes with them, especially in the kindergarten and early stages of primary schooling as in the case of the family literacy and numeracy programmes considered earlier. French initiatives go further by inviting parents to sit in on teacher training to learn more about teacher perspectives. They gain a better understanding of the basis of the curriculum their children are entering and what is considered the most effective practice in delivering it.

Cultural awareness

3.8 All such training should make much more central the need for sensitivity to cultural diversity and difference. Schools should strive to satisfy the 'special needs' not only of individual children but of the minority communities represented within the classroom. Recognition of the value systems in which children are growing up is a first step towards understanding what will motivate them to succeed.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The contemporary curriculum has been a rather static, if not moribund, instrument for building capability. Rooted in 19th century conceptions of skills to match the employment and civic needs of early industrial society, it has failed to keep up with modern demands. Far more opportunities for curriculum development in tune with the contemporary digital world need to be taken. What should follow is not only the implementation of new curricula and pedagogy, but a major overhaul of both initial and in-service teacher education and training.

4.2 Parents, employers and the local community should all be seen as stakeholders in building effective and inclusive education, both in intakes and in outcomes. This is where the key to success in the battle with disadvantage and exclusion and the reduction of inequality is most likely to succeed.

John Bynner,
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