

**Measures to combat educational disadvantage:  
A European consultation symposium December 2011**

Rapporteur Report

**Workshop 5: How to address national disparities related to equity in education**

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**National and Regional Differences in Inequality of Education** (Jaap Dronkers, Maastricht University)

- The presentation drew on the PISA 2009 dataset to highlight:
  - Wide differences in reading scores of 15 year olds between countries
  - Wide differences in socio-economic gradient between countries
  - Differences between regions in countries with highly stratified systems (Germany, Belgium), in math scores and in socio-economic gradient
- Only 'native' pupils were included in this analysis, because migrants in different countries have very different success rates, making overall comparison difficult. (Note -some delegates from very diverse countries thought that the exclusion of migrants for analytic purposes itself creates the notion that different things should be expected of education for migrants and 'natives')
- Professor Dronkers pointed to four groups of variables to explain these differences:
  - Individual characteristics of pupils and parents (i.e .compositional factors) – including early scholastic ability, parental educational level, family structure)
  - School characteristics (including type of school and entrance requirements, school composition, curriculum, teacher quality and morale, school climate)
  - Education system characteristics (including the degree of standardisation of input and of examinations, the extent of differentiation, practices such as tracking and setting within schools)
  - Regional economic, social and cultural macro-characteristics (including socio-economic composition, urban/rural nature, education ethos, availability of further secondary and tertiary education)
  - National-level economic, social and cultural macro-characteristics
- He argued that there is some evidence for the importance of particular variables, including transparency of school and system success, school ethos and standardisation of input. Pedagogical ethos or morale seems more important for success than socio-economic background or measurable school and system

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characteristics. However, there is no optimal system configuration. Success needs to be evaluated in relation to the desired goals and outcomes of a system, which could be:

- Equality of socio-economic opportunity
  - Efficient sorting and selection
  - Preparation for the labour market
  - Socialisation
- His analysis looked at all these outcomes, and also at value-added scores. He noted that Finland (highest attaining country on raw scores) does much less well controlling for value-added, urbanisation and migrants, and school characteristics. This suggests that raw PISA comparisons reveal relatively little about the lessons that can be learned from successful countries.

### The Nature of Disparities in Education and Measures to Combat Them

The format of the workshop (a large group with each delegate only having a few minutes to speak on each question) did not lead to delegates offering lengthy descriptions of within-country initiatives that had been successful in combating inequalities. It was felt that it was more appropriate to (later) point the commission to policy documents and evaluations in order for specific initiatives to be developed. There was also a sense within the group that identifying successful projects was the wrong approach, given the wider features of educational systems that were tending to the reproduction of inequalities. Much of the discussion focussed on the contribution the EU could make to addressing these more systemic problems.

- The group discussed two kinds of disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes: those arising from, broadly speaking **cultural injustices** and those arising from **economic injustices**.
- **Cultural injustices** refer to the inequitable treatment of groups on the grounds of their membership of minority ethnic, religious or racial groups or other minorities or marginalised groups. These could include learners with disabilities, women, or gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender learners, although the workshop did not particularly discuss these groups. The discussion in the workshop focussed most on the position of Roma, gypsies and travellers, and to some extent on the position of learners with disabilities or additional educational needs.
- **Economic injustices** refer to the inequitable treatment of groups on the grounds of their material circumstances, or socioeconomic position.
- There is often an intersection between groups marginalised on cultural grounds and those marginalised economically, but this is not always the case, and the group agreed the need for clarity on the nature of the injustices being addressed, as they may require different remedies. Though the group did not refer to it specifically, the work of Nancy Fraser<sup>1</sup> is relevant here.
- In both cases, delegates agreed that it is important that discussion around educational inequalities is framed in terms of the failure of educational institutions and education systems to deliver equitable outcomes, not the problems of learners.
- **Cultural injustices** stem from prejudice, lack of recognition and sometimes the denial of fundamental human rights. These are manifest in the systematic denial of equal opportunities. For example, a delegate from the UK described the position of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in the UK:

<sup>1</sup> Fraser, N. (2003) *The Radical Imagination: Between Redistribution and Recognition* (2003)

- Lack of early childhood provision (partly because of the inability of the system to cope with mobility)
- No improvement in early school leaving since 1968
- A much higher likelihood of being labelled as having special educational needs and allocated to special provision

Similar issues were reported in Sweden, and additionally new groups of Roma not in education at all. The problem of no access to education for undocumented migrants was also mentioned.

A delegate from Hungary described the multiple ways in which Roma children can be discriminated against even though most are enrolled in primary education:

- Internal differentiation – Roma children put in separate classes
- Quality gap in teaching between classes
- Roma children placed in special schools
- Critical approach and attitudes from non-Roma teachers
- Cultural injustices need to be addressed by measures that ensure equal recognition and prevent marginalisation and exclusion. Concrete proposals here were:
  - The adoption of legislation to protect minority rights
  - Additional services adapted to meet the needs of particular groups (eg the Traveller Education Service in the UK, a flexible resource following need – this was felt to be an example of good practice that could be extended to other countries)
  - Promotion of a representative teacher workforces, including affirmative action
  - Education in diversity for ALL teachers, so that teachers have tools to deal with diversity and so that attitudes of the majority change. In Hungary, integrated schools have provided the focus for this kind of work and have performed better. They provide an example that could be replicated. In London (a post-minority city) highly integrated schools with high poverty levels are outperforming schools in other areas of the country.
  - Cross-country professional and political learning about what happens within institutional settings: the nature of pedagogy and the kinds of relationships that can be established in schools for greater equality. For example, a delegate from Hungary suggested that in Central Europe teachers see themselves as delivering the curriculum (tending towards authoritarian relationships and exclusion of

- unsuccessful/challenging learners) , whereas in some other countries teachers see themselves as teaching children (leading to greater inclusion and to more co-operative relationships)
- In relation to the latter point, delegates put a strong emphasis on aspects of 'school ethos' relating to democratic values
  - They also stressed the importance of teacher education (rather than simply teacher training). This had two components a) education as ongoing throughout the teaching career and b) education as a process of critical reflection on pedagogy, not as the acquisition of skills or competences.
  - Monitoring of structural discrimination (ie the over-representation of particular groups in particular types of schools) as a basis for tackling the problem
  - Specifically the EU to examine how the Roma national strategies being developed in response to the EU framework are addressing education
- **Economic injustices** stem from the inability of education systems to provide equally well for learners who are not materially well equipped and whose families have lower educational, social and financial capital. Where economic inequalities are historically embedded (as in the UK) and there is low intergenerational social mobility, people from lower socio-economic groups may also face cultural non-recognition in a system primarily designed by and for people from more advantaged social classes.
  - Economic injustices need to be addressed by redistributive measures. The workshop did not focus on these to a great extent in its main discussion. However, measures that were regarded as important were:
    - The provision of state schools, for all students. Privatisation was regarded as leading to greater social segregation and unequal provision, according to the ability to pay
    - Measures to ensure the best quality teachers in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas
    - Ongoing support and professional development to support such teachers
    - More regional and place-based approaches to target funds to the schools most in need and also to enable cross-professional working
    - Inspection and accountability systems that incentivise schools to raise the achievement of the most disadvantaged students and close the gap

## Measuring Disparities: Identifying the Problem

- There appear to be differences between member states in the quality of data and analysis to identify issues, in particular:
  - Subnational data
  - Data from privatised parts of the system (eg early childhood services in some countries)
  - Analysis which places data on educational disparities in the context of other social and economic data, in order to avoid the conclusion that educational disparities are all within the remit of education systems to fix. An example was that early school-leaving rates are now likely to decline, as labour market opportunities for youth deteriorate. This should not be seen as an educational success.
  - Relative as well as absolute data for groups in the setting of targets. For example, travellers have made progress in the UK, but other groups have made more progress and at higher levels.

### **The Impact of the economic crisis on disparities in educational opportunities, quality of provision and educational outcomes within and between member states**

- The crisis is exacerbating deep seated historical and structural inequalities – it is not in itself creating them.
- The crisis is being experienced differently in different countries partly because of its differing depth and partly because political decisions have been made in some countries, such as the UK, to protect education budgets more so than other areas.
- Examples of the difficulties faced by some countries were given by delegates from Romania and Ireland. In Romania:
  - Freezing of budgets and prohibiting the hire of any new teachers except one teacher to replace seven other teachers.
  - Cuts in budgets for auxiliary staff, who particularly support those with additional educational needs
  - Children leaving school in rural areas as too expensive
  - Teachers leaving the country
- In Hungary ( a highly decentralised system):
  - The worst-hit localities (mainly in rural areas) are closing schools
  - Church schools are better funded and are remaining open – thus there is a rebalancing of the system towards religious rather than secular education
  - Funding for projects to support minority groups have gone (this was also reported in the UK)

- The government is moving to centralise schools in response
- Some members of group felt that members states were in some cases failing to provide a minimum standard of education and that EU structural funds should be used to secure this minimum standard.
- The crisis has led (or allowed right-wing governments to move more quickly) to an increasing withdrawal of the state from education. For example, in Sweden, where differentiation, choice and privatisation policies are increasingly being pursued. This is leading to greater social segregation in the school system, accompanied by quality gaps. The least qualified teachers are in the poorest areas. In addition, competition between schools leads to the disproportionate representation of minority groups into special schools.
- In the UK, compulsory education budgets have been maintained but there have been cuts to educational maintenance allowances to support poorer children into further education. The burden of HE funding is now being passed to students with a large increase in fees and it is anticipated that this will deter lower income students.

### **Experience of Education Priority Areas/Zones**

- A variety of countries (eg England, Sweden, Portugal) have had experience of programmes targeted towards disadvantaged areas. These experiences suggest that such programmes have limited effectiveness if done in isolation and may be counteracted by system changes that lead to more segregation. One delegate described this as a 'dispiriting history of projects'.
- They have tended to focus on additional services, eg mentoring, after-school hours support, language support, rather than on core activities of curriculum and pedagogy in order to effectively engage disadvantaged children.
- In England there has been a tendency for education department funded programmes to focus on additional work in schools, rather than on the multiple characteristics of areas that effect learning (such as poor housing and amenities, lack of labour market opportunity). In other words they have been insufficiently holistic.
- In Portugal there have been successes with priority zones. A key feature is that schools in these zones have been given extra resources to hire teachers directly, thus leading to more evenness of quality across schools. Schools in zones have had some success in reducing early school leaving. They have better integration with communities and more holistic approaches linking with other policies.
- Thus zones/targeting seem most effective where they redistribute core resources, improve teacher quality, and are holistic. A delegate from Ireland

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suggested that that country had now adopted an approach of ‘targeted universalism’ rather than targeting or universalism.

### **Use of European Structural Funds to tackle regional inequities in education and training**

- Structural funds could be used to build regional resources that can be flexibly deployed (eg to support minority groups across a region) than being vested in particular projects or schools.
- The group emphasised that holistic, cross-policy approaches demand a different sort of accountability. Strict monitoring of spend against original plans and by specific institutions can inhibit partnership working, innovation and flexibility. Some delegates felt that there was insufficient requirement for grant recipients to learn from other countries, and that money was held too much in large institutions, inhibiting change driven by parents and local communities.
- Bidding for funds can cause areas to compete to be the worst.

### **Overall Recommendations**

- EU efforts should be directed to support the development of more equitable systems and eliminating structural discrimination rather than simply targeting specific groups to enable them to access existing systems. In this sense, the economic crisis presents an opportunity to take stock and build a different future. Establishing minimum standards/objectives across Europe as well as targets for equity could be one mechanism. The EU should not see its role as being to fund a series of projects, nor encourage member states to see that as a sufficient response. Indeed the EU could specifically support Member States in moving from projects to policy.
- However, EU funds should be used to support struggling regions and ensure minimum standards across Europe. The processes by which EU funds are allocated and monitored should enable flexibility and holistic approaches and change driven by parents and communities, as well as cross EU learning.
- Teacher education is critical, and should encourage reflexivity about purposes, values and ethos, and provide tools for dealing with diversity.