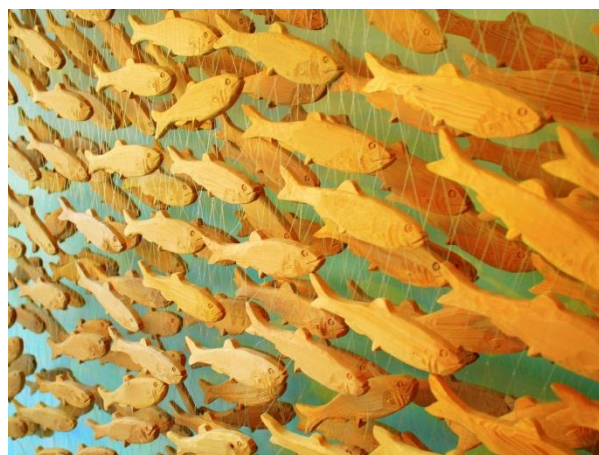


Education and social cohesion, which impact?

NESET Expert Author:

Marie Duru-Bellat,

Sciences Po



The notion of social cohesion implies that societies “hold together” because their members have the qualities and attitudes required to live in harmony and to develop behaviours that foster solidarity. Education is generally assumed to be one of the keys determinants of social cohesion – through fostering common values and giving young people the life skills needed to get a job and become integrated into society. However, few empirical studies provide evidence for this claim. Recently, some comparative research has shown that, in relation to social cohesion¹, the distribution of education may be more important than the mean level of education. In other words, educational inequality between one country’s members may have some specific detrimental effects upon social cohesion: it would generate stress and competition between students and so run counter their sense of belonging to the same community, especially when this competition results in some segregating students into separate tracks and schools. Countries with a common core curriculum which is taught in comprehensive and non-segregated schools generally demonstrate a higher level of social cohesion.

It would appear that the daily climate within classes and the whole educational “style” prevailing in the country do matter. The perceived quality of human relationships (peer relations and student-teacher relations) - assessed by questions such as “to what extent do you trust your teachers?”, “To what extent do you think that teachers are there to help you?”- seems to impact more strongly on social cohesion than providing specific contents such as civic education.

However, the positive impact of a good climate may be counteracted by the benefits brought by educational qualifications in professional life: whenever the economic returns of education are high, whenever access to some jobs is limited to individuals with specific educational qualifications, social cohesion tends to be lower. In that case, educational qualifications operate as key criteria of exclusion - since individuals with few or no qualifications are marked by a stigma of professional

¹ The situation may be different as far as economic outputs are concerned.

incompetence and sometimes by social indignity. This rigidifies and restricts the allocation of social positions and fosters a high level of inter-individual competitiveness in classes.

Although comparative studies and the correlations they observe are unable to produce definitive “laws”, education is actually proven to affect social cohesion. This is not through the channels that are generally emphasised, i.e. the percentage of people in full-time education and achievement levels. Instead it is the general educational climate which is found to play a role. Indeed, surprisingly, social cohesion appears to be generally weakened by the impact of degrees on social positions and income levels - even if that observation cannot be isolated from the country’s broader historical, social and economic context. Across the board, general socioeconomic factors (particularly the level of economic wealth and dynamics of the labour market) seem more important determinants of social cohesion than the more specific characteristics of educational systems.

So, schooling is not a panacea: education is nested in the whole society. Research shows that disparities between children emerge before they enter school, due to unequal environments outside the school. Attention to the local context in which pupils live and learn is thus necessary, with more concern for housing conditions, urban renewal, income support for families, and local employment among others. In this perspective, adult training becomes a crucial issue. It delivers a double benefit: investing in adults will transform either the way one works or the way one brings up his or her child. Besides, all forms of adult training, life-long learning and offering second chances are important issues, for economic purpose, as most often underlined, but also for equity considerations and social cohesion.

In conclusion, even if it is impossible to achieve a satisfying level of social cohesion solely through educational solutions, educational policies remain one important piece of the puzzle. But there are important implications for the kind of education system one should develop if social cohesion rather than economic growth is to be promoted: in the first case, it is likely to involve a pre-school and common-core curriculum for every member of the community, while for the promotion of economic growth, tertiary and competitive education might be more effective. Moreover, from the perspective of social cohesion, education should not be focused only on academic success; the development of social skills and the promotion of well-being may be judged as equally important. Thus, the kind of education (its style, its distribution...) matters more than the quantity, although “more of the same thing” is often an easy and consensual objective.

Further readings:

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