



Key messages from the 28/05 NESSE seminar on strategies for equality and inclusion in and through education and training.

Prof. Ides Nicaise, University of Leuven

There is a wide variety of strategies to tackle social exclusion in education. There is already a lot of knowledge from research. Rather than a lack of knowledge, it is disagreement on the definition of equality that prevents societies from achieving truly inclusive education systems. **The model of equality that we adopt matters.** The equality objectives that we promote depend on the interpretation of equality that we endorse. It makes a big difference if we adhere to a *minimalist basic equality model* in education or if we want to have *substantive* as opposed to *formal* equality.

The literature on equality in education mostly distinguishes between three forms of inequality:

- *unequal "talents"* (mostly interpreted as genetic endowments), which are considered unalterable and therefore "accepted";
- *unequal effort or preferences*, which refer to the responsibility of the individual;
- *unequal opportunities*, i.e. differences in material and cultural resources, social support etc.: such inequalities are exogenous to the education system but affect the chances of students.

Curiously, the fourth and probably most important source of inequality is often ignored in the literature: ***unequal treatment*** which, if unjustified, turns into discrimination. Discrimination is often unintended, for example, if it is based on misunderstanding due to cultural or information barriers (e.g. socially biased selection mechanisms in the transition to further education, or IQ tests which discriminate against ethnic minorities); but it may also be based on abuse of power (e.g. banning headscarves as a way to repel immigrant students) or pressure from a majority group (e.g. white middle-class parents threatening to withdraw their children from school if "too many" coloured students are admitted).

Depending of the views held by the majority of citizens, policies to combat social exclusion in education will be more or less radical. The *meritocratic* view, which dominates in many EU countries, rejects unequal opportunities but tends to accept or indeed nurture unequal talents: the culture of "merit" (defined as the combination of personal effort and talents) is used to justify selective schools or streaming in secondary education and thus reinforces some inequalities. On the opposite side, the *egalitarian* view links the right to education to human dignity, irrespective of talents, and therefore even advocates the use of positive discrimination to compensate for inequalities at the start.

Generally speaking, three sets of strategies can be distinguished to tackle (social) inequalities:

- **strategies for more equal opportunities** tend to be supported by meritocrats as well as egalitarianists. They aim at bridging the differences in material, social, cultural and human resources between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The most typical example is multiservice schools, which offer a variety of services (school library, internet classes, theatre, sports, homework clubs, etc.) in addition to regular teaching activities. When appropriately designed and monitored, such services help disadvantaged students who lack this kind support to keep pace with other students. Early childhood education programmes moreover target preschool children so as to prevent the accumulation of deficits. They are generally considered as the most efficient type of pro-poor education strategy.

Nevertheless, equal opportunity strategies are criticized for focusing too exclusively on the boundary conditions and ignoring all sort of endogenous barriers within the education system as such.

- **strategies for more equal treatment** are very complementary, as they focus on removing barriers and combating discrimination. On the micro-level, it is important to improve the mutual understanding between teachers and students, between schools and parents, and between students from different backgrounds. For example, school community workers may encourage groups of parents from minorities or deprived neighbourhoods to express their expectations from schools collectively, while at the same time sensitizing teachers about the living conditions and cultural differences in education patterns. Mutual understanding between teachers and parents is essential, not only to enhance the effectiveness of teaching (making it more experience-based, tailored to the interests and needs of difficult learners and less culturally biased) but also to raise the mutual respect and "emotional support" between all parties. Intercultural and experience-based education bridge the gap between school and home within the school pedagogy.

On the macro-level, segregation (i.e. the co-existence of elite and ghetto schools) is probably one of the most severe forms of discrimination. *De-segregation* may require legal instruments such as anti-discrimination clauses in registration procedures, or indeed quota systems in the distribution of students across schools. At the meso level, "magnet schools" in inner cities have successfully implemented powerful learning environments by investing in arts education, ICT or technology projects. In this way, a renewed interest from students and commitment from teachers have been encouraged. The positive impact of such projects, combined with a smart marketing strategy, have succeeded to attract 'white middle-class' students so as to achieve a better social mix at school. Bilingual education aims to help young children master basic concepts in their mother tongue before exposing them fully to the majority language as instruction language. Inclusive and comprehensive education aim to avoid the segregation effects of separate school curricula: all students are kept, as far as possible, within a broad mainstream curriculum for as long as possible, keeping in mind that comprehensive education leads to more equal outcomes in the longer run.

- **Strategies for more equal outcomes** move a step further: they explicitly allow for preferential treatment of minority groups, so as to compensate for their initial disadvantage. Affirmative Action in the USA has been highly controversial, as priority admission of coloured students appeared to occur at the expense of majority students with better scores on admission tests in selective schools. A softer form of positive discrimination is educational priority funding, which provides for additional subsidies to schools with a more disadvantaged audience.

The empirical evaluation research is not very enthusiastic about the effectiveness of the existing funding mechanisms. Positive net outcomes have been signaled, but it seems that schools need guidance and clear guidelines in order to spend their additional resources in the most efficient way.

On the micro-level, positive discrimination translates into differentiation within the classroom. Here again, evaluation studies suggest that not all forms of differentiation are equally successful in achieving more equal outcomes. Curriculum differentiation, pull-out programmes and student-driven teaching appear to yield mixed results. The example of "Success for All" in the USA shows, however, that a well-designed and flexibly organized differentiation of inputs can dramatically improve the chances of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.