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Structural and Cohesion Policies

EFFICIENCY AND EQUITY IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS

CULTURE AND EDUCATION



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Directorate General Internal Policies of the Union

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European education and training systems**

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Content:

The note gives a critical analysis of the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament entitled “Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems” (COM(2006) 481 final). On the basis of this analysis, the Commission's recommendations are examined and further recommendations for action are made.

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Executive summary

The Commission calls for consideration of the double challenge posed to European education and training systems: to ensure both competitiveness and social cohesion. It immediately sets the background against which this challenge must take place: a context of limitation of public spending, and four significant pressures - globalisation, population issues, the rapid development of the nature of the labour market, and technological innovation. A resolutely economic approach is therefore clearly outlined right from the second paragraph, and is maintained throughout the text as a whole. This orientation translates into the approach of the two central concepts of the text: equity and efficiency.

Equity is defined as “the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes”. This definition combines, without specifying as such, different concepts. These different concepts are based on very different demands: firstly, equal opportunities, and secondly, actual equality of access, treatment and results (internal or external). While the first concept addresses the idea of *potential* equality, the three others concern *actual* equality, whether being able to have access to the same educational service, benefiting from equal treatment, or obtaining equal results.

According to the Commission, a system is defined as equitable if, firstly, “the outcomes of the education and training are independent of socio-economic background and other factors that lead to educational disadvantage” and secondly, if “the treatment reflects individuals’ specific learning needs”. However, the Commission has not retained the notion of “threshold” which states that beyond a certain level or “threshold” of skills, individuals are sufficiently equipped to continue their schooling and confront the demand for higher skills required in order to integrate satisfactorily into civil society and the labour market. Gender, ethnic origin, or a handicap (other than socio-economic) are just as much constitutive of conditions from which individuals cannot escape, which makes the inequalities of which they are victim particularly unfair. This idea seems to be neglected by the communication.

Equity is a normative notion, in the sense that it is intimately linked to the notion of fairness. The Member States must therefore define unfair inequalities in education. For replacing the term equality with the term equity does not detract from the necessity to make a statement on the model of fairness, something which seems to go unmentioned in the Commission’s communication.

With a view to pedagogical effectiveness, the objectives defined in the context of the Lisbon partnership by the Member States of the European Union could be considered as the minimum objectives to be attained. The follow-up reports from the Lisbon process can henceforth be read as much as evaluations of the pedagogical effectiveness of European educational systems. As for the evaluation of the (economic) efficiency of European educational systems, this would suppose that there is agreement on an ideal relationship between the investments and the results or, at least, that the inputs are explicitly taken into account, when viewing the results. In fact, the reports on which the Commission’s proposal was based, although they use the term “efficiency”, tend to confuse this notion with that of effectiveness, since the evaluations performed are done so mainly in relation to cognitive data, measuring the acquired knowledge of the pupils (and therefore the “cognitive” yield of the educational systems), and not according to the inputs (in terms of money, teaching loads, time, and so on) invested in the various educational systems. Although recent literature in the field of educational sciences clearly shows

that effectiveness and equity can be mutually beneficial, such an analysis has not yet been carried out on a European level on the link between efficiency and equity. The examination of the effectiveness of European educational systems should include the evaluation of objectives defined within the context of the Lisbon partnership and should be more criteria-based (linked to specific objectives in terms of well-being or actual options to continue training throughout life) than normative (in terms of comparison or percentages).

The proposals of the Commission are largely based on the theoretical model proposed by Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov. This economic model for the development of the child holds that skills which are innate or acquired at a certain age are the foundation on which subsequent learning is built. Starting out from this principle, which is backed up by common sense, the authors affirm that the earlier the investment, the better its rate of return, since the fruits of this investment will last for a lifetime. Conversely, later investments will yield a lesser return, since they are only effective over a shorter period, and will have to be more substantial since, the older the child, the harder it is to remedy shortcomings accumulated since early childhood. The model relies on empirical data which is hardly convincing for European countries, as it is essentially based on data from tests given in the United States. The data used is not suitable for testing the general model of the authors. One must be aware of the specific nature of pre-school education in the United States. International data concerning attendance at pre-school education indeed shows that national traditions in this area vary hugely. Furthermore, given the diversity of the national contexts in terms of participation in pre-school education, a common policy within the European Union cannot be uniformly valid. The weakness of the Commission's rationale should not, however, make us forget the importance of pre-school education. More than a prioritisation of resources, on the level of pre-school education, more efficiency must without doubt be sought via the coordination of policies and services, and to implement measures available for initial and further training of staff, for the improvement of the status and salaries of staff and for better services for the most disadvantaged children, especially through working with families. The need to invest in favour of children from disadvantaged families as a priority is well known. However, this observation calls for a reflection on the method of helping the poorest populations the best without stigmatising or blaming them when, despite the help given, the anticipated results are not achieved.

The Commission's communication reserves a relatively limited space for the study of effectiveness/efficiency and equity in the area of compulsory education. However, decision-makers must remain vigilant about compulsory education, to the extent that, firstly, some children, and in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, effectively only have access to compulsory education and, secondly, that research has shown that different pedagogic structures and practices can produce different results both in terms of effectiveness and equity. On the level of primary education, the Commission does not mention any specific analysis and does not set out any particular measure. However, data from international studies shows that countries can already largely diverge, both in terms of average output and social inequalities, gender inequalities or the proportion of pupils attaining a certain threshold of skill, from the primary level.

Research in education sciences has shown how much educational structures can reinforce these inequalities on all school levels, since all the explicit or implicit selection mechanisms, established or not countered by the systems, can produce this effect. Heterogeneity of classes therefore appears to be the most effective solution to maximise the progress of the underperforming pupils without proportionally burdening the progress of the strongest pupils. A market of more and more diversified schools is a vector for social segregation. And yet, the

results of the international assessment PISA 2000 indicate that the overall majority of top performing countries in reading show a large degree of homogeneity of performances between schools, which shows that it is important to pursue the objectives of equality and effectiveness simultaneously at this level. If all the implicit and explicit differentiations have the effect of producing inequality, and often ineffectiveness, it is in particular because they involve the choice of unequally informed parents, unequally equipped to support their children and unequally capable of investing financially in their schooling. The moments when children choose their courses and the different levels in schooling are also moments of (self) selection, socially differentiated depending on the schools, pupils and their parents. The different levels of support from which each pupil may benefit at home, throughout his/her school career, and the sometimes very unequal nature of the education provided, during compulsory schooling, are clear evidence of the need to monitor all school careers, particularly at moments of choice (orientation), so that the latter are not transformed into moments of selection.

More local or school autonomy may therefore lead to unequal strategic choices, depending on the quality of user information, or the forms of family self-selection. The proposal to increase local autonomy may also be called into question by an international comparison of school results.

To identify actual good practices, it is important to identify accurately the conditions in which these practices are effective, both in order to increase the average level of apprenticeships and to reduce the disparities between pupils and limit failures for the weakest pupils. Analysing education systems and the impact of a certain organization method or another is a difficult job that requires access to and processing of huge amounts of data. Most often, there is no isolated parameter, but a set of parameters that must be identified. To obtain a result, it is therefore generally necessary to act in several areas at once, otherwise the system runs a severe risk of adapting to the new situation with no notable improvement.

The teaching-efficacy factors, in addition to overall school structures, are even less well understood and the research is intended to analysis standard practices, by means of direct observation of the latter to be supported and encouraged.

Regarding higher education, if the observations of the Commission can be largely shared, the solutions proposed must be questioned. In effect, the generalization of the tuition fees, and measures helping the neediest in the form of loans, risk making higher education even more unequal. The tuition fees introduce market mechanisms to higher education. The solution does not seem to present guarantees that one would expect from an in-depth reform of financing methods. The central idea, to increase private participation, owing to, as mentioned right at the beginning of the Communication, a context of restriction of public spending, if it regulates the problem of financing higher education, without increasing public spending, does not seem to offer any guarantee with regard to equality of access for a certain number of reasons that the Commission itself mentions.

Regarding vocational education and training, the Commission proposes two steps, the first being a reinforcement of the partnerships between the public and private sectors and the social partners and the second being the adaptation of training programmes to employers' needs. The Commission underlines the difficulty in persuading the private sector to finance vocational training, as the latter has no direct link to the needs of the company concerned. This reflection makes a case for the public sector to preserve an important role in the sphere of the social promotion of workers, especially those without much training, so as to allow the acquisition

both of general skills, not directly linked to the work posts held, and skills allowing the acquisition of a better position on the labour market.

In the field of education, an international collaboration by the countries of the European Union is essential. By virtue of their common destiny, it is in these countries' interest to work together to establish the objectives to be attained and the methods to be implemented in order to evaluate them. With regard to the methods to be implemented to achieve these objectives, the Commission recommends an exchange of good practices, and recognizes the specific responsibility of Member States. It would be illusory to imagine that identical methods would produce identical results in different historic, cultural, economic and educational contexts. The assessment of promising practices must deal not only with their efficacy and their capacity to increase equity, but also with the conditions of transferring or generalizing them in other contexts. An ambitious and multilingual policy for developing the results of European research into education science must be set up. It is important to support the development of a cumulative approach, especially by establishing or sustaining the development of European research centres concerning education and the dispersion of knowledge in the field, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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Chapter I – Summary of the Commission’s Communication

The communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament entitled “Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems” (COM(2006) 481 final) is aimed at informing policy makers on developments in Member States and on research available at European level concerning efficiency and equity of education and training systems. It stresses the importance of combining these two objectives within the context of the Lisbon agenda. It puts forward the social and economic benefits of reducing injustice in education and training, while emphasising the need to proceed with long-term planning of expenditure.

The recommendations of the Commission are presented by education level, considering in turn 1) pre-school education, 2) primary and secondary education, 3) higher education and 4) vocational education and training (in upper secondary education and for adults).

The Commission suggests reinforcing expenditure in pre-school education, particularly in favour of children from underprivileged backgrounds, arguing that this will lead to lasting social and economic benefits resulting from this early investment, while further measures during children’s school careers allow the fruits of these initial investments to be consolidated. The Commission points out the need to involve parents in the schooling of their young children and to develop programmes aimed at developing skills in pre-school education.

With regard to primary and secondary education, the Commission emphasises the need for equality in terms of acquiring basic skills, with particular attention to the situation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities. The Commission makes two recommendations concerning the structures most suited to achieve this objective: first, it points out the inefficiency and inequity of structures which make an early selection on the basis of subjects or groupings of children with similar aptitudes, and second, it recommends independence for individual schools while monitoring results centrally. As for teachers, it recommends an improvement in teacher quality in underprivileged areas.

The Commission notes that the broadening of access to higher education has not been accompanied by an increase in financial investment, and that the most disadvantaged still have less access to higher education than other pupils. It recommends increasing individual investments, in the form of enrolment rights, while providing financial aid to the neediest. For the latter, it notes however that improving equality of access inevitably leads to more efficient and equitable school structures, and to better information on the benefits of higher education.

With regard to vocational education and training, the Commission recommends the elimination of the blockages within some vocational programmes in upper secondary education, so that they provide real access to higher education and employment. The Commission underlines the need, for adults in insecure economic situations, to have access to vocational training responding to business requirements. In these cases, public bodies and private companies should share the cost of the training.

The Commission concludes by pointing out the need to make a priority of efficiency and equity, to establish a culture of evaluation, and to promote the validation and dissemination of good practice.

Chapter II - Note

The structure of the note reflects the structure of the Commission document

1. Introduction

The communication of the Commission (COM(2006)481 final) calls for consideration of the double challenge posed to European education and training systems: to ensure both competitiveness and social cohesion. It immediately sets the background against which this challenge must take place: a context of limitation of public spending, and four significant pressures - globalisation, population, rapid changes in the labour market, and technological innovation. A resolutely economic approach is therefore clearly outlined right from the second paragraph, and is maintained throughout the text as a whole, supported by a “Commission staff working document” (SEC(2006) 1096), itself prepared with the help of a text written by the experts of the “European Expert Network on Economics of Education” (EENEE) (Wößmann and Schültz, 2006)¹. This orientation translates into the approach of the two central concepts of the text: equity and efficiency.

Equity is defined as “the degree to which individuals can benefit from education and training, in terms of options, access, treatment and results”. This definition combines, without specifying as such, different concepts which nevertheless deserve greater attention than a footnote (note 2, page 2). These different concepts (which were, for example, well covered in the work of the *European Group for Research on Equity in Educational Systems* (EGREES, 2005)), are based on very different demands: firstly, equal opportunities, and secondly, actual equality of access, treatment and results (internal or external). While the first concept comes back to the idea of potential equality (having virtually the same chance, statistically, of getting a degree, for example), the three others concern actual equality, whether being able to have access to the same educational service (equality of access, for example, to higher education), benefiting from equal treatment (benefiting from teachers or premises of equal quality), or obtaining equal results (for example, mastering basic skills). Continuing its definition, the communication of the Commission specifies that a system is defined as equitable if, firstly, “the results of the education and training are independent of the socio-economic environment and other factors leading to an educational handicap” and secondly, if “the treatment reflects the specific needs of the individuals in terms of learning”. The concept of educational equity retained by the Commission, in other words independence between the socioeconomic status and the results of the education, corresponds to the common denominator on which most theoreticians on fairness are in agreement (on this subject, see the overview of Meuret, 2001). However, the Commission has not retained the notion of “threshold” suggested by the EGREES (2005), which states that beyond a certain level or “threshold” of skills, individuals are not sufficiently equipped to continue their schooling and confront the demand for higher skills required in order to integrate satisfactorily into civil society and the labour market. The explanatory note continues in rather a strange way, however: “Unfairness based on an individual’s belonging to one sex or another, or to an ethnic minority, on a handicap, or regional disparities, etc, are not the main topic of this document, but must be taken into consideration to the extent that they contribute to the overall socio-economic disadvantages”. It would therefore seem that the Commission, in its communication, wishes only to cover inequalities of socio-economic origin, to the exclusion of

1 Réseau Européen d'Experts en Economie de l'Education in French and Europäisches Expertennetzwerk Bildungsökonomik in German (<http://www.education-economics.org>).

any other source which does not come under this origin. Yet at the same time, it is difficult to isolate the causes from each other, and notably when they interact with one another, and it is regrettable not to take into consideration such determining factors as those cited by the Commission itself. Indeed, sex, ethnic origin, or a handicap (other than socio-economic) are just as much constitutive of conditions from which individuals cannot escape, which makes the inequalities of which they are victim particularly unfair, thus fitting into the definition proposed by the Commission. The situation of a handicap, where this affects the mental faculties, may nevertheless, fairly generally, be handled in a different way, since it would prevent the individual from attaining the same cognitive objectives, despite an increase in educative resources. It therefore remains to determine to what extent it is appropriate to focus on the attainment of objectives other than the shared objectives for this specific population group, which will be unable to attain the objectives of competitiveness and excellence.

An equitable system is therefore a system which does not produce unfair inequalities. The recent works of the EGREES (EGREES, 2005, Baye, Demeuse, Monseur and Goffin, 2006) therefore explain that equity is a normative notion, in the sense that it is intimately linked to the notion of fairness. The Member States must therefore define the unfair inequalities in education. Replacing the term equality by the term equity does not detract from the necessity to make a statement on the model of fairness, which seems to go unmentioned in the Commission's communication.

With regard to effectiveness and efficiency, the Commission's communication defines this as "the relationship, in a process, between the resources brought into play and the results obtained". It is therefore more a measure of efficiency (achievement of results at lower cost) than of effectiveness in the teaching sense (achievement of objectives)². The note specifies that a "system is effective if the resources brought into play give a maximum result". The perspective is therefore clearly comparative or relative. In fact, this last term is that used by the Commission when it specifies that the relative effectiveness of educational systems "is generally measured using the results of tests and exams, while their effectiveness with regard to society as a whole and to the economy is judged against their rate of return on a private and social level". This approach is the same as the Lisbon strategy: it is not so much a matter of providing everyone with a certain level of life which is satisfactory with regard to defined criteria, as of becoming the most competitive knowledge economy (European Council, 2000). This utilitarian approach, in the sense that the aim is the maximisation of the average result, at the risk of leaving to one side a large part of the population, while another part compensates for this weakness, confirms the need to take an interest, at least in the name of equity, in the fringe of individuals below the threshold, and not only in the gaps between those who are better off and those who are less so.

In the context of educational equity, the objectives defined by the Member States in the context of Lisbon could be considered as the minimum objectives to be attained. The follow-up reports from the Lisbon process (Commission of the European Communities, 2004 *et sq.*) can henceforth be read as much as evaluations of the teaching effectiveness of European educational systems. As for the evaluation of the (economic) efficiency of European educational systems, this would suppose that there is agreement about the ideal relationship between the investments and the results or, at least, that the inputs are explicitly taken into account, when viewing the results. However, not only are there not yet any indicators to suggest this, but it is also evident that the Commission has not made any proposal in these terms, which seems logical in that the

2 On the subject of the distinction between effectiveness and efficiency, see the short review of the available literature presented by Reezigt (2001, pp. 2-4).

objectives established in the context of the Lisbon partnership envisage increasing spending, including private spending³. In fact, the reports on which the Commission's proposal was based, although they use the term "efficiency", tend to confuse this notion with that of effectiveness, since the evaluations performed are done so mainly in relation to cognitive data, measuring the acquired knowledge of the pupils (and therefore the "cognitive" yield of the educational systems), and not according to the inputs (in terms of money, teaching loads, time, and so on) invested in the various educational systems. Although recent literature in the field of educational sciences clearly shows that effectiveness and equity can be mutually beneficial, such an analysis has not yet been carried out at European level on the link between efficiency and equity.

Recommendations:

The examination of the effectiveness of European educational systems should be accompanied by an examination of their efficiency. The examination of effectiveness should include the evaluation of objectives defined within the context of the Lisbon programme and should be more criteria-based (linked to specific objectives in terms of well-being or actual options to continue training throughout life) than normative (in terms of comparison or percentages).

There should be a clarification of terminology, both for effectiveness / efficiency and for equity.

The examination of the equity of European educational systems should include the notion of a threshold, present in the Lisbon objectives, extended to other areas. Individual characteristics from which an individual cannot escape, such as sex or national origin, should be included in the examination of equity.

2. Pre-school teaching: focusing on learning at an early age

The proposals of the Commission are largely based on the theoretical model proposed by Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov (2005). This economic model for the development of the child holds that skills which are innate or acquired at a certain age are the foundation on which subsequent learning is built. Starting out from this principle, which is backed up by common sense, the authors affirm that the earlier the investment, the better its rate of return, since the fruits of this investment will last for a lifetime. Conversely, later investments will yield a lesser return, since they are only effective over a shorter period, and will have to be more substantial since, the older the child, the harder it is to remedy shortcomings accumulated since early childhood.

As attractive as this economic theorising on the development of the child may seem, it can be called into question on several points. First of all, because it does not take into account the fact that learning difficulties can occur relatively late in the development process of the child or the adolescent, without these difficulties being easily attributable to a deficit during previous stages. The difficulties observed at a given schooling period or level could therefore be too easily and routinely attributed to the previous schooling period or level. This could have the effect of absolving subsequent educational workers of responsibility, while depriving them of the attention and tools required to prevent and remedy school dropouts, particularly in terms of secondary education. Secondly, the model of Cunha et al. (2005) relies on empirical data which is scarcely convincing for European countries, as it is essentially based on data from tests given

³ *Investing effectively in education and training: an imperative for Europe*, Communication of the Commission COM(2002) 779 final (10 January 2003).

in the United States. The data used is not suitable for testing the general model of the authors, since the databases used do not take into account the development of skills measured at the pre-school level and whose progression has been monitored until at least the end of secondary schooling (no ongoing long-term follow-up).

Furthermore, in order to grasp the range of the proposed model, one must be aware of the specific nature of pre-school education in the United States. International data concerning attendance at pre-school education indeed shows that national traditions in this area vary hugely: while the rate of participation of children of less than 4 years old stands at 52.9 % in the United States, it is on average 73.5 % in the countries belonging to the European Union (EU-19, according to the OECD, 2006, p. 266). This high average can be explained both by a strong tendency to attend pre-school education which has long been present in certain Member States (Belgium, France, Italy, Spain) and by the significant efforts carried out in this area during the course of the last decades in the European Union, as revealed by Eurydice data on the progression (1979-2002) of rates of participation in pre-school establishments among 4 year old children (2005, p. 133).

The affirmation that pre-school education displays the highest yield in terms of the results obtained and the social adaptation of the children is not based on empirical data from within the Member States of the European Union. Furthermore, given the diversity of the national contexts in terms of participation in pre-school education, a common policy within the European Union cannot be uniformly valid.

Moreover, it must be stressed that the works assessing the impact of childcare structures preceding obligatory schooling are fairly discordant. While the impact is positive overall, it is more so in terms of social adaptation than from a language viewpoint (Duru-Bellat, 2003). In her overview of social inequalities at school, Duru-Bellat also states that the social gaps can be slightly increased by attendance of primary school because, with all children benefiting from early schooling, the better-off children could benefit even more from the situation.

On the level of European Union countries, the data from the recent PIRLS study (Mullis et al., 2003), concerning the reading skills of pupils in primary education, can be called upon to support the debate. It does not concern longitudinal data allowing a response to the statement formulated in the Communication. However, the context questionnaires used in this study allow correlational analyses between the reading results and the length of participation in pre-school education. On average, for the EU countries who participated in the study, no correlation is observed (or rather a slightly negative one, -0.14) between the proportion of children having attended pre-school education for more than two years and the average primary reading results. However, the attendance of pre-school structures seems beneficial for the poorest performing, whilst the participation rate for children aged 4 years in pre-school education programmes (Eurydice, 2002, p.133) is positively correlated (0.41) to the rate of pupils reaching at least the 25th percentile in reading (Sources: Mullis et al., 2003, Eurydice, 2002).

The weakness of the Commission's rationale should not, however, makes us forget the important of pre-school education. Above all, it raises the question of the state of research on the long-term benefits of pre-school education in the countries of the European Union.

Furthermore, the recommendations of the Commission would benefit from integrating the policies already implemented by Member States. For this reason, the examination of the education and training of young children before the age of mandatory schooling carried out for

the OECD (2001), including 9 countries from the European Union⁴, indicates converging policy tendencies. First of all, the report notes a tendency towards an extension of services so that all children have at least two years of free subsidised services before mandatory schooling. A centralisation of financial measures at this level, as proposed by the Commission, will no doubt only reinforce the current policies, to the detriment of obligatory schooling for which too few measures are proposed by the Commission.

The OECD report (2001) states that current concerns involve above all the quality of services, due to a lack of coherence of policies and services with regard to education and training of young children, the lack of training of certain staff and the tendency for low-income families to have worse services.

More than a prioritisation of resources, on the level of pre-school education, more efficiency must without doubt be sought via the coordination of policies and services, and to implement measures available for initial and further training of staff, for the improvement of the status and salaries of staff and for better services for the most disadvantaged children, especially through working with families. The definition of framework documents and pedagogic objectives centred on the overall development of the child must allow the setting of standards and the assessment of their achievements for a better control of the systems of education and childhood services, thus guarding against decentralised measures which place no limits on variations in access and quality of services. Finally, it indicates the necessity of an international harmonisation of data collection concerning this level of education.

The need to invest in favour of children from disadvantaged families as a priority is well known. However, this observation calls for a reflection on the method of helping the poorest populations the best without stigmatising or blaming them when, despite the help given, the anticipated results are not achieved. Priority education policies can in fact sometimes turn out to be disappointing, for many reasons, not least because in reality they do not always have the means on the ground which they are given in principle. This may be because, in particular, the most experienced teachers are assigned elsewhere or choose establishments attended by less needy children. Another handicap in the area of priority education arises mainly from the absence of serious assessments taking into account both the problems upstream (targeting the audience, definition and selection of programmes, allocation of human and material resources etc.) and the manner in which these actions are implemented on the ground (Salvin & Fashola, 1998; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998).

4 Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Sweden.

Recommendations:

The data on which the communication is based, in particular the Cunha, Heckman, Lochner and Masterov text (2005) does not offer sufficiently robust elements, in particular in the European context, to indicate with certainty, as the Commission appears to believe, that financial effort must be concentrated in pre-school education. More research on pre-school education is necessary on an EU level, in particular in the domain of early and targeted actions in order to identify the practices which produce the expected effects.

The recommendation to concentrate the available means on disadvantaged pupils seems better supported, but programmes still need to be put in place which avoid negative labelling effects for selected children or their separation from other pupils, which further reinforces the effects of segregation.

From the pre-school level, social diversity of classes and establishments must be ensured in order to avoid a differentiation of curricula and expectations.

3. Primary and secondary education

The Commission's communication reserves a relatively limited space for the study of effectiveness and equity in the area of mandatory schooling. However, mandatory schooling must be subject to complete vigilance of decision-makers, to the extent that, firstly, some children, and in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, effectively only have access to mandatory schooling and, secondly, that research has shown that different pedagogic structures and practices can produce different results both in terms of effectiveness and equity (Mullis et al., 2003, 2004a, 2004b).

On the level of primary education, the Commission does not mention any specific analysis and does not set out any particular measure. However, data from international studies shows that countries can already largely diverge, both in terms of average output and social inequalities, gender inequalities or the proportion of pupils attaining a certain threshold of skill, from the primary level.

In this respect, one could place the cumulative and multiplying model of acquired skills proposed by the Commission alongside a cumulative and multiplying model of inequalities. Therefore, for example, the specific effect of the social environment on school productivity, which may be slight at the start of schooling, and on a one-year scale, is progressively incorporated at the school level, which will be the main ingredient for the progression on the ulterior level. In other words, the social inequalities which are in place on one level will have a perennial effect, via the school level achieved at the start of the following year (Duru-Bellat, 2003).

However, research in education sciences (Demeuse, Crahay & Monseur, 2001, 2005, Crahay, 2000, Demeuse & Baye, not yet published) has shown how much educational structures can reinforce these inequalities on all school levels, since all the explicit or implicit selection mechanisms, established or not countered by the systems, can produce this effect.

On the level of implicit mechanisms, let us take a look at the regrouping of pupils in homogenous classes. If this practice may be favourable to the most competent pupils, it

seriously harms the worst performing students. It places the latter in conditions which are often less favourable, both in terms of work climate and expectations from teachers, but equally in terms of time devoted effectively to learning. However, this concerns factors of pedagogic effectiveness (Scheerens, 2000). What underperforming pupils would gain from the generalisation of heterogeneous classes is twice as important as what the stronger pupils would lose. Heterogeneity of classes therefore appears to be the most effective solution to maximise the progress of the underperforming pupils without proportionally burdening the progress of the strongest pupils (Crahay, 2000, Duru-Bellat, 2003).

Certain EU Member States are also characterised by major differences between establishments. Often, these establishments are far more unequal than the pupils that they take in (Coleman, 1966, OCDE, 2004, Grisay, 2006). A market of more and more diversified establishments is a vector for social segregation. And yet, the results of the international assessment PISA 2000 indicate that the overall majority of top performing countries in reading show a large degree of homogeneity of performances between establishments (OECD, 2005), which shows that it is important to pursue the objectives of equality and effectiveness simultaneously at this level.

One example of an explicit mechanism generating social inequalities is the practice of holding pupils back a year, still possible from the primary level and more so on the secondary level in certain Member States (Eurydice, 2005). In his synthesis on social failure, Crahay (1996) demonstrated that this practice was not only ineffective, since it did not allow pupils to make up for their being held back, but also unfair in the sense that it is marked on a social and gender basis.

Other structural mechanisms may reinforce the inequalities at certain key moments of the educational system: all transitions (between two levels of education, two courses, two options etc.) are susceptible to reinforcing disparities between pupils (Boudon, 1973). In particular, the regular accumulation of inequalities seems to mark an acceleration at the time of the passage from primary to lower secondary school (Sammons, 1995, Duru-Bellat, 2002), to such an extent that in two years, as many social inequalities are created as during the entire primary education (Duru-Bellat, 2003). With courses and options, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are offered more concrete programmes. With these programmes, teachers are more concerned with motivation than with content, and they have less ambitious expectations of the pupils, a situation which may risk creating negative portrayals and “self-fulfilling prophecies” or a “Pygmalion effect” (Rosenthal et Jacobson, 1971).

The Commission has put forward the ineffective and unequal character of the creation of early courses. In fact, research in education sciences confirms that a long period of a common-core syllabus before any selection appears less selective socially (Crahay, 2000, OCDE, 2005) and avoids the trap of “segregated democratisation”, denounced by Merle (2000). To ensure the success of all pupils requires stopping a multi-speed system in which certain pupils are led to pursue a valued education which others, having accumulated setbacks, are “reoriented” towards different special schools or courses. This also raises the problem of the assessment of courses, school orientation and the place of specialist teaching, organised separately, rather than integrated into an ordinary system⁵.

5 Even if specialised education organised in different establishments only involves relatively few pupils (on average 2%), the recourse to this type of organisation varies strongly (from 0.5% to around 5%), depending on the educational systems considered (Eurydice, 2005; Baye, Demeuse, Monseur, & Goffin, 2006).

Aside from Scandinavian countries, who have adopted voluntary policies leading to both great effectiveness and great equality in cognitive results, let us take a look at the recent example of Poland, which has profoundly changed its educational structures and has notably lengthened the common-core syllabus, which has resulted in a reduction of social inequalities in performances at 15 years, whilst raising the average level (OECD 2004).

If all the implicit and explicit differentiations have the effect of producing inequality, and often ineffectiveness, it is in particular because they involve the choice of unequally informed parents, unequally equipped to support their children and unequally capable of investing financially in their schooling. The moments when children choose their courses and the different levels in schooling are also moments of (self) selection, socially differentiated depending on the schools, pupils and their parents. In the discussion on effectiveness and equality, the Commission does not get involved with strategies of positioning families depending on their social contexts. However, family strategies must be taken into account to avoid a waste of talents.

In this respect, the Commission's structural proposal, which pleads for a combination of local autonomy and central responsibility, must be handled with a lot of prudence. In fact, "each time that the possibilities of choice are introduced, they are used above all by well-off families, in particular to ensure that their child is well educated amongst their peers, in a school which is not too heterogeneous socially or ethnically." (Duru-Bellat, 2003, p. 60). More autonomy may therefore lead to unequal strategic choices, depending on the quality of user information, or the forms of family self-selection.

The proposal to increase local autonomy may also be called into question by an international comparison of school results. These do not show a net relation between more autonomy for establishments and better performances from pupils (Duru-Bellat, 2003, OCDE, 2004). Furthermore, the superiority of results from autonomous and private establishment can largely be attributed to the socio-economic composition of their public (OECD, 2005). On the other hand, the reinforcement of local autonomy may favour geographic disparities, offering optimal conditions so that a differentiated offer of unevenly prestigious courses, options and establishments becomes more marked.

The Commission makes few recommendations regarding effective and equitable structures and teaching practices. It identifies a single structural mechanism which is both ineffective and inequitable: premature differentiation on a subject basis. Education systems are complex systems, in which the players have a tendency to seize any strategic opportunity (Demeuse, Crahay & Monseur, 2001, 2005). These natural mechanisms, which are highly understandable, particularly in discriminating systems where nobody wants to be on the wrong side of the education barrier, must be taken into account as a whole to promote efficacy and equity in the education system. It is therefore imperative to take note of all implicit and explicit differentiation mechanisms, and to anticipate players' strategies, in order to propose effective solutions.

To identify actual good practices, it is important to identify accurately the conditions in which these practices are effective, both in order to increase the average level of apprenticeships and to reduce the disparities between pupils and limit failures for the weakest pupils. It is useful to study protocols that allow identification of practices and conditions for generalisation thereof, involving specialists in research and education methods. To do this, the Commission should support research in this field, including analysing practices in the sector, by direct observation in a real context, and evaluating the results of these practices. This support also entails assistance to distribute these practices.

Recommendations:

Analysing education systems and the impact of one or other form of organisation is a difficult job that requires access to and processing of huge amounts of data. Most often, there is not one isolated parameter, but a set of parameters that must be identified. To obtain a result, it is therefore generally necessary to work on several dimensions at once, otherwise the system runs a severe risk of adapting to the new situation with no notable improvement (e.g. prohibiting the resitting of years can accentuate selectivity in the most prestigious subjects or an increase of interest in specialist education).

Factors affecting teaching efficiency, apart from those linked to school structures, are even less well understood and research focusing on classroom practices by means of direct observation should be supported and encouraged.

The equity objectives must also be used to limit discrepancies between the weakest and the strongest in order to allow all pupils, including the weakest, to master basic skills considered essential to lead a worthwhile and active life as a citizen and not merely as a worker. With regard to compulsory education, the equality of results is therefore the aim, not merely equalisation of opportunities for children in the school system. Contrary to the implications of the Commission's Communication, it is therefore not sufficient to invest in the early years (pre-school) in order to place all young people on the same starting line and give them equal chances. The different levels of support from which each pupil may benefit at home, throughout his/her school career, and the sometimes very unequal nature of the education provided, during compulsory schooling, are clear evidence of the need to monitor all school careers, particularly at moments of choice or orientation, so that these do not become mechanisms of selection.

4. Higher education

The observations presented in the Commission's preparatory working document (SEC(2006) 1096) indicate rightly that the increase in higher education has not been accompanied by a democratization of this level of education: young people from underprivileged families are still clearly disadvantaged in terms of equality of access and consequently achievement of corresponding qualifications. Furthermore, those going on to higher education do not choose the most profitable subjects, and have a tendency to give up more quickly if they fail. This situation is harmful both in terms of efficacy and equity, as there is a waste of talent, the latter determined by individuals' independent characteristics.

Given that mass higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon, this observation may appear logical, in that it is more privileged families who continue to be best placed when access to a level of education traditionally reserved for the elite is generalized. However, even without taking into account the recent nature of the increase in higher-education staff, this phenomenon is coherent with regard to other levels of education: the most prestigious subjects, options or establishments are selected and in turn largely select a favoured public. This level of education is however designated, more than others, as inequitable, by virtue of the inequitable distribution of collective financial resources that it mobilizes. The rationale is simple: the overall scenario contributes to an educational good of which the most privileged are the greatest beneficiaries. The unfair nature of this situation is countered only if one takes into account the positive externalities that the most qualified produce, especially in terms of innovation and productivity. This observation may be made, *mutatis mutandis*, for secondary education, but here the personal contribution of the beneficiaries of the system is envisaged as a means of making the system

more equitable. This can effectively justify itself more than other levels, if one takes into account the unequal division of their relative costs (cf. EGREES, 2005, p. 175).

If the observations of the Commission can be largely shared, the solutions proposed must be questioned. In effect, the generalization of the rights of enrolment, and measures helping the neediest in the form of loans, risk making higher education even more unequal. The rights of enrolment introduce market mechanisms to higher education (SEC(2006) 1096, p. 25). They should at the same time introduce a healthy pressure to the heart of the system, pressure leading to greater quality of teaching and greater motivation to success on the part of pupils (increase in attendance at lesson, reduction in failure rate). On the one hand, as the Commission recognizes, the data are not fully sufficient, with regard to countries of the European Union, to support these arguments, and, on the other hand, this method could have the inverse consequences. Therefore, the countries of Northern Europe, which traditionally use the system of loans in higher education, have observed that students preferred not to have to finance their studies with paid work. Student work has a tendency to prolong studying length, which leads these countries to increase grants (Eurydice, 1999).

Bayenet and Demeulemeester (2005), in their review of the literature concerning public finance policies with regard to higher education in the countries of the OECD, cite three arguments for preferring the grant system to the loan and enrolment-right system: i) the non-existence of studies on the effects of these policies in terms of choice of programmes and length of studies, ii) the difficulty in determining the incidence of reimbursement obligations and iii) the example of countries in Northern Europe faced with the results of a policy favouring loans.

Recommendations:

As for pre-school education, the Commission's analysis seems generally acceptable with regard to the "diagnosis" element. Higher education, with its growth should benefit from greater financing than it currently receives. However, the favoured solution does not seem to present guarantees of success that one would expect from an in-depth reform of financing. The central idea, to increase private financial participation (owing to, as mentioned right at the beginning of the Communication, a context of restriction of public spending), does not seem to offer any guarantee of equality of access for a certain number of reasons that the Commission itself mentions. One can therefore only raise questions at this part of the Communication and hope for a more solid document.

5. Vocational education and training

The Commission groups into the same section vocation education and training, whether provided in the context of secondary education or training programmes for adults. This unconventional grouping is interesting, as it recognises the need to improve the quality of all training directly linked to the labour market. In effect, the Commission recognizes that some vocational training skips certain subjects, and that we are dealing with vocational education organized at a secondary level which does not ensure access to employment and further training, or with programmes for adults aimed at those with few qualifications.

To improve the situation, the Commission proposes two steps, the first being a reinforcement of the partnerships between the public and private sectors and the social partners and the second being the adaptation of training programmes to employers' needs. If the dialogue between the labour market and the sector of vocational education and training must be reinforced, we should

be under no illusions that this collaboration might guarantee greater efficacy of the education and training systems. Therefore, an excessively strong adaptation of training programmes to the occasional requirements of the labour market could lead, in a recession, to a severe discrepancy between the specific skills acquired and the new requirements of the labour market. Furthermore, the Commission underlines the difficulty in persuading the private sector to finance vocational training, as the latter has no direct link to the needs of the company concerned. In effect, excessively general training or training allowing attainment of levels with no direct relationship with the jobs carried out may lead workers to take advantage of the new skills acquired to leave the employer who has financed them for other companies that are more generous from a salary point of view, but less generous in terms of training. This reflection makes a case for the public sector to preserve an important role in the sphere of the social promotion of workers, especially those without much training, so as to allow the acquisition both of general skills, not directly linked to the work posts held, and skills allowing the acquisition of a better position on the labour market.

Recommendations:

Both public and private partners should cooperate to define needs, develop and finance programmes, while preserving the final decisions on programme content and access for the public authorities. This will avoid the emergence of “ad hoc” training, exclusively reflecting the short-term needs of companies. The speed of change in the labour market requires training to equip people with general and adaptable competences, allowing them to benefit from lifelong learning.

To avoid the redundancy or under-valuing of competences acquired during working life, the recognition of experience gained on-the-job should also be improved. This is not to promote competition with qualifications earned through formal (usually initial) training, but to allow people to benefit from their real experiences in both working and non-working life.

Public investment should focus on the most disadvantaged target groups, as they are the ones who benefit least from continuing training, either because they lack the basic competences required to exploit the opportunities, or because they are unable to access training during their working life, being outside the world of work or confined to low-skill activity areas.

6. Actions by the European Union

International cooperation by the countries of the European Union is essential. By virtue of their common destiny, it is in these countries’ interest to work together to establish the objectives to be attained and the methods to be used to evaluate if they have been achieved. With regard to the methods to be implemented to achieve these objectives, the Commission recommends an exchange of good practices, and recognises the specific responsibility of Member States. It would be illusory to imagine that identical methods would produce identical results in different historic, cultural, economic and educational contexts. The assessment of promising practices must deal not only with their efficiency and their capacity to increase equity, but also with the conditions of transferring or generalising them in other contexts.

The Commission sees, in the improvement of efficacy and equity of education systems, a source of mobility of people. It is not clear whether mobility will be extended as a corollary result or as an intended objective of the Commission’s Communication. If it is an objective, it seems appropriate to ask: From what kind of mobility will people benefit? A mobility alleviating the

problems of regional employment without resolving them? Mobility centred on jobs? On exchanges between citizens? In any event, questions can be asked with regard to the added value of an investment centred on an objective of mobility. It seems more important to underline the added value of an investment centred on the development of basic skills of all citizens, including as a priority disadvantaged citizens and those with few qualifications. On the other hand, we must reflect on mobility conditions with regard to students and rethink the fair allocation of exchange grants as well as the amounts thereof, as the latter do not allow equitable access to training in other Member States. Without rebalancing, the gap between well-off and mobile students and underprivileged and therefore less mobile students will widen, all the more so as mobility is important for employment. The establishment of centres of excellence with regard to education and training, rather than a universal service, accessible throughout the European Union, if not coupled with assistance properly in proportion to the costs generated by this mobility, will lead at the same time to a reinforcement of regional disparities and discrepancies between individuals on the basis of their own resources

The Commission concludes that the priority is to provide equity and efficiency in European education systems. The introductory remarks concerning the precision required in defining these concepts are extremely resonant here. The culture of assessment and exchanges must be developed to reach these objectives. The Commission calls for this culture only in the field of pre-school education, whereas it should be provided for at every level of education. Education and training must be conceived as a coherent combination in close interaction with other major economic and social sectors. Wider policies aimed at reducing inequalities in living conditions and financial security are required to increase equality of opportunity (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). Coherency of policies and the evaluation thereof must therefore be looked into. With regard to policy evaluation, work already carried out under the aegis of the Commission (regarding for example the EURYDICE network, NESSE⁶, EGREES) must be developed. An ambitious and multilingual policy for developing the results of European research into education science must be set up. While the economy of education is a relatively structured discipline sharing largely common methods, the same does not apply to social sciences, where national and international financing is generally modest. It is important to support the development of a cumulative approach, especially by establishing or sustaining the development of European research centres concerning education and the dispersion of knowledge in the field, from an interdisciplinary perspective.

6 Network of experts in Social Sciences of Education and training (<http://www.nesse.fr>).

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Useful Websites

- **EUROPE**

Association pour le Développement des Méthodologies d'Evaluation en Education en Europe (ADMEE)
<http://www.irdp.ch/admee-europe/index.html>

Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE)
<http://www.atee.org/>

Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS)
<http://www.utwente.nl/cheps/>

The Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning
<http://crell.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

Comparative Education Society (CESE)
<http://www.cese-europe.org/>

Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE)
<http://www.cidree.org/>

eEducation Europe: the online observatory on education policies
<http://www.e-education-europe.org/uk/rubriques/home/1.asp>

ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)
<http://www.enqa.eu/>

European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education
<http://www.european-agency.org/>

The European Education Policy Network
<http://www.educationpolicy.eu/>

The European Educational Research Association (EERA)
<http://www.eera.ac.uk/web/eng/all/home/index.html>

European University Association (EUA)
<http://www.eua.be/>

Eurydice: The Information Network on Education in Europe
<http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice>

Le Réseau Européen d'Experts en Economie de l'Education (EENEE)
<http://www.education-economics.org/>

Le réseau européen des responsables des politiques d'évaluation des systèmes éducatifs
<http://cisad.adc.education.fr/reva/france/presentation1.htm>

The Thematic Network on Teacher Education (TNTEE)
<http://tntee.umu.se/index.html>

- **INTERNATIONAL**

The Council of Europe / Education for Europe

http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/education/

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)

<http://www.iea.nl/Home/home.html>

OECD / Directorate for Education

http://www.oecd.org/department/0,2688,en_2649_33723_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html

UNESCO / Education

http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=48712&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

UNESCO / International Bureau of Education

<http://www.ibe.unesco.org/>