



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels, 22 October 2010

15142/10

**EDUC 178
SOC 679**

NOTE

from: Presidency

to: Permanent Representatives Committee (Part 1) / Council

No. prev. doc. 14685/10 EDUC 166 SOC 630

Subject: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage – The role of education in combating poverty,
inequality and social exclusion
- *Policy debate*

Delegations will find attached a Presidency discussion paper to serve as the basis for an exchange of views at the EYCS Council on 18-19 November.

Presidency discussion paper
in preparation for the
Council meeting (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 18-19 November 2010

*Breaking the cycle of disadvantage –
the role of education in combating poverty, inequality and social exclusion*

On 28-29 September 2010 the Belgian Presidency organised a conference on the subject of *Breaking the cycle of disadvantage – social inclusion in and through education*, which confirmed that inequalities in education and training persist, with severe consequences for individuals and for societies. The conference showed that, while some examples of successful measures are already in place, Member States need to intensify their efforts to introduce effective and comprehensive educational and wider policy strategies aimed at tackling cumulative educational inequalities which, reinforced by external factors, can lead to poverty and exclusion. Education policy alone cannot remedy the situation. What is needed is a careful mix of preventive and remedial cross-sectoral policy measures, coupled with a culture of policy evaluation and long-term planning, in order to ensure success against the vicious cycle of disadvantage.

Introduction

It is estimated that 84 million Europeans currently live below the poverty line, about 20 million of whom are children. People with low educational attainment are at a 4 times greater risk of falling into the poverty trap than people with high educational attainment. The cycle of disadvantage and exclusion starts very early. Children born into low-income homes facing multiple disadvantages (typically characterised by poorly-educated parents, unemployment, poor housing and health, family breakdown, and vulnerability) face seriously reduced educational opportunities and future life chances. Most often, socio-economic disadvantage and precarity are ruthlessly transmitted to the next generation.

Inequalities are socially corrosive. There is compelling evidence to suggest that countries with high income inequalities show higher levels of skill inequalities and lower levels of social cohesion. Almost everything, from life expectancy to mental illness and from violence to illiteracy, is affected not by how wealthy a society is, but by how equal it is. Yet, the gap between rich and poor, and the number of people below the poverty line both in Europe and internationally, are continuing to grow with severe consequences, including for the well-off.

While education is often seen as a vehicle (and sometimes the *only* vehicle) out of social disadvantage, it often remains unequal itself and in some cases makes things worse rather than better. The pursuit of equality is a relatively new goal in education policy. For a long time, the main function of education and training systems was to socialise children into future adult roles in class- and gender-specific ways. Education and training systems played - and to a large extent continue to play through their ostensibly meritocratic modes of operation - a major role in the reproduction and legitimation of social inequality. Despite the general assumption that education and training systems offer opportunities for upward social mobility, they can often reinforce rather than break the cycle of disadvantage and exclusion. EU education and training systems themselves are, to a greater or lesser extent, marked by inequalities in access to quality education and training, in treatment and in educational outcomes. These inequalities reflect, and in many cases compound, patterns of wider disadvantage that lead to precarious lives of poverty and exclusion.

Towards an inclusive society

Raising educational attainment and competence levels does not necessarily guarantee less deprivation and less social inequality. Under certain conditions, the situation of the low-skilled can become even more precarious. Policies that aim to reduce the gap of educational and skill inequalities are necessary, but at the same time insufficient. Not all the problems relating to social exclusion are due to a lack of competences or skills among the relevant group. The problem should not lie solely with the individual, but also with the system, which should become more inclusive.

Societies should benefit as much as possible from the available stock of human capital and should guarantee a decent life, with respect and identity, for the low-skilled too. Genuine inclusion means respecting all citizens, irrespective of their competence levels. The prevailing policy discourse of the knowledge society can – under certain conditions – lead to the symbolic exclusion of people who are not able to meet rising expectations in terms of schooling, skills and competences. Furthermore, we should recognise that the knowledge society is not merely an academic society, and that the value of manual labour and vocational education and training should be reassessed.

A holistic approach to breaking the cycle of disadvantage

- Decades of research show that joined-up action across several policy fields is much more effective in removing the barriers to inclusion. Synergies across several policy fields are required. Education and training policy measures need to be carefully articulated with measures in related social and economic policy fields (such as employment, health, youth, housing and migration), in order to ensure effective intervention against the vicious cycle of disadvantage.
- Evidence-based policies are needed. Effective long-term policies can only be based on solid evidence from research.
- A comprehensive strategy with clear, measurable goals, combining prevention with remedial policies is necessary, with a strong focus on prevention.
- In tackling educational inequalities, both targeted policy approaches (aimed at learners at risk) and comprehensive policy approaches (aimed at all learners) are required, but targeted policies should avoid stigmatising and isolating vulnerable learners. Comprehensive approaches aim at enhancing the possibilities offered by the education and training system *for all* and at increasing overall quality of support. Targeted approaches make use of additional funding in order to devote extra time and efforts to work with learners experiencing deprivation; however, these should be well-connected and acknowledged in the education and training system.

- Education and training policies and practices need to respond to diversity and to provide for the successful inclusion of disadvantaged groups within mainstream education and training. Providing systematic help to those who fall behind at school and reducing year repetition is essential.
- Teachers, trainers, adult educators, school leaders and other educational staff who provide learning support are key players in the effort to reduce the effects of disadvantage. It is essential to invest in initial and continuous teacher education, in order to provide the skills for addressing the causes and consequences of disadvantage and to ensure that well-prepared and experienced teachers work in schools with a disadvantaged intake. It is also critical to raise the level of expectations among teachers and trainers towards learners in such schools, in order to avoid a "self-fulfilling prophecy" effect.
- Family involvement is crucial. Parents' aspirations and the extent to which they support their children are highly influential. Improving communication between families and schools is therefore essential. We need to strengthen the links between school and home, and to encourage disadvantaged parents to help their children to learn.

Breaking the cycle as early as possible

- Investing enough and investing early is essential in the effort to break the cycle of disadvantage. We need to strengthen the provision and raise the quality of early childhood education and care for all and to widen access for the disadvantaged, as well as to preserve the benefits of good early childhood provision with interventions at later stages.
- Evidence shows that strategies comprising a mix of targeted policies aimed at different profiles of youth at risk combined with more comprehensive equity measures are more effective in combating early school leaving (ESL). Education and training measures alone are not sufficient in combating the sources of ESL; coordinated policy action across several policy areas is needed. While compensatory strategies (which usually take the form of second chance, transitional or comprehensive support programmes) are also needed to "rescue" those who leave school early and help them benefit from education and training, the prevention of ESL is vital.

- Evidence suggests that where there is "quasi-market" free school choice and selectivity, there are also higher levels of school segregation and higher levels of social determination of skills outcomes.
- There is some evidence to show that early tracking can have negative effects on the achievement levels of disadvantaged children. This is partly because it tends to channel them towards less prestigious forms of education and training. Postponing tracking until upper-secondary level, combined with the possibility of transferring between school types, can reduce segregation and promote equity without diminishing efficiency.
- The enhancement of clear and diverse vocational pathways through VET to further learning and employment (in order to remove "dead-ends") as real alternatives to academic upper-secondary routes is a discernable and promising trend in several Member States, aimed at combating educational disadvantage and early school leaving in particular. Again, qualitative improvements and the permeability of the system are of paramount importance, in order for this trend to lead to a substantial decrease in the ESL rate.
- Particular attention must be given to key transition points. Disengagement and ESL are more a process than an event, but there are critical points within that process. These tend to be the transitions from pre-school to primary school; primary to secondary school; compulsory to post-compulsory education; and education or training to the labour market. At each of these key moments, there is a higher risk of disengagement.
- The expansion of higher education in recent decades still favours individuals from richer family backgrounds and depresses the prospects of social mobility. Lower socio-economic parts of the population and disadvantaged social groups continue to be seriously under-represented in both undergraduate and post-graduate levels, and many more students from these groups drop out before finishing their studies. In their efforts to achieve the relevant national targets, Member States need to develop socially inclusive models of higher education.

Other supporting measures

- Part-time, distance- or non-formal learning can also make a contribution, particularly if they help learners to shape their own personal project. This can be a driving force to participate in education and training, since disorientation, lack of personal objectives or not believing in one's own possibilities are often mentioned by early school leavers and other disadvantaged learners. The experience of learning outside a school, with a different and more personalised learning style, and experiencing a new environment, can help to tackle disengagement.
- Guidance is a key preventive, as well as a remedial measure. Policy responses against ESL and wider educational disadvantage must take into consideration the new education context which now provides a growing range of learning pathways and channels, thereby increasing the need for guidance and individualised support. Guidance can also help in overcoming learning difficulties, reinforcing study skills through coaching, and reducing the incidence of drop-out due to wrong educational choices. Guidance for those who have already dropped out is also essential.

Work, employability and social inclusion

- The emancipatory goal of education is to enable young people to become full and equal citizens who are able to engage in all areas of society. Work is an important source of social inclusion, because it fosters social integration and reduces poverty. According to the OECD, almost six times as many jobless families are below the poverty line than working families. Nevertheless, work alone is not enough to avoid poverty and the quality of jobs is also an important consideration. Education and training systems should aim to deliver adequate starting qualifications for all. These qualifications should enable people to start a meaningful career, offering gratifying instead of alienating labour market experiences, self-consciousness, professional pride and growth opportunities. Accordingly, the importance of key competences - including in initial vocational education and training - should be emphasised.

Enabling the low-skilled to catch up

- The design of joined-up effective educational and wider strategies, aimed at better supporting, better motivating and guiding the low-skilled and the long-term unemployed, is essential. The economic crisis has increased their vulnerability and worsened their job prospects. In this context, there is a need to improve public training programmes for the unemployed and for disadvantaged learners. The quality and relevance of such programmes can be enhanced by encouraging stakeholder partnerships at a regional and local level.

Measuring progress

- Aggregate national and European averages often mask very unpleasant regional and local realities. There is a need to identify priority zones and to target resources effectively, where these are most needed.
- There is a need to examine possible new approaches towards monitoring progress. One way would be to develop and improve reliable and comparable statistical tools to better measure and monitor educational inequality (including at the local/regional level), in order to promote evidence-based equality and inclusion. More attention should be paid to monitoring educational equality in existing progress reports. In current reports, too much attention is given to average levels of educational attainment, whereas the distribution of more equal outcomes is often neglected.
- Breaking the cycle of disadvantage is a shared responsibility. Measuring progress should be done at different levels, from the local level to the supranational level, in order to foster ownership and accountability of all partners involved. All stakeholders need to be involved and better cooperation is needed between different policy domains such as education and training, employment, social affairs, youth, migration, housing, welfare and culture. At the EU level, coherence is promoted through the integrated guidelines for the economic and employment policies of the Member States. The integration could even be reinforced by including an impact assessment of the social outcomes for each of the ten guidelines, so that the impact of the economic policy in reducing poverty and creating greater equality could be assessed.

Work at EU-level

The May 2010 Council Conclusions on the social dimension of education and training highlighted several key issues that need to be tackled urgently. The Commission is currently working on a proposal for a Council Recommendation on early school leaving. In addition, a Commission communication on early childhood education and care is planned for 2011. Another communication planned for 2011 will be on *Equity in education and training to support European inclusive growth*, in which the Commission will highlight concrete examples of policies and practices that contribute to preventing or disrupting patterns of disadvantage and that foster equality and inclusion in European schools and societies. It will highlight the benefits of joined-up policy interventions in tackling disadvantage and exclusion and will call upon Member States to achieve faster progress. It will also open the discussion on measuring progress in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. This will facilitate the achievement of the national targets agreed in education and training.

In the light of the above, Ministers are invited to consider the following two questions for discussion:

1. When combating poverty and inequality, cooperation with other sectors is essential. What examples from your country can you provide of specific joined-up policies and measures, in which education and training policy has been linked up to other policy areas (e.g. employment, housing, youth, immigration, social welfare, etc.) with a view to tackling inequalities and social exclusion ? And what has been the impact of such policies?
2. How do the Member States measure and monitor :
 - a) educational inequality?
 - b) their progress towards promoting equality and inclusion both in and through education and training?