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EQUITY IN EDUCATION. A NEW DEFINITION FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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*Equity in education. A new definition from
a european perspective*
Summary

This paper is the first in a series based on the Erasmus+ project: "Supporting Opportunity in Schools: Promoting Educational Equity" which includes educational institutions from five European countries. This project is aimed to empower school leaders to enhance and to assess equity through the development of several intellectual outputs and actions about the importance of assessing equity in schools to raise awareness among educational stakeholders. The first output was to agree on a new definition of school equity, which captured the needs of the five different educational systems involved in the project and represented current policy perspectives from across Europe. The definition was built around the identification of six key words, which became equity dimensions. From this point, these dimensions have been the starting point to deepen the topic and set the sub-dimensions. This will allow school heads to evaluate equity in their school by means of using a variety of digital tools, which will be developed throughout the project.

1. Introduction

European countries seek to fulfil the child's right to an education and this is reaffirmed in many declarations, such as the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1991), with the clear purpose of making education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for all. However, it is not enough. Education plays a key role in determining how we spend our adult life and reviewing the literature suggests strongly that an individual's level of educational achievement directly correlates to future quality of life (EUROSTAT 2017).

Consequently, there is a need for schools and education systems to focus on equity, as a measure of achievement, fairness and opportunity to ensure that socioeconomic background, disability, race or gender issues are not a determiner of future success and so that everyone can attain the same type of healthy lifestyle (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006).

School stakeholders have a key role in enhancing equity in education and school autonomy is a drive for school quality. When schools combine equity and excellence all children are given opportunities for a good quality education.

Taking into account these reasons, several educational institutions from different European countries developed a project within the Erasmus+ Programme with the aim to empower schools to enhance and assess equity. The project set out the following specific objectives:

- To develop school practices that enhance equity in education.
- To create a framework to assess equity in schools.
- To empower school heads to lead school changes that increase equity in their schools.
- To promote awareness and collaboration in school communities to enhance school equity.

2. Equity in education

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) presented two dimensions of equity (OECD, 2017). The first dimension is fairness, which ensures that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. The second dimension is inclusion, through ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all. The two dimensions are closely intertwined: tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure (Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007).

The same report stated that fair and inclusive education is desirable because, first, there is a human rights imperative for people to be able to develop their capacities and participate fully in society. The right to education is recognised, for example, in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child and in the constitution of most nations. Secondly, the long-term social and financial costs of educational failure are high. Those without the skills to participate socially and economically generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security. Thirdly, increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in some countries while other countries face more long-standing issues of integrating minorities. Fair and inclusive education for migrants and minorities is a key to these challenges. Equity in education enhances social cohesion and trust (Field, Kuczera & Pont, 2007, p.11)

Three key policy areas can affect equity in education: the design of education systems, practices in and out of school, and how resources are allocated. The OECD has developed ten practical steps that governments can take in these three areas to enhance equity in education (OECD, 2008).

The basic structure of education systems can affect equity. Traditionally, education systems may categorise students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process (OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2016). Early sorting can also weaken results overall. This prompts two conclusions: early tracking and streaming need to be justified in terms of proven benefits; and school systems using early tracking should postpone it to a later stage to reduce inequities and improve outcomes. The socio-economic structure of education systems is also important. Secondary school systems where there are large socio-economic differences between schools tend on average to have worse results in mathematics and reading and a greater spread of reading outcomes (Agasisti, T., F. Avvisati, F. Borgonovi and S. Longobardi, 2018). Indeed, social background is more of an obstacle to educational success than in systems without such socio-economic differences between schools. Selecting learners on the basis of academic achievement tends to create great social differences between schools. It also increases the link between socio-economic status and performance – it tends to accelerate the progress of those who have already gained the best start in life from their parents – and is also associated with stronger performance at the top end of the scale in mathematics and science. So academic selection needs to be used with caution because of the risks it poses to equity (*Castelli, L., Ragazzi, S., Crescentini, A. 2012).*

3. Different perspectives on school equity in Europe

3.1. School equity in Belgium

In Belgium, equity in education means that education is open to the whole target group of education. This is achieved by offering differentiated education, which takes into account the individual educational needs of each learner and adapts to the needs of different target groups and a developing society.

Flemish schools can receive financial incentives to create equal education opportunities for every learner[1]. Such support is based on the following socio-economic indicators: mother's education, educational grants, home language. Additionally, for secondary schools, the neighbourhood in which the learner lives is also considered. A school may use the additional funding to provide extra resources such as additional teaching hours or teaching materials, for example.

In accordance with the "M-decree"[2], schools also strive to include learners with special needs within regular educational institutions. For this, schools can request additional means.

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[1] Decreet betreffende Gelijke Onderwijskansen I, 28 June 2002, B.S. 14-09-2002 and Decreet houdende wijziging van het decreet van 28 juni 2002 betreffende gelijke onderwijskansen-I (1), 15 July 2005, B.S. 30-08-2005.

[2] Decreet betreffende maatregelen voor leerlingen met specifieke onderwijsbehoeften, 21/03/2014.

Within GO! Flemish Community Education, all schools are supported and advised by the pedagogic guidance service and a pupils' guidance centre. From 1 September 2018, a new decree applies to pupils' counselling. This renders the roles between the school team, the Pupils' Guidance Centre (CLB) and the Pedagogic Guidance Service (PBD) sharper and their cooperation intensified. Each school must, together with its team, parents, pupils and with the support of the PBD or other external service, work out a qualitative, integrated policy to work on pupils' counselling. When needed, the PBD also supports schools, headmasters and teachers to achieve the learning goals set forth by the final attainment goals or programme. They also give advice on pedagogic policies and guidelines, the organization of the professionalisation of school teams and the expansion of care and individually adapted curricula.

The pillars of this support are considered to be the educational career of the pupil, learning and studying, psychological and social functioning and preventative health care.

3.2. School equity in Italy

The Minister of Education defined in 2017 the concept of fairness and equity, as to overcome all the obstacles that prevent access to qualified education. In order to improve equity, it is necessary to address school drop-out and educational failure. Furthermore, schools must work to overcome social differences by providing real opportunities for qualified studies for all students, up to university education, as stated by Article 34 of the Italian Constitutional Charter.

The Constitution and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, launched by the United Nations in 2015, indicate the scope of the formative function of school and education for the development of citizenship of the new generation. This concept of citizenship is one rooted in a global European dimension.

As regards the Italian Constitution, Article 3 states: *"the Republic has the task of removing the economic and social obstacles which, by affecting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevents the full development of the human being and the real participation of all the citizens in the political, economic and social organization of the country".*

The school, in particular, is the first place where children learn that all citizens have equal social dignity and are equal within the law in relation to sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal conditions and social status. Education must be a key factor of equality and an instrument of equal opportunity. To guarantee equity within the education system, the Government pays particular attention to these aspects: teacher training, school inclusion, reform of vocational education, creation of an integrated educational system from birth to six years, right to education with contribution of local authorities, promotion and dissemination of humanistic culture and the evaluation of general learning and skills.

3.3. School equity in Romania

In Romania, equity is mentioned in several national educational policy documents, especially in the the Romanian Law of National Education, 1/2011. According to the law, the principle of equity provides access to learning without discrimination.

The Education Law specifies the financial sources of the Romanian education: the state budget and the own incomes of the educational institutions. The fairness of the distribution of funds for the achievement of a quality education is explicitly stipulated in the text of the education law (art. 9). The same article states that Romanian education is free of charge. Preschool, school aged pupils and higher education students with social or special education needs are financially supported by the state (art. 12). Thus, the state allocates social scholarships and prizes. Special and specially integrated education provision are part of the Romanian pre-university education system. The Education Law provides special sections for early years, pre-schoolers, pupils in secondary education and also for those in high schools or professional education. The rights of individuals belonging to national minorities or those with special educational needs are also included within Education Law, through special provisions. Thus, pupils belonging to national minorities may study in their mother tongue at all levels of education (art. 45). The contents studied by pupils with special educational needs are adapted and are established through differentiated pedagogical approaches. The Education Law also includes provision for additional educational opportunities for special groups of students. The „Second Chance" program offers an opportunity for those who have not completed their primary education (art. 30). The "School after school" program creates extra-curricular educational opportunities (art. 58). Individual institutions also employ a range of equity measures.

3.4. School equity in Spain

In Catalonia (Spain), the concept of equity is closely connected to social cohesion, inclusion and equal opportunities for all. This perspective has been developed in some educational laws. Furthermore, since 2000, as a result of a significant number of immigrants who joined the educational system, schools provide a range of activities and programmes to ensure a greater level of cohesion and cohabitation. Educational regional authorities developed specific programmes such as *Aules d'Acollida* (classrooms for newcomers) and ELIC staff (language and interculturality teachers) to ensure the inclusion of newcomers from mainly South America and Morocco within schools. Nevertheless, the Catalan educational system has always been very focused on inclusion. At present, this perspective is being broadened by considering not only inclusion, but also access, opportunity and personal development issues.

Schools are evaluated by the Inspectorate of Education on a regular basis. Equity is assessed in two ways. First, equity, along with students' attainment and resource allocation, is assessed every two years. The equity dimension includes a qualitative assessment, which takes into consideration drop-out, absenteeism,

inclusion and cohabitation. Schools are judged according to an efficiency score on a four level scale. Second, schools have access to a dashboard of indicators with information about their position compared to different national average rates. Some indicators related to equity are the rate of special education needs students, newcomers, deprived socioeconomic status, grants, dropout, absenteeism and retention.

3.5. School equity in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) has long been committed to the principles of equity, with both UK and successive devolved governments recognising the role schools have to play in growing a fair and inclusive society, with each placing a strong emphasis on improving educational outcomes as a means of achieving this vision (Powers, 2016). This has led to programmes focussed on mitigating the impact of disadvantage on learners' outcomes and a strategic focus on tackling poverty at school level (Estyn, 2010). This has resulted in: investing in the early years; introducing additional funds for learners' in receipt of 'free school meals' (the main school indicator to determine whether a child is from a 'poorer family' (Egan et al, 2014)); family and community engagement approaches which focus on upskilling parents and developing early speech, language and communication; and a drive to improve the quality of teaching (Welsh Government (WG), 2014; 2015). Welsh Government's *'Our National Mission'* (WG, 2017) have embraced a notion of equity that includes well-being, inclusion and fairness. New curriculum reform is viewed as a vehicle for enacting further inclusion and equity within Wales (UNESCO, 2017; WG, 2017).

4. Towards a new definition of school equity

A review of the literature on equity in education suggests that equity and quality are directly linked, this is the reason why stakeholders should enhance equity practices in schools; but it is also known that a top-down policy approach in education does not work well to foster successful change.

Equity in education is a very complex concept involving the identification and interpretation of many dimensions. These dimensions have been analysed differently by specialists. We will present some approaches to the dimensions of equity in education.

In the project introduced above, a new definition on school equity was agreed. This definition fulfilled the different approaches of the five countries involved in the project. To them, equity in education is "*the right to a fair and inclusive educational system that ensures access to a high-quality education and provides opportunities for personalized learning, personal and social development*".

5. The dimensions of equity in education

The definition stated above is built around six keywords, which become the different dimensions of school equity. For each dimension, it is necessary to

outline its contents, establish the level of achievement and identify some indicators, which will allow us to evaluate equity in schools. The following are the agreed dimensions:

- **Fairness***:* fair education is a universal right that guarantees every child to achieve their highest individual potential.

- **Inclusion** is related to learners with SEN, socioeconomic status or are newcomers. An inclusive school respond to the learners' needs in all areas of school life. Staff must be able to deal with these needs through personalised education, additional support and resources ensuring well-being, achievement and development of learners aspirations.

- **Access** is the right to a high-quality education which provides a wide variety of learning opportunities to support the development of academic attainment and the socio- economical skills needed for the learner to take their place in modern society.

- **Opportunity** in education is the possibility for learners to develop themselves through a wide range of chances to reach their maximum potential, both personally and socially.

- **Personalised learning** is a process taking into account the context of a learner, including personalized characteristics and social and cultural background in order to achieve the optimal progress (skills and personal development).

- **Personal and social development** is the process in which every learner should achieve their own goals through activities in order to empower their well-being and self-confidence.

Image 1: School equity and its dimensions

To enhance school equity, the dimensions must be deployed into several sub-dimensions, so that schools can focus on more specific equity practices. The sub-dimensions that have been identified are the following:

Table 1: School equity: definition, dimensions and sub-dimensions

School equity				
Definition	*The right to a fair and inclusive educational system that ensures access to a high quality education and provides opportunities for personalized learning, personal and social development*			
	Dimension			**Sub-dimensions**
1	Fairness	1.1		Right to education
		1.2		School policy
		1.3		Grants and funding management
		1.4		Participation
2	Inclusion	2.1		SEN students
		2.2		SES students
		2.3		Newcomers
		2.4		Gender
		2.5		Ethnicity
		2.6		Intercultural issues
3	Access	3.1		High quality education
		3.2		High quality teaching
		3.3		Prevention of absenteeism and dropout
		3.4		Access to resources
4	Opportunity	4.1		Support and Intervention Activities
		4.2		School projects
		4.3		Extracurricular activities
		4.4		School environment
5	Personalised Learning	5.1		Methodological aspects
		5.2		Organizational aspects
		5.3		Curriculum/Teacher's flexibility
6	Personal and Social Development	6.1		Learners' expectations
		6.2		Learners' well-being
		6.3		Learner's self-confidence
		6.4		Soft skills

With all this information, it will be possible to develop a range of tools, which will facilitate the evaluation of school equity, such as an interactive rubric and a dashboard of indicators. These tools will help schools to assess their own level of equity and identify new strategies and school practices to enhance equity.

6. Conclusions

To foster changes in schools, regarding equity in education, a blending of top-down and bottom-up approaches is needed (Demeuse, 2004). This involves both schools and educational policies. Besides, international cooperation is an added value when dealing with this essential issue in terms of generating influence as it attracts much more public attention and the topic can be much more efficiently handled and controlled.

To increase school equity practices in the countries participating in this project, some steps have to be followed, such as empowering school heads, raising awareness on the importance of equity in education and making available the tools to assess equity. This will be based on the theoretical framework developed by the project, which comprises of different European school equity perspectives.

This framework is built around a new broad definition of school equity, already given in this paper, which is based on six keywords that are defined and split into several sub-dimensions. These are the starting point for defining different levels of attainment that will help schools to assess their level of equity.

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