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Feature

Inclusive Schools: A Challenge For Developing An Inclusive European Society

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Introduction

EU society and schools are both currently facing two major policy dilemmas regarding threats to social exclusion: (1) how to promote *competitiveness* while ensuring *social cohesion* (here focusing on *solidarity* as the attempt to reduce social inequalities); and (2) how to enhance *integration* while respecting the entitlement for *inclusion* of diverse individuals and groups. These are genuine and complex dilemmas in constant tension that have no final solution, but call for a continuous *re*solution of the balance between the two conflicting processes of each dilemma (Clark et al., 1999; cf. Eurydice, 1994).

Dilemma 1: Promoting competitiveness while bolstering solidarity

Heads of State and Government have set two major tasks for the EU: (1) "to become the knowledge-based economy that is the *most competitive* and most dynamic in the world", accompanied by (2) "greater *social cohesion*" (Commission, 2000). These two desirable aims are in constant tension (Commission, 2001). Competition is seen as the key to efficiency and excellence. But its five synonyms in Microsoft Word's

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thesaurus are 'rivalry; opposition; antagonism; war; struggle'. Competitiveness is a factor in the exclusion of the weak as the powerful seek to protect their own interests (Jordan, 1996); in the widening of the gap between rich and poor individuals and regions (Burgess & Propper, 2002; 'Persistent poverty' in the EU increased from 10% to 11% in 1997-1998 (Eurostat)); in intolerance for diversity and xenophobia. Moreover, it breeds a tendency to blame the socially excluded for their own plight (Hudson & Williams, 2001).

From a solidarity viewpoint, civil and economic institutions are seen as constraining the opportunities for some individuals and groups from remedying their exclusion (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002). As the EU upholds social solidarity and justice *per se*, then it needs to increase its efforts to reduce social exclusion.

Competition and solidarity in schools

The same dilemma is experienced in schools. Competitive school organisation, with normative examinations and streaming within and between schools, is currently widely regarded as the best means of raising standards in education (European Commission, 2001b). But again, a competitive school ethos tends to exclude those students who "fail" and to blame them for their deficits in ability, motivation or behaviour (Barton & Slee, 1999).

However, from a solidarity viewpoint, the serious prejudicial impact of deficit thinking has been spelled out in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and the concepts of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). It was earlier strongly also spelled out by a prominent European (Austrian) psychoanalyst, Alfred Adler, working from an individual rather than macro-social perspective:

> The great majority of school children are nearly always at the same level: they are the best or the worst or the average, and they stay that way. This state of things does not reflect so much the development of the brain, as it does the inertia of psychological attitudes. It is a sign that children have limited themselves and cease to be optimistic after the first few checks. … (Adler, 1930/1970, p.175)

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The first few checks are not made in their youth, but start from birth, tied to their home and neighbourhood (Lupton and Power, 2002), and experiences of social exclusion are immediately reinforced at preschool. Enabling measures cannot be limited to the world of work. Though 'second chances' remain important, 'Lifelong learning' starts from birth (Commission, 2001). The success of early and prolonged intervention with children and families from disadvantaged milieus in the USA and a number of EU countries are clear proof that social inequality is a major factor in school success and failure (Eurydice, 1995; Sparkes and Glennerster, 2002).

Whether schools can change society or vice versa (and mobility trends may turn schools into a leading community institution (OECD, 2001)), schools too need to address the constant tension between competition and social cohesion in order not to feed the often noted cycle of disadvantage and exclusion (Sparkes and Howard, 2002).

Dilemma 2: Balancing the need for *integration* with the entitlement for *inclusion*

From its inception, the EU has been seeking 'European integration' at economic and increasingly at cultural levels (Marfleet, 2001, p. 81). Here again there is a genuine tension between integrating all into a single pan-European identity, while at the same time valuing – 'including' – diverse citizens, groups and cultures. For instance, while immigrants are sought to close the gaps in particular economic activities, they remain foreigners (Kofman & Sales, 2001). Their *integration* entails total adaptation to the language and culture of the receiving country. One may see this as an effective way of ensuring cohesion and promoting 'European values' such as those attributed to the British: "Fair play, tolerance, democracy and decency"; however, "a more negative version of this national [or European] cohesion reflects: cultural prejudice, complacency, patronage and old-boy networking" (Corbett, 1999, p.60). This exclusive process hits substantial groups of European citizens who are rejected for their diversity.

Inclusion embraces diversity. Inclusive communities adapt their ways so that all members whatever their diversity can belong and be full participants within them. This is implied in the European Charter (2000):

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> The union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration *and participation in the life of the community*. (Art. 26, emphasis added)

But, if participation is conditional on a person's development of standard characteristics or skills, then many will remain excluded.

Integration and inclusion in schools

The important distinctions between *integration* and *inclusion* have clearly arisen in the education of students with special needs. While increasingly 'integrated' in regular schools, they often remain excluded from the unchanged, one-size-fits-all curricula, organisation and activities of schools dedicated to their normative function (Bartolo, 2001; Marinosson, 2001). The inclusive school calls for a radical change in approach:

> It assumes that human differences are normal and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the child rather than the child fitted to preordained assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 7).

It is based on a valuing of the strengths of each person's uniqueness. As one Maltese young person with physical disability put it:

> The strong is duty bound to help the weak. … Is this a fair mentality towards the disabled? Yes, only to a certain extent, because in everyday life we find that this kind of mentality is more apt to hinder us than to help us. In the sense that the strong has still not sufficiently understood how the weak can help the strong.
>
> We can manage to help the strong by making use of our potential. However we must have open to us those opportunities and adequate means for this to materialise. (Mercieca, 1989, p.11)

Inclusive communities regard difference as a resource rather than a problem (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Bartolo et al., 2002). For instance, an inclusive school is stimulated towards a better balance between the striving for cognitive achievement and the development of the 'softer (social) skills' that are significantly related to future employability (Sparkes & Glennerster, 2002). Moreover the higher collaborative and supportive effort that is stimulated leads to everyone's enrichment and reduces the need for coercive control measures (see Jordan, 1996).

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There are many local initiatives to promote inclusive education throughout Europe, but not within the 'European dimension'. Thus, a search of the *European Commission's Research website* (8898 sites, September 2002) yielded only 27 sites for "social exclusion", 24 for "inequalit*", 8 for "social inclusion", only 2 for "inclusive society", only 10 for "solidarity", and not a single site for "inclusive education". This contrasts with 1,939 for "competit*" and 37 for "European integration". Even on the Eurydice website, not a single site was yielded for "inclusive education". Are these only linguistic facts?

Implications for European policy and research

The 1994 warning of Eurydice has become more relevant today:

> The wholesale exclusion of individuals from the education system is a major cause for concern in all the Member States of the Community. …
>
> The stakes are high. … a decision must urgently be taken lest we build … a European Community without any genuine element of solidarity, a Europe without a soul. (Eurydice, 1994, p. 15)

The EU must balance dilemmatic tension by increasing its promotion of inclusive processes in education and society, highlighting the values of solidarity and respect for human rights and diversity. These are part of our European psychological heritage:

> The ideal school class [or community] should be a unit, in which each of the children feels himself [or herself] a part of the whole. (Adler, 1930/1970, p. 173)

While "fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity" (Treaty of Maastricht, Art.126), EU policy and resources should actively support the engagement of local educational systems in the process towards more inclusive cultures, policies and practices (e.g. Booth and Ainscow, 2002) by developing relevant explicit policies and supportive structures, and assigning specific resources for their implementation.

The EU should also monitor developments in inclusive education through regular surveys of two types: critical analyses of education systems that entail social

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exclusion (e.g. Eurydice, 1994); and surveys of developing inclusive education cultures, policies and practices in European regions (e.g. OECD, 1999). Both should address interactions between schools and the local communities and enable action plans for reducing barriers to learning and increasing the participation of all students.

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