New Perspectives for Learning – Briefing Paper 41

Social exclusion and Equality in Education

Context of the Research

Various regional and national government agencies and the European Community are actively supporting developments and policies that combat social exclusion and will boost the further development of regional and European economies. However, social exclusion and unequal opportunities in education can occur at any time throughout an individual's life. Therefore, the scope of this project ranges from early childhood education to the training of older workers and university education.

Social exclusion in education is the subject of various "Targeted Socio-Economic Research Programme" (TSER) funded projects under the European Fourth Framework Programme. The aim of this project was to review twenty projects that related to the issue of 'Education, Equality and Social Exclusion' in order to create a wider body of knowledge and consensus in the area. This project group conclusions and recommendations around four themes.

Key Conclusions
Effect of pre-school and early childhood education

1. Positive outcomes of pre-school and early childhood education programmes are affected by timing, intensity, duration, professionalism of the staff, low staff/pupil ratios and intellectually rich and broad curricula.

2. Yet after some years, the positive effects were eroded for the educationally disadvantaged children, as their primary schools' pedagogical/didactical principles did not match some children's specific needs.

3. New perspectives for research emerged which focused on interaction, transaction, self-regulation, co-regulation, cognitive development and co-constructed skills. These can be transferred from early literacy teaching and learning to primary schools and teacher-training.

4. Generally, investments in early childhood interventions are highly cost-effective.

5. The pre-school/early school period is when fundamental linguistic, cognitive and socio-emotional skills are developed. Increased understanding of these developmental processes is important for the design of early childhood interventions and relevant to the teaching/learning strategies of compulsive education.

6. School effectiveness research has: -

    a) Discovered unequal opportunities in compulsory education/ education are a persistent and evolving problem.
    b) Found that adequate resources are important for school effectiveness.
    c) Recognised that organisation curricula and instructional levels should be similar.

7. A learning model that encourages students to develop their own learning and competency processes, whilst incorporating teachers/trainers and students learning theories and interpretation, can be more appropriate for the acquisition of skills and could make learning appealing for different groups.

8. Compensation programmes/schemes have been designed to combat inequality in education, but evaluation studies are scarce. The effects of these are small but in sophisticated cases, significant.

9. Educational priority areas were considered not successful, due to disagreements over the strategy of allocating additional resources to "difficult-to-define" areas, and the unacceptable acknowledgement that segregation at school level is inevitable

10. Segregation in education is often linked to segregation in housing, labour, civic and political participation.

New Governance Models for Education & Training: Decentralisation & Marketisation

11. There is a tendency towards deregulation and decentralisation in education & training with the main reasons for this being: -

    a) The awareness that complex legislation/prescriptive regulations do not produce the expected outcomes.
    b) Dissatisfaction with the performance of public institutions/services and the redefinition of the governmental role.
    c) Increasing individualisation and demand for diversification in public/private services and goods.
    d) Budgetary constraints that question the size of the government/public service and the welfare state.

12. Current policy anticipates that increased autonomy for education and training institutions will increase quality, efficiency, and accountability, and reduce bureaucracy.

13. Introducing market mechanisms to education and training did not affect the decentralisation and marketisation in education but adversely affected educationally disadvantaged groups.

14. Some research exposed the fear that further marketisation of education will increase educational inequality and social exclusion. However, the outcomes of other research showed that a market-oriented approach could lead to productive tensions and opportunities for innovation. But, it also indicates that teachers' positions have become eroded, which had lead to severe de-motivation and hindered pedagogical innovations.

School-to-Work Transitions

15. The period between school-to-work transitions has been extended whilst at the same time many young people are immersed in the world of work at an earlier age, combining studies with part-time or holiday jobs..

16. There are various "pathways" through education and into the labour market, which consist of a particular sequence of linked programmes. However, although policy makers can design these "pathways" students can choose their own route that may not conform to the intended route.

17. International comparative research shows that institutional arrangements around school-to-work transitions and the quality of links between schools and work do influence the transitional process.

18. The chance of obtaining skilled employment is increased by specific secondary vocational education systems, In fact, for countries with a strongly occupational focused labour market, the transitional process is smoother and initial employment is more stable.

19. However, entry to the labour market is much harder for the low qualified who are more susceptible to economic swings.

20. Educational opportunities that are not taken up during adolescence have a severe impact on later career stages

21. Some research found that whilst young adults who did apprenticeships gained faster entry to the labour market, their position and wages could be less favourable than graduates of upper secondary schools/full-time vocational schools.

22. The role and status of apprenticeship schemes and employers perceptions of these schemes could explain this contrast, as in countries with well established scheme there is have little or no differences between the wages and position of apprentices.

23. Some research has found that some students struggle to choose an option from the multitude of opportunities they have to consider. In addition, some students struggle to develop an identity that matches present developments in the labour market, which can lead to disorientated and marginalized young adults.

24. The emphasis of teachers and trainer would be on coaching students to develop their own learning and competency processes, which incorporate teachers/ trainers and students learning theories and interpretations.

25. Effective teaching/learning for upper secondary (vocational) education is changing as there: -

    a) Is increased understanding of learning processes.
    b) Is a more constructive approach towards teaching and learning.
    c) Are changes to the labour market.
    d) Are new demands on workers.

Labour Markets, Employability and Lifelong Learning

26. The mutually beneficial nature of training means that there is a funding confusion between employees, who pay for general training and employers, who pay for specific training.

27. The "at risk" groups for lifelong learning are: -

    a) The low skilled /low qualified.
    b) Older workers.
    c) The unemployed.
    d) Ethnic minorities.
    e) People re-entering the labour market.
    f) Employees of SMEs.

28. Each group can face different problems but the lack of transparency in the training market and fears about returns on investment effects them all. Lack of work is another barrier for the low skilled /low qualified, the unemployed and re-entrants the labour market.

29. SMEs have additional problems with training for employees as: -

    a) There is a lack of expertise in training and developing training policies.
    b) They have to replace employees who are on training courses.
    c) They have limited financial resources for training

30. Overall, poorly qualified members of the workforce have least chance of participating in training and their labour market position is continuing to deteriorate. This could lead to marginalisation and unemployment

31. The characteristics of effective training programmes for the unemployed are:

  a) Relatively small-scale programmes aimed at particular target groups and local/regional labour demands.
  b) A practical training component, particularly in an enterprise.
  c) Sufficient guidance and counselling throughout.
  d) Training in job search skills.

32. However, training providers tend to favour candidates who are most likely to find jobs afterwards, particularly if their funding is based on the number of candidates who find work. Therefore the most vulnerable have little chance of receiving training or reintegrating into working life.

Key Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations in four main areas of study:

Effect of pre-school and early childhood education

1. More research is needed into the interaction of the pre-school programmes characteristics, the children's' characteristics and the context in which such programmes are carried out.

2. Further research methods and strategies are required for bilingual development and second language learning. An approach that emphasises the comparative function of language has been supported by research so far.

3. Further investigation is needed on how different skill development "pathways" can be supported from a pedagogical/ didactic perspective.

4. Compulsory education must reconcile the contradictory goals of promoting equality, producing excellence and increasing efficiency.

5. Combating segregation at school level is problematic, as "better" schools tend to select better performing/more able pupils and schools in 'bad areas' tend to perform below average, even if they are controlled for the background characteristics of the pupil population. Further research is needed on this subject.

School-to-Work Transitions

6. Fundamental to the organisation of effective school-to-work transitions are: -

a) The involvement of key stakeholders, particularly employers.
b) Opportunities for training in a work context.
c) Well-organised guidelines/counselling facilities.
d) Safety nets for those at risk

7. To ensure these safety nets work, there should be: -

a) A close connection with the local labour market.
b) Training that is targeted towards employers needs.
c) An appropriate mix of school/work based learning.
d) Substantial career guidance and counselling.
e) Co-ordination between support services and "pathways".
f) Co-ordination between pedagogical/didactic approaches for different target groups learning styles, preferences and capacities.

8. A balance between instrumental, social and biographical skills is needed for effective training provisions.

9. Providing young adults with appropriate education and training opportunities requires: -

a) Education and training institutions to open up and become part of networks that include labour organisations and socio-cultural institutions.
b) Flexible programmes/activities that resemble working life and cater for the differences in young adults learning culture.
c) Professionalism from staff who can assume various roles i.e. coach, tutor, instruction, counsellor.
d) Staff who can continually tailor training to suit young adults' possibilities, capacities, preferences, problems and limitations.

10. Further research is needed into employers' recruitment processes and the role of qualifications play in these processes.

Labour Markets, Employability and Lifelong Learning

11. Institutions are required that enable people to combine different income sources to fund the training necessary for a transitional labour market.

12. Further investigation is needed into the multiple transitions between different labour market segments and labour market concepts.

Overall recommendations

13. New perspectives for further research are:

   a) An institutionalist and evolutionary approach to inequality/social exclusion in education and training.
   b) The need for further diversity in "pathways", particularly regarding demand led tailor-made solutions.
   c) Analysis of standards setting in education and training, with an emphasis on balancing the interests of different stakeholders and the most vulnerable groups.
   d) New governance models with integrative provisions.
   e) Analysis of production/measurement of human capital, with an emphasis on the effects of informal/non-formal learning and non-monetary returns.
   f) Through analysis into the implications of the emerging learning economy for the least qualified and the necessity/possibility of defining a minimum learning platform.
   g) The role of social capital inclusion/exclusion in education and training.

Further Information

Full title of study "Education, equality and social exclusion, final synthesis report" (November 2002)

Full report

Contact Person

Dr. Jittie Brandsma
University of Twente
Faculty of Behavioural Sciences
Department of Educational Organisation and Management
PO-Box 217
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 53 489 20 93
Fax: +31 53 489 37 91
Email: brandsmat@edte.utwente.nl

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