Strategies to reduce educational inequality: a general framework

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In this transnational study we will seek to order and analyse the relevant but rather diffuse experiences of different countries as systematically as possible. The first requirement is obviously a common frame of reference. In this chapter, a typology is proposed for education strategies,[1] to serve as a framework for the analyses performed in subsequent chapters.

Various criteria can be used in formulating this typology: types of stakeholder (policymakers, parents, teachers, schools, and so on), stages in educational curriculum (pre-school, primary, and so on), nature of the strategies, policy level (national versus local), and so on. We decided to adopt a double key for our reference framework, consisting of the two latter criteria. Each of them will be discussed in greater detail below.

First criterion: 'nature' of the strategy (equal opportunity, equal treatment, equal outcomes)

The nature of the strategies discussed below corresponds to the different nature of the various causes of educational exclusion. As we saw in the previous chapter, the literature on educational inequality suggests a basic distinction between obstacles on the 'demand' side of education (which can be referred to as 'unequal opportunities' depending on the socioeconomic environment of the pupil) and on the 'supply' side ('unequal treatment' or 'discrimination' on the part of educational institutions). The former group of factors are related to the socioeconomic handicaps of pupils from poor families: material or cultural deprivation, poor health, unstable family relationships, lack of social and cultural capital, and so on (that is, factors which are more or less 'exogenous' to the education system). The latter group have to do with the education system itself, or more precisely, the way in which educational institutions and their agents (teachers, counsellors, school

principals) contribute to prejudice against pupils from lower social backgrounds.

The distinction does not imply that education policy has no impact whatsoever on the former group, the environmental circumstances. Rather, it helps in classifying strategies to promote educational equality. For example, financial incentives within education can help overcome the (exogenous) material obstacles to a successful school career, even though the education system is not responsible for the latter. Thus, we will consider two types of strategies: those aimed at ensuring **more equal opportunities** (or **more equal access**), and those aimed at **more equal treatment** within education itself.

Besides being 'demand-focused', equal opportunities strategies will, typically, also be multidimensional and multidisciplinary in nature. Given the multiple causes of unequal opportunities (financial, physical, cultural, social, emotional, and so on), only multifaceted responses will effectively combat this source of educational disadvantage.

'Equal treatment strategies', on the other hand, focus on the elimination of discriminatory behaviour within the education process at school. They are thus typically 'supply-centred'; that is, they concentrate on what happens within the school or classroom. A great emphasis will be put on the role of communication, because the lack of communication between the school and the home environment of pupils proves to be a major source of prejudices and discrimination.

Over the years, the emphasis has shifted back and forth between both types of strategies, often accompanied by ideological debates on the causes (structural or otherwise) of educational inequality (Silver and Silver, 1991; Connell, 1994). In our view, controversies of this type are of little use, since both types of cause have structural roots: outside the education system in one case, and within it in the other. Moreover, both types of mechanism interact with each other. In the light of this, it would be naive to tackle the problems using one-sided strategies.

A third, somewhat hybrid approach can be added to the list: strategies for 'more equal outcomes'. These are based on the conviction that equal treatment in itself will not be sufficient to restore the balance in favour of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds; rather than 'non-discrimination', they imply 'positive discrimination'. Part of the purpose of education is, after all, to help *reduce* social inequalities, not to reproduce them as neutrally as possible. In this way, equal outcomes strategies are much more proactive ways of combating exclusion than the other approaches. Educational priority policies (consisting mainly

of extra funding for schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students) are a standard example of this approach.

The term 'equal outcomes' sometimes meets with resistance from critics who fear that it could lead to a 'levelling down', or at least a redistribution of the resources and opportunities away from the more able students towards the weaker pupils. Similarly, 'positive discrimination' is rejected by some out of fear of other forms of arbitrariness or even discrimination against highly achieving pupils. The first answer to these objections should be that positive discrimination must indeed not be arbitrary, but must in fact serve to remove the obstacles threatening the educational development of certain target groups. Moreover, it must be remembered that education policy is not a 'zero sum game': giving more to one group does not necessarily mean taking something away from another. Positive actions in favour of socially disadvantaged groups can, in fact, lead to reductions in repeated years, special education, and so on, leading to a substantial reduction in the net added costs of these actions or, in the best case, eliminating them altogether and turning them into a gain (Levin, 1989; Nicaise, 1999). We can therefore expect that equal treatment strategies are more likely to lead to 'levelling up' than 'levelling down'. The term 'levelling' can in fact (unfortunately) not be interpreted in absolute terms, since education is unable to rectify the enormous burden of social inequality on its own.

Equal outcomes strategies in fact combine elements of both previous types of strategy. However, unlike equal opportunity strategies, they are focused on *outcomes* rather than *access*. In this sense, they can also be characterised as 'ex post facto', remedying strategies. For example, targeted pre-school programmes and second-chance schools are two types of compensatory programme. However, pre-school programmes can be regarded as a typical equal opportunity approach because they contribute to a more equal start in primary school; whereas second-chance provision aims at equalising outcomes.

Contrary to the equal treatment approach, equal outcomes strategies discriminate positively in favour of disadvantaged groups. Hence, they are also more targeted on the specific needs of minorities than equal treatment strategies.

When reviewing examples from the six countries represented in our research network, we end up with the following checklist of strategies (for a more detailed overview, see Tables 2.1 to 2.3).

Equal opportunity strategies

- (Extension of) Compulsory education: as the spontaneous demand for further education has declined, public authorities have tried to impose a minimum participation on every individual. The minimum school leaving age has been raised in nearly all EU countries over the last 15 years. In some countries, on the other hand, the law guarantees each young person a set of (extra) educational services as a counterpart of these minimum requirements (as we shall see, for example, with the Scottish Education Act and the Spanish Social Guarantee Programme).
- The enforcement of compulsory education is not without difficulties: premature dropout and truancy have become serious problems. Hence, several governments have launched special measures to register and monitor school attendance, to encourage pupils and parents to comply with the measures, and to prevent dropout. Examples are the 'Well-prepared Start' programme in the Netherlands and the 'Education for All' programme in Portugal. Of course, dropout prevention is a more or less explicit objective of many other types of intervention, such as alternative curricula or integrated services to pupils and families, which will be dealt with in other sections.
- National governments have introduced a wide range of financial assistance measures for low-income families: grants, loans, means-tested educational provision (tuition fees, transportation, meals, clothing, book grants, and so on), special measures relating to family allowances, and tax credits (as far as they are related to education and to disadvantaged groups).
- Equal opportunities are also promoted through the provision of a wide range of integrated services (psychological, social, cultural, medical, material, and so on) for disadvantaged pupils, often organised and delivered at the local level. These services aim at improving the general conditions for effective participation in education, mostly in close collaboration with parents and other actors in the neighbourhood. Some attractive examples are found in the Flemish primary schools that were sponsored for some time by the King Baudouin Foundation and the Dutch Extended School Day experiment.
- One of the most effective strategies in promoting equal opportunities has been the development of pre-school stimulation programmes for disadvantaged groups.[2] The Irish 'Early Start', and its preceding local experiments, the Rutland Street and Kilkenny projects, are

undoubtedly the most outstanding examples of this kind in Europe. However, other interesting lessons can be drawn from the 'travelling pre-schools' in isolated rural areas of Spain and from various local projects with babies and toddlers in other countries.

Equal treatment strategies

- In order to combat selectivity, socially biased failure, streaming, and creaming mechanisms, there is a great need for curricular reforms in the sense of comprehensivisation, more relevant learning contents for everyday life, and less discriminating certification strategies. The recent major reforms in Portugal (1989) and Spain (1990) went a long way in this direction.
- Note the distinction between reforms of the general curriculum (covering all students and thus improving equality) on the one hand, and the development of flexible, alternative curricula for pupils with special needs on the other. At this point we will deal only with the former type of curricular reforms, as the latter actually implies a different treatment of disadvantaged groups with a view to equalise educational outcomes. Flexible, alternative curricula will therefore be discussed in the context of 'equal outcomes strategies'.
- Besides curricular reforms, it is worth studying the (potential) impact of some alternative pedagogical approaches (active and constructivist schools, accelerated schools, communities of learning, and so on) on the educational success of disadvantaged children. Experiments in Belgium and Spain suggest that such approaches may be of particular interest for these children; paradoxically, however, their access to such schools is often problematic because of institutional and financial barriers.
- Discriminatory behaviour is often due to social prejudices resulting from the ignorance of teachers (and indeed, of the entire school staff) with regard to social exclusion. Teacher training can play an important role in helping teachers to recognise and understand the processes and victims of social exclusion, and to respond appropriately and effectively.
- Combating discrimination calls for more intensive communication between schools/teachers on the one hand, and parents/local communities on the other. Some interesting experiments have been carried out recently, ranging from home-school-community liaison in Ireland and a school-environment link project in Portugal, to parents' groups and sensitisation campaigns among pupils in Belgium.

- The last type of equal treatment strategy consists – somewhat paradoxically – of categorical measures; that is, specific services being offered to groups with special needs, with a view to their integration into mainstream education – intercultural education, special services to traveller children (well developed in Portugal, Ireland and Scotland), and inclusive education for children with special educational needs.

Equal outcomes strategies

- As disadvantaged groups need greater investments to attain a given outcome, most member states in the EU have now adopted one kind or another of educational priority policies; that is, extra funds for schools faced with a concentration of children at risk. Educational priority funding has 'territorial' and 'categorical' variants; in some countries, both variants coexist (the Netherlands, for example).
- Positive discrimination in favour of marginalised groups can take the form of differentiation; that is, extra learning support within schools or classes (remedial teaching, differentiation within the classroom, direct learning support to pupils, teacher counsellors, and so on).
- Finally, a range of alternative curricula, transition systems and second-chance schools have been developed in order to ensure maximum access to recognised (if possible, standard) qualifications for socially disadvantaged students, mostly at upper secondary level: alternating forms of vocational education combined with work experience, apprenticeship systems, modular programmes, and remedial programmes or lower level certificates for students who fail in mainstream programmes.
- The demarcation line between flexible curricula (aiming at equal outcomes) and streaming (a form of social discrimination) is sometimes a very thin one. 'Flexible curricula' should ideally lead to standard (mainstream) certificates. The integration of specific 'sidetrack' certificates into the national qualification structure is a rather second-best solution, which cannot really be regarded as an 'equal outcomes' strategy. Empirical evaluations are needed in this context, more than anywhere else.

Second criterion: educational policy levels (macro, meso, micro)

In addition to the main criterion relating to the nature of the strategies, we also wish to take explicit account of the policy level at which a measure or project is developed. We are well aware that a great many valuable initiatives are being taken on the field which have not yet been incorporated into general education policy. Thus, the distinction between the different levels is, in the first place, a means of ensuring that 'grassroots initiatives' are not forgotten, although we do not by any means claim to depict a representative sample of the latter.

It is of course quite possible that certain strategies can best be implemented at the micro level (for example, integrated service delivery), while others are more suited to the macro level (for example, statutory education).

The term 'macro level' is defined here as the highest education policy level. This may be the national level (as in Portugal, the Netherlands and Ireland), or the level of an autonomous community or region (as in Scotland, Flanders and Catalonia). The 'meso level' refers to lower level authorities, such as municipal authorities or regional centres, networks or partnerships (often also involving a variety of stakeholders), or Local Education Authorities in Scotland. Sometimes we are dealing with a collection of local projects under the auspices of the national government; the distinction from the macro level in this case lies mainly in the fact that the national regime is not generally binding (as in the case of experiments in a number of schools). Finally, the 'micro level' refers to isolated initiatives in individual schools or classes. Even where these are subsidised by a national or lower public authority, these initiatives are typically 'bottom–up'.

Synoptic tables

Tables 2.1 to 2.3 classify a number of examples of measures, programmes and projects in the six EU member states included in the study, using the double classification system outlined above.

It has to be admitted that some programmes are hard to classify unambiguously. Whereas a 'strategy' is an abstract set of well-defined, logically integrated targets and methods, a real-life 'programme' or project can have more than one rationality. It can combine elements from different strategies. When classifying national programmes by strategy, we can either isolate 'pure' elements from programmes that belong to a

single strategy, or refer to the programme within the different strategies to which it belongs. The in–depth analysis of each programme will be classified under the strategy where it fits best.

The same comment applies for the distinction between policy levels. Sometimes a policy framework is created at macro level, which is implemented locally in many different ways. Depending on the context, we shall therefore discuss some initiatives at different levels.

Notes

[1] Some more holistic strategies encompassing educational measures are also studied.

[2] General pre–school provision (such as daycare centres, nurseries or infant schools) will not be analysed in our study, unless they include special services for socially excluded children.

Table 2.1: Synopsis of relevant measures, programmes and projects aimed at more equal opportunities

Type of strategy	Macro-level	Meso-level	Examples at micro-level
Compulsory education	B: 1983: school leaving age raised to 18 IRL: School leaving age raised to 15 in 1972, to 16 in 1997; School attendance officers NL: Compulsory Education Act (1969, amended 1994) NL: 'A well prepared start' (EGVS) P: 1986: school leaving age raised to 15 (if 'basic school' finished) P: Education for All Programme ES: 1990: school leaving age raised to 16 (LOGSE) Sc: 1980: Education (Scotland) Act – as amended 1981: Special Educational Needs Sc: Exclusion and non-attendance – Scottish initiative on attendance and absence Sc: Early years provision	B: Dropout prevention projects at regional level NL: Regional reporting and co-ordination function (RMC) Sc: Youth Strategies Lothian Region/Edinburgh City Council	
Financial and material assistance	B: Free education at primary and secondary levels IRL: Free education at all levels B: Study grants at secondary and tertiary level IRL: Book Grant and Rental Scheme, Back to School Clothing Allowance, Local Authority Higher Education Grants, ESF Training Grants NL: Study grants and loans at tertiary level P: Financial aid via School Social Assistance P: Free milk, subsidised school canteens, accommodation for students Sc: Free school meals/clothing allowances	IRL: Free school meals IRL: Local initiatives including financial aid (BITE, LCBEI, TAP) ES: Grants for lunches and books (Compensatory programmes)	

Table 2.1: Synopsis of relevant measures, programmes and projects aimed at more equal opportunities (continued)

Type of strategy	Macro-level	Meso-level	Examples at micro-level
Integrated services for disadvantaged pupils in mainstream education	B: 'School guidance centres' for psychological, medical and social assistance	B: King Baudouin Foundation's network of projects in primary education	IRL: Jobstown Education and Training Strategy (JETS)
	NL: Schools advisory service	B: Magnet schools (Antwerp)	P: Local school transport initiatives
	NL: Guidance bureaus	IRL: Locally integrated projects (Galway, Limerick)	Sc: Pilton Early Intervention Programme
	NL: Support structure	IRL: Cultural and financial intervention projects (BITE, LCBEI, TAP, Peter Pan)	
	P: School social assistance		
	P: Pedagogical support	NL: Homework projects	
	ES: Multidisciplinary Service Teams	NL: Extended Schoolday	
	Sc: 1995 Children (Scotland) Act	P: Educational animators	
	Sc: Extended support within Further Education	Sc: Local authority children's service plans	
		Sc: Home-School-Employment Partnership (Paisley)	
Early intervention	B: Extended care (see equal outcomes strategies)	ES: Maternity Centres	B: Poverty projects for toddlers (Kind & Gezin)
	IRL: Early Start Programme	ES: *Casas de los niños*	IRL: Rutland Street Project, Kilkenny Project
	Sc: Early Intervention Programmes (see equal outcomes strategies)	ES: Travelling pre-school	NL: *De Kofflepot*
			Sc: Pilton Early Intervention Programme

Table 2.2: Synopsis of relevant measures, programmes and projects aimed at more equal treatment

Type of strategy	Macro-level	Meso-level	Examples at micro-level
Curricular reform and certification strategies	B: Renewed Primary Education (1980s)	B: Middle schools	IRL: Jobstown Education and Training Strategy (JETS)
	B: Renewed Secondary Education (1970s)/ Unified structure (1990s)		
	B: Renewed Vocational Education		
	IRL: Junior Certificate		
	IRL: Foundation Levels		
	IRL: Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme		
	NL: Basic Education		
	NL: 'Programmes' in secondary education		
	NL: National Qualification Structure		
	P: Framework law on educational system		
	ES: Comprehensive stage in secondary education (Educational Reform Act – LOGSE)		
	Sc: Standard Grade		
	Sc: 5-14 curriculum		
	Sc: Higher Still		
Pedagogical innovations		B: Experience-based Nursery Education	B: De Buurt (Gent)
			ES: Communities of learning
Teacher training			

Table 2.2: Synopsis of relevant measures, programmes and projects aimed at more equal treatment (continued)

Type of strategy	Macro-level	Meso-level	Examples at micro-level
Parent-school-community relationships	IRL: Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme IRL: Visiting Teacher Service for Traveller children	See 'integrated services' (often with active participation of parents) B: Tapori campaign Limburg B: School Community Action P: School-Environment Link Project Sc: Partnership in Education Project (Strathclyde) Sc: Home-School-Employment Partnership (Paisley)	B: Renovation Project Kortrijk IRL: Clondalkin Area Parents in Education (CAPE) Sc: Home-School-Parent Project (North Ayrshire PPA)
Categorical measures	B: Integrated education for disabled pupils B: Intercultural education IRL: Visiting teacher service for traveller children; pre-schools for traveller children; special schools/classes and Junior Training Centres for traveller children NL: Going to School Together Again (WSNS) for disabled pupils NL: NT2 (Dutch as 2nd language) for immigrants P: Entreculturas P: Travelling nursery school ES: Support teachers / therapeutic pedagogy teachers Sc: Ensuring education for Travellers' children in Scotland	B: Non-discrimination charters P: Gipsy mediators (Go to School Project); Nómada Project P: Isolated Schools Project Sc: Scottish Travellers' Education Project	B: Pilot project for gypsy children (sponsored by King Baudouin Foundation) Sc: Positive Action Project for Traveller Children (Armadale Academy)

Table 2.3: Synopsis of relevant measures, programmes and projects aimed at more equal outcomes

Type of strategy	Macro-level	Meso-level	Examples at micro-level
Educational priority in school funding	B: Educational Priority Policy (EPP) B: Extended Care (EC) IRL: Assistance to Disadvantaged Schools IRL: Breaking the cycle NL: Educational Priority Policy (weighting rule) Sc: Early Intervention Programme	B: Educational Priority Areas (EPA) Limburg IRL: Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage NL: Educational Priority Policy (regions) P: Educational Priority Areas (TEIP) Sc: Educational components of Priority Partnership Programmes/Regeneration Programmes	NL: Educational Priority Policy (projects)
Differentiation within schools/classes	NL: Pupil counselling IRL: Remedial teachers ES: Curriculum Diversification Programme IRL: Teacher counsellors Sc: Extended support in Further Education (cf integrated services) Sc: Learning Support/educational psychologist support	B: Learning Support Project Sc: SuccessMaker Project (North Ayrshire PPA) Sc: East Dunbartonshire Council Network Support	B: Differentiation projects within the classroom IRL: Basin Street Project
Alternative curricula and second chance provision for at-risk groups	B: Part-time vocational education (PTVE) IRL: Junior Certificate Schools Programme IRL: Leaving Certificate Applied Programme IRL: Youth Reach NL: KMBO (short secondary vocational education) P: Alternative Curricula P: Apprenticeship ES: Social Guarantee Programme ES: Apprenticeship (abolished); Workshop Schools	IRL: Youth Encounter Projects NL: Free Port Rotterdam NL: Practical schools NL: Remedial projects NL: Educational-work projects	