

Equal Opportunities at school: Mission impossible?

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Introduction

Equal opportunities is a critically important issue in the world of educational policy makers and researchers in the context of classrooms and schools.

In our first chapter we give a short overview of the concept of 'equal opportunities', linking it to other concepts and to possible traps for the unwary.

In the second chapter we look into the official documents of European policy makers and analyse how these deal with this topic.

The third chapter presents descriptions of equal opportunities in practice in Belgium and Cyprus, with some commentary.

Our final chapter gives some critical reflections and conclusions, with some references and a checklist for students.

With this booklet we hope to open discussion and reflections on this issue, and we also hope that readers will make their own *Status Questiones*¹ about equal opportunities.

¹ Status Questiones: an expression in philosophy meaning the results of considered investigation of an area, considering all points of view and questions

1. Equal opportunity as a concept

The starting point: a lack of opportunities

There was a time when education had to be introduced compulsorily, to force unwilling parents to send their children to school in order to get an education. Over the intervening years the conviction has grown that everybody has the right to an education, and more specifically, the right to a good education. It is the responsibility of the government to provide all people with such an education. It is commonly accepted that any impediments to this – be they financial, social or cultural in nature – should be eliminated. Every child must have the opportunity to develop her or his talents to maximum potential. Indeed, many people who became adults before the second world war rightly lament 'If we had only had the possibility to study!' In current times the fact that they did not have such opportunities is not so much considered a sad turn of fate, but a form of social injustice (Devroede 1985).

An ambiguous concept

'Equal opportunities' can be an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, the phrase indicates that there is an existing inequality, while on the other it implies that this inequality is undesirable. Although life is in many ways a game of chance, the inequalities we refer to here are systematic inequalities.

Whenever the term 'equal opportunities' arises in debate, it seems to imply that while inequalities of chance will never cease to exist and as such have to be accepted, while others need to be, and will be, eliminated.

When terms such as equality and inequality are used the following points should always be considered:

- from what perspective is equality (or lack of it) being perceived,
- whom is being compared as equal or unequal, and
- on what criterion is equality/inequality being measured

(for example, inequality in the cognitive development of children from high and low income classes, according to the criterion of the study results).

An additional question is whether equality is regarded as an achievable aim or as an ideal.

If the constitution of a country holds that 'all people are considered equal', this is a formulation of an ideal situation. Those which include equal treatment in the constitution address the desirability of equality in humanity. Those who favour unequal treatment are likely to deny this equality, or even consider it of little social significance.

Strong and weak equality

Those with an equal opportunities vision will favour an ideal of equality related to two crucial observations: firstly, all people are similar in certain basic traits, for example in their ability to experience pain and pleasure, to mean something to others and in their need for self-respect. Secondly, political and social systems are structured so that justice is unequal. This is why we do not use the term equality, which is usually seen as something 'personal', and nothing to do with political and social equality. Philosophers link the ideal of equality to *strong* and *weak equality* (Manenschijn). Strong equality is seen as dividing a good with the sole criterion of equality. But whenever relevant differences are taken into account when dividing goods according to the criterion of equality, Manenschijn sees this as weak equality.

We suggest that it is important to formulate the goals of the equal opportunities policy when discussing the difference between strong and weak equality. In most cases the goal is to reach weak equality: the underlying idea being that offering equal opportunities in education will gradually do away with the influence of all differences thought relevant.

The influence of research: a case study

Research in Flanders shows how little of these goals have been realised so far (Elchardus, 1998). In the higher professions and influential positions, particular groups of people remain under-represented, while others have too many representatives, regardless of how much education drives forward equal opportunities. This raises a question for policymakers and researchers: in the practice of equal opportunities, should not the aim be to achieve strong equality through the application of positive discrimination in education (Van Den Bossche, 1997)? Such a policy would start from discrimination on exactly the same basis of irrelevant differences that meet with disapproval in negative discrimination, e.g. gender or skin colour, but with the aim of bringing the underprivileged on to an equal footing more quickly.

By the end of the 20th century, however, the large majority of children in need of care are those who still have both parents. These children either have emotional disturbances and/or behaviour problems, or they come from families where abuse or neglect is the rule. Such experiences require a new approach to parents, teachers, the community and children. For many years the attitude of child welfare professionals towards parents was one of blaming and patronising: compassionate in the best cases, but generally failing to show respect. The new aim of practice in equal opportunities is to open doors for children, not to close them; to encourage children to

extend their talents and knowledge without feeling restricted by beliefs such as 'that's for girls' or 'boys don't do that'.

Research by the *Hoger Instituut van de Arbeid (Leuven)* has linked inequalities of opportunity in education with deprivation, in both native and non-native population groups (Nicaise, 1997). In longitudinal studies, researchers have looked at the conditions under which children grow up. After parental income, the most important factors in determining success in schooling are the parental level of education and their professional situation.

The financial, physical, cultural, and social and cognitive mechanisms were examined by both sociologists and pedagogues (Elchardus, 1998; 2000) in a fine-tuned research project, and a new list of contributory factors was added, such as financial impediments, health problems, language skills, the availability of role models, the existence of supporting social networks, and the relatively stable cognitive skills that were measured by IQ tests (Nicaise, 2002).

Equality and Justice: two words for one reality

The teacher has to promote justice equally for all pupils and treat them and their needs justly. The idea of equality and justice going hand in hand can be traced back to Aristotle, although he made a distinction between distributive justice and corrective justice. In distributive justice somebody who makes a constructive contribution to society get greater opportunities, whereas in corrective justice no account is taken of the efforts or talents of the person: everybody is entitled to equal treatment. This later form of justice is more one that restores a balance rather than one that instills order. This is why Aristotle writes about corrective justice in his *Ethica Nicomachea*. It is this same principle that resonates sympathetically in talk of equal opportunities (Crahay, 2003).

Justice within the school starts with the idea that every co-worker has rights which have to be respected. These include the right to be oneself, the right to freedom, to dignity and to respect. A senior member of staff can only be just if he or she has put aside his or her prejudices. But in order to do this, it is essential to realise how many prejudices unconsciously determine his or her actions. This is a necessary condition in order to free himself/herself of these prejudices. A pure judgement is a prerequisite of ensuring fair treatment of the individual: 'He who wants to do the right thing, has to change his way of thinking' (Grün, 2002). It is only when one is freed from one's 'clouded' thoughts that one can see people for what they are, and treat them well. Pupils like a just teacher or headmaster. It is acceptable for them to be strict, for if they are just in their judgements they will be respected by everyone.

Traps for equal opportunities

The Pygmalion effect

In his 2003 survey, the Dutch education-sociologist Jungbluth puts forward the idea that teachers in Netherlands primary schools are inclined to react – implicitly or explicitly – to high parental expectations by providing relatively intensive education, even where the children are of average talents. The result of such behaviour is that teachers generally manage to get remarkably high performances from children who are already privileged by birth. The different expectations of the teachers give rise to informal differences in the curriculum for socially diverse groups of pupils, thus promoting or reinforcing unequal opportunities.

Teachers recognise and are aware of their pupils' social and ethnic background. These backgrounds prompts certain expectations, and thus traditionally lead to goal differentiation. However, the idea of 'blaming the teacher' is an attitude that must put in perspective. It can be argued that teachers are only one link in a long chain of those who 'divide opportunities' – the pupils themselves being other important players. Another rationalisation offered is that the teachers are not acting of their own accord, but rather that their behaviour is pre-determined by the social and ethnic opportunity structure. Such an opportunity structure leads them to particular sets of expectations and predictions, and consequently predisposes them to favour purported differentiation – practices they are used to seeing in their older colleagues (Jungbluth, 2003).

The meritocratic ideals of equal opportunities developed in the Enlightenment has not so far been made concrete. Both white and black children of parents who themselves have a limited educational background currently have to accept during their school careers that their chances in society have already been severely limited as a consequence of their personal cognitive limitations. The consequences of their social fate at birth are redefined later in their lives as self-imposed, in the same way that the privileges of those with rich opportunities are justified as self-won.

The scissor effect

In devising provision of schooling for children with special needs, the scissor effect is rarely given due importance. The Dutch pedagogue van Parreren introduced the term 'scissor effect' in the 1980s to indicate that the lines of development tended to diverge for two groups of children rather than to converge (van Parreren, 1982). This results in the prime beneficiaries not being the children for whom the special programmes are intended, but their already more privileged peers (Feys, 2003).

Children from privileged social backgrounds are able to take disproportionate resources from the educational system through their head start, their ingenuity, their greater intellectual initiative and through the help they get from their parents. The importance of the home in this context was recently confirmed in a survey carried out by the Flemish pedagogue Opdenakker. In her doctoral thesis she concludes that the most important factor in determining a child's performance in school is mainly the 'inclination towards education' of the parents. The subjective attitudes of parents exercise a greater influence than parental income. Teachers have to believe in the possibilities for their pupils, and the willingness of the parents to guide their children irrespective of their background: this is why pleas are made for a 'parent-school partnership' (Opdenakker, 2004).

The Robin Hood effect

Some researchers use the term 'Robin Hood effect', referring to the English folk hero who 'robbed the rich to serve the poor', in particular orphans and widows. It was his sense of redistributive justice that led him act in this way (Crahay, 2003). A similar heroic attitude can sometimes be seen in the promotion of equal opportunities. Through small-scale projects such as cooperative learning and remedial programmes, weaker pupils could benefit from the knowledge and the skills (the cultural capital) of the stronger pupils. Nevertheless we need to make sure this does not lead to separatist policies. The new movements towards integration and inclusion, which indirectly resonates with equal opportunities policies, approaches all children and young people from a 'we' point of view, and no longer from a 'we – them' perspective.

The Matthew effect

The Matthew effect describes the exact opposite to the Robin Hood effect. The concept refers to Jesus' words from St Matthew's gospel: 'To he that hath, shall be given, and he shall have plenty; but from he who hath not shall be taken' (Matthew 13, 12).

A team from the Centre for Social Policies (University of Antwerp) led by Herman Deleeck researched the effect of scholarships on the democratisation of secondary school education in the mid 1980s. They concluded that the higher social-professional categories profited from the system of scholarships proportionately more than the lower categories.

More recent findings support this (Crahay, 2003). Children from blue collar families do not get sufficient opportunities for a good education, and cultural and financial hindrances constitute a continuing barrier for them. This is why some educationalists prefer to talk about 'sufficient opportunities' for education (Feys, 2002), because equal opportunities for all too often conveys the impression

that all children are capable of the same output, and consequently are capable of studying at universities or at a college of advanced education. Sufficient educational opportunities means that talented pupils get the opportunity to deploy their talents in primary, secondary and higher education. But this means relatively fewer opportunities for the less talented.

The Homogamy effect

One of the effects is 'homogamy': more educated people mainly marry other more educated people, and less well-educated people marry similarly less well-educated partners (Elchardus, 2000).

Managers of school projects have noticed that schools rely on the 'midfield' (Huyse, 2001; Elchardus, 2000), consisting of social groups, sport associations and neighbourhood projects. Schools support midfield activities participate in school life in order to do away with extreme forms of inequality and to tackle negative effects.

2. European policy on equal opportunities: Terms, definitions and actions

The Lisbon European Council Meeting in 2000 identified the aim of developing a new European economy, education and social agenda by 2010. The conclusions of the Barcelona meeting (March 2002) welcomed the work programme to meet the objectives of education and training systems. Working Group G was established by the Commission in January 2003 to address three issues towards the objective '2.3: Supporting active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion'

- Ensuring that the learning of democratic values and democratic participation by all school partners is effectively promoted in order to prepare people for active citizenship
- Integrating fully equal opportunity considerations in the objectives and functioning of education and training
- Ensuring fair access to acquisition of skills for the less privileged or those currently less well served and motivating them to participate in learning

(European Commission Progress report 2003, pp 4-5)

The OECD policy concerning education and equity was expressed as follows:

For a more equitable society, all individuals, independently of their socio-economic background, origin and gender, should ideally have access to equivalent learning opportunities; those with organic disabilities, learning difficulties or social disadvantages should benefit from specific support; and finally, improving outcomes of all learners, and especially those who are less successful, should be a permanent objective of all educational systems (OECD Observer, 2004:1)

It is also noteworthy that the Treaty of Amsterdam includes in the First Pillar an anti-discrimination clause, which enables European institutions to take measures to combat discrimination. Article 13 did not previously exist in the treaties, and gives European organizations a significant opportunity to take 'appropriate action' to counter types of discrimination

Article 13 declares:

... the Council ... may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (ENAR, 1999, § 1)

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) is a body of the Council of Europe which aims to combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance at a pan-European level and from the angle of the protection of human rights. One aspect of

ECRI's work programme is its country-by-country approach, in which it analyses the level of racism and intolerance in each of the member states of the Council of Europe and makes suggestions and proposals. The reports of ECRI indicate that problems of racism, xenophobia and discrimination persist in most countries.

A conceptual framework has been developed by the *Education for Democratic Citizenship* project: 'education for democratic citizenship aims to promote a culture of human rights, democratic principles and citizen's participation and responsibilities' (DGIV/EDU/CIT (2001) *Final regional report* p 15). The report recommended that the concept of diversity should extend beyond ethnicity to include aspects such as age, gender, religion, and civic status. The concept of diversity must be based on respect for human rights, democracy and pluralism. Education for the acceptance, respect and responsibility for diversity includes the acquisition of competences such as openness to and interest in others, cross-cultural communication and understanding, critical approach to social reality, democratic citizenship knowledge, and values and attitudes.

The education pack of the Council of Europe *All different – all equal* (European Youth Centre, 1995) gives ideas, resources, methods and activities for informal intercultural education with young people and adults in multicultural societies. This defines multiculturalism as referring to different cultures, national, ethnic, religious groups living within the same territory but not necessarily coming into contact with each other, since intercultural societies refer to different cultures and groups maintaining open relations of interaction, exchange and mutual recognition of their own and respective values and ways of life. Intercultural process presupposes the elimination of prejudice and stereotypes about other groups (p 27).

3. The national or regional equal opportunities policies: two cases

Equal opportunities in Flemish schools

Most schools in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) belong to one of three groups of education authorities:

Private or voluntary schools, denominational or non-denominational (including Steiner schools and Freinet schools); the education authorities are congregations or private organisations; most of these are Catholic schools: $\pm 70\%$ of all pupils.

Official schools, which can be denominational or non-denominational; the education authorities are provinces or cities: $\pm 15\%$ of the pupils.

Flemish Community schools, multi-denominational and non-selective; the education authority is called ARGO (until recently the Ministry of Education): $\pm 15\%$ of the pupils. A large proportion of children from underprivileged families attend Community schools.

The Ministry defines the criteria that schools must meet in order to receive support. These include 'final objectives' or 'targets' for student behaviour and attainment. The curricula of the different education authorities must be in accordance with these objectives. Inspectors assess every school once every few years: their reports are not made public. There are no central examinations.

The genesis of the Flemish policy of equal opportunities

The first Act on equal opportunities was based on two older projects. In 1991 the Ministry published aims designed to integrate deprived migrant youngsters. From 1993 efforts were made for the 'improvement of care' in nursery and primary schools (6-7 year olds), leading to a preventive remedial process. From 1998-99 both projects were linked together to provide a common content.

Five aspects are included: a prevention and remedial developmental programme for children with learning problems; language skills in Dutch; intercultural education; socio-emotional development; and parental commitment. From 2004 'improvement of care' has particularly focused on deprived (poor) migrant children: schools have to devise and propose appropriate local methods.

The concept 'children from deprived families' initially emerged in 1995-1996: before this, no criteria were indicated. This was the result of research in 26 primary schools in an urban district over a school year.

'Target pupils' have to meet one or more of the following criteria: mother without secondary school qualifications, both parents unemployed, a single-parent family. Children are given questionnaires to be filled in by parents: on the basis of completed questionnaires schools apply for 'improvement of care' support. The reference to learning problems shows the targeting of children with learning difficulties.

The objective in the new Act shifts to support underprivileged pupils. Academic research and the evidence of experienced teachers indicated that children from single-parent families should not necessarily be categorised as children with difficulties.

Since 2002 the programme of the Ministry of Education has had a single theme, centred on the child. This policy promoted 'multi level instruction', each child following her/his own path. For some organisations this programme allowed them an excellent way to promote expensive ideas Feys, 2003). The past achievements and 'effective didactics' were not appreciated by the policy makers (Feys and Van Biervliet, 2002; 2003).

The influence of research on policy

This resulted in the re-definition of factors by the Department of Education. Heads of school used these in a questionnaire for parents, on the basis of which the school was given 'care hours' that it had to use in the 'care plan' that it devised. The indicators were defined as: the child living in a family which only had benefits income; homelessness; parents from a travelling community (gypsies, barge crew); a mother with no secondary school qualifications; Dutch not the home language.

The government also wanted to work in a step-wise manner, and the initial stage focus was mainly on non-natives and the underprivileged: this phase started in 2002.

From 2003 each school was given resources and hours to provide extra care for all children (phase 2). If at least 10 percent of the school population were 'target group pupils' (that is, those who met one or more of the equal opportunities indicators), the school got extra hours for the following three years.

The government is now focused on education for children with special needs, and the interaction between 'normal' education and special care education (phase 3, from 2004). Children with learning problems are the majority of those eligible.

All of this is intended to result in 'inclusive education'. From the early results these projects to promote equal opportunities, it is clear that schools cannot stop social inequality at the school gate. It is not easy to change issues of inequality into an equal opportunities policy.

The main reason behind the new approach and interpretation of equal opportunities is the notion of the 'hidden disability' of a pupil: the policy answer is 'improvement of care'.

In the past care was provided for children who were orphaned or abandoned by parents because of poverty. Since the mid 20th century the great majority of children in need of care still have parents, but present emotional or behaviour problems, or suffer abuse or neglect. The Ministry of Education is now beginning to show a new approach to parents and children.

Child welfare professionals have displayed patronising attitudes towards parents and a lack of respect. A Flemish educational journal describes 'equal opportunities as an ideology', in which the content depends on the 'political colour' of the Minister of Education. While Acts create a legal framework for people's behaviour by defining boundaries around what must, or must not, be done, legislation alone does not change behaviour or attitudes. However it does make a public statement about what is acceptable and unacceptable within a society in difficulty. The hidden target of this Act was to create the basics for inclusive education. Knowledge about child development and insights into learning processes were no longer important. Equal opportunities was the first and central issue for all early years care, educational and play work settings. In 2003 a similar programme was started for secondary schools. Schools could choose between language support, diversity programmes, remedial teaching and socio-emotional topics.

Equal opportunities means that everything is now grounded in children's experience. Migrant children are not excused when they make offensive remarks to other children; girls need to show consideration to boys, as well as vice versa. Disabled children are to be treated as children first, and this brings them responsibilities as well as rights. Nowadays we speak of children with a physical handicap and no longer of 'handicapped people'.

Some policy makers hold the rather limited view that equal opportunities policies are only relevant for city areas, probably inner cities, because it is they who have racial problems. They argue that if the local areas have no immigrants or refugees, then there are no 'problems', and so no need for equal opportunities initiatives. The challenge in a non-diverse area is to present materials (stories, pictures, moral dilemmas) that extend all children's horizons, whilst showing that daily life is different not so far away within their own country, perhaps no more than an hour or so by car or train.

Equal opportunities in Cypriot schools

The general aim of education in Cyprus is to provide for 'equal opportunities of all students'. Education is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 15, and the Cyprus educational system is highly centralised. All schools are accountable to the Ministry of Education and Culture: therefore all schools run the same programmes and have the same curricula and textbooks.

Students with minor disabilities have been included in ordinary schools since 2000. Special programmes, withdrawal programmes and support programmes have been organised by the Ministry of Education in order to meet the needs of all students.

A programme of functional literacy, supervised by two multidisciplinary committees, aims at the successful mastery of reading, writing and arithmetic as basic rights, and at preventing the problems of social exclusion consequent on failure to do so.

Since 1999 primary schools have been implementing the 'All Day School' policy. This aims to provide learning space and time to help children with their homework and to help those with learning difficulties and special needs.

Enrolment in school is based on the principle that all schools equally provide quality education. Teachers are recruited by an independent Educational Committee, which takes care to distribute teachers who perform well across all schools. Therefore students do not have a choice of school. All students (native, migrant, and underprivileged) are enrolled in the neighbourhood school on the basis of the address of their permanent home.

School is described as a democratic place, where each child is accepted with her/his individual abilities and weaknesses and is treated as an individual personality, with individual needs, interests and inclinations. The democratic school places a great deal of emphasis on the rights and obligations of citizens in a democratic environment, in which each student participates in curricular, extra-curricular, and school based activities. In the introduction to the *Primary School Curriculum* (2003), which sets out Cyprus' whole educational philosophy, it is emphasised teachers must

- create conditions for active participation by students;
- contribute knowledge;
- observe the development of students' work and help students when they face difficulties.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has, from 2001, implemented the Education and Training of Children with Special Needs Law (113(1)/1999), The Mechanisms for early Detection of Children with Special Needs (185(1)2001) and the Regulations for Education and Training of Children with Special needs (186(1)2001). The Ministry

aims at reinforcing the awareness and sensitivity of schools towards children attending regular classes (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report, 2003, p 211).

Multicultural education is currently being practiced in the form of various support measures. Among these is language support for students from other countries, which refers to the learning of Greek as a second language, as well as measures for facilitating the smooth integration of groups with different cultural identities.

4. Critical reflections

The hidden situation

Social inequalities at schools are a reality. Individual factors of difference, such as socio-economic background, nationality, language, and achievement remain important variables for success in schooling.

Inclusion and exclusion rest on the labelling of different groups of students as having strengths and weaknesses in accomplishing the undifferentiated agenda of everyday schooling. This labelling is based on the assumption that students must undertake the formal curriculum: we never ask how might we adapt this curriculum, or the life of the school, to work for each individual child. Administrative support is needed to facilitate teachers' shift of attention and attitude to diverse students. It is also of note that market-oriented education will not support equal opportunities for diverse students, because emphases on academic excellence and advanced skills force teachers and educational systems to concentrate on work with a small proportion of academically talented students and to accelerate the content of their learning.

There is a strong multi-faceted hidden curriculum, organized along the following dimensions:

- Teaching
 - Emphasising content and memorization
 - Silencing of diverse students who delay the regular pace
 - Undifferentiated curricula and lessons
 - Students coexist in the classroom and school without any interaction
- Extra curricular activities
 - Domination of high achievers, usually native students
- School environment
 - Hostility towards students with special needs
- Administration/educational policy
 - Lack of multicultural education policy
 - Teachers without special training
- Beliefs of Teachers, students and parents
 - Difference is disadvantageous
 - Teaching is covering content
 - Diverse students are burdensome

Equal opportunities currently is linked to the quality of teaching, school life and teachers. The US National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (1995) reported cooperative learning as the most important instructional strategy supporting inclusive education.

Are the explicit declarations of policy makers in conflict with the politics of the school, which allows 'hidden' agendas to exclude diverse students? There is a discrepancy between official declarations and educational policy at the macro level (European Union, educational system, official curriculum) and the way in which schools and teachers are expected to work.

The initial and continuing education of teachers needs to change to prepare students to recognise the diversity of the student population and to support diverse thinking and learning. This is closely linked to the way teachers are supervised and evaluated: if inspectors are only interested in 'the content covered', teachers will work to their expectations.

The actors on the scene of equal opportunities

Teachers need a positive approach, putting the principles of equal opportunities into 'everyday action and practice with children and in the meetings with the parents' (Jungbluth, 2003).

If teachers are uncertain about how to deal with children's comments or questions, they will need to talk with the parents involved. The parents may be helpful in various ways, such as when one child says to another 'you can't have two mothers!' or when preparing the annual celebration of father's or mother's day.

Children will feel unhappy and isolated if their family situation is regarded with hostility or offensive amusement. In an unwelcoming local community, children may feel that they have to keep secrets about their family. This will rarely enable them to feel at ease and to talk openly about their lives and what is important to them.

In the past, professionals labelled some families as 'resistant', 'hard core' or 'hard to reach'. Children and adolescents had no voice. More recently, the voices of children and their families have been heard, not only through the media but also in scientific publications. But we still observe the marginalisation and stigmatisation of children in care situations supposedly designed to meet their needs.

There is an agreement in the literature that family-based preservation services are significant for the advancement of children's welfare, and also that some families will always be in need of other child welfare services, such as day treatment, family foster care, and residential care (Hellinckx, 2002).

Many parents necessarily become relative experts on their child's disability or health condition. If a teacher makes time to talk and listen to the children and parents, s/he will extend her/his knowledge in general and, importantly, understand far more about what the disability or health condition means to the individual child and family. But not all parents of disabled children are experts, or feel as though they are. It is also important that the teacher shares what

s/he knows and explains her/his way of working. It is far better that a teacher struggles with potential embarrassment at the beginning than that a child is put at risk because the teacher is muddled.

Good practice

A very good and controversial example is the issue of language in school – in the classroom and in the playground. Every school team (teachers and head teachers) needs a constructive approach to language, based on the vision of Bernstein (1973). Nagging people, or only highlighting what they say that is wrong, can seriously undermine staff morale. The negative consequence is that teachers become more concerned about what they are not allowed to say than with considering the views that underlie the words. For student teachers reflecting on their school practice this is a critical point in their appreciation of the behaviour of their teachers (Verkest and Ameye, 2004).

It is almost inevitable that staff will have to use brief phrases that sum up the school approach. It is important that all the members of a staff team understand and can explain what the words mean in practice.

In some school brochures we find phrases such as as:

we respect children's home language
here we work to empower disabled children
we celebrate diversity in our school.

Yet school brochures also have pictures that allow a predominance of one gender group, and only one or two pictures containing a person from a minority ethnic group. There are always some girls in the propaganda of technical schools, but in reality they are still a minority.

Resources are an important part of equal opportunities but good practice does not begin and end with the purchase of a wide range of play materials. Some activity resources can be counter-productive if used with limited knowledge or in a dismissive manner.

Each educational setting needs a clear policy on equal opportunities and guidelines for everyday practice. Any policy needs to be open to discussion and review, and an exchange of opinions within a team can raise important practical issues, as well as highlighting misunderstandings or disagreements. Equal opportunities is not a bolt-on or optional activity, but starts with a teacher who is expert in didactics.

A student explains that being dyslexic is like running a 100-meter track race.

In my lane I have hurdles, but no one else does. I have this feeling that it's unfair that I'm the only one with hurdles but don't know how to explain it. Soon the feeling leaves me as the starting gun shoots and I take off running. I try running like the other classmates, because we have all had the same education on how to run. But then I hit the first hurdle and fall flat on my face. My parents and teachers are yelling at me from the sidelines 'try harder, the other kids are making it down the track ok, you must be lazy or slow'. Pulling myself up I try running faster and fall even harder after hitting the next hurdle. Then someone takes the time to show me how to run hurdles and like an Olympic hurdler, I outrun the other classmates. The key, though, is that I have to do it differently, the way that works best for me. Learning is like a tailored suit; it takes a while and is unique to everyone. (Ameye and Verkest, 2004)

Dyslexic students' intelligence, vision, hearing, motor control and physical development all vary from very good to poor but are mostly around average, as with everybody else. They have no more problems with home life, school attendance or emotional life than anyone else – except they have the frustration and discouragement caused by failure. 'It's just my words', said one girl.

Current classifications of disability reinforce a medical approach, and fail to recognise the impact on disabled children of wider discriminatory and oppressive attitudes and social structures. Parents of disabled children are also vocal in their criticism of this medical model, which treats their daughter or son as 'a disability' or 'a case', rather than as a child. An alternative social model of disability has been promoted which focuses on the child as an individual and as a citizen. This model does not deny the value of medication, but stresses that children's lives should not be driven by the disability label they are given, or by the regime of their treatment.

Conclusions

Four main points have been made in this Guideline booklet that are crucial to any activity that looks to reconsider Equal Opportunity policy and practice.

Firstly, we must clarify the discrepancy between policy and reality. Declarations and advice alone are not enough to ensure equal opportunities for different groups.

Secondly, it is clear that socio-economic globalisation has established new stereotypes about economic migrants and about poor countries.

Thirdly, students experience inequalities through the power of teachers, who are trying to cover a wide curriculum content without having sufficient time for real education and the cultivation of attitudes.

Finally, we can point to four factors that affect school's equal opportunities policies, and suggest that there is a need for systematic and intensive support for change if we want students to experience equality in schools:

- Teachers' beliefs about students, diversity, and their own role
- Students' beliefs about 'self' and 'others'
- Curricula and teaching practices
- The ecology of schools, home and society.

Beyond general policies of Equality and Inclusion and declarations at the macro-level, the realisation of equal opportunities in schools today is above all dependent on the implementation of practices and beliefs at the micro-level.

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APPENDIX: A checklist

The implementation of Equal Opportunities practices influences several actors: most importantly, the pupil or student. This questionnaire may be useful for collecting data or experience about the lack, or the possibilities, of equal opportunities.

School experiences

What have you missed during your school time?

What did you like?

If you were the Minister of Education, what would be your priorities?

What is 'good education' to you?

Are there difficulties inside the school?

Personal negative experiences

Were there any conflicts during your school time?

Was there help to solve the conflict given by someone in the school?

What did you hate during school time?

Have you had any experiences of personal discrimination?

Have you had any other experiences of discrimination at school?

What was unjust at school for you?

What was a 'great opportunity' at your school for you?

Do you feel excluded or included by the school?

Did you have a moment in your school life that you wanted to leave the school?

When was it? Why was it? Why have you done it? Why haven't you done it?

Support experiences (caring for different groups)

Did your parents participate in your school life?

At what period did they support you most?

Did you need your parents to help you in your struggle against inequality?

Could handicapped people study at your school? Why? Why not?

Could refugees or immigrants study at your school? Why? Why not?

Have girls more opportunities than boys at your school? Why? Why not?

Can you give some examples?

Do refugees or immigrants receive more support?

Do you agree that they should receive more support?

Do you agree with positive discrimination, to allow more equal opportunities for some groups?

Could students who lived in poor situations be supported by school?

If you had some problems about behaviour or the content of some subject, how would you solve these?

Solutions experiences (act)

*Could you participate in all the activities organised by your school?
Why did you feel excluded?*

When did you have a 'sad feeling' at school?

Could you talk to someone about your sad experiences at school?

*Could you talk to a professional, a teacher, the director or a parent
about your problem?*

*If you had a social, an emotional or a financial problem could you go
to someone at school?*

*Was there a person or a system at school or linked with the school
where you could find solutions for your personal, social, emotional
problems?*

Why not?

How did you find it?

How was this person known about?

*What do you want promote in your school in order to have more equal
opportunities?*

Which kind of services did you find in your school?

*Is it important that you go to a service in or outside school for some
advice?*

Equal opportunities means to you...

Unequal in school means...

Unequal in class means...

The Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe (CiCe) Thematic Network links 28 European states and some 80 universities and college departments which are engaged in educating students about how children and young people learn about and understand their society, their identity and citizenship.

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