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Equal opportunities at school: mission impossible? The perceptions of different target groups

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Introduction

In the 5th century BC Aristotle wrote that there is nothing more unjust than treating unequal persons in an equal way (*Ethica Nicomachea* E). Do contemporary education systems respect this principle, or do they provide equal opportunities to unequal persons? How do they differentiate their policy and curricula practices so that they provide equity to different students? Is a really equal opportunity policy a 'mission impossible'? What are the perceptions of different target groups?

> Participation rights and opportunities of learners in schools and educational institutions are regarded by the European Union as essential elements of a high quality learning environment for active citizenship education. Participation rights and opportunities of learners in schools and educational institutions are regarded by the European Union as essential elements of a high quality learning environment for active citizenship education (European Commission Progress Report 2004, pp 14-15).

The right of all individuals to equality before the law and protection from discrimination is a fundamental principle of all democratic societies.

EU policies about equality have long been established through EU treaties, agreements, and legislation. Article 13 of the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty empowers European Union institutions to act against discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation. Moreover the Community has adopted legislation prohibiting discrimination.

Nevertheless, treaties, agreements, and laws in themselves are not enough to guarantee the provision of equal opportunities. If discrimination is to be eliminated then attitudes, beliefs, unfair behaviour and hidden practices must change. We need to move from theoretical framework and policies at the macro-level to personal engagement and implementation at micro-level.

This paper asks whether equal opportunities are a reality in European schools. Do all schools and institutions provide opportunities for equal participation to different students? What are the perceptions of students and how do they experience equality and inequality?

The meaning of equal opportunities today

The Lisbon strategy identified the aims for the development of a new European economic, educational and social agenda to 2010. The Barcelona Conclusions (March 2002) welcomed the work programme for meeting the aims and specific objectives of education and training systems. Working Group G was set up by the European Committee in January 2003 with a remit to address three issues towards the objective of 'Supporting active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion':

- ensuring that the learning of democratic values not democratic participation by all school partners is effectively promoted in order to prepare people for active citizenship.
- fully integrating equal opportunities considerations into the objectives and functioning of education and training
- ensuring fair access to the acquisition of skills for the less privileged or those currently less well served and motivating them to participate in learning.

<div align="right">(European Commission Progress Report 2003, pp 4-5)</div>

Inclusion and exclusion are based on labelling different students as having deficits and strengths in respect to the undifferentiated agenda of everyday schooling. Such labelling is based on the assumption that students must accomplish the content of the formal curriculum: we should be asking how we might adapt the formal curriculum and the life of the school to make them work for each child. Moreover administrative support should facilitate a shift in teachers' attitudes towards diverse students.

It is also worth-noting that market-oriented education does not support equal opportunities for the range of diverse students, because of the emphases on academic excellence and on advanced skills, which force teachers and educational systems to accelerate content and work with a small proportion of academically talented students.

The OECD policy concerning education and equity is expressed as

> 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)

Do schools succeed in providing equivalent opportunities to all individuals, given that not all countries have the same concept of equal opportunities, disabilities, social disadvantages, and learning difficulties?

Cyprus educational policy on equal opportunities

Cyprus became a full member of the European Union on 1 May 2004. Since its foundation, the Cyprus Republic educational system has followed all the democratic values that shape the policies of the EU concerning equal opportunities at educational institutions, and democratic citizenship. A non-discrimination policy is declared in the General Aim of Education in Cyprus.

The policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture for inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream education is expressed within the Special Education Law 113(1) of 1999, the Regulations for the Early Detection of Children with Special Needs 185 (1)/2001 and the Regulations for the Training and Education of Children with Special Needs 186(1)/2001. During the academic years 2001, 2002 and 2003 the special education services provided individualised education programmes for approximately 5000 children within mainstream elementary schools and for 300 in the high school sector (Ministry of Education, Annual report, 2001)

Cyprus participates actively in the Socrates programme and offers its support to Erasmus and the measures of NARIC and lifelong learning.

Methodology

The aim of the study reported here is to investigate how students in various age groups (primary and secondary education) from different European countries (Belgium, Cyprus, and Portugal) experience the lack or the support of equal opportunities at school.　The investigation has been conducted by means of focus-group interviews based on semi-structured questionnaires. The groups were selected using the following criteria:
- gender
- physical, mental or behavioural disability
- achievement (drop outs, low and high achievers)
- culture (ethnicity, language)
- social class.

One more group was interviewed to investigate the attitudes of 'average students' towards the target groups. What is their perception about the compulsory policy of non-discrimination at their school?

The specific objectives/questions of the study were the following:
- do students experience equality or inequality in schools?
- if students experience inequality, when and how this inequality expressed?
- are there some 'hidden mechanisms' that establish inequality at school?
- to what extent is equal opportunity practice part of a societal / cultural context?

Sample of questions

School policy
- Do you feel that there are some barriers - implicit or explicit - in your school (a hidden agenda)
- What would you like to change in your school? Explain.

Personal experiences
- What did you miss during your school time? Explain!
- What was unfair at your school for you (and for others)?

Expectations
- Equal opportunities means to you ...
- Inequality in school means to you ...
- Inequality in class means to you ...
- Inequality in society means to you ...

Interviews with the teachers of students participating in this study were conducted with the object of interpreting students' perceptions, and investigating teaching practices and teachers' beliefs about diversity and equal opportunities.

Results

This paper reports the results of the study in Cyprus, with twelve groups, each of three to five students, from three different primary schools in three different districts.

Table 1 indicates the personal experiences and the expectations of the groups concerning equality and inequality in schools. Results suggest that the pupils in the sample experience inequality as two contrasting extremes: when experiencing their own depreciation, for example, at the same time they experience the appreciation of the 'others', and when expressing inferiority they attribute superiority to the other group.

The group with a different language and culture, (in the case of Cyprus these pupils are the children of economic emigrants) feel cognitively, socially, and emotionally devalued; they feel that their thinking ability is underestimated because they can not express their thought in the official language. The group with low social-economic status experiences feelings of inferiority in the school environment and attribute to students with high social-economic status a kind of superiority, obvious from the levels of participation of the 'others' in both curricular and extra-curricular activities. Gender discrimination is not experienced; boys and girls accept that gender does not affect the behaviours and attitudes of others towards them. A number of students said that school does not recognise differences in cognitive styles, because they find lessons and activities in the classroom boring. Finally, major problems appear in the groups of students with special needs. Inequality is experienced as social rejection, over-protection or pity - emotions which do not contribute to inclusion in the school life, especially life outside the classroom, where students with special needs are excluded due to the physical environment or the ' perfectibility' of extra-curricular school activities.

Table 1: Results

Diversity	Personal experiences	Expectations 'equal opportunities' means =

• Nationality
  Language
	•Depreciation -
	  Cognitive
	Appreciation
	  Emotional
	  Social
		→ Recognition of thought

• Social-economic status	•Inferiority Superiority	→ Participation

• Gender	• Differentiation
	  of roles/luck
	  of discrimination
	Stoic attitude
		→ Role taking

• Learning-cognitive style Achievement	•Boredom-inequality between Low-High achievers	→ Recognition of diverse competences and abilities
• Physical ability	• Social rejection- Over protection and pity	→ Opportunities for diverse ways of expression

Interviews with teachers aimed at interpretation of the results revealed the well-known teachers' syndrome of 'covering the content'. Teachers explained that they wanted to help all students but did not have time because 'there is too much content to be covered', 'too much pressure from inspectors and head teachers', 'unwillingness of students to learn', 'little support on how to differentiate the undifferentiated curriculum'. Moreover, teachers evidenced parents' pressure against the practice of equal opportunities.

The response to the general questions support the following conclusions:

1. Despite the declared policy of equal opportunities, students experience inequality in schools. This is more of a problem for students with different language and culture, for children with special needs, and low achievers than for students of different gender, and lower socio-economic levels.
2. Inequality is expressed especially through extra-curricular activities and non-participation in school-based activities. In contrary to the educational principle 'give more to the students that have less', within the regular class students needing more are actually given less.
3. Hidden mechanisms include teachers' interest in 'covering the content', the everyday struggle of teachers, schools and parents for excellence, the external pressure of evaluation, and school environment and ethos.
4. Equal opportunity practice is part of a societal-cultural practice, as shown from the low expectations of native parents towards 'other' students. According to teachers, if the number of 'other' students in the classroom is high, parents that that their

children are removed to other classrooms, and if they are not satisfied, change schools.

Discussion

There is a strong multi-faceted hidden curriculum, which is organised in the following dimensions:

- Teaching
    - emphasis on content end memorisation
    - silence of diverse students who delay to the regular pace of work
    - undifferentiated curricula and lessons
    - coexistence of students in the same classroom and school without any interaction
- Extracurricular activities
    - domination of high achievers, usually native students
    - school environment
    - hostility towards students with special needs
- Administration/ educational policy
    - luck of multicultural education
    - teachers without special training
- Teachers', students' and parents' beliefs
    - difference is a disadvantageous situation
    - teaching is largely concerned with 'covering the content'
    - 'different' students are burdensome

The meaning of equal opportunities today is linked with the quality of teaching, school life, and teachers. Accordingly the National Centre on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (USA, 1995) reported cooperative learning as the most important instructional strategy supporting inclusive education. As teachers and teacher educators we should question whether the explicit declarations of policy-makers are in conflict with the politics of the schools, which allow 'hidden' agendas to exclude students with differences. One could say that there is a discrepancy between the official declarations as well as education at the macro level (EU, educational system, official curriculum) and the way schools and teachers are expected to work.

Both initial and continuing teacher education need to change in order to prepare teachers not only to recognise the diversity of the student population but also to support diverse thinking and learning. This is closely linked with the way teachers are supervised and evaluated: if inspectors are interested in 'the content covered', teachers will work to those expectations.

Conclusion

There are six factors that affect school policy on equal opportunities in schools, and   there is an immediate need for systematic support of change if we want students to experience equality in schools. We need to address:

- teachers' beliefs about students, diversity, and teachers' role
- students' beliefs about 'self' and 'others'
- curricula and teaching practices
- the ecology of schools, homes and society.

Beyond a general policy of equality and inclusion demonstrated by declarations at macro-level, the realisation of equal opportunities in schools today is closely associated with practices and beliefs in micro-level.

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