

CONFERENCE REPORTS

CONFERENCE: EDUCATION, EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Prague, 16th –19th June, 2008

An international conference on education, equity and social justice was organized by the Institute for research and development of education which is a department of the Faculty of Education. The conference took place as part of the celebrations of the 660th anniversary of Charles University in Prague and that's why it was opened with a speech by Vice-Rector Stanislav Štech, whose academic specialization concerns the conference topic.

The conference participants came from universities in 16 countries, including prestigious universities situated in Western Europe but also universities in developing countries, whose experts offered their perspectives on problems concerning inequalities and injustice in education.

The aim of the conference was to focus on all the key processes concerning justice from the micro to the macro level of schooling, which means looking at the relevant processes in schools, classrooms or even during interactions between teachers and pupils and among pupils themselves, as well as at processes which are going on in the context of the national educational system and its wider social implications or international comparisons. This aim was mirrored in the choice of keynote speakers. The complexity of the points of view offered was multiplied by the interdisciplinary foundations from which they came (from educational science, sociology or psychology and anthropology to statistics).

Belgian psychologist and statistician Professor Marc Demeuse (University of Mons), in his wide-ranging lecture "The European Commission stepping up both the efficiency and equity of education and training systems", stressed a lot of empirical evidence which shows us that it is possible to combine two seemingly contradictory demands, the one for greater efficiency and the other for equity. And what's more, this is the case not only in the sense of equal access to education (which means no discrimination in terms of gender, ethnicity, the socio-economic status of parents, region and so on) but also in the sense of the equal use of educational outcomes on the labor market and so on. A very good example of these findings is provided by Scandinavian countries whose pupils are among the best in international comparisons of educational performances and outcomes, but where levels of social difference among pupils are among the lowest and where the dependence of performance on gender, socio-economic status and so on is low. That's one of the reasons why, as Professor Marc Demeus pointed out, the first international official trip made by reform-minded ministers of education from different countries in the world is to Finland or to some other Scandinavian country,

although the so-called Finnish model is very difficult to implant in different socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts.

It could be rather provocative in front of a largely academic audience to present the key thesis of the speech which says that policy documents, for example those of the EU or national ministers of education, make a lot of ambivalent and even controversial statements and adopt positions which as a consequence stimulate theoretical as well as empirical research on educational topics. For example, it is taken for granted that smaller classes always lead to more effective learning processes. However, this positive effect brings added value only up to a certain class size; after this critical number, there is no added value in reality. In a similar way, it is assumed that the best thing to do to eliminate educational inequalities between disadvantaged pupils (those with poor family background) and mainstream background pupils is to start pre-primary education as early as possible. In fact, we don't know what kind of effect adding one more extra year of education for such children would have.

British sociologist Sally Power (Cardiff University) stressed in her lecture „The continuous reinvention of compensatory education“ that all education systems are more or less stigmatized with educational inequalities which more or less mirror the socio-economic inequalities which can be found in any particular society. At the same time, almost every educational system which produces as well as reproduces social inequalities, offers some compensatory mechanisms to eliminate these inequalities. Nowadays, we can see a trend towards a more complex approach supporting disadvantaged areas and localities, but Sally Power's critical review of the most important compensatory approaches and policies used to date showed their weaknesses and limits. The thesis that if we want to have a successful compensatory policy, which is not so far our situation, we need to clearly know what we want to compensate, is a rather pessimistic conclusion concerning the future. Until then all policies will be unsuccessful.

Professor Alan Dyson (University of Manchester) went down to the micro level in his lecture „Beyond the school gate: schools, communities and social justice“ which showed new trends in school developments toward community schools in Great Britain. From his perspective, the new community model of school can work as a powerful instrument for dealing with problems of social inequalities, social exclusion and a variety of other social problems, because schools like this care not only about what is going on inside but also what is going on beyond their gates. The concept as well as the practice of community schools is changing. It is not only a center of social life of local communities (like villages or neighborhoods) but also a provider of a variety of social services. Community schools focus not only on learning processes but offer a wide variety of activities after classes as well. These activities are not restricted to learning processes, weekdays and children only, but provide an offer of leisure time activities on all days and at all times and for young people as well as for retired people, for example. According to Alan Dyson we can observe an expansion of many other social functions which are to be dealt with on school grounds and at school level in the case of the new generation of community

schools. The priorities are social services – from social security and health care to unemployment – which are guaranteed by the state or NGOs and have so far been provided outside the school gates. In the case of new community schools these tasks are dealt with just in the schools, so that the problems are addressed immediately in the place where they are occurring. Alan Dyson stressed that school can be more flexible in these cases in comparison with ineffective administrative bodies, office departments or social workers which are too distant from the places where problems occurred.

Italian anthropologist and ethnographer Francesca Gobbo (Turin University) focused on the classroom level in her lecture „Learning from others, learning with others: The tense encounter between equality and difference“. The anthropologist’s starting point is based on the differentiation people make between “me” and “others” and between “us” and “them” or between “ours” and “the foreign” which is a consequence of people’s experience with different people. At classroom level in the context of multicultural society and related trends towards a more heterogeneous composition of classes, there is a more and more important problem of interaction among pupils with different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds which has consequences for educational inequalities. According to Francesca Gobbo, interactions among pupils influence the divergent trends in the case of educational inequalities because higher-status pupils (caused by socio-economic or mainstream culture and ethnic family background) interact more easily and more often with other pupils, and this has positive effects on learning processes. On the other hand, pupils with lower status interact less often with classmates and as a result learn less at school. As a consequence, their status in the class is decreasing, they continue to interact and learn less than the others and the gap in knowledge between the pupils grows.

As for the presentations in different conference sections, these reflected key contemporary problems in the field of educational inequalities, for example in terms of gender, socio-economic status, immigration and other points of view. The conference covered all the important trends concerning education, equity and social justice and showed the potentialities as well as the limits of qualitative and quantitative methods used in research.

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