Bo-Ruey Huang

Social Justice and Capacity for Self-development in Educational Systems in European Union

Abstract

This paper explores social justice and equity in educational policies and systems in the European Union, and analyzes the significance within. Equity indicators of the European educational systems, *Equity of the European Educational Systems: A set of indicators* declared in 2006, introduces the debates on educational justice issues on one hand, and provides a reference framework for international comparison and educational policy-making on the other. In 2009, a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training was agreed by member states of European Union lasting to 2020. Meanwhile, the European Council emphasized the objective of promoting social inclusion through the reduction of poverty and the need for quantification of education and social inclusion/poverty indicators. The target population is defined as the number of persons who are at risk-of-poverty, material deprivation and in jobless households. Educational equity, transcending the traditional idea of equality and combining the Justice Theories of Rawls and Sen, not only focus on the resource distribution in education content or processes, but also identify individual capability, willingness and effort and respect the diversity of career development.

Keywords: social justice, capacity for self-development, educational equity, educational systems, European Union

Introduction

Issues of equity, equality and justice are crucial topics for the study of education systems. Maiztegui-Oñate and Santibanez-Gruber (2008) point out that the concept of equity must include, and at the same time transcend, that of equality. And the concept of equity also includes that of social justice. While the principle of equality, promoting the same treatment for all, and the term 'equity' acknowledges the existence of unequal treatment in education process. They propose the different conceptions of equity that have been formulated recently in the debate on the school.

Equity and social cohesion are also important issues in the European Union (EU). In the report *Social Justice in the EU – A Cross-national Comparison*, Schraad-Tischler and Kroll (2014) find that countries in the EU vary considerably in their ability to create a truly inclusive society. 'Social justice' is a central constitutive element of the legitimacy and stability of any political community.

Government policies of redistribution function as an instrument of social justice and are conceived in terms of an investment rather than compensation. In this sense, social justice can be understood as a guiding principle for a participatory society that activates and enables its members. In education, the concept of equity is set as a core element in education policy and education systems.

This paper explores the idea and place of educational equity and social justice in the EU by analyzing a collection of relevant documents.

Equity indicators of the European educational systems

Declared in 2005, '*Equity of the European Educational Systems: A Set of Indicators*' was carried out as part of the Socrates 6.1.2. programme with the support of the European Commission, and is the result of collaboration between six European university teams. The report, with 8 principles and 29 indicators, is intended to measure and compare the equity of the education systems in the European Union Member States, and as an informative tool helps decision makers to redefine the educational politics.

The indicators are listed in four categories: (1) Context of inequalities in education; (2) Inequalities in the education process; (3) Inequalities in education; (4) Social and political effects of inequalities in education. Also there are five major principles of equality in terms of education, and the claims and the consequences of these various principles of justice. Five major principles of equality including: (A) libertarian positions, (B) equality of access or opportunities, (C) equality of treatment, (D) equality of achievement or academic success, (E) equality of social fulfillment or output (EGREES, 2005).

The indicators are intended to provide input to the debate on justice in education, by offering some elements of response to the following questions: (1) To what extent do individual educational inequalities have major social consequences for the individuals? What is the importance of those inequalities? Are they due mainly to the context, or rather to the process of the educational system? Are they used to help the disadvantaged? (2) What is the importance of educational inequalities between girls and boys or between groups of different social, economic or national origins? To what extent are they due to the societal context or rather due to the process of the educational system? To what extent are they aggravated by the society or the labour market? (3) To what extent does being below a minimum skill threshold have important consequences for the individuals in and outside the school context? What is the proportion of individuals who find themselves below that threshold? What proportion of each group is beneath that threshold? Is the fact of being below the threshold due mainly to the socio-economic context or rather to the educational system itself?

Equity systems in European education

In 2009, a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training was agreed by member states of European Union lasting up to 2020. Meanwhile, the European Council emphasized the objective of promoting social inclusion through the reduction of poverty and the need for quantification of education and social inclusion/poverty indicators. The target population is defined as the number of persons who are at risk-of-poverty, material deprivation and those in jobless household (Münich, Plug, Psacharopoulos & Schlotter, 2012). This section will present the situation and systems of education equity in Europe.

Pre-primary education

Participation in high-quality pre-primary education has long-lasting benefits in terms of achievement and socialization during individuals' schooling and careers, because it facilitates later learning. Early intervention programmes, especially those

targeted at disadvantaged children can produce large positive socio-economic returns, and that these persist well into adulthood. Effects include better school achievement, grade retention, employment rates, earnings, crime prevention, family relationships and health. In order to offset disadvantage throughout the education system, pre-primary programmes need to be followed up with subsequent interventions, such as support for language learning and social adjustment, otherwise their beneficial effects tend to decay. A lack of investment in early learning, leads to substantially higher levels of remedial spending during later life stages. This is less cost-effective and can be linked with increased spending on crime, health, unemployment and other social policies (Commission of the European Communities, 2006). A number of European countries have introduced spending policies targeted at reinforcing early education and tackling disadvantage from the earliest age. The type of early childhood provision and the pedagogy to be used should be considered carefully. Programmes focusing on learning as well as personal and social competences tend to produce better outcomes and, consequently, greater knock-on effects throughout life.

Primary education

EU primary education focuses on quality basic education for all. Compulsory education and training systems should provide the basic education and key competences required by all to prosper in a knowledge-based society. This is especially important for some disadvantaged groups and where Member States are providing for a large number of migrants and ethnic minorities. Education systems with early selection of students exacerbate differences in educational attainment due to social background, and thereby lead to even more inequitable outcomes in student and school performance. Selection has been considered effective in some Member States, where whole schools are tailored to groups of students with similar needs and levels of achievement. However, the evidence brings this into question. Those European countries that select pupils at an early age display greater variation in pupil achievement than countries with more integrated school systems. Therefore, member states of the EU were informed that education and training systems which select pupils at an early age exacerbate the effect of socio-economic background on educational attainment and do not raise efficiency in the long run (Commission of the European Communities, 2006).

Secondary education

In secondary education, the Europe 2020 strategy highlights the completion of upper secondary education as the minimum level of educational attainment for young people in today's society. Indeed, one of the two education targets for the EU by 2020 is to reduce the rates of young people leaving education and training with no more than lower secondary education to below 10%. Early school leavers are more likely to have their life chances limited in today's society, as they lack the crucial qualifications needed for successful integration into the labour market and they are at greater risk of social exclusion and poverty. Early leavers from education and training are also more likely to find it difficult to participate in civic and democratic life. For these reasons, early school leaving may represent significant social and economic costs for society. The Council has recommended that Member

States should ensure that evidence-based comprehensive strategies to reduce early school leaving are in place. The recommended framework defines three areas of policy: prevention, intervention and compensation. Prevention policies include system-based and other reforms to remove obstacles to achievement and thus prevent early school leaving. Intervention policies are intended to avert problems for individuals, already showing signs that they may not complete their schooling; and compensation policies include the provision of 'compensatory' education – special programmes or customized support – for those returning to education after leaving early (Eurydice, 2013).

Higher education

Higher education is a key sector of a knowledge-based economy and society. As the Commission makes clear, the EU higher education sector faces numerous challenges and needs to be modernized if it is to become more competitive and promote excellence. One challenge is to create diversified systems which allow equitable participation for all, while remaining financially viable and playing their role more efficiently. There has been a steady growth in student numbers and a widening of the expectations placed upon European universities, but funding levels have not risen accordingly. At the same time, the expansion of student numbers has not increased equity, as it has mostly favored individuals from higher socio-economic groups or those whose parents attended higher education.

In order to bring about a more equitable balance between the costs funded by individuals and society and the benefits accrued by each, and to contribute to providing universities with the extra funding they need, many countries are turning to the main direct beneficiaries of higher education, the students, to invest in their own futures by paying tuition fees. Evidence also suggests that the market effects of tuition fees may improve the quality of teaching and management in universities, and reinforce student motivation. As a result of inequities earlier in the education cycle, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds often do not achieve the level of qualifications needed to access higher education. Even those that do are often reluctant to consider going on to university. Policies to reinforce efficiency and equity of school systems are vital, along with action to change cultural perceptions of higher education. To this end, information about the opportunities and advantages afforded by higher education should be targeted at school pupils. Universities should be encouraged to develop comprehensive outreach and access policies, which could include the introduction of bridging programmes and earmarked places (Commission of the European Communities, 2006).

Theories and ideas of European educational equity

The '*Equity Indicators of the European Educational Systems*' could be seen as a policy tool, enforcing educational equity and social justice. The construction of the indicators will be taken as the measure and comparison of equity in national educational systems, and as the reference framework of educational policy making both in EU level and in national level as well. The idea of equity has been the direction of the educational systems development and policy forming in the EU.

In the Indicators, EGREES (2005) points that: 'equity is a more difficult concept than equality, and that it allows, in its principle, inequalities; nevertheless, it is a

concept that allows to go beyond a purely formal examination to perform a multidimensional analysis, … A strictly egalitarian vision, which would aim to give everyone the same treatment, while ignoring the characteristics of each individual at the outset, or even, the results in terms of reproduction of the initial inequalities, would force us to question its very foundations, precisely for reasons of equality'. Therefore, the concern of diversity under the principle of equity could offset the neglect of individual original situation. It should be taken account of a multiplicity of principles of justice, assets connected with education or groups of individuals.

There are eight principles listing in the EGREES's Indicators to guide the formation and implementation with holistic and diversity (EGREES, 2005). In the first principle, it refers that indicators must enable discussion in the context of the various existing principles of justice, including: Utilitarianism, The responsibility theory, Justice theories of Rawls, Walzer and Sen. These theories are the framework of the column in the indicator. Among these theories, the focus that EGREES discusses is the difference and transition between the theories of Rawls and Sen. Rawls' theory represents a liberalist standpoint and was the basis for equality of educational opportunity. However, Sen's justice theory makes more mention about the equity of each individual's need. In the indicators, the application and integration of these two concepts of justice it could be observed that education systems and the subsequent change in education policy ideas move from equality to equity.

The justice concept of Rawls, equality is built on the idea of 'original position'. The 'Original position' is an imaginary equal situation that the 'justice' will be produced under the 'Veil of ignorance'. These ideas will decide a basic social apparatus for a real justice society. 'Principle of justice', according to Rawls, seeks the equality of distribution under a background institution that guarantee the equal liberty and the equality of certain general opportunities (Rawls, 2001).

The concept of 'equality of educational opportunity' is generated from the justice principle mentioned above. From this principle, 'the just equality of opportunities should first be checked, then we should make sure that the remaining inequalities are in favor of the most disadvantaged' (EGREES, 2005). According to Rawls' approach, it could be possible to consider that where countries are more or less equitable according to equality of opportunities, then within a group of countries similar in this aspect, the most equitable are those where the most educated offer their capacities to the service of the most disadvantaged (EGREES, 2005).

However, EGREES also recognizes that 'the only equality in education which almost everyone agrees with, the equality of opportunity is a hypothetical equality'. It should be concerned that: 'assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them should have the same prospects of success, regardless of their initial place in the social system', 'it relies on concepts with questionable operationality: talent, ability and even desire; how can they be measured or even assessed?' (EGREES, 2005).

Therefore, EGREES replenish the indicators with Sen's theory. According to Sen (2011), 'there is no external or internal factor which can counterbalance the injustice of the existence of such a population'. 'It should be checked that results and career inequalities originate in differences of will, efforts of the pupils, and not in inequalities of contexts or process' (EGREES, 2005).

In fact, Sen's theory of justice, based on the 'capability approach', is different to the 'distribution approach' of Rawls's theory. From Sen's perspective, the concept of educational opportunity offers more freedom for individuals pursuing our objectives. Then, the educational opportunity is not only concerned with the achievement of the 'culmination', but the choices or comprehensive opportunity of the educational process (Sen, 2011). This perspective is particularly concerned with correcting this focus on means rather than on the opportunity to fulfill ends and the substantive freedom to achieve those reasoned ends. The focus of the capability approach is thus not just on what a person actually ends up doing, but also on what he is in fact able to do, whether or not he chooses to make use of that opportunity (EGREES, 2005).

Conclusion

This paper describes the ideas of equity in the educational policy and educational systems of the European Union. Education and training systems play a critical role in the competitive development and social cohesion of the EU. Member states are recommended to consider both the principle of efficiency and the equity concept in education policy formulation. Students in levels of education systems are provided not only with equal education systems and environments, but also education for self-development capability. The idea of educational equity in European educational policy and systems transcends the traditional idea of equality and combines the Justice theory of. Rawls and Sen, not only focusing on the resource distribution in education contents or processes, but also identifies individual capability, willingness and effort and respects the diversity of career development.

References

Commission of the European Communities (2006): *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems*. Brussels: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament [SEC (2006) 1096].

EGREES (2005): *Equity of the European Educational Systems: A set of indicators*. European Commission, Brussels: Directorate General of Education and Culture.

Eurydice (2013): *Education and Training in Europe 2020: Responses from the EU Member States*. Eurydice Report. Brussels: Eurydice.

Maiztegui-Oñate, C. & Santibanez-Gruber, R. (2008): Access to education end equity in plural societies. *Intercultural Education*, 19(5), 373-381.

Münich, D., Plug, E., Psacharopoulos, G. & Schlotter, M. (2012): *Equity in and through Education and Training: Indicators and Priorities*. EENEE Analytical Report.

Rawls, J. (2001): *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Sen, A. (2011): *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Schraad-Tischler, D. & Kroll, C. (2014): *Social Justice in the EU – A Cross-national Comparison*. Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bo-Ruey Huang, Chinese Culture University, Taiwan, hbr2172@gmail.com