

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
FAIR AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
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ISSUES PAPER – SESSION C

This session will encourage discussion and recommendations on school practices to handle individual learning difficulties, including those of special needs students. It will also consider how to improve the out-of-school learning environment by reaching out to homes of disadvantaged children.

Our conclusions and recommendations are:

Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind at school, and reduce high rates of school-year repetition

Evidence

- In some school systems, up to one-quarter of students repeat a year at some point. In others it is rare.
- Although year repetition is often popular with teachers, there is little evidence that children gain benefit from it. Repetition is expensive – the full economic cost is up to USD 20 000 equivalent for each student who repeats a year – but schools have few incentives to take into account the costs involved. Some countries, such as Luxembourg, are taking steps to reduce the extent of repetition.
- The classroom is the first level of intervention for equity. Evidence shows that it is possible to improve classroom attainment with methods such as formative assessment – a process of feeding back information about performance to student and teacher and adapting and improving teaching and learning in response, particularly with students at risk.
- “Reading Recovery” strategies – short-term, intensive interventions of one-on-one lessons – can help many poor readers to catch up.
- Finland uses a hierarchy of successive formal and informal interventions to assist those falling behind at school. This approach appears to be successful: only 1% of 15-year-olds are unable to demonstrate basic functional reading skills, while the OECD average is 7%.

Policy recommendations

- High rates of year repetition in some countries need to be reduced by changing incentives for schools and encouraging alternative approaches.
- Interventions in the classroom can be very effective in tackling underachievement. Among the approaches available, we can highlight formative assessment, reading recovery strategies and careful monitoring.
- Many countries could usefully follow the successful Finnish approach to learning difficulties, offering a sequence of intensifying interventions which draw back into the mainstream those who fall behind.
- Teaching professionals need to develop their in-classroom techniques to support those in the class who are falling behind.

Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn

Evidence

- On average, children in OECD countries spend more than 20% of their total learning time out of school – doing homework, working with a tutor or on other activities.
- Home factors, including parental support for education, engagement with children's learning and cultural assets (like books), are associated with stronger school performance.
- Homework can improve school outcomes, but reliance on homework may also threaten equity, since some children lack the home support necessary to realise its benefits.
- Parental involvement – working with children at home and actively participating in school activities – does improve results. All other things being equal, schools that foster communication and participation by parents, and encourage and assist parents to support their children with their school work tend to have better outcomes.

Policy recommendations

- To support learning among disadvantaged children, schools need to target their efforts to improve communication with parents in the most disadvantaged homes and help develop environments conducive to learning.
- After-school homework clubs at school may provide an environment that supports homework for those with weak home support.

Points for discussion:

- 1) *What kind of learning support should students with weaker achievement receive within the same classrooms? What is the impact of these approaches for the rest of the students?*
- 2) *The provision of supportive learning within classroom is more challenging for teachers. How should teachers be prepared for this task?*
- 3) *Tackling students' individual learning problems requires reaching out to student homes. Therefore the coordination of education policies with policies in other areas and across ministries is necessary. Does this coordination take place sufficiently? What are the difficulties and what are the solutions?*