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OECD SECRETARIAT DISCUSSION PAPER

GOVERNANCE, COMPLEXITY AND FUTURES THINKING

Trends Transforming Education

OECD societies have transformed fundamentally in the course of the last century. To name but a few trends that have radically changed the way we live since the Industrial Revolution:

- An ongoing process of individualisation has transformed communities and even families;
- Rationalisation and specialisation has transformed work in the private and public sectors, with more formal procedures and hierarchies; and an increasing professionalism;
- Democratisation has changed political processes and transformed hierarchical relations.

These societal changes have profoundly transformed life in OECD countries. In the late 19th century someone coming from a particular family in a particular village would, at the age of 12, be able to draw a picture of the rest of her life that would be quite accurate. A life governed by stable hierarchies and strong traditions fixed the life-path and made it somehow predictable. Clearly, this has changed; the life-path is no longer predictable and depends to a much larger extent on personal qualities and decisions. Apart from the increasing freedom, the number of possible lifestyles, jobs, locations that one could opt for have exploded over the last hundred years. This lack of predictability and greater fluidity are reflected at the different levels of aggregation. Stable structures such as the village, the family, the company and even the nation state are transforming.

The trends that have driven the increasingly complexity and fluidity of society have been intensified by other trends. The steady rise of income and education levels of parents has made these parents more critical about the education of their children. There are clear indicators that parents with higher levels of education and from higher socio-economic groups are less satisfied with schooling and more involved in decision making on schooling. These parents have the knowledge and skills to push their demands on the educational system or individual schools, further increasing the complexity under which the system and schools have to operate.

But complexity is not just increasing because some parents are more demanding. Parental and student backgrounds are increasingly diverse. Increasing migration is leading to an increasingly diverse society: ethnically, culturally and religiously. This increased diversity has consequences for the educational system, for example when religious groups demand religious schools or when students with language deficiencies need special education. Complexity is also increasing because of rapid technological developments that schools are confronted with: both as they are trying to chose and implement some of the possibilities that ICT has to offer, but also when thinking about how to prepare students for a life marked by rapid technological developments. The rise of the Knowledge Economy has given rise to additional stakeholders and new demands: it has made governments aware of the economic

value of education and to some extent to attune education to the economy; it has also increased the influence of (local) employers on schooling.

Schooling is an integral part of society. Its fabric tightly interwoven with the fabric of society in that it fulfils one of the most fundamental functions, the handing over of knowledge from one generation to the next. It is also the place where children spent up a good deal of time for almost 14 years of their lives in a crucial time for the formation of their personalities and their abilities to cope with the demands of society. Schools need to respond to the increasing complexity and fluidity of societies, both because they are a part of that society and because they are preparing a next generation of citizens to live their lives in that society. The debate on what 'schooling for tomorrow' should look like is an open one, where no one best way of moving forward has been identified. One thing is clear: centrally planned bureaucratic educational systems can no longer account for the diversity, the flexibility and the unpredictability of today's societies.

The Changing Schooling System

The state has played a vital role in the responding to these large-scale societal changes. It can be argued that the welfare state in many ways replaced the traditional social structures in which social security, health care and education were organised. But where the state seemed to be the natural rational provider of education, this role has been questioned throughout the latter two decades. As societies have become more diverse and complex, life-paths less predictable and the role of the state limited by globalisation, the problems of central, rational planning exacerbate. And there is a moral dimension: individualisation has brought freedom and the possibilities of self-realisation that do not sit well with standardised production for standardised consumers.

These realisations have led to two broad changes in educational systems that – put together – have meant a major transformation of the educational system as a whole. First, decentralisation: the realisation the central running of the educational system was no longer viable. Second, an increasing role for demand: the idea that stakeholders – most importantly parents – needed to have more influence on education.

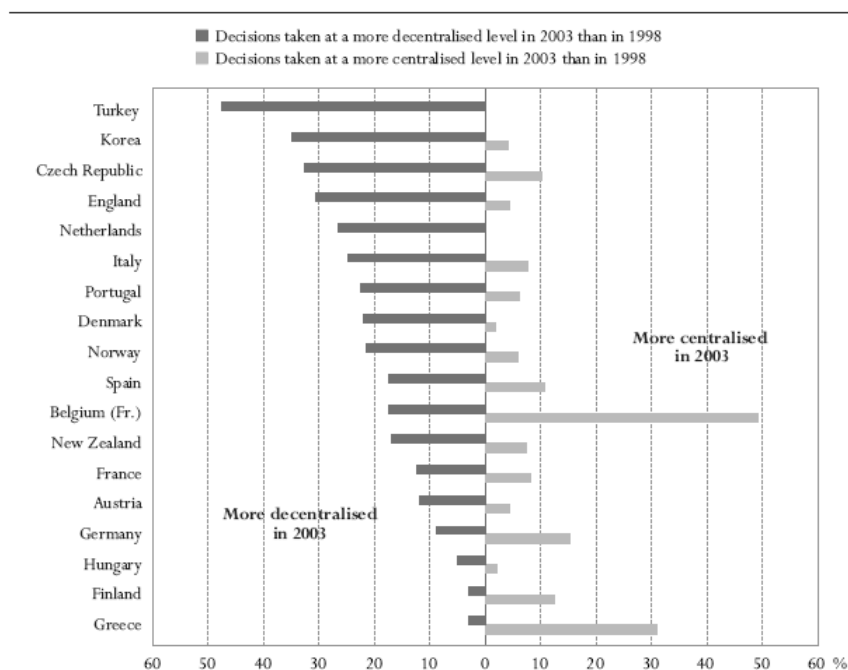
Decentralisation

Most OECD countries have decentralised their school systems. Education at a Glance 2004 concludes: "Placing more decision-making authority at lower levels of the educational system has been a key aim in educational restructuring and systemic reform in many countries since the early 1980s." These changes are to a large extent a response to the increased dynamic and complexity of the environments of these systems. Governments have come to realise that the amount of information that needs to be processed in order to ensure high efficiency and high quality of education is beyond their capacity. There are more detailed rationales governments have for decentralisation and they vary from country to country. The first broad rationale for de-centralising is to increase the efficiency of education by reducing bureaucracies and increasing the operation of market forces. This basically means that governments acknowledge that some competition is better able to ensure efficiency than traditional forms of governmental oversight. The second broad rationale is that

decentralisation can increase the quality of education by increasing the responsiveness of education institutions to local communities and allowing for creative management and bottom-up innovation.

Table 1. Centralisation and decentralisation of the decisions taken relating to public sector, lower secondary education (1998-2003)

Percentage of decisions taken at a more centralised or more decentralised level in 2003 than in 1998



Note: Differences in data collection methodology between the two years may cause some distortion in the changes reported but this should not affect the general trends. Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of decisions taken at a more decentralised level in 2003 than in 1998.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2004).

The situation is more complex, however, for while there has been a shift towards different governance arrangements that allow for more decentralisation in certain areas, particularly management and teaching, at the same time some countries have sought to centralise other areas like output assessments and sometimes curricula. Further governance changes are about strengthening the avenues for stakeholders to influence the educational system or individual institutions, leading to a shift from supply driven systems to demand driven systems.

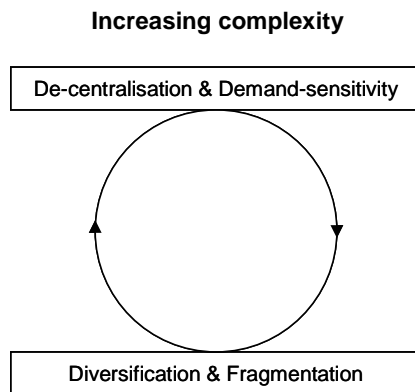
A greater role for demand

The recent OECD/ CERI publication (2006): *Demand-Sensitive Education? Issues and Evidence* shows that many countries are moving towards greater demand sensitivity by introducing mechanisms for (most importantly) parents to influence schools and schooling. These mechanisms rely on choice: the possibility for parents to choose the school they prefer for their children and voice: the possibility to influence decision-making in the school of their children.

In almost all countries parents are increasingly entitled to choose the school they consider most appropriate for their children. Most often this takes the form of allowing parents to send children to a school outside their own school district. Supporting choice further is the trend in many countries is towards greater diversity, by combining decentralisation with the right of schools to develop specific profiles. Increased competition has, in many countries, supported this trend towards diversification. Finally, the information available to parents to make their choices has improved as well. Governments have sought to make the schooling system more transparent. At the same time there are moves for schools to become more participatory as well; through boards and councils parent are getting more formal opportunities to raise their voice and influence schooling. These developments remain more patchy across OECD countries.

Challenges for Education

The combined effects of complex and fluid societies in combination with a decentralised and demand-sensitive school-system are potentially far-reaching. Together these developments may set in motion a cycle of events driving fragmentation and diversification.



This could lead to an educational system fragmented down to the school level, with every fragment uniquely shaped and positioned. Ideally, this can result in schools that are uniquely fit for the students that attend them but not to the extent that they exclude the socially weak. that are focal points for their local communities but also contribute to preparing children for the cosmopolitan conditions of today’s world, that have strong leaders able to balance the responsiveness to parents with a long term vision, with teaching staff that is able to work in teams and take responsibility for their own continuing education.

However, this system presents serious governance challenges; it is a system difficult to control by central – but democratically legitimated – powers. Governments have often opted for steering through guidelines and targets. But this can only be part of the answer. Both the guidelines and the targets need to be relatively broad in order to reap the benefits of decentralisation in the first place: if these become too detailed, top-down control mechanisms are smuggled in through the backdoor. Governing education thus becomes a balancing act in which decentralisation, stakeholder influence and market forces must be balanced with mechanisms to keep the system together and ensure democratic legitimacy.

Increasingly complex systems of education also raise the question on which level innovations in the educational system can most effectively be realised. Central governments are clearly not well placed to micro manage innovation and its implementation, but a system that depends to heavily on local innovation may not be effective either. Local players may lack the critical mass to be able to invest in the research necessary for successful innovations. A situation in which every school solves its own ‘unique’ problems is not very effective.

There is the issue of quality to consider. Decentralisation and diversification means that each school to some extent has its own definition of “quality education”. There is a first question of such diversity of qualities is acceptable in one nation; it implies that different citizens will be treated different. Second, there is the issue of whether at local levels there are sufficient checks on schools to provide quality education: are parents qualified to judge educational quality and will they have the necessary information and time to process this information? Many countries have a system in which some form of central inspection plays a role in maintaining quality. But in such systems there is an inherent tension between local differentiation and central quality criteria.

There is an issue of equality. In a diversified system, some schools will not be just different but also worse than others. Even if there is conscious effort to improve the quality of weak schools; school quality is to a large extent tied to the socio-economic backgrounds of its students which in turn depends on the location of the school. There is a serious risk that the more open to local demand, schools in rich neighbourhoods (with high parent participation, highly qualified students and possibilities to raise additional funding) will increasingly be better than schools in poor neighbourhoods.

Responding to Complexity

All OECD countries are confronted with these challenges. Countries are facing what Bentley (2007, forthcoming) calls a ‘deep systemic tension’ in which performance regimes from the centre in pursuit of higher standards requires strengthening vertical command chains. But that at the same time an increasingly differentiated student body and the increasing evidence about effective learning practices requires much greater levels of flexibility and openness. David Hopkins (2006) suggests that one of the barriers for successful policy implementation is the use of the school as the key unit of intervention. He argues that effective change depends critically on (a) the actual learning processes taking place in the classroom because these are key in raising achievements, (b) a commitment to sustained, systemic change because a focus on individual school improvement distorts social equity.

This analysis suggests the puzzle to be cracked is how effective reform can be attained under the condition a need to ensure system-wide quality and equality, without preventing the flexibility and autonomy that is needed for the systems to respond to societal diversity and to be innovative.

Networks are an important form of activity and decision-making which respond to the changing conditions and pressures: horizontal, flexible and based on participation of the key players (at macro, meso and micro levels). They offer an organising principle responding to the changing locus of decision-making, diversification and demand-sensitivity while at the

same time providing the linkages for innovation, quality assurance and equality. The importance of new forms of *leadership* has been stressed by many, including at the school level with greater autonomy and the need to design strategies and build and motivate their teams. At the level of teaching and the teaching profession, changes towards the ‘re-schooling’ scenarios assume that the nature of schools as organisations would be significantly changed towards greater flexibility; some have referred to this as ‘reinventing’ not just ‘reforming’ schools. *Personalisation of education* is one important avenue in this regard to combine enhanced individual choice with quality and equity.

Futures thinking can make an important contribution to all these levels by building capacity throughout the education system for long-term thinking as well as continuous dialogue amongst all actors and stakeholders in the system becomes a natural mission for the centre in a context of decentralisation and change. This includes building capacity among school leaders, civil servants and politicians so that they are an integral part of the education and learning reform not simply the managers of complex institutional environments. Informed dialogue on the future shape of education and learning – whether at system or local level – will be a critical ingredient for ensuring that there is direction and progress rather than chaotic fragmentation in educational systems of OECD countries. Such dialogue is a prerequisite of working towards a vision of education, one that is consistent and sustainable and that is inspiring for the practitioners, managers and policy-makers working in education.

There remains a critical set of questions to do with embedding this in the reality as opposed to it remaining attractive rhetoric – giving substance to and investment in notions such as networks, distributed leadership and personalisation when confronted with reality.

The system level

- How far is educational policy and reform informed by a long-term view of the future? Is it possible for schooling to be shaped by awareness of the major trends like to drive the future of society and the economy while maintaining a proactive, not just reactive, role?
- Are the mechanisms of educational reform appropriate for the complex learning systems of 21st societies? What role is there for networks and how can they be managed to create desirable sustainable change?
- What examples do we have of futures thinking being an integral part of system-level change? In what ways can this role be strengthened?

Futures thinking and leadership

- What concepts of leadership are appropriate for the school of the 21st century? Are these the concepts that underpin current practice? Are they informing reform agendas?
- Are leaders – in schools, networks of schools, and other learning organisations – equipped to make decisions about the future of their institution or organisation?

What more do they need to be able to carry out such functions effectively? Are there systemic barriers in the way?

- How can the myriad leadership decisions which take place in complex learning systems contribute to a desirable vision of the future which has strategic direction? What leadership infrastructure can help overcome excessive fragmentation?

Futures thinking, professionalism and the educational workforce

- Should the schools of tomorrow look like the schools of today? Are they already changing and if so is this happening quickly enough? How to transform schooling so that learning is organised in ways appropriate to the society of the 21st century?
- What concepts of professionalism are appropriate for the schools of tomorrow? How far will they involve teachers in new roles and how far will they be about recognising other forms of expertise and assistance in schools? What about the professionalism needed for forms of organised learning outside schools *per se*?
- In what ways might the tools of futures thinking help to make these transformations in learning organisations, professionalism and the educational workforce? What examples do we already have and how might they be more widely applied?

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