

Closing knowledge divides

Education: A Good School for Every Community

Wednesday morning, 4 June 2008

Moderator : **Barbara Ischinger**, Director, Education, OECD

John Bangs, Assistant Secretary, Education and Equal Opportunities, National Union of Teachers, United Kingdom

Donald MacLeod, Editor, *Education Guardian*, United Kingdom

Philippe Manière, Director, Institut Montaigne, France

Holger Rupprecht, Minister of Education, Youth and Sports, Brandenburg, Germany

Cecilia Tortajada, President, International Water Resources Association

The subject of education naturally invited itself into the Forum discussions because it was, as **Barbara Ischinger** said, tightly linked to employment and stability. The OECD's PISA survey showed that a large number of children are failing to learn basic skills, Ms Ischinger said, warning that "the price for educational failure is high."

The panel broadly agreed that the challenge of reaching equity in education, in developed as well as developing countries, involved problems rooted well outside the classroom, and centered on what **Cecilia Tortajada** called the "vicious circle" of social disadvantage.

"Poverty and marginalisation remain the leading causes of exclusion from education," said **Ms Tortajada**. "Families in remote communities in rural areas, mostly in developing countries, have less access to primary education, while families in disadvantaged urban areas in both developing and developed countries have less access to quality education."

Net enrolment ratios for primary schools are above 90% in more than half the countries across Europe, East Asia, North America and Latin America, but are much lower in Africa, Central, South and West Asia and the Arab States, she said. Among OECD countries, children who drop out of school at an early age stand a 1-in-2 chance of spending the rest of their adult lives in the lowest social categories, with little or no skills and largely unemployed. Their children would probably follow suit.

Ms Tortajada said the problems for poor and marginalised communities are exacerbated by the quality of schools serving them, beginning with poor facilities, insufficient hours of instruction, sub-standard learning material. The most important short-term issue was the quality of teaching.

John Bangs, commenting on the issue for developed countries, agreed. "All the evidence in OECD research shows we should be putting emphasis on the quality of teachers," he said. It was "the quality of teaching, not diversity of provision" that required

attention. It was vital that every country defined a vision for education in the 21st century. There was an enormous amount to do, he said, beginning with raising the level of teacher training. Once in the job, teachers were not adequately "empowered" to take control of their mission, and many as a result felt disassociated from the broader management of education.

Donald Macleod said teachers in the UK were inundated with bureaucratic directives, diverting their attention from the essentials of their job. "A lot of teachers are beginning to scream 'enough!'", he said. He said while there was consensus in the UK that schools must be available to every category of society, "the way to do it is fiercely contested."

Returning directly to the subject of the session, **Holger Rupprecht** said it was vital for ensuring proper education that every community, in a geographical definition, had access to a school. While the OECD's PISA survey showed that in Germany a pupil's social background was broadly the key to the level of academic results they attained, this was found to be less influential in Brandenburg where extraordinary efforts are made to maintaining schools in every neighbourhood.

"We have parts of the Brandenburg region which are very sparsely populated and others, in neighbourhoods close to the capital Berlin, which are over-populated," he said. Several years ago schools began closing down in the smaller, generally less affluent, communities requiring children to transfer to establishments far from home. The closures were halted and schools are now kept open despite often very low pupil attendance numbers. "This is a costly programme, and we have to regularly defend our decisions with the financial departments," said Mr Rupprecht. "We have to review the situation on an annual basis." But simply maintaining a school in every community is, according to Mr Rupprecht, a significant contribution to equity in education. "We are certain we have made the right choice," he added.

Philippe Manière said education in France suffered from a social segregation of schools. "There is not enough [social] diversity in school populations, and not enough diversity among teaching staff either," he said. The situation was getting worse. In France's *grandes écoles*, elite schools that produce most of France's future decision makers, only 9% of students came from modest social backgrounds, he pointed out, whereas 50 years ago that proportion was 28%! Mr Manière was particularly worried that the entrance exams are now essentially concerned with mathematics, which is supposed to cut across the social divide.

"Essentially kids from bad neighbourhoods go to bad schools, those from good neighbourhoods go to good schools," he said. There was no obvious answer to the problem. But there were practices that should be changed. At present, freshly-qualified teachers are sent to the most deprived and difficult areas, and as a result many of them are soon eager to leave the profession. Salaries should be raised and the criteria for recruiting teachers changed to attract candidates from wider social and ethnic backgrounds.

The multiplication of academic paths to employment was misleading the lower social categories into useless studies. Those which truly led to promising professional paths remained an elite few: "The more privileged know exactly where to go," said Mr Manière.

He cited Finland as a model example for education, where the teaching profession is regarded with great respect, and where there are vastly more candidates to become teachers than there are vacancies. Teachers occupy a fundamental role across Finnish society, especially in rural areas. "The elite among Finnish students may be less elite in their training, but among all the students no-one is left behind," Mr Manière said, and it raises the question of "whether you want your focus to produce a highly-skilled elite or to put the greatest number through education."

During questions from the floor, the panel was asked about the value of information exchanges between developing countries and "the north". Ms Tortajada said access to information "does not automatically translate into knowledge". Computers will never replace teachers.

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