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Statements on conclusion of the EUNEC conference in Lisbon (8-10 October 2007)

EUNEC organised a conference in Lisbon hosted by the Portuguese National Education Council (CNE) and linked to the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union. The conference addressed two topics within education policy: evidence based education policy and equity within education systems.

This paper is split into three sections, the first addresses evidence based policy and the second concentrates on equity. Thirdly EUNEC wants to reflect on the role of education councils.

Evidence based education policy

The contribution of solid evidence for diagnosis, design, development, implementation and monitoring is vital for Education policy. However, we need clarification of, and agreement on, the concept(s). We have to define the critical success factors to use evidence in a balanced decision making process.

EUNEC considers evidence as a broad term. It may in no way be reduced to statistical data. Evidence is to be compiled from different sources, such as:

- Statistical evidence;
- Qualitative analysis;
- Peer learning and action research; and,
- Experiential knowledge coming from practitioners and society.

Evidence is useful at all levels:

- At an international level (indicators, benchmarks, comparative analysis);
- At national or regional level; and,
- At school level (well informed management decisions).

Using evidence in education is a complex process. Education is not the result of exact sciences. Often the evidence available can only act to steer or guide policy making, rather than to provide 'objective / absolute' answers. Evidence use has to be part of a process of active knowledge construction, with the collaboration of researchers, stakeholders, decision makers and practitioners (engendering a sense of ownership). Evidence also needs interpretation. Decision making needs a balance between evidence and values (ethical and political views). Generalization of evidence should be done with care, decision making should take into account the local context (historical, social, cultural).

It is crucial to know who sets the agenda, who interprets the results and who decides, respecting each others' roles and professional standards. Therefore, we need platforms for mutual understanding and careful consideration.

If we want to enhance the quality of education, we have to promote the use of evidence in classrooms. This calls for a strong movement towards professionalisation of teachers. Teachers should be recognised and trained (during initial and in-service training) as professionals and reflective practitioners. Teachers have to be involved in action research. Therefore they need support, time and resources. There is also a need for development research projects.

The results of research should be presented in an accessible, appropriate and readable way for all actors involved. These actors, including teachers, should have an understanding of research and evidence so that they can use, and benefit from, its contribution to policy and practice.

Equity within Education systems

Equity in education is an end in itself. It is important because education enhances life chances of individuals and well being of societies, equity in education supports social equity and unequal results in education have heavy costs. There is no contradiction between equity and efficiency in education. Within the equity debate in education, the social inclusion of migrants is a very important matter. Therefore equity should become a base line in every education policy.

Equity is not only a challenge for education. It needs collaboration with and support from other sectors in society, such as welfare, employment, and culture.

EUNEC considers the ten steps of the OECD study on equity within education¹ as a very useful evidence-based approach to strengthen the policies on equity in the Member States. At a national level this study is a real challenge to consider equity as an increasing priority within national education systems. It is clear that such an approach should be considered as part of a national and international strategy, taking into account the national contexts. It demands a coherent long-term strategy, corresponding action plans and a broad social consensus.

An implementation strategy at a national level calls for serious discussion with stakeholders to reach maximal consensus and ownership. This means: setting up common aims, goals and targets; time-schedules; responsibilities; co-ordination etc. It is clear that education councils can play a crucial role in this process.

The role of teachers in dealing with diversity is underestimated. This issue should get greater emphasis in initial and in-service training of teachers. Once again this demands a strong movement towards professionalisation of teachers. Social and counselling skills of teachers have to be further developed. Therefore, there is need for support, time and resources.

If we want greater equity within education systems, the role of schools must be emphasised. It is important that schools can formulate their action plans based on their own needs, taking into account their own context (socio-economic, environmental and political). Therefore, they need relevant and readable evidence at school level and have a culture of evaluation and monitoring.

¹ 'No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education' will be published by OECD in October 2007.

The contribution of education councils and of EUNEC

There is a great diversity in using evidence in the different education councils. The general role of the education councils is to prepare political decision making, involving all relevant stakeholders. It is key that education councils are involved in setting the education policy making agenda. The advice that education councils give should itself draw on the types of evidence identified above. Therefore we need to have access to the results of all kinds of educational evidence. Where evidence is missing, the councils may choose to propose for example, trials, experiments and research.

Equity is to become a central issue in national education policies. Education councils have a crucial role to play in mediating the evidence about equity towards a comprehensive and detailed national strategy. Education councils can help to convince society at large and policy makers to design and implement such a policy. They are powerful contributions to raise awareness of issues, to enhance national debate and to find a consensus on equity.

EUNEC can play a role in publishing and disseminating this kind of information and in exchanging policy making and examples of good (or bad) practices in different countries.