

# What is a Just Educational System ?

## A response to the report

### “L'équité des systèmes éducatifs européens. Un ensemble d'indicateurs”

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## 1. Preamble: Why indicators matter

The work exemplified by this report is of paramount importance for the fate of social justice in Europe.

If well conducted, it will greatly strengthen, in the field of education policy, a process analogous to the so-called Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) as it already operates to a greater extent in the areas of employment and social policy. No less than these two domains, education policy is, for reasons to be spelled out below, of momentous importance for the achievement of social justice. It is also one in which the European Union does not have direct legislative powers. Nonetheless, by means of the OMC — the formulation of shared objectives, the designing of indicators that operationalise the extent to which they are achieved, the commitment by the member states' governments to provide reliable data, and the definition of benchmarks and the identification of best practices in the light of these indicators —, the European Union can play a powerful role in a way that is consistent with the autonomy of the member states and the diversity of the policies they may wish to adopt, indeed in a way that protects this autonomy and this diversity against downward unification under the competitive pressure of mounting globalisation and the completion of the single European market.

The impact of the OMC is twofold. Firstly, it constitutes an instrument for making differences in the performance of national policies visible to all in an area of particular importance for the achievement of social justice. It thereby puts national governments under pressure to muster greater effort into improving their performance. Secondly, it provides an instrument for the detection of the good and bad effects of national policies, and hence for mutual learning from each other's successes and failures, thereby helping those governments which wish to do better to do so effectively. But for this twofold impact to work, it is crucial to devise intelligent indicators that capture adequately a country's performance as regards meaningful objectives — in this case a fair educational system. Choosing the wrong indicators would create perverse incentives, and hence be worse than doing nothing. Hence the enormous importance of the work incorporated in this report.

## 2. Point of departure: A defensible conception of social justice

What is a fair or just educational system? Without a satisfactory answer to this question, the search for indicators lacks guidance. One possible answer, suggested by a small portion of the report, is that a just educational system is one that is regarded as just by their putative beneficiaries. Trying to elicit the pupils' feelings about how they are treated by their schools may serve some useful purposes, for example that of checking whether a widespread feeling of injustice is correlated with unruly behaviour or with lower educational achievement and, if so, whether the feeling of injustice is the cause or the effect. But as a way of finding a suitable point of departure for assessing the fairness of an educational system, it is fundamentally flawed. If pupils are asked to judge actual situations, their feelings about how just the system is will be systematically biased by ignorance about how it works and what effects it generates. If instead they are asked to spell out, abstracting from any particular situation, their conception of a just educational system, the averaging of their improvised answers can hardly provide a better point of departure than what we can ourselves come up with, on due reflection, after having scrutinised the implications of alternative proposals, whether gleaned from the literature or concocted from scratch.

When doing so, I conjecture that we shall quickly shelve, as does the report, both utilitarian and libertarian approaches. For a utilitarian, there cannot be a normatively relevant notion of a fair educational system, as opposed to an efficient one, i.e. one that helps a society achieve the highest possible level of aggregate welfare. And such an efficient system may well be one that, for example, systematically filters out those with both a poor capacity and a weak desire to become educated by virtue of their poor social background. For a libertarian, on the other hand, there is no normatively relevant notion of a fair educational system apart from whether it respects duly defined property rights. For example, if the owners of all local schools deny access to ethnic minorities because they expect them to be troublemakers, or if no one bothers to provide any schooling to the children of the indigent, no injustice whatever needs to be involved. Implications of this sort can safely be regarded as disqualifying both utilitarianism and libertarianism as suitable points of departure.

What is then left? Essentially a conception of justice as equality, or at least equalisation, of opportunities. Those attracted by other *prima facie* plausible options, such as some form of outcome egalitarianism or some form of principle of proportionality to merit or to effort, will converge, on due reflection, to some version of opportunity egalitarianism. At least so I would argue, without having the space to do so in the present context.

## 3. Three interpretations of justice as equality of opportunities.

It is, however, very important, to distinguish three families of conceptions of social justice as equality of opportunities. All three agree that people's achievements, the outcomes they reach, can legitimately turn out quite unequal as a result of being affected by their choices — the efforts they decide to make and the risks they willingly take — but that they should be given equal opportunities to reach these outcomes, at least in so far as doing so is not counterproductive.

What I shall the *formal* interpretation of justice as equality of opportunities require that only people's current abilities, their competence, should affect their opportunities. It amounts to indicting *discrimination* in access to education, employment, etc., as exemplified by the restriction of some subjects to male students, or by differential hiring according to race. But few people

interested in the fairness of educational systems, if any, will find conceptions of this first kind adequate, once aware of the extent to which children's competences are affected by their social background, even in the absence of any formal discrimination.

What I shall call the *restricted* interpretation of justice as equality of opportunities requires that only people's natural talents should affect their opportunities. This makes the restricted interpretation far more demanding than the formal one, as people's current abilities can themselves be affected by many factors besides their natural talents, such as their race, gender, nationality or social background. Restricted conceptions require the impact of all these factors to be neutralised. Common interpretations of a "meritocratic" approach to educational fairness, as well as widespread understandings of educational injustice as *reproduction*, in Bourdieu & Passeron's (1970) sense, belong to this second family.

Finally, what I shall call the *comprehensive* interpretation of justice as equality of opportunities requires the impact of all determinants of opportunity to be neutralised. Opportunities must be equal to all, irrespective not only of their race, gender, social background, etc. but also of their innate talents. This is, after all, nothing less arbitrary, morally speaking, about people being richer than others thanks to these talents than thanks to their social origins.

Needless to say, the trade off between the equalisation of opportunities and economic efficiency is very unequal depending on which conception is adopted. In the formal interpretation, equalising opportunities is quite likely to increase efficiency. In the restricted interpretation, it may have a cost in terms of efficiency, but hardly a large one. In the comprehensive conception, on the other hand, it is bound to have a prohibitively, indeed absurdly high cost. Theories of justice that adopt the comprehensive interpretation of equality of opportunities will therefore tend either to settle for equality at some basic level, as in Amartya Sen's (1985, 1992) equality of basic capabilities, or to replace strict equality by a sustainable maximin, i.e. a lasting maximization of the opportunities open to those with least opportunities, as in my own conception of justice as "real freedom for all" (Van Parijs 1995).

## 4. John Rawls's two principles for the equalisation of opportunities

On this background, the (non-exclusive) privilege given in the report to one specific conception of social justice, namely John Rawls's, appears fully justified. This is not only because of the pivotal role played by John Rawls's (1971, 2001) theory of justice in any contemporary discussion of social justice, owing to the rigorous and original way in which his principles articulate freedom and equality, efficiency and responsibility. This is also, more specifically, because his principle of fair equality of opportunity (PFE0) — equal opportunity for given talents — is nothing but a standard formulation of the restricted interpretation characterised above, while his difference principle (DP) can be interpreted as a sensible way of capturing whatever there is in the comprehensive interpretation of equality of opportunities that is not already captured by the restricted one. The latter point deserves a brief explanation, especially as the difference principle is often wrongly interpreted as a principle of maximin outcome — maximisation of the outcome for the worst off —, with the outcome formulated in terms of an index of social and economic advantages or even sometimes in terms of welfare.

Rawls conceives of a society as a system of unequal social positions, in the sense that their incumbents can expect on average, over their lifetimes, unequal levels of social and economic advantages, as measured by an index that integrates wealth and income, the powers and prerogatives attached to those positions, and what Rawls calls the social bases of self respect. The PFE0 demands that these positions should be equally open to all, for given levels of talent, whereas the DP requires that to the

worst of these positions should be associated as high an expected level of social and economic advantages as is sustainable. This stipulation is not about the outcomes actually achieved by the various individual members of a society, because outcomes will vary, among incumbents of the same social position, depending, for example, on how much overtime work they perform, on how much they spend on expensive holidays, on whether they manage to avoid costly divorces by behaving decently with their partners, on how good a bargain they make when buying or selling their houses, on how well they look after their families' health, and on countless other factors. Hence, the subject of the DP is rather the opportunities of the worst off, the options that will be accessible over their life time to the least fortunate — those least well served by their (innate) talents, by their family background (to the extent not neutralised by the PFEO) and by sheer luck — to whom only the worst social positions are accessible.

The DP does not demand a full equalisation of the expectations associated to all social positions. For more talented people tend to need incentives to attract them to the positions in which they will put their talents to the socially most useful use, and to develop their talents in such a way that they can occupy these positions competently. And an efficient development and allocation of the available talents is essential if the amount of social and economic advantages to be shared among all, including the incumbents of the worst off positions, is not to shrink unduly. Unequal opportunities in this sense, i.e. unequal lifetime expectations of income, wealth and other advantages depending in particular on how talented one happens to be, can consequently be justified on the basis of the DP, but only to the extent that they help boost the lifetime expectations associated with the positions accessible to the least fortunate, in particular the least talented. In this light, the DP fits easily into what has been labelled above the comprehensive interpretation of equality of opportunities, with strict equality weakened, out of efficiency concerns, into a sustainable maximin. (See Van Parijs 2002 for a detailed discussion of the DP.)

Thus clarified, Rawls's PFEO and his DP provide, as we shall see shortly, a useful way of organising most of the indices of educational fairness used in the report. Those relevant to the assessment of the degree to which the PFEO is satisfied will make sense to anyone committed to either the restricted or the comprehensive interpretation of justice as equality of opportunities. Those relevant to the assessment of the degree to which the DP is satisfied will make sense only to those committed to a comprehensive interpretation.

## 5. Measuring the achievement of Fair Equality of Opportunity

As a first approximation, the extent to which the PFEO is violated can be measured by the strength of the correlation between such variables as race, gender, nationality, residence, parental income, parental status or parental education on the one hand, and on the other hand access to and success at the various levels of schooling or levels of competence achieved. Measuring such correlations is undoubtedly relevant, but it is important to be aware that the absence of any significant correlation between these variables is neither necessary nor sufficient for the full satisfaction of the PFEO.

The absence of any significant correlation is not a necessary condition for two distinct reasons. Firstly, a significant correlation may reflect differences in preferences between different categories, rather than differences in possibilities. And what matters, for the sake of the PFEO is the equal distribution of possibilities irrespective of gender, ethnic group, social class, etc., not the equal distribution of probabilities. The latter are also affected by preferences, which we have no reason to presume to be identical in all categories. This qualification is important, but it needs to be handled with care, both because modest preferences may be the

protracted effect of modest possibilities and because differences in the parents' preferences cannot justify inequalities in the children's possibilities.

Secondly, one cannot rule out a priori that a significant correlation between educational achievement and social origin may reflect differences in innate talents. For example, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) have notoriously argued that, by fostering homogamy in terms of intellectual capacity, female access to all levels of education, has unintentionally generated a polarization of the U.S. gene pool in terms of innate IQ. Their empirical claims have been challenged and may be wrong. But no law of logic or nature rules out that they may be true. For the sake of the argument, suppose that they are true. In a knowledge-based economy, one can then safely expect a significant correlation between the genetic component of intellectual capacities and social class. And if this is actually the case, equality of opportunities for given talents is consistent with the indefinite persistence of a significant correlation between social origin and educational achievement, indeed with a growing correlation as gender-based inequality of opportunity keeps being eroded.

On the other hand, the absence of a correlation between educational achievement and social origin (and other unchosen characteristics except talents) is not sufficient for the satisfaction of the PFEO, as what matters with respect to the latter is not the enjoyment of educational opportunities as such, but the influence of this enjoyment on access to both economic and social benefits throughout people's lives (the report rightly does not consider only economic opportunities: see esp. A.1.2). If the neutralisation of the impact of social background on educational achievement were systematically accompanied by a neutralisation of the impact of educational achievement on professional success, for example, precious little may have been gained for the sake of social justice as equality of opportunities. But if there is a correlation between educational achievement and economic and social success in life which is not reducible to the impact on both of a common causal factor, then a reduction of the correlation between non-talent factors and educational achievement does generate a better satisfaction of the PFEO, even if the correlation between schooling and economic and social success had nothing to do with what is being learned at school and was entirely due to the impact of the network it enables one to acquire or even to the selection effect.

In this light, three sets of indicators featuring in the report are obviously relevant to the assessment of the extent to which the PFEO is satisfied. Firstly, it is relevant to ask to what extent various educational systems specifically devote resources to improving the educational achievements of children with a less favourable background: are class sizes smaller, teachers more numerous, etc. for poorer children, for children with immigrant parents, etc. ? (See columns (5) and (6) in B.1.2.)

However, focusing resources in this way may prove ineffective. Far more important is therefore, secondly, the set of indicators that reveals the extent to which race, gender, social background, etc. actually correlate with access to and success at the various levels of education. (See the inter-group differences in tables 2-3 of C.1.1 and C.3.1).

Thirdly and finally, one has to check that the neutralisation of the impact of these variables on educational achievement is not offset by a fall in the return to educational achievement, whether on average or specifically for the least advantaged. (See A.1.1, A.1.2 and D.1.1.)

## 6. Measuring the satisfaction of the Difference Principle: central indicators

It was obvious enough that the PFEO had to give a key role to the educational system. Only a little more reflection is needed to realize that the DP too can only be realised if the educational system functions adequately. But the criteria for deciding whether it does are quite different, and hence also the set of indicators that becomes relevant.

Remember that what the DP requires is that the social institutions should be so designed so that the expectations associated to the worst social positions should be as good as possible. In order to achieve this, cash benefits certainly have a role to play, in a form that must make sure not to trap beneficiaries in a situation of exclusion from economic and social participation — bear in mind that the relevant expectations are not only about income and wealth, but also about powers and prerogatives and about the social bases of self-respect. Rawls insists, however, that the market regime that is justified by his DP is not *welfare-state capitalism* — a market system with residual payments to those whose market income is not sufficient for subsistence. It is rather what he calls a *property-owning democracy*, i.e. a market system in which capital and in particular human capital is so widely spread that social assistance is only required in exceptional cases. From this perspective, an educational system that equips all citizens with all they need not only to find a decently paid job, but also to get along in the other aspects of their lives, such as choosing a doctor, renting a flat or selecting an internet provider, is of paramount importance.

For this reason, the set of indicators that is most relevant to assess the extent to which the DP is realized is not the one explicitly connected with the latter in the report — how much will the best educated do for the poor (see D 2.1) —, to which I shall return shortly. It rather needs to be concerned with characterising what an educational system achieves for its pupil population taken as a whole. What matters, however, is neither the average level of competence achieved, nor the inequality in the competence achieved (as measured by the standard deviation, the variance or whatever: see C.1.1), but rather how well educated the worst educated of the system manage to be.

It is therefore relevant, firstly, to assess the resources deployed for the sake of improving the achievement of the weaker pupils (see column (7) of B.1.3). But here again, the means are less important than the outcomes. Hence, it is even more relevant to develop indices analogous to poverty indices, but with an index of the minimum level of competence required for functioning reasonably well in our economies and societies in the place of the minimum level of income required for subsisting reasonably well. This may take the form of a *head count* of the “incompetent” (how much short are we from universal minimum competence in terms of percentage of the total population) or of a *gap* (how much short are we of universal competence in terms of the amount of competence to be provided to the less than minimally competent). (See C.1.2.). Alternatively, instead of using some analogue of a poverty line to design the indicators, I suggest that it would make a lot of sense to use the same data in order to calculate, for each country, how high an average level of competence its educational system manages to provide to its 10, 5 or 1% least competent pupils — or perhaps, if that turns out to be more informative, how large the mean and variance of the competence of the country's 5% least competent is.

Whether for this last couple of suggestions or for the analogues of poverty measures, the question unavoidably arises (as pointed out in the report on pp. 101-02) whether the levels of competence that make sense in a international comparisons should be assessed relative to the country's mean or median or rather using a country-independent standard. It is clear that Rawls's DP, as a criterion of maximin expectations (rather than of maximally equal expectations), should not be interpreted in country-relative

but in absolute terms. However, one should not rush to infer that this also holds for a Rawlsian assessment of maximin educational achievement. For education matters, as far as the DP is concerned, mainly by virtue of what it gives access to, and part of this access — in particular access to a job — is strongly dependent on the educational achievement of other residents of the same country. The same absolute level of education may therefore provide a guarantee of a job in one country, while being a sure recipe for long-term unemployment in another. On the other hand, some capacities learned at school are about equally useful wherever one lives, and as the European market becomes more integrated, employment-related educational requirements tend to converge. All things considered, therefore, taking the weakest 15% of all countries as the benchmark for calculating headcounts and gaps, and hence using the same absolute level of minimal competence in all countries, should make more sense than taking the weakest 15% within each country. And for the same reason, comparing the average levels of the weakest 5% or whatever in each country, as I suggested above, should be done using the same absolute standard.

## 7. Measuring the satisfaction of the Difference Principle: additional indicators

These indicators about how good an educational system manages to be for the worst achievers are undoubtedly relevant for assessing how well a country is doing as far as the DP is concerned. But it would be wrong to stop there. For it is another essential function of the educational system, no less centrally, though more indirectly, relevant to the DP, that it boosts society's productive capacity and hence also its capacity to durably boost the expectations of the worst off. For this reason, some measure of each educational system's overall efficiency in producing productive competence, as well as of its overall cost, should also be part of the picture. For increasing the competence of the least competent might conceivably come at a cost either in terms of the average level of competence achieved by the pupil population as a whole or in terms of the resources devoted to the relevant levels of education. For example, the suggestion (p. 124), in connection with Finland, that there is no trade off between efficiency and equity should be checked bearing the cost dimension in mind. There may be no trade off, or only a very mild one, but it is important to find out, as less overall competence means a smaller productive potential while a higher resource bill means a smaller budget for other public expenditures, and there is therefore in both cases a smaller potential for boosting in ways other than through education the expectations of the worst off, and hence the satisfaction of the DP.

Further, there is of course no guarantee that the productivity generated by a competent labour force is being used to boost the expectations of the worst off. Estimates of the fiscal return of education (briefly alluded to in fn 6 p. 171 of the report, but dismissed in part because of a lack of comparable figures), though not decisive, are relevant in this perspective. A negative fiscal return of post-obligatory education, for example, would justify a strong suspicion that the educational system is not fair. It must, however, be observed that the very notion of aggregate fiscal return is pretty tricky, as one needs to try to imagine counterfactually how much there would be for the state to cash in if it did not fund post-obligatory education — how many people would still undertake post-obligatory education, for how long and in what field, how many graduates would move in from abroad, etc. —, which is not the sum of what each individual would have been taxed had he had no post-obligatory education, as it can be assessed from current income differentials (cf A.1.1).

Even if it could be uncontroversially measured, the fiscal return would still not provide an appropriate indicator of how well the global efficiency of the educational system is used to further the satisfaction of the DP, as the expenditure financed by this return

may have nothing to do with boosting the expectations of the worst off. An additional relevant indicator is the extent to which poverty has shrunk as a result of transfers (see D.2.1. and p. 171). Here again, there are various pitfalls. First, poverty may shrink very little because there was very little of it in the first place (pre-transfer poverty rates should be mentioned next to the poverty-reduction rates in order to reveal this), owing precisely to an educational system that is good at boosting the competence of the least competent. But this difficulty can be handled by viewing it as a complement and not a substitute for the indexes of worst achievement discussed above. Secondly, most poverty reduction indices of this sort operate on a data base consisting of time slice income distributions (rather than lifetime) and therefore treat as poverty alleviation part of the effect of an earnings-related pension system that simply shifts a portion of good wages from the active to the inactive period of an affluent person's life. Thirdly, this type of measure fails to capture the crucial difference between on the one hand a highly targeted assistance or unemployment insurance system that reduces income poverty at the cost of creating steep unemployment traps, and hence durably impairing the beneficiaries' access to jobs and the associated powers, prerogatives and self respect, and on the other hand variants of a more "active" social state which perform better in terms of dimensions of people's opportunities than do not reduce to purchasing power and are no less relevant to the DP.

Despite all these difficulties, it is essential to somehow supplement an assessment of the direct impact of the educational system on the competences of the worst off with an assessment of the impact of the very unequal competences it produces on a social product that is partly used to boost the options of the worst off, whether through institutional transfers in cash or in kind or indeed directly through general prosperity and the associated job creation. The DP will be better approximated by a system that trains people more unequally if it boosts more the expectations of the least competent in this indirect way. Inequalities in the distribution of competences and the associated expectations could be justified along these lines.

The approach suggested by this last set of indicators brings us closer to the explicit connection made in the report between the DP and the attitudes and behaviour of the highly educated (D.2.1 and pp. 129-38). Let me first remark that the way in which the connection is phrased is sometimes misleading. True, the DP can be interpreted as stating that unequal expectations can be justified if they contribute to improving the expectations of the worst off, and hence, arguably, that unequal levels of education can similarly be justified if they work for the benefit of the worst off. But, contrary to what the report suggests (esp. pp. 127 and 130), saying that *inequalities in education* work for the benefit of the worst off is not equivalent to stating that *the more educated* work for the benefit of the worst off, which is all the D.2.1 indicators capture — and even that, only in the best cases, as some of them are not even about what the highly educated do for the less advantaged, but about how they feel towards them. Since the indicators proposed do not enable us to assess whether the better educated tend to do these things more than the less educated (an indicator of the differential is explicitly discarded), the measured impact of the education system is only through equipping some people to do this helping more effectively than would be the case if they were less educated, not through making the more educated more altruistically disposed than the less educated.

Now, the magnitude of this impact on the worst off need not be negligible: marvellous institutions like the UK's Citizen's Advice Bureaus or literacy classes for immigrant women in many European cities, which rely largely on the voluntary work of comparatively educated retirees, housewives or students can plausibly be conjectured to make quite a difference to the expectations associated with the worst social position, typically by providing crucial information, advice or understanding at critical junctures in the lives of comparatively disadvantaged people. Nonetheless, this effect of spreading education — making non-governmental informal assistance more effective — is bound to be dwarfed, under well functioning institutions, by the effect it has on a domestic product a large portion of which is taxed to provide, through formal channels, health care, social security and

indeed a fairly high level of education to all. Sen-inspired indicators of educational weakness, rates of fiscal return to education and rates of poverty reduction induced by the tax-and-transfer systems are therefore at least as “Rawlsian” as are, according to the report (see p.138 about Sweden), rates of voluntary help of the poor to the rich.

Once these clarifications are made and the range of “Rawlsian” indicators considerably broadened, Finland will probably still emerge as having the fairest educational system in terms of the PFEO, and Belgium the most unfair : a suitably weighted average of columns (3), (4) and (5) in Table 1 of p. 100 would presumably establish that. How countries fare in terms of the DP is less easily determined. Finland is again at the top, while Italy at the bottom in terms of incompetence rates and gaps (see *ibid*, columns (6) and (7)). But there is no indicator of the general efficiency of the educational system or of its fiscal return (except for four countries in fn 6 p.171), and only fragmentary data (see D.2.1) about how much poverty is reduced by the tax and transfer system (with Denmark at the top and Greece at the bottom) and about the involvement of the more educated in solidarity associations (with the Netherlands at the top and Germany at the bottom). Consequently, there is little basis for guessing which country’s educational system is fairest according to the DP, in the sense of doing most overall to improve the expectations associated with the country’s worst positions.

## 8. Indicators for instruments

I shall close by emphasizing that indicators are not only useful in allowing us to assess how fair or unfair the various educational systems are, but also in enabling us to conjecture why they are as fair or unfair as they are revealed to be. In this respect the data on segregation, as estimated by dissimilarity indices are particularly striking (see B.2.3 on p.63 and the comments on p. 123). One instructive, though incidental, feature of these data is that they illustrate the sensitivity of the indicator to levels of aggregation and hence to the regional dimension: Belgium is the most segregated country in terms of levels of competence when it is taken as a whole, but its measured level of segregation drops significantly if one takes as the relevant index the weighted average of the segregation level in its two educational systems (Flemish and francophone) considered separately.

More central, however, is the following suggestion. The considerable variation in the extent of the various dimensions of segregation provides useful hints as to what could enable countries to improve at a low cost both the fairness and the efficiency of their educational systems. This line is made particular promising when the data on segregation are coupled with the data on the influence of “peer quality” (see esp. the graph on p.119 and the comments on p.117): in Germany, Austria and most other countries, whether your children will do well at school is far better predictable from the average social status of the parents of their class mates than from your own. This should go a long way towards explaining, for example, why Belgium, which looks particularly generous in terms of resources focused on the weakest (see the data on class size in B.1.2, p.57), is doing so badly in terms of neutralising the impact of social background or improving the competence of the weakest. For example, the potential for cross-pupil tutoring, whose effectiveness was forcefully emphasized in her comment by Carol Fitz-Gibbon, is presumably greatly reduced in more homogeneous classes. Moreover, as suggested elsewhere in the report (p.78), social mixity should also be a good for the sake of fostering informal solidarity between the better off and the worse off. More importantly perhaps, it should be a major factor in securing stable and widespread political support for generous institutionalised solidarity.

Finally, it is important to realise that, more than ever under contemporary conditions, a country' schooling system is only part of its educational system. Children spend less time inside class rooms than in front of television and computer screens. This enables them to learn, very unequally, all sorts of knowledge and skills which may turn out to be far more important than much of what they learn at school. Competence in English as a second language, for example, is no doubt a major influence on children's future opportunities throughout continental Europe. But cross-national variation in both its average level and its spread (as revealed in Eurobarometer 54, 2001) arguably owes far more to whether English-language TV programmes are dubbed or subtitled on the channels they watch, than to any feature of their educational systems. Similarly, variation in the average level and inequality in computer literacy can plausibly be conjectured to have far less to do with the number of hours allocated to computer courses at school than with the way in which municipal libraries, the spread of internet cafes, the tax system or whatever else have helped spread access to computers and the internet to children of all social backgrounds.

Both at the level of assessing the realisation of the objectives — by not restricting the competence tests to narrowly schoolish skills — and at the level of detecting the key instruments for achieving them — by broadening the sight beyond the classroom —, it is important that the indicators should not shrink a fair educational system to a fair school system. This is my final suggestion to the authors of a report which I found extremely instructive, extremely stimulating and, for the reasons spelled out at the beginning, extremely important for the prospects of a just Europe.

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