EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Education plays a key role in determining how you spend your adult life – a higher level of education means higher earnings, better health, and a longer life. By the same token, the long-term social and financial costs of educational failure are high. Those without the skills to participate socially and economically generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and social security systems.

So a fair and inclusive system that makes the advantages of education available to all is one of the most powerful levers to make society more equitable. Education has expanded significantly in the past half-century, but hopes that this would automatically bring about a fairer society have been only partly realised. Women have made dramatic advances, but overall social mobility has not risen and in some places inequalities of income and wealth have increased.

Increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in some countries while other countries face longstanding issues of integrating minorities. Fair and inclusive education for migrants and minorities is a key to these challenges. Equity in education enhances social cohesion and trust.

Equity in education has two dimensions. The first is fairness, which basically means making sure that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential.

The second is inclusion, in other words ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all – for example that everyone should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic. The two dimensions are closely intertwined: tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure.

Three key policy domains have been identified by OECD for achieving equity in education:

- the design of education systems,
- practices both in and out of school, and
- resourcing.

The basic structure of education systems affects equity. Traditionally, education systems have sorted students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. Early sorting can also weaken results overall.

This prompts two conclusions: early tracking and streaming need to be justified in terms of proven benefits; and school systems using early tracking should postpone it to a later stage to reduce inequities and improve outcomes.

The socio-economic structure of education systems is also important. Secondary school systems where there are large socio-economic differences between schools tend on average to have worse results in mathematics and reading and a greater spread of reading outcomes. Indeed, social background is more of an obstacle to educational success than in systems without such socio-economic differences between schools.

Selecting pupils on the basis of academic achievement tends to create great social differences between schools. It also increases the link between socio-economic status and performance –

it tends to accelerate the progress of those who have already gained the best start in life from their parents – and is also associated with stronger performance at the top end of the scale in mathematics and science. So academic selection needs to be used with caution because of the risks it poses to equity.

Governments often allow parents a choice of schools, partly in the interests of equity. But this may in fact increase the risk of inequity because better-educated parents make better-informed choices. In many OECD countries, greater choice in school systems is associated with larger differences in the social composition of schools.

The conclusion is that school choice requires careful management from an equity perspective, particularly to ensure that it does not result in increased differences in the social composition of schools. Popular schools are likely to be oversubscribed, and need ways to ensure an even social mix. This could include selection methods such as lottery arrangements. Financial premiums to schools attracting disadvantaged pupils may also help.

Students struggling within the system face a further risk as they get into the final years of compulsory education – lack of future choice, and a high risk of dropping out altogether. The reasons for dropping out include disenchantment with school, lack of support at home, negative learning experiences and having to repeat years because of poor performance.

The best cure is to stave off the risk of dropout as early as possible. Basic schooling should support and engage those who struggle at school as well as those who excel.

One way of improving performance and preventing dropout is to identify at-risk students early and take action quickly. This means monitoring information on attendance, performance and involvement in school activities, and having a concrete response to improve outcomes and prevent dropout.

Upper secondary education needs to be attractive not just to an academically-inclined elite, but also to offer good quality pathways without dead ends and effective links to the world of work. Offering at-risk students good career guidance and counselling, as well as making the curriculum more flexible and diverse is helpful. Additional learning support at the end of secondary school may also help to encourage students to stay in school.

Good quality vocational tracks are essential. Removing an academic hurdle from entrance to general upper secondary education, and allowing access to tertiary education from vocational programmes, as Sweden and Norway have done, can increase the status of the vocational track.

In the modern knowledge economy, one shot at education which determines once and for all your future life choices is not enough. But those who fail at school often find it difficult to recover later on. In all OECD countries, those with weak basic qualifications are much less likely to continue learning in adult life. However, there are big differences between countries.

Second chances for those who lack basic education and skills can be provided in a number of ways, including programmes that provide literacy training, work-based programmes, and arrangements to recognise informal learning.

What happens in the classroom obviously affects equity, but the relationships between schools, parents and communities also matter. Student learning benefits from an effective school-home

relationship, but weak support at home can hold back children from deprived backgrounds. Effective provision for migrants and minorities in the education system is also a key challenge.

Making students repeat a year if they are not keeping up is a popular option – in some school systems, up to one-quarter of students repeat a year at some point. But it is costly and there is little evidence that children benefit from it. High rates of year repetition in some countries need to be reduced by encouraging alternative approaches in the classroom. 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. Many countries could usefully follow the Finnish approach to learning difficulties, which offers a sequence of intensifying interventions to draw back into the mainstream those who fall behind.

attitudes at home, including parental support for education, involvement in children's learning and cultural habits like having books around, are also associated with stronger school performance.

Expecting homework to improve performance may threaten equity, since some children do not have the parental support needed to bring results. But encouraging parental involvement – working with children at home and actively participating in school activities – does improve results. Schools that foster participation by parents, and help parents to support their children in their school work tend to have better outcomes.

For this to work, schools need to target their efforts on improving communication with parents in the most disadvantaged homes and to help develop home environments conducive to learning. After-school homework clubs at school may also help those with weak home support.

Minorities and migrants face particular difficulties, and systems need to respond to their needs. Success in both education and employment varies widely between immigrant and minority groups and between different countries. But in many cases minority groups are less likely than others to participate in early childhood education and care, more likely to be in special education and more likely to drop out or end up in low-status streams. For some "visible minority" groups, labour market discrimination is sometimes extensive. This limits employment prospects and reduces the incentives to obtain qualifications.

In most countries, first- and second-generation immigrant students tend to perform less well than their native counterparts. To combat these disadvantages, early childhood education and care is helpful and provides a strong environment in which to learn a second language. Special measures may encourage participation by immigrants' children.

Where immigrant and minority groups are disproportionately streamed into special education institutions, attention needs to be given to the risk of cultural bias in the selection process and whether separate schooling is in the best interests of the students involved. Newly-arrived immigrant children often need special language training, for example, but this should not isolate the children from mainstream classes for more than a year at most. Particularly in countries where immigration has risen sharply, teachers need training to deal with language issues but also a multicultural curriculum and teaching antiracism.