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Reflections on Disadvantage in Education with Focus on Socio-economic Background – Aspects from a Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper is part of the EPASI project (Educational projects addressing social inequality), and analyses educational policies directed at those who are socio-economically disadvantaged in 14 European states. This paper points to two different approaches to socio-economic disadvantage and discussing some preliminary findings. Socio-economic disadvantage is explicit or implicit: there is a “domino effect” linked to other aspects of disadvantage as such as minority ethnic status, religious and linguistic minorities, and it is sometimes impossible to state what is the hen and what is the egg. There is a tension between on one hand the democratic commission and aims for inclusion and on the other hand, practice.

Introduction

The EPASI project is surveying, analysing and reporting educational policies regarding those economically disadvantaged, minority ethnic groups, indigenous minorities and those disadvantaged by gender, those with disabilities, religious minorities and linguistic minorities, in a group of 14 European states.¹ In this paper we are pointing out two different approaches to socio-economic disadvantage and discussing some preliminary findings.²

With an intention to provide equal opportunities and giving access to education at all levels, policies have in most countries been focussing who is educationally disadvantaged. Socio-economic disadvantage is explicitly or implicitly and like a “domino effect”, linked to other aspects of disadvantage as e.g. minority ethnic groups, religious groups and linguistic minorities, and figuratively speaking it is sometimes impossible to state what the hen is and what the egg is.

In 2006 the Swedish report *Utbildningens dilemma. Rapport av Utredningen om makt, integration och strukturell diskriminering. Demokratiska ideal och andrafierande praxis*³ was published (SOU 2006:40). The report shows the dilemma between on one hand the democratic commission and aims for inclusion and on the other hand, practices. Knowledge about “reality” and its “what it is like” is depending on the history creating it

¹ Belgium, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden and UK.

² The final and comparative results on socio-economic disadvantage will be accounted for in a thematic report later in 2008.

³ Sawyer, Lena & Kamali, Masoud (Eds.). *The Educational Dilemma. Report on power, integration and structural discrimination. Democratic ideals and the praxis of otherness.* (Our translation.)

and who created it. It is an a priori system of knowledge which brings in conceptions and stereotypes of “us” and the “others”.

As reported in e.g. the Swedish and Danish Country Reports (Hartsmar; Cederberg & Lingärde, in press), a majority of the individuals or families suffering from poverty are found amongst immigrants. About one child out of four who experience poverty in Sweden is of foreign background and with one or both parents born abroad. Today the situation is hardest for immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa having an unemployment that is four times higher than for those born in Sweden and only 30 per cent were self sufficient in 2002. The reality that a successful and long education is no guarantee for young persons with a foreign background or adopted from other countries to get a job especially discriminates young people who “don’t look Swedish” and political proposals such as not allowing newly arrived children and young people to use their mother tongue while in school substantiate institutional discrimination since it is effectively excluding them from making their voices heard. It is of great importance to take into consideration how and to what extent schools reflect contemporary society, what traditions exist in the individual school and in what way societal power and control find expressions in how children and young people perceive the world around them.

Part of an institutional discrimination is the way groups of children and young people are talked about as being or becoming a problem instead of being focussed as having a potential when defined as educationally disadvantaged. Undoubtedly in most cases this is done with good intentions and in trying to get better resources for disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, we see this as one of the reasons for a continuous institutional discrimination. Stigendal (2006, p. 18-19) states that “money has potential, but is it used in ways which cause the appropriate effect? /.../ Perhaps the money hasn’t got the effect to cause the desired effect. /.../ To what extent is the potential of young people used and allowed to cause effects?”

Hartsmar (2001) reports on how pupils in school year 2, 5 and 9 and living in socially diverse residential areas anticipate their future as grown ups. While those from areas labelled as segregated and with low status, associate their future with having a family and children of their own, but at the same time “no job” and “no money”, those living in areas with high social status, as segregated as the former but seldom labelled that way, express confidence in becoming further educated, getting good jobs, buying a house and travelling to interesting places with their future family.

Investing more and better in human capital is at the heart of the Lisbon strategy in order to create jobs and growth for all people. The European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism, Jan Figéel states that “efficient education and training systems can have a significant positive impact on our economy and society” in that way that “if we forget the social dimension of education and training, we risk incurring huge corrective costs later on.”⁴ Again, with all good intentions of including everyone in a prosperous Europe, some groups (the others) are being talked about as those causing the rest of us, “we risk incurring huge corrective costs later on”.

⁴ For further information see: [MEMO/06/321](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/back_gen_en.html)
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/back_gen_en.html

Two approaches to socio-economic disadvantage

The *title of this paper* might be read out in two different ways: (1) socio-economic disadvantage in education, or (2) educational disadvantage of a socio-economic character.

These dissimilar approaches might indicate different views of the deeper origin or character of the disadvantage. The former approach (1) might imply that certain pupils, or groups of pupils, are seen as socio-economically disadvantaged in the society at large. In this case, the educational system may either mirror and reproduce these disadvantages, or try to compensate for them. Alternatively, disadvantages might (perhaps implicitly) be thought of as deficiencies at individual, family, or group level, rather than structural or institutional problems. Again, the assumed role of the school will probably be a compensating one. In contrast, the latter approach (2) might imply that the educational system itself actively creates disadvantage for certain pupils, e.g., through school fees or socially discriminating practice. When reading official documents on educational policies and projects, we may expect that the former interpretation (1) dominates, since most education politicians and officials probably view the educational system itself as constructive rather than destructive for the pupils. We should therefore not be surprised if official documents generally view socio-economic disadvantage as something that primarily has its origins anywhere else than in school. The latter interpretation (2) will, however, still be relevant and valid if there are signs that the school system turns variety and differences into problems (e.g. by using pedagogies biased against working-class experiences and communication styles, and how pedagogic discourse is structured; see e.g. Bernstein 1993) or aggravates inequality problems (e.g. by imposing school fees and other economic costs on low-income households). The school system may also create social and economic dilemmas, if for example pupils from low-income families are exempted from fees or get free lunches only through application processes or practical procedures of a stigmatising character.

Aside from the question of the origin of disadvantage, we should pose the question *which* pupils are seen as (socio-economically) disadvantaged. This probably varies between different contexts and does so in comparison between different countries. Is a pupil disadvantaged first and foremost by his or her individual situation, or can disadvantage be identified collectively for certain groups of pupils? In the latter case, are those groups small or large? That is, does the discourse on disadvantage focus on very poor, marginalised or excluded groups or on large groups such as the entire working class or, as in some countries, the rural population?

In addition, there is an *identification* issue: how are disadvantaged pupils identified in practice? Are they identified collectively (e.g., by entire schools, living areas or communities being labelled disadvantaged and/or segregated), at household level (e.g., by household type, parents' occupation, household income, or recognised family problems), or individually (e.g. by school behaviour, school results, or recognised individual problems)? Such methodological issues may also have a bearing on which pupils are actually seen as disadvantaged. In this sense, practises for identifying (groups of) disadvantaged pupils may be seen as one important component of the actual or potential policy measures to eliminate or mitigate disadvantage.

Poverty statistics for EPASI countries

Below we present statistics of child poverty, early school leaving, the incidence of low literacy, and public expenditures for school in those EPASI countries for which data are available. However, these statistics should be interpreted with caution. Cross-section comparisons may be misleading, if not properly put in context. Therefore, we only view the statistics as a starting-point for reflection. It is important to note that although there are good reasons to expect causal connections between child poverty, scarce public resources for schooling, early school leaving, and low literacy, such connections are not matched by anything like clear and consistent correlations between the countries we are comparing. This highlights the need for further analysis and discussion.

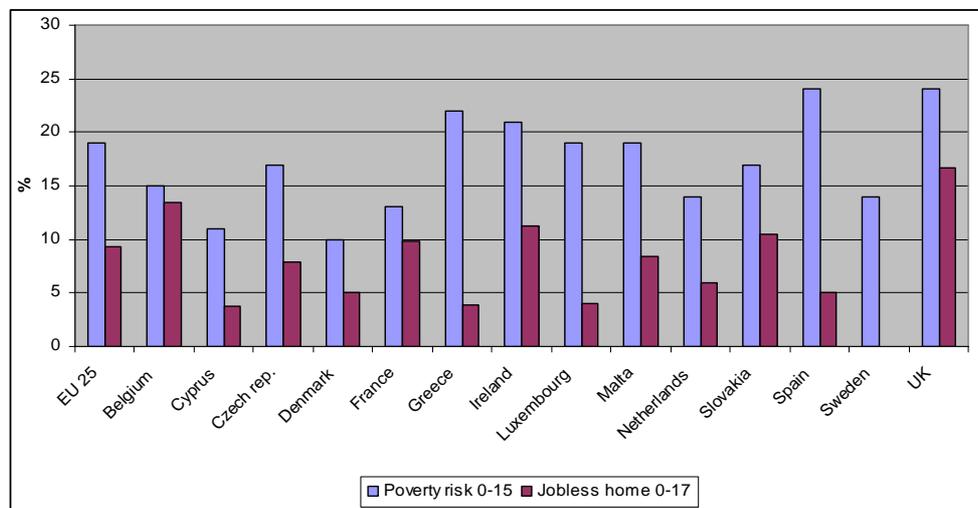


Figure: Child poverty. *Poverty risk 0-15:* Percentage of 0-15-year-olds who live in households with an equivalent disposable income below 60 % of the country median (2006). *Jobless home 0-17:* Percentage of 0-17-year-olds who live in households where no one works (2007). No data available for Sweden. EU 25 refers to the average (estimated by Eurostat) for all EU countries except Bulgaria and Romania. *Source:* Adapted from Eurostat.

Child poverty, comment. The child poverty patterns differ widely between countries. In Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, and Spain, incidence of poverty risk is high while the share of children living in jobless households is low, i.e., many children have ‘working poor’ parents. However, absolute poverty figures might show different patterns, particularly for Luxembourg, by far the richest country in the group. The share of children living in jobless households is highest in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Ireland, and in the United Kingdom, the poverty risk figure is also high. Interestingly, both poverty indicators show relatively low values for Cyprus. However, income levels in Cyprus are generally low, so an absolute income poverty measure would probably give a higher figure in this case. The same is true for the two poorest countries in the group – Slovakia and Czech Republic. Both of them have moderate figures for poverty risk as well as the share of children living in jobless households. The lowest poverty risk figure is to be found in Denmark. In Sweden it has recently risen markedly (according to the Eurostat time series); the same is true for Greece but not for any other country in the group.

Economic factors of disadvantage

We mean that disadvantage in education can be sharpened if a child is poor and the school system is constructed in a way that family economy matters.

We want to discuss some factors that may influence disadvantage in education.

- Existence of school fee
- Free books and school material
- Free school meals
- Demand on school uniform

The existence of school fee

The existence of school fees is a disadvantage in education for poor children and youths. If parents do not have the money to pay the bills that will exclude their children from education. None of the countries we have examined have that system. Some however have a mixture of free schools and school fee. If some schools have school fees but others have not it will divide schools into “schools for rich children and for poor”.

If the family has to *pay the books and school material* it could also make a disadvantage. Even if the school and the school material is free, to be poor affects your possibility to participate in school activities that cost money, for instance school trips, according to a study from UK by Willow, 2001. The demand from school to parents to finance some school activity is a structural exclusion of poor children according to Ridge (2006). While this is free in e.g. France and Sweden, it has repeatedly happened that parents having their young ones in an upper secondary school offering practice abroad have been forced to complain to the Swedish National Agency for Education since schools have asked them to pay for all costs in connection with the practice.

To be poor also affects the possibility to be a part of the cyber world since you have to have the expensive equipments. Low family income affects relations with friends and is especially difficult for poor children living in the countryside according to Ridge (2002, 2006). Transportation cost is high and transportation is difficult to find. That also affects the possibility to maintain in leisure time activities not only because the cost of transportation but also the fact that most activities are organised by private firms and costs money.

Free school meals

It is important to get new energy during the school day. The children have to have something to eat. For poor children this is a problem. They need something to eat but that could mean that they also get a stigma as poor. The possibility of free school lunch is experienced as positive by the children in Ridge (2002) study – you get something to eat but also as stigma since the free lunch is for poor children only. In Sweden all pupils get free school lunch. In most countries you have to bring your own lunch.

School uniform

Ridge (2002, 2006) studies show that when school uniform is used, like in the UK and Ireland, the children as social strata instead acknowledge shoes and other attributes. Ridge points out that they feel afraid not to fit into the group and to be bullied. The experience of being poor is different when growing up in a poor neighbourhood, *as being poor* growing up in a rich. When you go to a school in the same block you are living in or if you go to a school in a socio-economic area different from your own matters. When *family income is generally low* children are not that afraid of being bullied when not wearing the "right" attributes or cloths. Being bullied in school can cause disadvantage. Does that mean that in this sense socio-economic segregation in school could mean fewer worries for children or are the disadvantages caused by segregation bigger? Sweden has had a tradition that the children should join the elementary school in their close neighbourhood. Since the housing areas are highly segregated, in some districts a majority of the pupils belong to poor immigrant families. Such tendencies may be aggravated if all the other families living in the area choose schools in other areas for their children. The fact that such choices are possible to make in some countries may be recognised as a disadvantage caused by official policy.

The Lisbon strategy from 2000 includes the goal to eliminate poverty in EU by 2010. In order to fulfil this strategy, six main priorities were specified, including the elimination of child poverty as well as the prevention of early drop outs from school (European Commission 2004). A strategic goal in the Lisbon Treaty is that EU in the year 2010 will be the world's most dynamic economy (Utbildningsstatistisk Årsbok, 2008). To reach this goal the Ministers of foreign affairs in 2001 have agreed to modernise the education systems in the EU countries. To raise the equivalence in education the means are to develop equal access to education, equal education and equal value of education. Access to education, and that no category is excluded from education and more recourse to pupils that have the most difficulties to pass, should equate educational prerequisites.

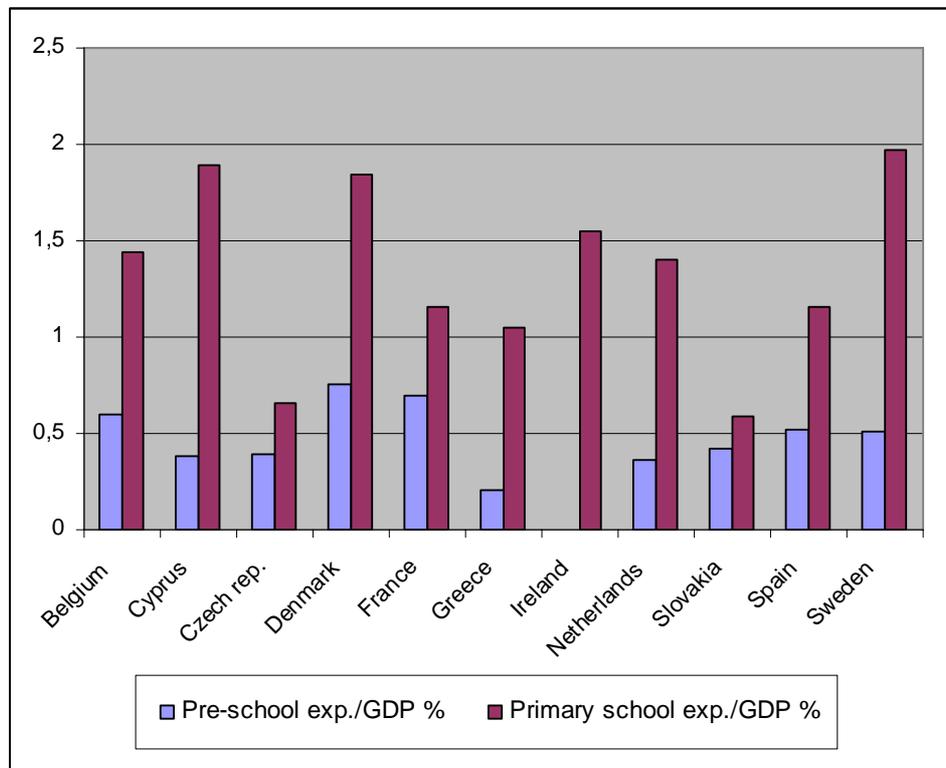
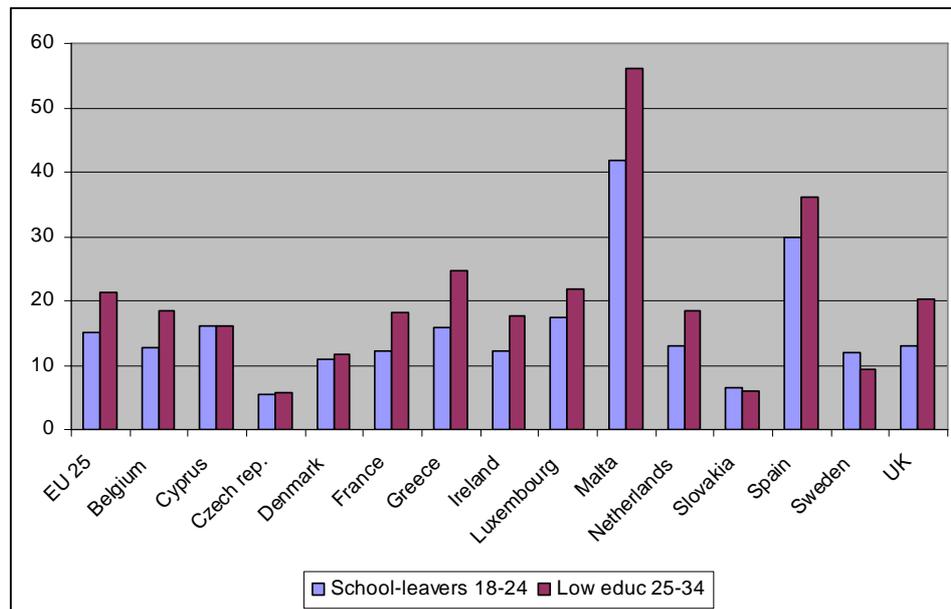


Figure: public school expenditures as shares of GDP. Percentage of gross domestic product spent on public budgets for pre-school and primary school education, respectively (2004-2005). No data available for Luxembourg, Malta, and the United Kingdom. *Source:* Adapted from UNESCO; own calculations.

Comment: A zero figure for pre-school education is reported for Ireland, where this education is probably included to a large part in the figure for primary school education (taking into account that many Irish children start primary school early and few have publicly financed childcare before starting school). In relative terms, the public expenditure on pre-school education is highest in Denmark and France. The (relative) public expenditure on primary school is highest in Sweden, Cyprus, and Denmark, and lowest in Slovakia and Czech Republic.

We have also calculated public expenditures *per capita* (in purchasing power parity US\$, 2004-2005) for pre-school and primary school education with the same dataset. The rank order between the countries remains largely the same as in the figure above, with the following main exceptions: For pre-school education, Sweden and the Netherlands get a somewhat higher relative position than above, while Slovakia falls back relatively. For primary school education, Cyprus falls back from the second to the sixth place, and the gap widens even more between the richer countries, on the one hand, and Slovakia and the Czech Republic on the other. (*Per capita* public expenditures for primary school in Slovakia are only about 15 % of the figure for Sweden, according to this measure.)

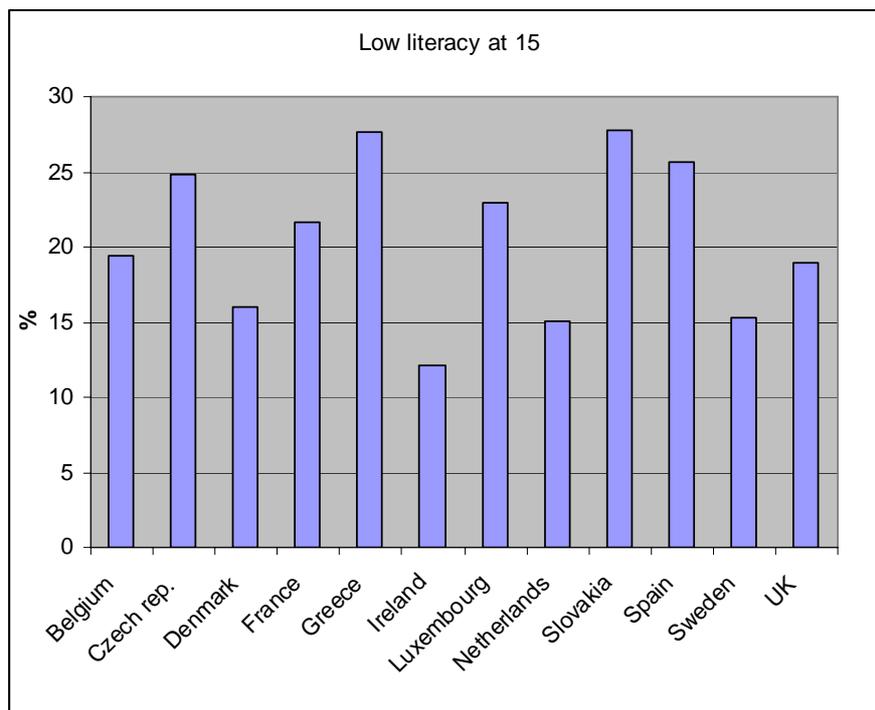
The UNESCO dataset also includes figures for public expenditures on secondary and tertiary education. We have not included them here, since we believe that pre-school and primary school education are strategically most important in relation to socio-economic disadvantage, particularly in a prevention perspective. (This is not to say, of course, that secondary and tertiary education is unimportant in this context.) It may be noted, however, that in all of the countries except Spain, Cyprus, and Belgium, public expenditures for secondary and tertiary education are at least twice as large as for pre-school and primary education. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, they are even three times as large.



Educational level figure. *School-leavers 18-24:* Share of 18-24-year-olds (2006) with a highest level of educational and training attainment corresponding to lower secondary level (ISCED 0, 1 or 2) and have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. *Low educ 25-34:* Share of 25-34-year olds (2006) with a low education level (ISCED 0, 1 or 2). *Source:* Adapted from Eurostat.

Educational level, comment. In these variables the differences are huge between the countries in the group, with a very high share of early school leavers among young adults in Malta and very low shares for Czech Republic and Slovakia. Differences between the age groups may be interpreted largely as time trends in leaving-school patterns, although the correspondence with time series data cannot be assumed to be perfect. The present trend in the EU to expand upper secondary and tertiary education probably accounts for the fact that the 'low education' figures seem to be rapidly falling for young adults in many of the countries, and stable only in those countries where the figure is already low. (However, the figure also seems to have stabilised in Cyprus, at a moderate level). Sweden shows the one clear deviation from this pattern. The share of early school-leavers has been rising for the youngest group of adults in Sweden, which is also confirmed by time series data (Eurostat).

The PISA (Program for International Students Assessment) results show that in general pupils growing up in socio-economic weak surroundings / families are weak achievers in tests. PISA tests measure 15-year old pupils' understanding of text, Mathematics, Science and Solution of problems. Differences in achievement between pupils could, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2003), be explained with factors as gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity. Girls achieve better than boys in corresponding socioeconomic levels and the higher socioeconomic background the higher achievement.



Low literacy figure: Percentage of 15-year-olds with poor reading literacy performance (at level 1 or below of the PISA scale) according to the PISA investigation of 2006. No data available for Cyprus and Malta. *Source:* Adapted from Eurostat.

Low literacy, comment: In a cross-section perspective, these figures correspond poorly with the data for educational levels cited above. They also correspond poorly with the child poverty figures. The highest shares of poor readers are reported for Slovakia, Greece, Spain, and Czech Republic. The lowest share is reported for Ireland. If so, do not weak socio-economic background / poverty in general mean disadvantage in achievement in school? National evaluations carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Education, report that boys with Swedish background living in small industrial villages and in the countryside with weak socio-economic backgrounds, are very weak achievers, like in general migrated pupils who often live in poor families. Migrated girls achieve better than migrated boys on corresponding socio-economic strata (Cederberg, 2004).

The PISA studies have been criticised for being context free rather than contextual and taking pupils' backgrounds into consideration. In an article in *Skolvärlden*,⁵ Anita Wester, the Swedish representative in the International PISA group means that PISA studies are able to describe condition but not causality. If the PISA measurements do not give valid representations of causally relevant variables they will be misleading for causal interpretations and potentially make policies based on such interpretations inefficient. The question must also be posed whether the measurements give any relevant information on the fulfilment of actual policy *goals*. Hence, the measurement problem is highly relevant for the formulation as well as the implementation and evaluation of education policies.

Conclusions

Socio-economic disadvantage should be discussed in relation to diversity, institutional discrimination, and the complex interplay between the educational system, individuals, groups, and the surrounding society. In official discourses, there are often ambiguous attitudes to diversity, which is at the same time expressed as a resource and a problem. The preliminary findings show that we will have to go deeper into definitions of socio-economic disadvantage and problematise them further depending on what groups in the various countries are defined as disadvantaged. Such an analysis should also take into account whether overall educational policies and rationales for educational projects conducted are universally or selectively formulated.

Quantitative cross-section analyses have shown that there are no clear bivariate correspondences between variables such as the rate of child poverty risk, public expenditure on lower education, and educational outcomes at macro level, such as the share of school drop outs or the share of poor readers among 15-year-olds. This might of course be taken as a sign that multivariate analysis is needed, but we believe that a qualitative approach may give a deeper understanding of contexts and discourses.

In our forthcoming thematic report on socio-economic disadvantage in education, our intention is to get further into an analysis of the two approaches outlined above, i.e. focusing problems created outside and inside the educational system, respectively. In this analysis we shall make use of descriptions from country reports, case studies and project descriptions carried out on the 14 different countries.

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⁵ (2007, 20 Nov. <http://www.skolvarlden.se/Article.jsp?article=2124>)

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