Equalities and Education in Europe: Explanations and Excuses for Inequality

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROMISE OF EDUCATION

What do we expect education to do? What is its purpose?

These may seem naïve questions, but they lie at the heart of the debate about the nature of inequity in our societies and the future development of social activity. There is no simple and universally agreed answer: different societies have debated and disputed the reasons for why we should teach and learn at least since Aristotle wrote

> … in modern times there are opposing views about the tasks to be set, for there are no generally accepted assumptions about what the young should learn, either for their own virtue or for the best life; nor is it yet clear whether their education ought to be conducted with more concern for the intellect than for the character or soul … It is by no means certain whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those most conducive to virtue, or at exceptional accomplishments. (Aristotle *The Politics*, Book VIII, Chapter ii: 1337a33)

Do we teach to enhance and develop the individual's intelligence or their social behaviour? Do we spend large sums of money on schooling in order to develop a skilled and able workforce ('the useful things in life'), or to advance socially responsible behaviour ('those most conducive to virtue'), or to support specialised knowledge and progression ('exceptional accomplishments')? Are these competing alternatives, or can some or all be achieved at the same time? These debates are used to pit instrumentalism and utilitarianism against individual development, socio-economic cohesion against socio-political liberties, sciences against humanities. The contested nature of the purpose of education and these ensuing debates are, we will demonstrate in this book, at the heart of the reason why our education systems continue to produce gross social inequalities.

Our concern is with why and how educational systems fail to address equalities of outcome. We write particularly about the context of European

educational systems, both because we know most about these systems, and because the European Union has a growing educational policy agenda of its own, but we draw where appropriate on experience and policies from other parts of the world. In particular, as we detail later in this chapter, we draw on our shared research into the policies and practices of fourteen European countries, compiled in a study that was intended to directly address social inequities. The EPASI (Educational Policies Addressing Social Inequity) study investigated the successes and failures of educational policies that set out to address educational inequalities: it is described in more detail in this chapter. Our concern is not with individual inequalities, which form part of the statistical normal distribution of individual differences, but with social inequities, where particular socially-defined groups or sub-sets of the population persistently are shown to achieve less well than the mainstream population. These groups may be defined variously by ethnicity, gender, disability status, socio-economic status, residency, origin, linguistic grouping – and other possibilities – and may sometimes in terms of numbers, rather than power, form the majority. But across Europe we see that there are wide variations in how different groups perform as collectivities in the sphere of education, often despite the presence of particular educational initiatives that are designed to redress these inequities.

Why do these educational inequalities arise and persist in the face of attempts to do away with them? We will argue that to address this issue we need to consider what societies – and their policy makers, educational practitioners, parents and students – think the purpose and possibilities of education to be. What do we expect education to do? What is its promise?

Transformation or Reproduction: two views of the possibilities of Education

The dispute first set out by Aristotle polarises around two belief systems that are frequently set in opposition: that education should preserve cultural and social systems and structures, and that education should be used as an engine for social transformation and change. Teasing out these positions will help illuminate the role of education in social change, and its role in the promotion and reproduction of inequities.

Durkheim characterised education as ‘the image and *reflection* of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter in an abbreviated form; it does not create it’ (1897: 372; emphasis added). For him, education was

> the means by which society prepares, within the children, the essential conditions of its very existence. ... the man whom education should realise in us is not man as nature has made him, but as the society wishes to be ... Society draws for us the portrait of the kind of man we should be, and in this portrait all the peculiarities of its organisation come to be *reflected*. (Durkheim 1897: 64 - 5; emphasis added)

This functionalist view is still common: 'all societies have the task of passing on to the next generation the knowledge and skills regarded as particularly worthwhile; ... societies achieve this by means of ... education' (Lawton and Gordon 1996: 10). Although Durkheim's model was not wholly static (Durkheim 1938), it emphasises stability, and sees society as essentially homogeneous. The reflection is mirror-like and results in self-replication. We learn who we are to be: we are what we have learned to be: as Brillat-Savarin put it in a rather different context, 'tell me what you eat: I will tell you who you are' (1825).

By contrast, John Dewey proposed a largely transformative model of education. The school processes should promote social equality, so that 'each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and come into living contact with a broader environment' (Dewey, 1916: 20). Education also had a developmental role for the individual: 'it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means for making the desire effective in fact' (50). These egalitarian and developmental functions partly derived from Dewey's view of knowledge as something to be constructed by the learner as an active experimenter, provoked into inquiry by the teacher. More recently, John Rawls has similarly argued that education has such egalitarian and developmental functions

> Resources for education are not to be allocated solely or necessarily mainly according to their return as estimated in producing trained abilities, but also according to their worth in enriching the personal and social life of citizens, including here the less favoured. (Rawls 1971: 107)

But many observers have argued that, whatever the ambitions the egalitarians and liberals have for education to transform society, this has not happened. Raymond Williams argued that:

> the common prescription of education, as the key to change, ignores the fact that the form and content of education are affected, and in some cases determined, by the actual systems of decision and maintenance. (Williams 1961: 120)

Political (decision) and economic (maintenance) structures tend to prescribe the composition of the curriculum and the systems by which it is delivered in ways that minimises the possibility of societal or economic change. Michael Apple develops this further, concluding that schools contribute to inequality because they are intentionally organised to distribute particular kinds of knowledge unequally (Apple 1990: 43). Williams and Apple both hold that the educational systems in Britain and the United States (respectively) are designed to replicate social and economic inequalities.

Education can also be portrayed as the principal engine for social change and transformation. Education, it is argued (particularly by western governments, and by the European Union) will produce social beings or citizens who will challenge xenophobia, sexism, promote human rights, equalities and democracy, who will be able to reason and argue, who will promote sustainable lifestyles, who will be economically literate, environmentally concerned, and be good parents and neighbours. Education will inform people, ensuring that they are literate, numerate, able to use science, speak several languages, and be technologically competent. It will give people the skills, knowledge and competences that make them able to work and sustain themselves and their families' needs. Rather than reflect the old order, education will (or can) act as refracting prism, teasing out a spectrum of attitudes, skills and abilities, altering the direction, form and perspective of the next generation.

But there remains an inherent traditionalism in much educational policy, whatever the extent to which the rhetoric of transformation is employed. Most countries expect the curriculum to maintain and instil what are seen as the country's traditional values and views of its history. Education should support and legitimise current political, social and economic norms. Because all adults have been through an educational process, all see themselves as qualified, by virtue of this experience, to judge what forms and functions education should perform: change becomes difficult when politicians, parents and teachers see proposals for new forms of education as a criticism of the education that made them what they are.

It can also be argued that our educational structures have been created around a model of capitalist production – that there is a correspondence between the nature and organisation of contemporary schooling and the labour requirements of capitalist industrialised economies. The correspondence theory advanced by Bowles and Gintis (1976, 1988) suggests that modern education systems are a simple response to the

capitalist system, transmitting technical and social skills (through the overt curriculum) and inculcating discipline and obedience to authority (through the hidden curriculum). The social relations of the means of production correspond to the social relations of schooling, which, they argue, is not a coincidence.

> The school is a bureaucratic order, with hierarchical authority, rule orientation, stratification by 'ability' as well as by age, role differentiation by sex … and a system of external incentives (marks, promises of promotion, and threat of failure) much like the pay and status in the sphere of work. (Bowles 1973: 357)

It is not simply that schools reproduce the types of personality required by capitalist production ('those at the base of the hierarchy requiring a heavy emphasis on obedience and rules, and those at the top, where discretionary scope is considerable, requiring a greater ability to make decisions on the basis of well-internalised norms' (87)) – this is the very *purpose* of education. Alienation and anomie become the necessary outcomes of this schooling, and are not merely incidental to the incompatibility of the cultures of primary and secondary socialisers (Gramsci 1971; Berger and Luckmann 1966).

From this assertion it follows that schools become mechanisms for cultural distribution and class reproduction: the two are indivisible. The subtle hegemony that the ruling class exercises over the legitimisation of acceptable or valued cultural knowledge is exercised through the control of the knowledge-producing and knowledge-preserving institutions of society (Apple 1990). A particular version or reality is selected and distributed, a social construction picked to serve the interests of a particular segment of society (Mannheim 1936). As Whitty puts it, the question then becomes 'how and why reality comes to be constructed in particular ways, and how and why particular constructions of reality seem to have the power to resist subversion' (Whitty 1974: 125).

Bowles and Gintis examine the connections between technological change, production, capitalist organisation and the educational system. Using US data – though a study of European educational history might produce broadly similar conclusions – they compare the institutional background of the development of modern capitalist systems to the development of the systems of schooling. While they concede that there are some benefits to schooling, such as the elimination of illiteracy and giving access to learning experiences that are intrinsically fulfilling, they

argue that the expansion of mass schooling was a response to economic need, not to initiate or promote social reform.

> Schools are destined to legitimate inequality, limit personal development to forms compatible with submission to arbitrary authority, and aid in the process whereby youth are resigned to their fate (Bowles and Gintis 1976: 266)

They point to the explicit links between education's central role in the reproduction of the political structure of capitalist production processes and the legitimisation of the rights vested in property:

> …education is directly involved in the contradictory articulations of sites in advanced capitalism and is expressed in terms of the property/person dichotomy: education reproduces rights vested in property, while itself [is] organised in terms of rights vested in persons. (Bowles and Gintis 1981: 56)

The inability of education to promote personal development is not because of the content of the curriculum, which has little part to play: it is the form of the educational discourses that determine what is reproduced. As we shall argue later in this volume, this argument is central to the reproduction of inequalities that creates disadvantage for particular groups: it is not what such groups are taught or not taught, but the educational discourse of marginalisation and lowered expectations that determines educational outcomes and inequities.

But Bowles and Gintis also argue that the situation is not necessarily closed. There are contradictions in the system that allow for the possibility of renegotiating more egalitarian consequences, because the dominant – almost the only – mode of discourse provided in schools is that based on natural rights,

> This contradictory position of education explains its dual progressive/reproductive role (promoting equality, democracy, toleration, rationality, inalienable rights on the one hand, while legitimating inequality, authoritarianism, fragmentation, prejudice and submission on the other) and is, in part, a reflection of the stress in liberal discourse on procedure over substance. But it provides as well the tools by means of which it can be transformed into an instrument in the transition to socialism … the goal of progressive educational reform must be framed in the structural boundaries of liberal discourse, and can be simply expressed as the full democratisation of education. These goals can be divided into two complementary projects: the democratisation of the social relations of

> education and the reformulation of the issue of democracy in the curriculum. (Bowles and Gintis 1981: 57)

But this optimism is tempered by what they see as the stronghold of capitalism: they link the development of the American educational system to the need of production; in the early nineteenth century there was a need for a system of training labour. The authors quote educational policy makers of the time who consciously modelled school organisation on the principles of the division of labour in order to meet the needs of the larger employers for an obedient and malleable workforce. They cite an 1854 school board memorandum:

> The object of education is by no means accomplished by mere intellectual instruction. It has other aims of equal if not higher importance. The character and habits are formed for life … of attention, self-reliance, habits of order and neatness, politeness and courtesy … habits of punctuality.

The growth of corporate industry in the late nineteenth century required a more highly differentiated and hierarchically organised labour force, and Bowles and Gintis relate this to the urban school reform movement of the time that led to a domesticated workforce for corporations. The reform was based on standardisation, testing and the bureaucratic tracking of students and the educational system was based on a method that purported to be fair and just in its allocation of individuals to particular social and economic positions, but did so at the behest of larger social and political forces. The same educational system inculcates the population to accept as legitimate the limited roles in society that they are allowed (see also Meyer 1977).

MacDonald has also pointed to the same hierarchical, rule-dominated organisation of schools as a characteristic of the pre-industrial school (MacDonald 1977). She argues that there is a more complex relationship between the educational system and its social setting, better examined by distinguishing the systems for social reproduction from those of cultural reproduction. Though the latter are dependent on the former, cultural reproduction is able to maintain a certain degree of independence.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capitalism includes both cultural production and reproduction in schools. The cultural capital, the *habitus* of the middle class, is expressed through its habits of thought, assumptions and complexions, which are particularly expressed through the system of schooling: the school inculcates, partly through the formal curriculum, but particularly through the informal curriculum, 'not so much with particular

and particularised schemes of thought as with that general disposition which engenders particular schemes, which may then be applied in particular domains of thought and action' (Bourdieu 1971: 184).

This cultural capital is used as a mechanism to filter pupils to particular positions within the hierarchy of capitalist society. Schools recreate the social and economic hierarchies in the way that they are embedded, using the processes of selection and teaching, judging and comparing performance in these activities against the *habitus* of the middle class, and thus effectively discriminating against all those students who do not have access to this. Dale *et al* summarise Bourdieu's argument thus: 'By taking all children as equal, while implicitly favouring those who have already acquired the linguistic and cultural competencies to handle a middle class culture, schools take as natural what is essentially a social gift, *i.e.* cultural capital' (Dale, Esland and MacDonald 1976: 4). Bourdieu himself argues that 'the cultural capital and the ethos, as they take shape, combine to determine behaviour and attitude to school, which makes up the differential principle of elimination operating for children of different social strata' (Bourdieu 1974: 36). Applying the same cultural criteria in an equal way favours those students who have been previously socialised into the particularly favoured culture:

> … students from different social milieux owe their … future to the fact that the selection that they have undergone is not equally severe for all, and that social advantages or disadvantages have gradually been transformed into educational advantages and disadvantages as a result of premature choices which, directly linked to social origin, have duplicated and reinforced their influence. (Bourdieu 1974: 37)

Treating cultural capital in the same way as one would analyse economic capital shows how and why our dominant cultural institutions are organised and operate to allow those who have inherited cultural capital to do better, in just the same way as inherited economic capital favours economic success. 'Like economic capital, cultural capital (good taste, knowledge, ability, language) is unequally distributed through society and by selecting such properties, schools serve to reproduce the distribution of power within the society' (Dale *et al.* 1976: 4). The implications of the unequal distribution will be examined below, when we consider Bourdieu's concepts of Pedagogic Action and Pedagogic Authority.

Bourdieu and Passeron argue that education has a particular function in the transmission of cultural hierarchy: it can reproduce specific realities in

particular social classes. They argue that traditional analyses of education tend to separate cultural reproduction from its function of social reproduction, ignoring 'the specific effect of symbolic relations in the reproduction of power relations' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 10). Functional analysts, such as Durkheim, assume that

> the different PAs [Pedagogic Actions] at work in a social formation collaborate harmoniously in reproducing a cultural capital conceived of as the jointly owned property of the whole 'society'. In reality, because they correspond to the material and symbolic interests of groups and classes differently situated within the power relations, these PAs always tend to reproduce the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among those groups or classes, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the social structure. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 11)

This is a very wide-ranging claim. It implies that the 'nature vs. nurture' debate is irrelevant, because we largely do not choose our identity – indeed, we cannot – for 'we receive the cultural identity which has been handed down to us from previous generations. … As we grow older, we modify the identity we have inherited. The identity is not intrinsic, but the scope for changing it is circumscribed by the social expectations of the group with which we are associated. By our actions we informally reinforce our inherited group affiliation' (Robbins 1991: 174). Bourdieu and Passeron's model claims – insists – that our social identity and our membership of groups are maintained by adopting tastes and lifestyles that serve as identifying images, with no intrinsic value other than to maintain the coherence of the group(s) to which we belong.

We are formally socialised by the system of education. The state establishes a schooling system to give the particular training or instruction necessary for the changing labour market. The schooling system also seeks to build, in the whole population of the state, an identity or association with the state or nation, that is in some ways equivalent or parallel to the group or class affiliation, but on a larger scale. States themselves are artificial or invented constructs (see, eg, Anderson 1991, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984, Colley 1992) that seek to construct uniform social identities within their synthetic boundaries. Robbins, in his commentary on Bourdieu, argues that while we are taught some things in school that are not necessarily part of this social purpose, for the most part schools are involved in the transmission of arbitrary culture and knowledge. These

> do not help people reconcile their group identity with a national identity, but instead … distinguish people on supposed merit or ability. The

> equalisation of opportunity provided by state education and by the recognition of 'innate' intelligence is a sham. The system simply provides a series of awards or qualifications which, as much as hairstyles, are reinforcements of our previous group identity. The content of courses is such that only those who have already been initiated into the language of school discourses by their earlier socialisation are able to demonstrate 'ability'. Schools which, in response, alter their curricula in order to be able to recognise the merit of students who have been differently socialised, will tend to find that they become marginalised as institutions because they have 'poor standards'. (Robbins 1991: 175)

Michael Young comes to a very similar conclusion in *Knowledge and Control* (1971). Power is unequally distributed in society: the system that allows this is created and maintained at least partly through the transmission of culture. There is a direct relationship between 'those who have access to power and the opportunity to legitimise certain dominant categories, and the processes by which the availability of such categories to some groups enables them to assert power and control over others' (Young 1971: 8).

How does Bourdieu explain the production and legitimisation of cultural goods? He distinguishes the agencies of cultural production – such as theatres and universities – and the cultural agents who produce them – such as writers, academics, artists – that together constitute 'an intellectual field'. Though the field might appear to be neutral, independent and cohesive, within an ethos of intellectual; freedom and autonomy (and thus seeming to make knowledge to be independent of the social context of those who produce it), Bourdieu argues that those who work in a particular cultural field have acquiesced to the demand that they should adopt a particular cultural code. This code determines the categories of thought, perception and meaning that constitute and order the way that the cultural agent perceives reality – in other words, their *habitus*. This makes educational institutions not simply guides to 'official' culture, but agents that reinforce the social groups that support their choice of approved culture. The action of the educational establishments (schools and universities) is to conserve and reproduce this culture, ensuring that individuals designated as 'successful' have the specific set of values, tastes and thoughts. The organisation and validation of knowledge is more important than the mere content of knowledge. It is not *what knowledge* that is important; it is *how knowledge* is validated that is significant and how its power-forming characteristics are used.

Culture both classifies knowledge and, in its power-validating mode, classifies the classifiers, determining those who have the power of cultural legitimation and those who do not. In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1990) Bourdieu and Passeron describe this process of Pedagogic Action as 'symbolic violence, insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power (5). Schools and universities have the Pedagogic Authority designating them as 'fit to transmit that which they transmit, [and] entitled to impose its reception and test its inculcation by means of socially approved … sanctions' (20). This control of the reproduction of culture means (as MacDonald summarises) 'the culture which the school transmits is not therefore a collective cultural heritage, but rather the culture of the dominant class' (1977: 40). Education controls cultural reproduction, and thus is one of the principal mechanisms to reproduce the class structure. Bourdieu observes that this is a process that is very well-suited for contemporary states that deny the hereditary tradition of power and privilege.

> Among all the solutions put forward throughout history to the problem of the transmission of power and privilege, there surely does not exist one that is better concealed … than the solution which the educational system provided by contributing to the reproduction of class relations and by concealing … that it fulfils this function. (Bourdieu 1971: 72)

Bourdieu constructs his notion of cultural capital in terms of the reproduction of a class system. In this book, we argue that it performs the same role in the reproduction and preservation of a much wider range of social inequities, positioning ethnic and linguistic minorities, those with disabilities, women, some religious minorities and others as necessarily inferior, lacking the necessary designated cultural capital. The role of cultural capital is acquired by the child from their family, through particular linguistic and social competencies and expectations ('style', 'manners', 'know-how'), and these skills and expectations give the child the ability to read, or not read, the code of the dominant culture, so that they can access, decode and accumulate this culture.

This culture and expectation can be contrasted with the range of cultures held by other social groups, such as working class culture and the various cultures of minority ethnic groups and languages, for example. Children outside the privileged class or social category, who have not acquitted the specific skills for handling the privileged cultural capital from their family, or whose families and cultural leaders expect their children to be incapable of successfully directing their skills at decoding the dominant culture, will

begin school deprived of the ability to recognise and respond to the dominant culture that the school represents, transmits and arbitrates upon. Privileged children arrive inured in the *habitus* to respond to academic training, and the expectation that they will do so. The others are positioned on the wrong side of a segregating cultural rift, that divides school culture and discourse from their own culture and everyday knowledge, and that expects them not to be able to bridge this. The dominant culture is described and delimited in symbols that are imposed in a way that subordinate groups are unable to decipher them, and transmitting the expectation that they will not be able to successfully learn to do so. Symbolic violence is the power 'to impose meanings … as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 4).

Inequity and institutional discrimination in Education

Nevertheless, there is a rhetoric that education can be a potent engine for social change and transformation. There is an awareness of inequalities, and governments in Europe, and the European Union. For example, on inequalities in education in gender, EU Commissioner Androulla Vassilio introduces a Eurydice report on gender differences in educational outcomes:

> Gender equality has long been a major goal at European level. Since the 1970s, various directives have laid the foundation of equal treatment and equal opportunities in Europe. However, despite the existence of comprehensive legislative frameworks, gender equality is yet to be achieved. Although women form the majority of students and university graduates in most countries, they still earn less and have lower employment rates than men. With regard to education and training, gender differences persist in both attainment and choice of courses of study. (Eurydice 2009: 3)

The report goes on to identify the policy directions and exhortations across European governments towards this.

On the educational achievements of migrants, the Commission has published a Green Paper (European Commission 2008) on aspects of migration and education, that highlights the variations between outcomes in different countries. In all countries both first and second generation migrants perform less well than 'native' students, and there is also wide variation between different countries in their success at closing the gap – in most countries there is only minimal improvement between generations, with substantial differences between the second generation scores and the

'native' scores, and in at least two countries there is a *fall* in attainment – second generation pupils perform less well than their parents had performed (see below, figure 3.1, p 58).

What these two – and other reports – identify is inequalities between groups, which is the principal focus of this book. It is important to distinguish inequalities between individuals and inequalities between groups. There will always be some form of inequality between how individuals perform and succeed in many aspects of life. It is, of course, important that resources are given to ensuring that significant inequalities are minimised, by giving additional support to disadvantaged individuals, and even more important that societies recognise that everyone has equality in terms of human rights, dignity and esteem. But our concern here is inequity between groups: that is, where an identifiable population has an overall distribution of performance significantly different from the distribution of performance of the mean population. There are aspects of inequalities that may apply to both individuals and groups: Burchardt and Vizard (2008) distinguished three - inequality of outcome (that is, inequalities in central or valuable aspects of life that are achieved), inequalities in autonomy (that is, varying degrees of independence in decision making about lives, the realities of choice and control), and inequalities in processes (that is, differential subjection through discrimination or disadvantage by others).

If a group within the population are achieving a less favourable distribution of educational outcomes than the majority of the population, then we argue here that it is reasonable to make an initial presumption that there have been inequalities in social and educational policies. The objective of policy should be to ensure that all groups within society have similar profiles of attainment. To achieve this may require differential (unequal) treatment for a particular group. The onus should be on those responsible for educational policy to demonstrate that all necessary policies are in place to achieve this. It is useful here to develop the principle set out in the Macpherson Report (UK Home Office 1999), which examined institutional process within a UK police force around the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence. The report defined the term 'institutional racism' to refer to

> the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance,

> thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (§ 6.34)

In other words, it is the outcome of policy and practice that is significant, not the intention. In respect of this study, the fact that various groups continue to suffer educational disadvantage, despite policy initiatives to counter this, suggests that whatever the intentions, educational systems institutionally discriminate against the disadvantaged. The term educational institutional inequality might be usefully employed to identify the collective failure of an educational institution or set of institutions to provide appropriate educational services to a minority group of the population because of their social, cultural, linguistic or behavioural characteristics. This can be detected in educational policies and practices that amount to discrimination through 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping' which leads to the group as a whole to achieve a lower set of educational outcomes than the majority population.

The European Dimension

Ambitions to address inequity often sit uneasily with other policy initiatives and with deeper ideologies. Educational attainment has become increasingly competitive, as instrumental reasons are used to justify educational policies and to drive parental and national ambitions. Examining first international competition, the development of scales and league tables that have followed the introduction of the Programme for the International Student Assessment (PISA) has lead to individual governments fretting about international rankings, asserting that these are closely related to eventual economic performance (on very little evidence of a correlation). In turn, the European Union has set itself the target of maintaining (or improving) Europe's comparative educational ranking. The Lisbon European Council meeting of heads of government concluded

> The European Union is confronted with a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy. These changes are affecting every aspect of people's lives and require a radical transformation of the European economy. (European Union 2000, § 1)

A strategic target was set: 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (§ 5, and as part of this agreed that

> Europe's education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities … . (§ 25)

The Commission has developed these strategies, and recent documents stress that education should be seen in economic terms, designed to create a competitive economy. A working document of 2007 (*Towards more knowledge-based policy and practice in education and training*) sets out the agenda:

> The 2000 Lisbon European Council identified knowledge as the key to future growth, jobs and social cohesion in the EU. We need policies that reinforce this knowledge base. Education and training are a prerequisite for a fully functioning 'knowledge triangle' (education – research – innovation). Member States and the EU institutions need to use evidence-based policy and practice, including robust evaluation instruments, to identify which reforms and practices are the most effective, and to implement them most successfully. The 2006 Spring European Council Conclusions stressed the need for an evaluation culture …. Education and training have a critical impact on economic and social outcomes. Ineffective, misdirected or wasteful education policies incur substantial financial and human costs. It is therefore essential that investment in education … is as efficient and effective as possible. (European Commission 2007: 1)

The agenda for both research – the creation of cultural capital – and education – the reproduction of cultural capital and of social structure are now embedded in this neo-liberal competitive model. European Union research is planned 'in the broader context of the various policy initiatives and the co-ordination process that form part of the Lisbon strategy, notably in the fields of economic and employment policies, enterprise policy, education and training policy, and the internal market strategy' (European Commission 2010: 7).

This is not only competition on an international level. There are similar competitive motivations in the way that individuals now view education. Many individual parents and students view education as a competition that is a zero-sum game: that is, there are inexorably winners and losers. It is not merely that if one child wins, another loses: the point is that the other child *must* lose in order for education to have been successful. The commodification of education, its location in a competitive market, and the dominant discourse of instrumentalism have turned education into a game that requires losers in order to be successful. But there are other

European imperatives: for example, in a European Union Council Recommendation of 2009 (EU 2009) considering the education of children with a migrant background, it was recognised that

> Education has a key role to play not only in ensuring that children with a migrant background can fulfil their potential to become well-integrated and successful citizens, but also in creating a society which is equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity. Yet many such children continue to fare less well in terms of educational outcomes, and issues related to racial and ethnic discrimination and to social exclusion are to be found in all parts of the European Union. The presence of significant numbers of learners with migrant backgrounds in many Member States thus presents a number of challenges – but also valuable opportunities – for their education systems. (EU 2009: 2, Recognition §4)

These are opportunities for the educational policies and structures of the European countries to change and transform, and challenges for them to counter social inertia and the reproduction of social norms and inequities.

We suggest that education as an activity can do any, all or none of the above. It has a potential to transform and to change society – in what we call a 'positive' way – developing social justice, minimising inequalities, promoting human rights, dignities and capacities. But although these values are notionally subscribed to by the great majority of people in Europe, the same people often use education in practice to maintain inequalities and injustices. They, wittingly or unwittingly, use education to explain or excuse inequity.

This book sets out to explain how this happens, and how education could seize the argument and act to transform. It tries to show how denials and excuses are used to evade the issue.

An analysis based on Equalities

We began our work together in this area in 2007 when we collaborated on a study for the European Commission that investigated the successes and failures of educational policies that set out to address educational inequalities. EPASI, as it became known (Educational Policies Addressing Social Inequity), reported in early 2009 (www.epasi.eu). Partners from seven countries systematically examined some 280 projects in fourteen different European Union countries, and teased out the ways in which educational inequity was conceptualised in each of these countries' policies. We are grateful to all the members of the study team for their

discussions, insights and debates, but this book does not attempt to reproduce the findings of that study, and we alone are responsible for the arguments and conclusions that we set out here. That study focused our attention on both the lack of lasting success of so many policies, and on what appeared to us to be the very muddled theorisation of inequity that was being applied by so many educational policy makers. This book is directed at these issues, rather than those underlying EPASI, but nevertheless we have continued to draw on the experience of this study, and here acknowledge our debt to our collaborators (Box 1).

Box 1

Those involved in the EPASI Project

Educational Policies Addressing Social Inequity

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Our book attempts to set out an argument that educational policy makers need to reconceptualise what is meant by inequality, reformulate their characterisations and explanations of why some groups do not achieve as well as others educationally; and above all, redirect the focus of programmes that are designed to address inequity towards the population as a whole, rather than to direct isolated focus on particular communities.

Just as the basis for social inequity and educational disadvantage is not a straightforward, transparent cause-and-effect process, the discussion of these issues is, at times, circular and complex. This is reflected in the following chapters: recurrent themes emerge, although they are approached from different perspectives. The question of underlying ideologies is interrogated from an economic perspective as well as a discursive perspective, for instance, and from the point of view of the individual as well as on a more ‘macro’ society level. Chapter two begins our discussion about equality and equity by considering different economic approaches that have been applied to explain and interpret these notions. However, further on we argue that it is important to distinguish other arguments for addressing group inequalities (e.g. the human rights argument) from economic ones, since the premise taken may alter significantly subsequent educational policies and practices that arise.

The topic of educational opportunity is another topic that is revisited through the chapters – arguments that equal opportunity is sufficient for overcoming the radical structural inequalities is interrogated from an economic perspective, a discursive perspective and a socio-political perspective in the different chapters. The concept of ‘meritocracy’ is also a recurrent theme: it is discussed in detail in chapter three but, inevitably, it comes up again in a discursive analysis of how disadvantaged groups are categorised or labelled and the consequences of such actions. Throughout the book, we look at different reasons which have been advanced to explain or justify inequalities in education – chapter three provides an overview of reasons that have been employed in recent decades concerning reasons that specific groups have lower achievement records. Chapter four examines these ‘excuses and evasions’ in detail and chapter five considers them from the perspective of socially constructed discourse.

Thus, starting from an economic perspective, we examine what is meant by equality, and offer some theorisation of inequity. Why do societies make some of their members unequal, and create ‘others’ who are destined not to achieve and succeed. We discuss the social consequences of

inequalities, and theories of social justice, linking these in the European context to the arguments for a social model for Europe. In particular, we look at how setting up education as a competitive enterprise – student against student, school against school, nation against nation – leads to classification and grading that divides groups as well as individuals into achievers and non-achievers, successes and failures. And from this comes a whole rhetorical barrage of explanations and excuses for inequity. Education creates and sustains inequalities, and a set of discourses that justify its existence.

The following chapter looks at how analysts have sought to explain and sometimes justify educational inequities. Categories of inequities have been created, based on social, political, cultural and psychological theories, and sets of underachieving groups have been defined and 'explained'. In may cases, taking a progressive and interventionists approach, policy-makers have then set out to address each underachieving group, explicitly intending to remedy the perceived deficiencies of the group. This remedialisation of social categories, we argue, often tends to exacerbate social difference, pathologising particular groups, and may often exacerbate educational underachievement.

In chapter four we examine the evasions and excuses that the educational policy community employs to explain the failure of these remedialisation policies. One set of explanations are based on denial: disadvantaged groups don't really exist, only disadvantaged individuals; opportunities for success are equalised, to ensure 'the playing field is level' (the metaphors of competition revealing so much); the emphasis on the provision of equal opportunities being sufficient to deal with the issue and to evade any responsibility to address any subsequent inequalities in attainment. A second set of explanations are used to excuse the lack of success of these programmes. There are other policy initiatives that may counter equality initiatives, perpetuating inequities; policies that either avoid identifying underlying social and economic structural inequities, or shift the blame for educational policy failures on to these inequities. The consequences of these excuses is that everyone sees inequitable educational outcomes as an inevitability: members of the socially disadvantaged groups, members of successful groups, and above all the students see themselves as predestined educational failures.

In the following chapter we then examine the dangers in policies that focus on identifying and isolating underachieving groups. We argue that while

the identification of groups at risk is necessary, because we need to quantify the inequity, to target resources and programmes, and to assess the effectiveness (if any) of the impact of such targeting, this type of intervention also serves to polarise society and schools. The 'achieving' majority perceive the 'other' groups as underachieving, and view their presence as a threat to the standards achieved by their own children. Stereotyping difference is too often seen as the inevitable consequence: neighbourhoods segregate, groups become isolated, and expectations are lowered. Efforts that are made to empower such groups and to involve them in the solutions may even lead to them being blamed for lack of success.

In chapter six we suggest that many educational policies in this field have been misdirected. Instead of identifying groups as failing, and directing programmes that are simply concerned with remedial action directed at rectifying deficiencies, we should also seek to work with the majority or mainstream community (and with other minority communities) to redress stereotyping, misconceptions, and above all to raise expectations of success. We argue that raising expectations is critical – not only the expectations of the students themselves, and of their parents and communities, and not only the expectations of the teachers who work with them, but fundamentally the expectations of the whole society, of all members of the society, need to be changed. This is not a straightforward process: as has been already argued in this chapter, and will be revisited later in the book, many people regard education as a competition, and one which is a zero-sum game competition. Raising the achievement of underachieving groups and individuals is all too often seen as threatening the achievement of other children ('our children'), because differentials in achievement will be lowered.

But we argue that transforming educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups *is* a task that education can perform: education does have the promise to transform and to create equity, given the structures, direction, policy and will. We hope to explain this in the following chapters. To begin, we must discuss what we mean by equality and equity.