



# Comparing priority education policies to fight against educational inequalities in Europe

## A multiplicity of fluctuating solutions

Priority education policies are used in the **fight against educational inequalities**. They have various names according to national contexts and periods of time (compensation policies, priority education zones, positive discrimination, etc.), but they have in common the fact that they operate on the basis of a break in the principle of formal equality in education. It is generally a question of allocating additional financial and educational resources for pupils in disadvantaged educational situations. In spite of the important issues at stake and the various forms which they may take on a European scale, these policies have practically not until now ever been studied systematically with a view to comparing them.

In order to make clear the field of the study, **priority education policies** have been defined by the researchers involved in the **EuroPEP** project as “**policies aiming at acting on educational disadvantage through targeted measures or action plans (whether targeted on socio-economic, ethnic, linguistic or religious, regional or educational criteria or breakdowns) by offering to provide the populations determined in this way something extra (or “better” or “different”)**”.

The study was based on **compulsory schooling**, but also on pre-school institutions when these are not directly concerned by the compulsory period of schooling. The teams partnering the project have long shared an interest in these policies and the key questions which they raise: those of the fight against learning inequalities, dropping out and educational exclusion, and of the effectiveness and equity of public policies.

The concerns of the European Commission, as condensed in the text of the invitation to tender for the *SOCRATES programme*<sup>1</sup> could hardly fail to catch the researchers' attention. Entitled “*Towards a better evaluation of educational policies adapted to the needs of groups at risk*”, the invitation to tender aimed at impelling a study relating to the various specific policies and special institutions that the member States had set up in answer to the problem of pupils not benefiting fully from the educational offer. Reference is here made to what was set up in the tradition of the famous Coleman (United States) and Plowden (United Kingdom) reports which stated the case in the 1960s for the implementation of compensatory policies, i.e. policies intended to distribute educational resources unequally so as to improve the chances of success of those pupils who are among the least privileged.

The request for a study was initially justified by the lack of knowledge, evaluation and summarised findings on these policies, which seem to have given rise to many achievements in Europe, as in the rest of the world. This request needs especially to be seen in the light of the concerns caused by the observation of the differences between the objectives of the common policy and the statistically observable reality: the perpetuation of an unequal educational situation.

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<sup>1</sup> “*Towards a better evaluation of educational policies adapted to the needs of groups at risk*”, *Socrates II Programme*. (Actions 6.1.2 and 6.2), 2006 invitation to tender.

**The European indicators**<sup>2</sup> underline the alarming nature of the percentage of pupils **leaving the educational system without any qualifications** increasing the risks of unemployment, and many studies call our attention to the fact that educational differentiations remain always highly correlated with the social backgrounds that pupils belong to. Children from disadvantaged social backgrounds, however these populations are defined and delimited, always provide the main quota of what many official texts call “groups at risk”, from the point of view of both educational failure and its social consequences.

These concerns therefore seem to derive from tension between the recognition of a need - that of the development of targeted or specific policies - and, at the same time, a certain amount of disillusionment. Such policies seem already to have been in place for many years in certain countries, but “no significant improvement in the situation of the most underprivileged is to be observed in any of the education systems”, as specified in the invitation to tender.

Researchers had then argued in favour of a better knowledge of these policies including not only a **description of how they work** and an **analysis of their results**, but also an analysis of the way in which they are defined. It was therefore necessary to examine how these policies operate, what their contents are, what problems they aim to solve, how they define the categories of beneficiaries, and how these are acknowledged as being categories for public action. Over and above **identifying the planned beneficiaries**, the **justifications for this way of targeting** and for the principles which underlie it also deserve the researchers' attention.

The great diversity of policies and measures observable on a European scale, the heterogeneity of their logic and their aims, and the fact that they seem closely related to the national context of the adopted measures have led to broadening the scope the evaluation of these policies beyond merely identifying their expected effects and “good practices”.

The first contribution of the study, which began in January 2007, was to stake out a field of comparison on a European scale. These policies, of uneven scope, were not only given different names, but are also permanently being revised and sometimes cover very different concepts. This variability is illustrated in national differences and over time. It gives an account as much of the hesitations, groupings and successive movements of redefinition within each Member State, as of the variety of conceptions at work among the member States. The data referring to this are disparate and in certain countries not very homogeneous, which makes this exercise of comparing public policies even more complex, but at the same time it stresses the importance of having an overview<sup>3</sup>. This initial summary of the results, while attempting to clarify the implications induced by accumulated knowledge, also makes it possible to assess the specific methodology adopted by a team that is both multi-disciplinary and international.

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<sup>2</sup> COM(2007) 61 final and “In Europe, far too many young people leave school without acquiring the skills necessary for taking part in the knowledge society and easily joining the job market. These young people are threatened with social exclusion. In addition, they are very quickly excluded *de facto* from lifelong education and training” (p. 8, 2008 Joint Council/Commission Report on the implementation of the Education & Training 2010 work programme, “Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation” [February 2008]).

<sup>3</sup> The first work, entitled “Priority education policies in Europe. Conceptions, implementations, debates” was published in 2008, in French. The English version is currently being prepared (see the final page of this document for the complete references). A second publication is planned for 2010 to give the results of the transverse thematic approach which will be developed throughout the rest of this report.

## Some information on the method used to compare educational policies

### *1. When comparing makes things easier to understand*

One of the observations which justified the **EuroPEP** project relates to the lack of international comparative studies concerning priority education policies, even from the standpoint of providing a description of them. This failing derives partly from the absence of a commonly accepted definition of these kinds of policies, particularly because of their stakes and the urgency with which they are developing and, also because of the diversity of measures which result from them. Difficulties in accessing the official and scientific literature in the various national languages and the lack of monographs disseminated on a wide scale, not to mention the absence of summaries at a supranational level, also explain the difficulties encountered in this field. And yet each policy and each measure are accompanied by discourses, analyses, attempts at evaluation and sometimes national debates which it appears possible and desirable to confront. The work carried out as part of the **EuroPEP** study had this ambition. This is therefore not an empirical investigation involving hands-on observations, but rather an analysis of the documents accompanying, describing, justifying or criticizing these policies, a summary of scientific knowledge on the subject and a secondary analysis of the data.

The choice of the eight countries selected was determined by a concern for representativeness of the variety of priority education policies and the socio-political and educational contexts in which they have been implemented. These countries include England, Belgium, France and Sweden which have long been parliamentary democracies and heirs to a long tradition of democratization of their school systems. The Czech Republic and Romania broke with the communist regime at the beginning of 1990. Portugal and Greece experienced a period of military dictatorship which ended in 1974. The existing school structures, the problems, the expectations and the educational concerns invested in these various countries remain, of course, partly dependant on these contrasted political histories. They necessarily interact with guidance from the European educational policy, which now provides a common unifying framework, and the recommendations of other international organizations. Of course, it ought to be possible to extend the study to all the member States, and setting up a permanent observatory for priority education policies at European level would make it possible to improve still further the knowledge already accumulated here.

### *2. How the study was organized*

The comparative study work comprises two stages. The first stage involved carrying out a kind of inventory of priority education policies in the eight countries. Each partner therefore had to produce an analysis of the policies followed within his own education system, including a description of how they work and a summary of the debates and knowledge related to them, starting from a common question matrix. It was in fact the results of this first stage that provided the material for the first publication.

The second stage was organized around the analysis of transverse topics and issues. This stage did not aim to propose a description of priority education policies on a country-by-country basis, but rather to develop comparative analyses dealing with coordinated sets of themes. More specifically, the researchers worked on various questions concerning the following three general sets of themes:

- How priority education policies are justified, how the problems which they propose to deal with are defined, how populations are targeted and beneficiaries categorized (for whom and why).

- The types of actions carried out in priority education policies and how they are organized (what to do and how to do it).
- How these policies and their results are evaluated, and the uses or misuse of these evaluations (for what results? how are they produced? what is done with them?).

The results of this second stage will provide the basis of the second publication, to appear in 2010.

## 2. About the method of comparison

Such a study cannot escape all questions relating to comparative approaches in general, and international comparisons in particular, language differences making the task all the more difficult. There are a number of “false comparisons”, one type being “the juxtaposition of monographs without any attempt at a thorough summary”<sup>4</sup>, but other traps lie in wait for researchers, either through a “safari” approach in which “only one researcher or only one national team of researchers formulates the problem, designs the research instruments and carries out the same study in more than one country”, or through the “lonesome cowboy” approach, “where the data are gathered by individuals and teams in each country and are then presented side by side without being systematically compared, before the researchers ride off separately into the sunset”<sup>5</sup>.

The first stage appeared necessary on account of the variety of forms taken by the policies in question and of the attempt to find common aspects in order to state the problem. It seems obvious that the analysis of priority education policies does not improve with being taken out of context or removed from the overall way in which the school systems work, and from the specific historical, social and political features of the countries concerned. As soon as one tackles the analysis of these targeted and specific policies, one of the central issues relates to how the relationship between these and ordinary or “generic” educational measures has changed.

For the authors it was also a question of taking account of some of the limits of comparative research, such as approaches of the **benchmarking**<sup>6</sup> type when they claim to identify “good practices” which could easily be exported on a turnkey basis. The comparative approach used here does not claim to identify supposedly good practices with a universal scope, divorced from any context, no more than it seeks to converge towards a single system. It is rather a question of opening up the field of possibilities by giving thought to the ways of defining the problems or of taking action according to common questioning related to the fight against educational inequalities.

To avoid the pitfalls described, falling either into the “safari” approach which would involve examining various systems from a single and somewhat “exotic” standpoint, or into the “lonesome cowboy” approach which would lead various teams to offer their monographs in haphazard fashion without pooling results, the **EuroPEP** team took the time required to build

<sup>4</sup> Vigour, C. (2005). *La comparaison dans les sciences sociales. Pratiques et méthodes. (Comparison in social sciences. Practice and method.)* Paris: La Découverte, coll. “Guides repères”.

<sup>5</sup> Osborn, M. (2007). Promouvoir la qualité : comparaisons internationales et questions méthodologiques. (*Promoting Quality in Learning: issues of international comparison.*) *Education et sociétés*, n° 18, pp. 163-180.

<sup>6</sup> We are thinking of the methods of international comparison and evaluation of the performance of public measures aiming at detecting and imposing good practices on the member States through pari pressure. On this point, see N. Mons, 2007. *Les nouvelles politiques éducatives. La France fait-elle les bons choix ? (The new educational policies. Has France made the right choice?)* Paris: PUF, and the international collective file coordinated by the same researcher “Évaluation des politiques éducatives et comparaisons internationales” (*Evaluating educational policies and international comparisons.*) Topic in *Revue française de Pédagogie*, n° 134, July- August-September 2008, Lyon: INRP 5-98.

up a team and define the goal of the study. The various lines of thought and questions accompanying the work of definition, together with the joint discussions around the analyses performed made it possible to work out a common reference framework, and to start to revise and conceptualise a set of perceptions, breakdowns into categories, expectations, and issues taken for granted that were shared nationally or internationally.

## An implicit change, or the three ages of priority education policies

### 1. Defining priority education policies: a difficult undertaking

The definition of priority education policies was drawn up by the **EuroPEP** team so as to give an account of the diversity of the observable situations while giving an account of a coherent unit. The authors did not wish to make this into a fixed set of data. It is an operational definition, subject to revision, or a working tool, which should not prevent thinking from going on around its fringe, for one of the first difficulties of the undertaking is the use, or failure to use, the very term “priority education policies” or its translations/adaptations in the eight countries. It is to be found just as much in the diversity of measures which the partners collected, presented and analyzed under this term, as in the slightly different uses that this diversity has led them to make of the joint definition.

The terms “priority education policies” or “positive discrimination policies” are in everyday use, and even correspond to politico-administrative categories in the countries where this type of concern and political measures is the oldest, as it is the case in Belgium, France, Portugal, or England where this concept is used as an umbrella term. Such is not the case in other countries, such Romania or the Czech Republic, which came later, and in different socio-political contexts, to the implementation of measures targeting categories of population considered as being “at risk”.

Concerning Romania or the Czech Republic, grouping these measures together under the title “priority education policies” is due to authors who present them and analyze them, but it does not easily correspond to a category of politico-administrative action, the latter being thought of and designated rather in terms of “**educational policies adapted to the needs of groups at risk**”.

Defining and delimiting the scope of these public policies has therefore been the subject of much discussion. For the researchers, it was a question of avoiding the pitfall of a form of ethnocentrism without falling into the sort of radical relativism which would make the object lose any consistency or put its common points into the shade. The question arose, for example, of how much space to devote to the fields of handicap, policies and educational institutions aiming at categories of population defined according to criteria of the nosographic or medical type. Several teams considered that this field did not come directly within the field of study. It was not a question of lack of interest, but a choice related to a breakdown that is frequent in the scientific literature field, and also the policies themselves, the field of handicap sometimes being dealt with by a ministry other than that of education. It was nevertheless included in this field by some of the partner teams who claimed that they were unable to separate this field and its developments from those relating to other population categories targeted by measures that are perhaps more easily identifiable as concerning priority education policies. The reason is that these teams find themselves more than others faced with the field of **inclusive education**, and the broadly heterogeneous category of **special educational needs**. These **special needs** and **inclusive education** categories are today moving the borders between what was the sphere of priority education, in the countries where this seemed to have developed independently, and special education. These changes are modifying various national realities and reconfiguring initial, long-standing segmentations.



These problems of defining and delimiting the subject are therefore not only a limitation of the study. The researchers stress the fact that they must also be understood as an occasion for gaining more understanding of this subject, for better analysis of what priority education policies and their contradictions are, and how they are developing in the various national and international, social and historical contexts. This is why they felt it was important not to limit the comparative approach to a **synchronic point of view**.

The complementary **diachronic point of view** which was adopted has nothing to do with a unilateral point of view which would aim at highlighting general laws and processes, extending their dominion across national and social borders and histories. Quite the reverse: it aims at promoting a dynamic, comparative analysis taking into consideration the historical depth and anchoring of the processes and political measures being studied, without ignoring the weight and the influence of supranational policies and institutions.

One of the main results of the study derives precisely from a simultaneously synchronic and diachronic take on priority education policies, to describe three ages or models of them. These models are not perfectly defined forms of organization. Instead, they cover configurations that are sufficiently similar in the way they are organized and implemented, and also in their purposes, but that are sometimes distant in time and space. The word “age” is used to refer to the historical dimension, while three models co-exist in the most of the countries today. The change observed and the heterogeneity that this juxtaposition leads to often nevertheless remain implicit and therefore little subject to public debate.

## **2. Three ages and models of priority education policies: an overlapping history leading to heterogeneity today**

The use of the two notions “ages” and “models” used by the authors show their concern not to stick to a simple evolutionary conception, but rather to give an account of a period in which two long-lasting movements overlap like two tiles on a roof.<sup>7</sup> Between these two movements, a third seems to be gradually marking the move of one towards the other: concern for the fight against exclusion. The complexity and especially the heterogeneity of the policies and measures that can now be observed on a European scale refer precisely to the coexistence of these three models or some of their aspects: one is not driving out the other, even though they may intend to do so, but superimposing itself on it. The ages of priority education policies bring into play changes and/or innovation in the way populations are targeted and categorized (how beneficiaries are designated or what problems are to be dealt with), arguments, methods of action (educational and curricular), and at the end of the day the goals of the policies and measures under consideration.

The authors suggest that the developments concerning priority education policies are one of the major components involved in the transformation of educational policies as a whole.

### **2.1. The first age, or compensatory policies**

Priority education policies were begun in a period of optimism which saw school as being the means towards a more egalitarian society. Their first age - they were then known as **compensatory policies** – started out as an extension of the political reforms ensuring the move from **elitist schooling** towards **mass schooling**, and the institution of a **comprehensive school**, of the same type for all, supposed to guarantee equal opportunity in the name of the **Welfare state**. For their promoters, in between 1960 and 1970, “compensatory” measures might allow this equalization of schooling and educational opportunity that the mere opening for all of the doors of the educational establishment, **equal access**, could obviously not alone guarantee.

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<sup>7</sup> Derouet, J.L. (1992) *École et justice. De l'égalité des chances aux compromis locaux ?* (From equal opportunity to local compromise?) Paris : Métailié, p. 32

In this sense, these first priority education policies appear as a kind of answer to the completion of this **comprehensive school** model: the political debate on this question seemed to be temporarily settled and, at the same time, the topic of **educational failure** or **learning inequalities** replaced that of **unequal access**.

In addition, these priority education policies were generally area-based policies: it was a question of granting additional means and of mobilizing local, professional, and educational resources, to fight against educational inequalities in the urban areas where economic and social difficulties are concentrated, alongside the poorest populations which are frequently also populations from ethnic or linguistic minority backgrounds.

A relative coherency between the three modes of targeting population categories (mainly defined from socio-economic categories related to educational criteria), in the regions and schools or networks of schools was to be observed. The predominating approach for thinking about these issues and discussing them was then of the sociological type. The advantages and drawbacks of this type of compensatory policy and its methods of implementation were subject to scientific and political debates. The debate, which had already begun on the North American continent, developed both in England and in France, around a criticism of **theories of disadvantage**, especially the one referred to as **socio-cultural handicap**, which was the basis of both policies and practices.

These sociological-type criticisms announced tension between compensation and democratization. They underlined the fact that aiming at democratization could not do without taking into account the role played in creating educational inequality by the way the education system operates, and how it builds and transmits school culture. However, as far as “compensation” was concerned, it was primarily a question of mitigating the insufficiencies of the cognitive development of children, put down, after some causal analysis, to the effects of the social and family background considered to be inevitably inadequate. The results were generally considered to be disappointing.

This compensation model was applied in England (with the institution of the **Education Priority Areas** or **EPAs** in 1967 and done way with since), in France (with the creation of the **educational priority zones**, or **ZEPs** in 1982), in the French Community of Belgium (where the name of the French model was used when they were created in 1989) and in Sweden which also has similar policies.

The targeted policies put into place in the other countries covered by the study were begun later and in a different political and social context. Greece and Portugal emerged at the same time (1974) from a period of military dictatorship which slowed down or prevented, as was the case in Portugal, the development of schooling. These two countries therefore had to treat both questions of **equal access** and **equal opportunity or results**, whereas in the countries mentioned above, these questions arose one after the other.

The situation of Portugal was nevertheless an unusual one, since the first priority education policy set up, **Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária (TEIP)** was very close to the model of area-based compensatory policies. The **TEIPs** began in the middle of the 1990s, but they also very quickly underwent change.

As for the Czech Republic and Romania, the collapse of the “communist bloc” in the early 1990s, led them not only to a certain distrust of the Central state, but also to radically call into question the structures of their former education systems (in particular the single school model) and the way they used to operate. These were identified with **totalitarian and standardizing egalitarianism**, indifferent to the diversity of pupils and families, and harmful to their creativity and personal development. The reforms and debates relating to the educational system of these two countries tended to assign as much, if not more, importance to questions of democratisation in the sense of **freedom of individuals and families**, of **promotion and recognition of the diversity of individual, cultural or ethnic features**, as

to those postulated by another meaning of the term democratisation, which looks at the reduction of **social and gender inequalities impacting access to courses and educational success**.

## 2.2. The second age, or the fight against exclusion

Sociological criticisms of the compensatory model fuelled another conception of priority education policies or policies aiming at fighting against educational inequalities, through **the transformation of educational practices themselves**. Such analyses and recommendations seem to have been passed on very little in terms of overall policy building. At the most, they gave rise to local adjustments and revisions. The second age of priority education policies observed seems rather to mark a slip in the very goal of these policies. From the early 1990s, these tended to minimize the objective of the fight against educational inequalities, in the name of a **fight against exclusion**: educational exclusion, of course (hence the increasing concern over the problem of pupils leaving the school system without a diploma or qualification), but also social and economic exclusion.

Arguments in favour of these policies were made more and more in terms of equity, in the sense of aiming at, or guaranteeing, for all a minimum range of competencies and knowledge to enable non-exclusion. This is where the rhetoric, much in vogue today, of core competencies and basic knowledge was heard. This reformulation was at the same time related to an increase in emerging social problems, and new concerns, enjoying great media coverage, such as those of unemployment or long-term integration, and school or urban violence. The use of the category of “**groups at risk**”, can also be understood in this sense, the risk being moreover sometimes evaluated more in relation to society than to the individuals or groups concerned. This category was a direct import from models of epidemiology. It had hitherto been especially used within the framework of work relating to health, drug-addiction, deviant behaviour or delinquency.

This transformation happened most explicitly in England, under the action of the **New Labour** governments. At a time when these governments had intensified and broadened their interest in socio-cultural handicap in schooling they became more ambivalent with regard to the question of knowing whether **equality** and **inequality** provide a suitable conceptual framework for understanding these questions. The most elaborate position was an undertaking less to promote equality than to fight **social exclusion** and to promote **social inclusion**<sup>8</sup>. As soon as the New Labour government came to power, this almost immediately resulted in the creation of a special organisation in charge of social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, later renamed The Social Exclusion Taskforce), in charge of coordinating policies in this sector.

The concept of **social inclusion** conveyed by **New Labour** involves the creation not of an egalitarian society as such, but a society in which all citizens have guaranteed access to a minimum level of social commodities (income, opportunities, health, etc) and therefore feel themselves included in a common social undertaking. **Social exclusion** occurs when people run up against barriers blocking access to these social commodities. There are many such barriers - unemployment, lack of income, ill health, poor services – acting on one another, and they may produce concentrated exclusion within particular groups and in particular areas.

The same can be observed in France concerning what occurred with the various revivals of the ZEP policy from 1989-90 and 1998. These revivals significantly extended the number of ZEPs, and therefore the number of schools and pupils impacted by this policy, while substantially bringing it closer to the social development policy of the districts, taken over as of the 1990s by the urban policy - of which the number of sites and the population kept on

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<sup>8</sup> Giddens, A. (1998). *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.



growing during the same period – and systematically showing that one is to be linked to the other. So it was that many observers were to show concern about the risk of dependence, or even of making the ZEP policy into a tool by the urban policy, and the risk of the main objectives of this ZEP policy changing from improvement in the academic success of the most underprivileged children towards mere “social management of educational inequalities”<sup>9</sup>.

Similar observations can be made concerning the transformation of the Portuguese TEIPs, or rather in their being replaced by the measure known as “New TEIPs”, set up in 2005. While the official objective was still to promote education for all as a condition of social cohesion and the possibility of facing the challenges of the information society and the knowledge economy, the references to social and educational inequalities tended to disappear behind targeting aimed at **difficult zones**. The scope of the new TEIPs was therefore to be limited to the urban centres of Lisbon and Porto, a choice justified by the fact that it was thought to be in these zones that the “difficult areas” are concentrated, in which “violence, lack of discipline, dropping out and learning difficulties” predominate, an assertion which, as the Portuguese members of **EuroPEP** remind us, is not based on any study.

This new age of priority education policies was naturally fuelled by the topic of the **common cores for learning, competencies and knowledge**, which was arriving in European countries. More concern was shown for the “fate of the defeated in educational competition” – pupils who until then could find themselves dropping out of the school system or relegated to the social and economic sidelines, without any diploma or qualification from their schooling – but aside from this, educational competition was greatly on the increase. There was a great risk of giving no more thought to the objective of equal opportunity and the appropriation of knowledge for all, or even to exclude it from the field of the thinkable, **as if such an objective were only utopian or unrealistic**.

### *2.3. The third age: inclusive education*

The complexity of policies in each country allowed researchers to observe the beginnings of a third age of PEPs, encountering a special meaning of the principle of an **inclusive education**. The move from the **fight against inequalities** to the **fight against exclusion** increases the probability of considering, once and for all, the risks not as a possible realization, but as a characteristic specific to certain individuals or certain population categories, and arising from certain conditions: the measures considered here are said to aim rather less at preventing or fighting against these inequalities than to manage their expected social and economic consequences. The problem with which this third model is confronted is part of this movement, the installation of **common cores of competencies** acting at most as a barrier against the outburst of the very idea of a common school.

What is now being witnessed, in fact, is a convergence towards a school that is more and more split up by a multitude of programmes and measures targeted on the basis of many forms of categorizations of school publics.

This fragmentation can be particularly observed in countries as different as England and the Czech Republic. The list of the categories considered as targets for priority education policies or their equivalents in these two countries speaks volumes. To the “conventional” targets and categories that are pupils from socially disadvantaged families and backgrounds and/or national, linguistic, cultural or ethnic minorities, other modes of targeting or categorization are added concerning, for example:

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<sup>9</sup> Kherroubi, M. & Rochex, J.-Y. (2004). Summary report “La recherche en éducation et les ZEP en France (Educational research and ZEPs in France). 2<sup>nd</sup> part: “Apprentissages et exercice professionnel en ZEP: résultats, analyses, interprétations” (Learning and professional practice in ZEPs: results, analyses, interpretations). *Revue française de pédagogie*, n° 147, p. 115-190.

- children of refugees or asylums-seekers;
- children from a particular migratory community or movement;
- ill children, with learning or behavioural disorders, or with “special educational needs”;
- pregnant high-school girls;
- gifted and talented pupils;
- depending on the sex of the pupils (boys or girls depending on the programmes, even if targeting is rare);
- and even “any pupil at risk from disinterest and exclusion”

In Romania, as in the Czech Republic, the same profusion of benefiting categories is to be found, these two countries adding that of **Roma children**, a population which itself undergoes several forms of categorization, sometimes as socially underprivileged groups, sometimes as an ethnic, cultural or linguistic minority.

Such fragmentation and the multiplication of measures that are very uneven in scope can also be observed in many other countries, over and above the major political priority education programmes which divert our attention (as in Belgium or France). To a large extent, this explosion is growing as a result of two different kinds of reasoning: that of “groups at risk” and that of special or particular educational needs.

This second category emerged in the English debate initiated by the **Warnock report**<sup>10</sup>. It was to have helped thwart the segregation mechanisms made up by specialised education courses. It was a question of giving preference to an educational rather than a solely medical analysis of these questions and of breaking with the disadvantaged individual model of handicap and difference contributing to exclusion or educational segregation of a large number of children. Since then, the category has grown significantly, through the work on encoding carried out by international agencies, such as CERI of OECD<sup>11</sup> and in so doing it has taken on an increasingly broad and qualitatively different meaning. From the debate in England can be seen emerging a strong conception of the principle of an inclusive school linked to the categorization of **pupils with specific needs**: this involves transforming schools into “communities open to all, which all learners have a right to on an egalitarian basis”<sup>12</sup>.

A significant dimension of this interpretation of the inclusive school implies that schools must change their culture, their curriculum and their practices: revise aspects of education that are ordinarily socially selective and discriminating, and instigate the construction of teaching approaches allowing learning for all. But the international extension of this debate frequently sets the **special needs** category within an individual model of handicap and difference. Over time, the category is becoming very broad, bringing in medical, social, cultural, economic, geographical and educational criteria to designate units that are sometimes rather heteroclite. It then takes up position in debates and analyses which mask a large amount of social and educational operations which generate some of these disadvantages.

This interpretation is not a new one, but it is now accompanied by a critical interpretation of the school system, which needs to be transformed because it remains profoundly standardizing. This is how one can understand the frequent inclusion in the classification of **special needs**, building new targets for priority education policies, of the **gifted and talented pupils** category. The inclusion of this category indicates a profound modification of the focus of priority education initially dedicated to reducing the educational inequalities related to

<sup>10</sup> Warnock Committee. (1978). *Special Educational Needs: the Warnock Report*. London. D.E.S.

<sup>11</sup> OECD (1995). *Integrating Students with Special Needs into Mainstream Schools*, Paris, OECD publishing.  
And OECD (2000). *Special Needs Education. Statistics and indicators*. Paris, OECD publishing.

<sup>12</sup> Armstrong, F. (1998). « Curricula, Management and Special and Inclusive Education », in P. Clough, *Managing Inclusive education : From policy to Experience*, Londres, Paul Chapman.

social and cultural inequalities. By including an increasing number of special categories, it is more a question of allowing each pupil and each category of pupil to maximize his or her development and his/her chances of educational success, taking into account what are claimed to be his/her particular or special characteristics. This is particularly true for those who do not correspond sufficiently to the expectations of an education system considered as wrongly normalizing. Although they are widely used, the concepts of **needs**, like those of **difference** or **diversity**, remain very often poorly defined and little discussed, in particular with regard to the general objectives and aims of school, setting the debate in the field of individual rights and therefore moving away from the principles which had founded priority education policies.

## By way of conclusion

The comparative approach adopted by the **EuroPEP** team has made it possible to highlight mechanisms that mere observation of an education system at a given time would undoubtedly not have revealed. The risk indicated by the move of priority education policies towards a third age, that of education individualized to such an extent that it could well signal the end of common schooling and of the construction of a shared culture, is not completely irrelevant. Between the need for taking into account individual differences and completely “à la carte” schooling, subjected to the contradictory pressures from parent-customers and employers in a hurry to obtain workers ready for employment, public policies aiming at fighting against educational inequalities deserve the attention of all those involved: researchers, decision-makers, teachers, pupils, etc. The analysis work proposed makes it possible to fuel the debate that has been scarcely developed since the beginnings of these policies, and rather poorly backed up by facts. As proof of this, it is only necessary to note **the obvious lack of evaluations** of these policies, at a time when they are tackling essential problems. The evaluation of results is not the only field which still receives very little coverage from studies and scientific analyses. Upstream, the principles which govern the various forms of these policies, whom they target and the actions to be carried out, at the appropriate decision-making level, are hardly discussed, if at all. Multiplying the categories and the beneficiaries will ultimately, as a result of concurrent priorities, eliminate any true priority, through the inability to decide what really had priority. In the same way, little is known about how teaching and the curriculum is adapted, deliberately or unknowingly, by schools and the categories of pupils concerned by PEPs.

The work of the **EuroPEP** team is continuing in three complementary fields. The first concerns how priority education policies, population targeting and categorization of the beneficiaries are justified. This involves identifying the probable beneficiaries of these programmes as accurately as possible, which means those who are actually helped by them... and those who ultimately do not benefit from them. This part of the work also consists in questioning the choice of educational and social categories or problems, which sometimes seems to happen “naturally”, whereas very little convincing data actually back up these choices. The comparative approach, once again, makes it possible to clarify that what is obvious for some is not necessarily so for others. This should not lead to sterile hyper-relativism, but on the contrary, to improved support for the debates so as to be able to better argue in favour of the choices made.

The second field concerns the types of actions carried out and how they are organized. These may take very varied forms, from reducing class sizes, via the provision of special materials, the organization of school time, reformulating curricula, adopting particular teaching models, or recruitment and training of specialized teachers. There are still very little data to ensure a certain *a priori* effectiveness of these measures that are sometimes extremely expensive and competitive. It is therefore important to use all information which may make it possible to enlighten decisions on the subject, including about daily classroom practices, and not just setting up overall structures or programmes.

The third field concerns how these policies and their results are evaluated, as well as the uses or misuses to which these evaluations are put. While evaluations of priority education policies are fairly rare, it is important not only to promote them, but also to check their quality and their scope, and to ensure that they are communicated. In the field of public policy, while it is impossible and not desirable to provide exclusively technical answers to the problems arising, it is essential to make sure of the quality of information which will be used for decision-making.

Finally, the work completed so far within the restricted framework of the SOCRATES programme, in connection with eight countries, is encouraging researchers to consider a permanent organization which would make it possible, via an observatory for priority education policies in Europe, to continue the work undertaken within the multidisciplinary and international teams.

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*This study develops a comparative analysis of priority education policies (PEPs) in eight European countries selected according to the variety of their education system: England, Belgium, France, Greece, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania, and Sweden.*

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