Perception versus reality: understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic determinants of success in education

Stephen Roche

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The first article in this general issue explores the role of education in promoting social cohesion in post-conflict societies. Based on a literature review, interviews and original data from a survey of all secondary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Taro Komatsu* investigates the role – both actual and potential – of decentralisation reforms in promoting social cohesion. The survey and interview data were collected from school directors and focused heavily on the relationship between school management and local school boards. This study has considerable international relevance, as the decentralisation approach has been pursued in many post-conflict societies, including those of Cambodia, Rwanda and South Africa. The great advantage, at least in theory, of decentralised education in such a context is that it has the potential, in the words of the author, “to depoliticise education from the bottom up, improve inter-ethnic relations in communities and increase trust between civilians and schools”.

He did not, however, find strong evidence that the decentralisation reform was actually enhancing social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather, the data showed a lack of active engagement between local stakeholders and school directors in school governance, with school directors typically viewing themselves as autonomous leaders. Nonetheless, this study does indicate some potentialities of decentralised and participatory governance by pointing out that school boards generally supported social cohesion by promoting school directors’ initiatives to implement relevant activities.

No single issue has affected European higher education in the last twenty years as much as the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the so-called Bologna Process. Its aim, according to the Bologna Declaration, originally signed by the Ministers of Education of 30 European states in 1999, is to create a pan-European area of higher education with “easily readable and comparable

S. Roche (✉)
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, Germany
e-mail: s.roche@unesco.org

degrees” (European Commission 1999), based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, and a with a common system of credits to facilitate student mobility. Inevitably, this ambitious reform programme has raised all kinds of challenges, both at governmental and institutional levels. Universities have struggled to adapt their courses of study to what is essentially the Anglo-American model of academic degrees and, in many cases, to cope with a swell in student numbers at undergraduate level. Much of the research published in recent years on the process has focused on the policy level, with comparatively little study of how the reforms have been received, perceived and implemented by those “on the ground”; namely students and academic staff.

Drawing upon original survey data gathered at the Technical University of Madrid (*Universidad Politécnica de Madrid*), one of Spain’s largest and most highly ranked universities, *Paz Kindelan* and *Ana Martin* investigate how academic staff are coping with the implementation of this process, and consider what more they can do to ensure a smoother transition. They found a large degree of uncertainty among academic staff regarding the changes required by the introduction of the EHEA and a feeling of resistance caused by a lack of knowledge about the rationale behind it. The results reveal a perception of the reforms as a process imposed from above. The authors argue that more active promotion and communication of the reform goals as well as a clear performance strategy are needed to ensure the active support and participation of academic staff in the successful implementation of the Bologna reforms.

2015 is the target date for both UNESCO’s Education for All (EFA) goals and the United Nations’ Millennium Goals. As this “year of fruition” approaches, twin processes are underway: to evaluate the successes and failures in achieving the current goals; and to formulate a new international development agenda for the period post-2015. The two sets of goals intersect in the objective to achieve universal primary education (UPE). While global progress towards UPE has been quite disappointing (the 2013/14 UNESCO EFA *Global Monitoring Report* [UNESCO 2014] projects that, by 2015, only 68 out of 122 countries will have achieved UPE), some regions have been more successful than others. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the adjusted net enrolment rate in primary education was calculated at 95 per cent in 2011. While impressive in itself, this statistic needs some unpacking. High enrolment rates do not, of course, guarantee high completion rates, nor do they say anything about the quality of education. Moreover, an increase in primary-school enrolment places burdens on other sectors of the education system. This is the subject of our third article. The authors, *Jeffery Marshall*, *Claudia Aguilar*, *Mario Alas*, *Renán Rápalo Castellanos*, *Levi Castro*, *Ramón Enamorado* and *Esther Fonseca*, examine the alternative middle school sector in Honduras, which has expanded rapidly in response to higher numbers of children graduating from primary schools.

The article analyses dropout in three of the four main alternative lower secondary school programmes in Honduras over a three-year period for a cohort of roughly 5,500 students. The authors’ analysis includes propensity score matching (PSM) methods that allow for more focused comparisons between students in alternative programmes and control samples. The results show that these programmes indeed

reach a vulnerable population, but dropout rates remain very high – upwards of 50 per cent in some cases – between Grades 7 and 9. However, multivariate analysis within alternative programme samples finds that attrition is lower in those learning centres which have adopted key features of formal schools, such as university-educated teachers. The results highlight the tremendous variation in the alternative middle school sector in terms of programme features, school quality and student outcomes, and reveal the fundamental challenge facing the alternative middle-school sector in Honduras: how to strike an effective balance between coverage and quality.

The author of our fourth article, *Sedat Gumus*, takes a different approach to the issue of school dropout, investigating the link between socioeconomic community factors and school participation at both primary and secondary levels in Turkey. Most previous studies in Turkey have focused on the association between household-level factors and school participation, largely ignoring the role of the broader environment in which children live. Using a recent, large-scale and nationally representative data set, this paper gives specific attention to community factors, which, as recent comparative literature suggests, have a major bearing on educational outcomes. The data used in this study came from the 2008 Turkey Demographic and Health Survey, which includes educational attainment, occupation, cultural beliefs and demographic characteristics of household members.

The author used hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) to address several issues that emerged from the multilevel nature of the data (individuals who belonged to the same community may have had more commonalities and variation of observations may substantially change across different communities, so within-group variation should be taken into account). He found that traditional economic approaches should be augmented by community-level social empowerment projects aimed at increasing adult education, changing traditional gender role attitudes and educating community members about the importance of education. This proposition does not suggest that improving physical infrastructures is unnecessary, but emphasises the importance of the social context, which has not received sufficient attention from policy makers. The strong relationship between community-level adult education and school participation also suggests that there is a need for greater investment in adult education.

As UNESCO's *Second Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE II) showed, "adult education remains a low priority for investment for governments and international development assistance alike" (UIL 2013, p. 77). This is due in no small part to the widespread perception that investment in adults yields a lower return than that in children. UNESCO argues that adult learning has a reductive influence on so many other areas of government expenditure – on health, law and order, economics and democratic participation – that it would be more appropriate to consider the cost of *not* investing in adult education. However, GRALE II conceded that hard data demonstrating the economic benefits of adult education remain elusive. In their article entitled "Educating the adult brain: How the neuroscience of learning can inform educational policy", *Victoria Knowland* and *Michael Thomas* approach the topic of adult education from two seemingly divergent but ultimately complementary perspectives. They examine the latest

scientific research on the capacity of adults to learn, and draw conclusions on the cost-effectiveness of adult education.

The common view is that adults are less able to learn because their brains are less plastic than in childhood. While there is some truth to this, the authors present a more nuanced picture of adults' learning capacity, showing that adults engage with stimuli in a very different way to children; in essence, the adult is selective while the child is immersive. This means that learning conditions need to be adapted to the adult brain. The authors refute the notion that there is some cut-off point beyond which adults are unable to learn new skills or knowledge. Rather, they conclude that while there is a gradual decline in human brain plasticity, this need not impair the rate and proficiency of later learning, provided appropriate teaching methods are applied. The primary message for policy makers is that learning is achievable across the lifespan, but that consideration must be given to both the strengths and limitations of the adult brain when designing educational programmes. The authors conclude the paper with a plea for further research in this area to "take the leap from the laboratory to the classroom".

This issue of the IRE wraps up with a systematic and highly engaging meta-analysis of Western education systems that questions their objectives and whether these are being met. As fundamental as these questions appear, they are too seldom asked, as educational research often fails to see the wood for the trees. The author, *Herman van de Werfhorst*, begins by defining the normative parameters of Western education, what he calls the "four tasks of schooling". These are: to prepare youth for the labour market; to sort students into tracks according to their talents and interests in order to optimise the acquisition of knowledge and skills; to provide equal opportunities to children from different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds; and to socialise citizens into active civic engagement. Each of the four tasks is analysed in terms of three contemporary societal trends: a rapidly changing labour market; a general and growing desire for selection and excellence; and increasing diversity and individualisation.

The author concludes with three sets of recommendations. First, that tracking or streaming should be avoided during the phase of compulsory education, as it is largely harmful to equality and unnecessary for an increasingly complex labour market. Where some form of tracking is desirable as a means to maximise skills and knowledge production, it should be combined with untracked classes for subjects where citizenship competences are taught. Second, standardised testing should be retained as it helps to reduce inequality and supports selection and excellence. Third, the vocational component of upper secondary and tertiary systems should be maintained in vocationally oriented systems such as those of the Netherlands and Germany. Reducing the vocational orientation of educational systems would not, in itself, do anything to meet the growing demand in the labour market for general and soft skills, as vocational training systems help to smooth the transition from school to work. Rather, contextualised generic competences should be integrated into vocational programmes.

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