

## EDITORIAL

Among the events that have had the greatest impact on the world of education in recent years—particularly in Europe and within the compass of OECD—the publication of international comparative studies such as PISA (2000 and 2003) or TIMMS/PIRLS occupy a primary place. In some countries, learning about the outcomes had the same effect as that of an electric shock, not only on politicians but also on public opinion and the media. The benefits of these international studies can no longer be questioned, but we have said everything about the real value of an education system when we have listed the scores or placed the countries that participated in the study in order of merit?

Almost, everywhere, there was an obvious need for political decision-makers, researchers and educators to attempt to have a better understanding of what exactly lay behind the figures and the running order, so as to avoid PISA being synonymous with “not being able to see the forest for the trees”. It is for this reason that a very large number of studies and in-depth researches have been carried out and they have thrown an interesting light on some realities of education systems.

One of the fundamental questions that faces any public policies—and particularly educational ones—is that of social justice or, to put it another way, the equity and the efficiency (or the quality) of these policies. In the field of health or social policies, for example, we know perfectly well that the results range widely between countries, although the declared objectives of the implemented policies would seem to have been the same everywhere. It is no different for education systems and that is one of the merits of international studies for, on the basis of the empirical data collected, when one examines the whole iceberg and not just the visible part it, we can attempt to reply to such important questions as: are efficiency/quality and equity inevitably incompatible? Are we able to explain why some education systems succeed in being both fair and efficient, and how they achieve this? Why are some others efficient but unfair? Why are some others inefficient but fair? And, finally, why are some inefficient and unfair?

This issue of *Prospects* is entirely devoted to these matters, examined from various points of view. It opens with an article by Denis Meuret under the “Viewpoints/controversies” section. Having participated in the GERESE study “Constructing international equity indicators for education systems” under the auspices of the European Commission and basing himself on the results of this PISA-based research, the author shows the wide range of the distribution of equity and quality among education systems, some of which belong to a “virtuous circle” and others to a “vicious circle”.

The articles forming the *Open File* in this issue are the outcome of research workshops organized by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and are all based on data from TIMSS 2003 and PISA 2003. The theme is introduced by the guest editors, J. Douglas Willms, Thomas M. Smith, Yanhong Zhang and Lucia Tramonte, and contains a brief

résumé of each contribution. Also in the Introduction, the authors define the indicators for the use of comparative international data necessary for the design of the studies that follow. Each one of these, based on a central or eastern European country, analyses a specific aspect of school quality compared to the equity of the education system. The information and outcomes obtained during the workshops and presented in the different articles allow us to go beyond a purely statistical approach to focus on the reasons for educational inequalities and inefficiencies and how they have come about.

This issue concludes with a *Trends* article written by Ferran Ferrer, Gerard Ferrer Esteban and José Luis Castel Baldellou. Here, the authors study equity and segregation within the Spanish education system—particularly that of Catalonia—from two points of view: firstly, using an analysis of uneven student performance compared to their socio-economic and cultural background; and, secondly, from the point of view of the schools and their role in adding to or reducing inequality among pupils.

Owing to his retirement, this 140th issue of *Prospects* is the last one to appear under the editorial responsibility of the undersigned. From the next issue, the new Director of the IBE, Mrs Clementina Acedo (Venezuela), will carry the torch. We wish to thank all those readers of *Prospects* for their interest, their support, and their understanding during this difficult period when the directorship of the IBE and the editorship of *Prospects* have both been assumed as an interim measure.

## Note

1. My thanks to Hanspeter Geisseler, research assistant at the IBE, who contributed to the writing of this editorial.

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