FAILURE. EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES THAT INCREASE SCHOOL FAILURE

School failure is a person's **inability to meet the minimum academic standards** of an educational institution. School failure is a process where a student slips farther and farther behind his peers and gradually disconnects from the educational system. The end result of school failure is **dropping out before graduation**.

Equity in education has two dimensions. The first is **fairness**, which basically means making sure that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. The second is **inclusion**, in other words ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all – for example that everyone should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic. The two dimensions are closely intertwined: tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure.

"Both equity and fairness are issues for OECD countries. Children from poorer homes in most OECD countries are between three and four times more likely to be among the poorest scorers in mathematics at age 15. And when it comes to inclusion, many students in OECD countries struggle with reading and risk, leaving school without basic skills for work and life in the 21st century. Significantly, there are big differences between countries. Achieving the necessary reading and mathematical skills is often especially difficult for migrants and minorities, who often lose out on both fronts – lower performance and low socio-economic background."

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf - p. 2)

Three key policy areas can affect equity in education: the design of education systems, practices in and out of school, and how resources are allocated.

The **basic structure of education systems** affects equity: *"Traditionally, education systems have sorted students according to attainment. Evidence from studies of secondary and primary schools suggests that such sorting can increase inequalities and inequities, particularly if it takes place early in the education process. Early sorting can also weaken results overall. This prompts two conclusions: early tracking and streaming need to be justified in terms of proven benefits; and school systems using early tracking should postpone it to a later stage to reduce inequities and improve outcomes."*

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf - p. 3)

What happens in the classroom obviously affects equity, but **practices in and out of school**, i.e. the relationships between schools, parents and communities, also matter. *"Student learning benefits from an effective school-home relationship, but weak support at home can hold back children from deprived backgrounds. Effective provision for migrants and minorities in the education system is also a key challenge. (…) Making students repeat a year if they are not keeping up is a popular option – in some school systems, up to one-quarter of students repeat a year at some point. But it is costly and there is little evidence that children benefit from it. High rates of year repetition in some countries need to be reduced by encouraging alternative approaches in the classroom."*

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf - p. 4)

Classroom intervention is not enough, as more than 20% of the learning time of children in OECD countries takes place out of school, in the form of homework, working with a tutor, or other activities. *"And attitudes at home, including parental support for education, involvement in children's learning and cultural habits like having books around, are also associated with stronger school performance. Expecting homework to improve performance may threaten equity, since some children do not have the parental support needed to bring results."*

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf – p. 5)

Education systems need to provide strong education for all, giving **priority to early childhood provision and basic schooling**. Public provision of education can foster equity if it counterbalances poor home circumstances at the outset of children's lives. But it may increase inequity if it offers a common resource that is primarily claimed by those least in need of it. *"Existing education resources are already being reallocated in ways that may not help equity in basic education. There is pressure for money from an expanding tertiary education system, for example. But while countries need a high quality well-resourced tertiary education system, public expenditure is not the only solution. So countries charging fees for early childhood education and care but not for tertiary education need to review their policies. Grants to poor families for school-age children may help reduce dropout rates at upper secondary level, but countries where grants to families for school age children are tied to school performance also need to review their policies, since this may in fact encourage dropout."*

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf – pp. 6-7)

Teaching quality is also an issue: *"Disadvantaged schools have the greatest need of experienced teachers, but in many countries the "difficult" schools can only attract the less experienced teachers. There should be incentives for more experienced teachers to work in these schools."*

(http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf – p. 7)

Researches show that social exclusion is a product of incorrect/illegal **educational or cultural practices**: *"On the one hand, practices such as early tracking, streaming, segregation and stigmatization of cultural minorities and migrants take place in Europe producing social exclusion and the reproduction of inequalities among individuals."*

 (*"INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education"*, University of Barcelona, CREA – p. 8)

Education systems who use **early tracking** tend to create exclusion and inequity: *"Early tracking tends to produce social exclusion, by means of offering lower levels of education to certain students and directing some individuals to educational dead end situations with limited options for retraining and reintegration into the educational system. Education systems with early "tracking" of students exacerbate differences in educational attainment due to social background, and thereby lead to even more inequitable outcomes in student and school performance that end up being inefficient in the long run."* (*"INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education"*, University of Barcelona, CREA – p. 11)

Studies[1] based on **within-class ability grouping in reading strategies** show that *"Segregation has harmful consequences, especially for at-risk students; the lower ability groups within these schools tend to spend more time on non-instructional activities, have less opportunities to choose reading materials, and are less encouraged to think critically, as they are asked less critical comprehension questions."* As a direct consequence, these practices do not accelerate the learning of at-risk students, but in fact decelerate it, thus perpetuating the inequalities which exist between students.

("INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education", University of Barcelona, CREA – p. 16)

A consistent **renewal is still missing** in education, as a response to the wider cultural changes in post-industrial societies: *"Parents' cultural capital has a clear influence on the students' learning. Nevertheless, most schools are still depending on conceptions of learning elaborated during the industrial societies which focus almost only on the relations among students and one teacher within the classrooms."*

("INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education", University of Barcelona, CREA – p. 23)

Gender issues are to be taken into account when speaking about educational practices that increase school failure: *"Girls perform better than boys in all the areas of knowledge but not in those that traditionally are associated with maleness. In this sense, even girls latest overall improvement, boys continue to achieve better results in Math than girls do. Research has already showed that there is a hidden curriculum in schools which reproduces values and models."* This mean that girls and boys internalize the tendency to aspire to careers that have traditionally been considered to be feminine or masculine. It also involves the teachers and family's expectations of the different "natural abilities" of boys and girls in different subjects such as reading and mathematics, all these associations being linked to the persistence of values that are related to traditional masculinity.

("INCLUD-ED: Strategies for inclusion and social cohesion in Europe from education", University of Barcelona, CREA – p. 51)

After implementing two federal programs[2] meant to remake the U.S. education system, important **correlations of international tests' results with races and social classes** are still visible in the country: *"And half a century after the end of official segregation, huge gaps continue to divide students by race and class, with the average black 12th grader scoring in reading at a level equivalent to the average white eighth grader on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the most trusted long-term yardstick of U.S. school performance."*

(http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139113/jal-mehta/why-american-education-fails)

It can be argued that **most teachers prefer small and homogeneous classrooms** - not too different in regard to age, social-economic status, language, ability etc. *"Thus, they are satisfied with students who*

---

[1] Chorzempa, B. F. & Graham, S. (2006). Primary-Grade Teachers' Use of within-Class Ability Grouping in Reading. Journal of Educational Psychology. vol. 98 num. 3 pp. 529-541.

[2] **No Child Left Behind**, a 2001 law that sought to use standards and accountability to push all students to proficiency by 2014, and **Race to the Top**, an Obama administration initiative that has tried to incentivize change by offering competitive grants to states pursuing reform agendas.

have "volunteered" for school, and they often have little interest in, or feel responsible for, children who are not enrolled and who are "different". (The same is true, of course, for many parents of "normal" children who don't want the school's quality diluted by learners with disabilities or from the poor or lower castes, or their own children "endangered" by others affected by HIV/AIDS.) By the same token, as we have seen, schools are also quite good at "pushing out" many of the "different" students who do get in (and call them "drop-outs") - by using a language many do not understand, by setting fees and/or other expenses too high, and by turning small disabilities into large impairments."

(http://www.idp-europe.org/eenet-asia/eenet-asia-9-EN/page24.php)

"The teaching profession at risk" appears to be one of the barriers in the literature on the inclusion of disabled students. The possibility of recruiting talented candidates for the teaching profession would be impaired by the low status of teachers and their adverse living and working conditions. The following problems that impacted on the popularity of the teaching profession were repeatedly identified:

- *Low salaries: In many countries around the world, teachers work and live in poor conditions. In general, teachers are poorly paid and many of them have another job to complete their income.*
- *Heavy workload: Teachers are required to deal with very large classes, and sometimes have to teach double shifts.*
- *Poor working environment: Teachers may also lack basic and adequate teaching and learning resources. In certain countries, teachers rarely have access to ICTs, and those who do are not always trained in their use.*
- *Lack of support: Teachers receive inadequate professional and administrative support from parents, the community or their superiors. Management issues, such as the lack of clear identification of their rights and responsibilities and the poor or irregular communication with the school manager and central office, also affect teachers' morale.*
- *Gender and ethnic biases: There may be a gender imbalance within the teaching profession, and biases against ethnic minorities or groups.*
- *Disparities in working conditions: The working conditions of teachers may vary depending on the zone and type of school they work in. Conditions for teachers in rural areas are often reported as being difficult: lack of classrooms, equipment, and transportation; and limited supervision..*

(http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Cap_Dev_Training/Virtual_Institute/pdf/Forum_Teachers_2_09.pdf)

Children with poor grades are consistently classified as having a learning disability, often **without any proper assessment** of why these children experience barriers to learning, development and participation: *"Some of these barriers may instead be caused by cramped classroom conditions, inflexible curricula and examination systems, learning material that lacks relevance to many children, or the lack of child-friendly and child-centered teaching approaches. Therefore, labeling of children based on unqualified and random assessments is a major challenge to inclusion and education for all."*

("Teaching Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Settings" - p. 13
In "Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments Specialized
Booklet 3", UNESCO Bangkok, 2009)

Children with disabilities face both **environmental and individual barriers** – these two forms of barriers are closely interrelated:

A. Environmental (and Attitudinal) Barriers

1. **Limited or no access to early intervention programs** – *The disabling effect of impairment will be multiplied unless there is access to quality early intervention programs (support systems).*
2. **Teachers, school administrators and school inspectors** – *if they discriminate against children who are perceived to be different from the majority of their peers.*
3. **Legal and regulatory systems** – *if these are discriminating, segregating and excluding.*
4. **Curricula** – *if these are rigid and do not respond to diversity of abilities, needs and circumstances amongst learners.*
5. **Teaching approaches and teaching/learning material** – *if these are not learning-friendly, nor responsive to the diversity of needs and abilities among learners.*
6. **Assessment and evaluation system** – *whether these exclusively or primarily assess the academic level of children according to general standards, rather than individual progress - ideally the academic, social, emotional and physical development should be assessed and evaluated.*
7. **School and classroom environments** – *when these are not inclusive, learning-friendly, or even physically accessible.*
8. **Social, economic and political conditions**.

B. Individual Barriers

1. **Communication** – *if a child has a different first language than the majority of their peers, their teacher, and/or the learning material available in the school (this includes children who have sign language as their first language as well as those who use Braille as written language).*
2. **Poor motivation** – *if children have little or no motivation for learning, due to many different factors, often related to the environmental and attitudinal barriers listed above.*
3. **Insecurity, low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence** – *This is likely to be the result of a combination of environmental, attitudinal, and individual barriers – some of which are listed above.*
4. **Abuse** – *Children suffering from psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse are likely to experience serious barriers to learning, development, and participation. These can be avoided if there is comprehensive intervention from schools and families, as well as a support system (education and health professionals). Children with disabilities (especially those living in segregated education institutions) are particularly vulnerable to abuse.*
5. **Gender** – *Girls with disabilities experience many of the same barriers that non-disabled women and girls face, but their social isolation and dependence on their families often magnifies these barriers, and their consequences. Women and girls with disabilities fare less well on most indicators of educational, professional, financial, and social success than their non-disabled female and disabled male counterparts.*
6. **Lack of social competence** – *Many children experience social difficulties, difficulties that may create barriers to learning, development and participation, and ultimately marginalization in, and exclusion from, school. Other difficulties include: interacting and playing with other children;*

communication; behaving in ways that are seen as socially and culturally "acceptable," as well as; difficulties in accepting boundaries (some of these are related to environmental and attitudinal barriers, as well as to impairments).

7. ***Temperament*** *– If a child has moods and rages, is introvert and has difficulty communicating with her/his peers (as well as parents and teachers), finds it difficult to adapt to new and changing situations, is easily distracted, has a short attention span, and reacts very intensely on positive as well as negative experiences (many of these temperament/behavior patterns are related to environmental and attitudinal barriers as well as to impairments).*

8. ***First-generation learners*** *– If the child is the first in her/his family to go to school, additional support (support system) may be needed to prevent barriers to learning from emerging.*

9. ***Cultural, language and religious minorities*** *– Many children belonging to a minority group will face enormous barriers to learning, development and participation. Without targeted support and an inclusive, learning-friendly environment, the barriers these children face may become permanent in nature. Children with disabilities from a minority background will often face additional barriers, and the consequences of the barriers they face will often be more severe than for their non-disabled peers.*

10. ***Impairment*** *– Many children with impairment will face specific barriers related to their impairment such as: difficulties in communication because teachers and children in the school do not know how to use sign language; the lack of books in Braille, or toilets that are not accessible for wheelchair users.*

11. ***Health conditions*** *– if a child is infected and/or affected by HIV, has epilepsy (a health condition as well as a disability), reoccurring malaria, or any other health condition that may lead to discrimination or keep the child away from school (ill at home or in hospital).*

("Teaching Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Settings" – pp. 8-12 In "Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments Specialized Booklet 3", UNESCO Bangkok, 2009)

Study of the social inequalities encountered at school has occurred in two phases. The first corresponds to a period during which the development of education systems was focused on **increasing the duration of school education**. *"During this phase, it was generally apparent that access to school tended to reflect the social background of pupils. The children first to benefit from easier access and/or the longer period of schooling came from privileged social classes; depending on the country concerned, a certain period of time was then required for those from poorer backgrounds to catch up."* The second phase of investigation has no longer been concerned with problems of access, but with **inequalities in attainment**. *"This issue may be considered from two angles: either children from poor backgrounds are more often excluded as they progress from lower to higher levels because they do not satisfy the academic requirements for admission to a particular level; or, alternatively, they are more frequently led to opt for branches or types of educational provision regarded as inferior in terms of academic performance. Some writers refer to quantitative inequalities in the case of the first scenario, and to qualitative inequalities in the case of the second. School attendance is therefore an insufficient condition for eliminating inequality at school."* ("Social inequality at school and educational policies", Paris, 2004, UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136282e.pdf – pp. 11-12)