

## **‘Competencies, polarization, flexibility : the European education policy in the era of economic crisis’**

The official European doctrine on Education can be summarized by two words: “efficiency” and “equity”. Who would refuse such a nice program? I suppose everybody in this room will support an efficient education and an equitable education. But, of course, we have to look at what’s beyond those words. What do they actually mean in the European educational discourse.

« Efficiency », as everyone knows, is in the first place the capacity of a person, a system or a machine to achieve its goals. But what are these goals ? What is the European vision on education ?

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There is no need to look too far to discover about what type of “efficiency” our European and National leaders are thinking of. A quick look at the website of the European Commission is enough. The personal webpage dedicated to Miss Androulla Vassiliou, the present European Commissioner for Education, outlines very clearly the central objectives, by the yardstick of which the efficiency of education should be measured :

*Improvements in education, research and innovation are needed to:*

- *to help Europe compete globally*
- *to equip the young for today's job market*
- *to address the consequence of the economic crisis.*

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Miss Vassiliou’s ideas are not especially original. They just summarize the fundamental doctrine that the Commission is been repeating since almost 20 years. Already in 1995, at the end — so we thought — of the economical doldrums of the eighties, the European Commissioner of Education, Edith Cresson, was promising that with a more dynamic and modern education, based on the new skills required by the labor market, Europe would definitely be moving towards a “knowledge society”. And this, of course, for the greatest happiness of mankind.

Six years later, after dozens of gleaming reports and a new stock market crash, it was the turn of her successor, Viviane Reding of Luxemburg, to brandish the prospect of the vast benefits that would result from an implementation of the Lisbon strategy in the European Education policy. She promised, no less no more, making Europe “*the most competitive knowledge economy in the world*” by adjusting the educational system to include lifelong learning, flexibility, individualized learning, “key-competences” and the «spirit of enterprise».

Today, a new financial crisis and a global economical recession have once again buried the promises of a capitalist system generating a universal prosperity. And yet, these 15 years of failure seem to have opened nobody's eyes: the European leaders still perceive the school mainly — not to say exclusively — as a tool for competition. They keep willing to make us believe that the solution to problems of unemployment and inequality, lies in a better adequacy between the education and the economical needs. One even has the feeling that the acceleration of the crisis and it's exacerbation lead the European Commission **in an irresistible 'fuite en avant'**

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One year ago, on the 25th of november 2009, the Commission published an important document titled « *Key competences for a changing world* »:

*Education and training should become more open and relevant to the needs of the labour market.*

*Particular attention should be given to establishing partnerships between the worlds of education and training, and of work.*

*The economic downturn puts these long-term challenges even more into the spotlight.*

*More than ever Europe's success in global competition is dependent on its skills and innovation capacities (...).*

*The role of education and training underpinning the knowledge triangle needs to be reinforced. Innovation and growth will be weak without a broad foundation of knowledge, skills and competences.*

As we see, the European education policy is clearly placed in the context of economic crisis and recession. It's worth taking a broader look at what economic crisis actually means for education systems.

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This crisis is, fundamentally, a threefold feed-back process. Excess of capital and overinvestment produce an excess of productive capacity (estimates 30% is unused). This generates an exacerbation of economic competition. Which means great instability, high unemployment rates, heavy pressure on public expenditures and a continuous pursuit of competitiveness, by way of new investments in technological innovation.

Those characteristics of the economic environment produce specific demands addressed to the States.

1) They are urged to open access of investors to new areas, especially in the former public services. And because many of the public services are already

privatised, the two and a half billion dollar worldwide education expenses are indeed regarded by investors as a new Eldorado. Everything that could possibly be profitable is going to be privatised : the most economic important parts of higher education, vocational education, adult training, but also individualised pedagogic help for higher or middle-class children with school-failures.

- 2) The State has also to support by all possible means the existing markets. Companies will try to use the vast commercial opportunities represented by hundreds of millions of students and pupils, by reinforcing their commercial presence in schools. And when it concerns sectors that are considered as strategic by governments, as it is the case for ICT-markets, then we see the European Commission itself plead the cause of using education as a mean of stimulating that market: *“It is doubtful if our continent will keep hold of the industrial place which it has achieved in this new market of multimedia if our systems of education and training do not rapidly keep pace. The development of these technologies, in a context of strong international competition, requires that the effects of scale play their full role. If the world of education and training does not use them, the European market will become a mass market too late”* (CEC, 1996).
- 3) But the most important result of the heavy economic competition is that governments are put under pressure to adapt swiftly and narrowly the contents, the organization, even the pedagogical methods of education, so that they would respond better to the changing demand of skilled workforces. As we have seen, this is also the major concern of the European Commission.
- 4) But economic crisis and recession do have a fourth consequence for Education. To improve competitiveness of national or local industries and services, governments are urged to diminish fiscal pressure. “Less taxes”, is one of the main demands of their national companies. But less taxes means less financing of public services, especially one the most costly, education. Actually, most of the representative organizations of business and capital are not demanding to reduce the education-budgets. The European Round Table of industrialists even asked for an increase. But at the same time their members ask each national government to reduce taxes. This is a characteristic contradiction between global and individual interests of capitalists.

In the report I quoted earlier, the European Commission recognizes that *‘public and private budgets are under strong pressure’*. I believe we have to go back for one moment to the precise definition of the word «efficiency». Actually it means not only «achieving the goals», but more exactly «achieving them with maximum productivity, with minimum wasted effort or expense».

Now, a profound contradiction takes shape: the school system has to provide the European labor market with a working force endowed with, as the Commission puts it, *“different and higher”* skills. But, at the same time, the education system should also be subjected to the indispensable austerity needed to bail out the banking

system and the ongoing competitive 'defiscalisation'. This is one of the main contradictions that capitalist economies face today in the field of education.

Some people on the left do even believe that the growing demand for high-skilled workforces will be sufficient to force governments to invest more in education and to push education systems towards more democratisation on the long term. I do not share this optimistic view. And to explain why, I have to deepen what it actually means to adapt education to the demands of labor-market. What is the nature of those demands? What are the main evolutions on the labor market ?

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Many people believe that future labor markets in advanced countries, especially in Europe, will almost only need high skilled workforces. Actually, this is a severe misunderstanding of the concept of "knowledge society". According to a research conducted by the European Centre for the Development of professional training (CEDEFOP), the future evolution of labor markets in Europe looks like this :

*Higher level jobs (...) are all expected to experience increased demand over the next decade.*

*There will, however, (also) be significant expansion in the numbers of jobs for many service workers, especially in retail and distribution, and also for some elementary occupations requiring little or no formal skills.*

*This has been characterised as polarisation in the demand for skills.*

*The structural and other changes taking place will, if these trends continue, create many jobs at higher levels but also large numbers at the lower end of the job spectrum, with low pay and poor terms and conditions.*

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This dual evolution of the labor market is also observed in United States: here you see a list of the 30 jobs with the most important volume growth in ten years, 6 need high levels of qualification (a Masters Degree or more) but 16 jobs require only a "short-term on-the-job training» : cashiers, cleaners, waiters, truck drivers, security guards, home care aides, food counters, etc.. Some writers have nicely described this polarization by speaking of "Mac-jobs" and "Mc-Jobs" (referring to the "macintosh" of Apple and the "Mc" of Mc Donald's).

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In France, the official statistics reveal also an important growth, since the middle of the nineties, of these new non-qualified jobs, essentially in the service sector.

This evolution of the market throws a new light on the dominant discourse about the “knowledge society”. And it certainly has radical consequences for education policies. The OECD is forced to recognize cynically that

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*“everyone will not take up a career in the dynamic sector of the “new economy” — as a matter of fact most will not — so that the school program cannot be conceived as if everyone should go that far”.*

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In France, Claude Thélot took up this formula, in an even straighter way, in the report written for Jacques Chirac :

*“The notion of school-success for everyone cannot be misunderstood. It does certainly not mean that school has to intend to make sure that all students reach the highest school qualifications. It would be as much of an illusion for individuals as a social absurdity since school qualifications would no longer be associated, even vaguely, to the employment structure”.*

The problem posed to the European decision-makers of education is as follow: through the evolution from the fifties to the eighties, we inherited education systems where students follow 8 to 10 years of common education. From a historical perspective, this coincided with the belief in a prosperous capitalism, with a strong and continuous growth, requiring a continuous rise in the level of education. But today, we live in an era of crisis, massive unemployment and polarization of the qualifications. So, what should today be the common base of education for, on the one hand, future engineers and, on the other hand, future low qualified workers, who will be working in one insecure job after another.

The answer lies in the nature of these new unqualified jobs. Or, should I say, so-called unqualified because unqualified jobs do not exist as such. It is only agreed to speak in such a way about jobs requiring qualifications that are not recognized because the knowledge, the know-how and the **behavior** they require are supposed to be shared by everyone.

For instance, since the beginning of the twentieth century, having an elementary level of skill in reading and writing is not seen any more as a qualification since it is supposed to be universal, at least in Europe.

Unqualified jobs are simply jobs whose qualifications have not to be payed by employers.

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The new « unqualified » jobs call for a great variety of low level skills. The “counter waiter” working at the bar of an international High speed train has to be able to

speaking elementary levels of different languages, he needs aptitude in mental arithmetic, he needs a minimum of technologic, numeric and scientific knowledge to deal with a number of varied tools (oven, micro-wave, water-heater, cash register, bank card reader, freezer, vocal announcement system, power supply board...) he needs to have social and relational skill in his contact with very different clients, he will also be asked to have initiative, commercial spirit and, of course, to be flexible (in view of train schedule) and to have a high level of adaptability .

That is, more or less, the list of the « key-competences » formulated by the European commission which is supposed to serve as the central axe for the reform of the education systems, from primary school to professional training, through secondary school.

1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; 8) Cultural awareness and expression.

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According to the EU Commission *«There is a clear trend across the EU towards competence-based teaching and learning. The European Framework of Key Competences has contributed considerably to this. In some countries, it has been key in policy reform».*

Today, says de Commission, about 30 millions of European workers do not dispose of such 'key-competences'. They are therefore excluded of the competition on the labor market for finding those "unqualified" job. Sometimes, this might force the employer to recruit overqualified workers and, then, risking to put an upward pressure on wages. On the other hand, by providing every worker with the famous basic "key competences", one helps the wage competition in the new unqualified jobs.

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*“The increase in offer (of these competences) will result in a decrease of real wages for all workers already in possession of such skills”.*

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This evolution from an education focused on knowledge, know-how and qualifications to an education oriented towards competences and employability, also meets the demand for a greater flexibility and adaptability of the working force. The economical instability, joint to the frenzied use of innovation as a tool to create new markets or to enhance competitiveness makes the productive environment more and more unpredictable. **What will the technical means of production look like in ten years?** No one knows and no one can predict the precise needs in terms of knowledge and qualifications. On the other hand, the very vague key-competences

put forward by the Commission are seen as being able to ensure the adaptability of the future workers.

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An OECD-report puts that very clearly: *“In the world of work, there exists a set of basic competences - relationship qualities, linguistic aptitudes, creativity, the capacity to work in a team and to solve problems, a good understanding of new technologies - which have today become essential to possess to be able to obtain a job and to adapt rapidly to the evolving demands of working life”* (OCDE, 1998).

The really important thing, in school, is not more to learn, but to “learn to learn”, to be able to adapt quickly to the fast changing technological environment and to the rapid rotation of labour force in industry and services.

Competency-based education is the answer to all of those demands : Because it ensures flexibility; because it ensures access to new skills demanded on labour market (ICT, foreign language, basic mathematic and scientific skills, social skills...); and because it solves the problem of what to learn in a “massified” primary and secondary education system that must produce engineers and low skilled workforces.

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*“For what reason, are these competences, all in all classics, in the news today?”* ask the OECD before answering: *“It is because the employers recognized them as key factors of dynamism and flexibility. A working force endowed with such competences is able to continuously adapt to the demand and fast evolving production processes”*.

Very recently, the Flemish council of education (VLOR) decided to implement competency-based teaching in Flanders, with this main argument : *“the growing popularity of the competences perspective in the present education system should first be put down to the wish to bring closer education and labour market by better preparing students to work in a flexible and adaptable way in their future professional life”*.

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The growing demand for flexibility has another consequence in the field of education. Not only do future workers have to learn to adapt, says the Commission, the education system themselves have to be able *“to react faster and more smoothly»*.

*Partnership between education institutions (and) the world of work, should be enhanced at all levels. Such partnerships would gather education and training practitioners, businesses, civil society bodies, national and regional authorities with a common agenda.*

*Work-based learning, apprenticeships and voluntary action schemes should be given a much greater role not only in VET and adult education but also in schools and higher education*

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This is especially true for Higher education.

*Enhanced university autonomy and improved governance and accountability of institutions are crucial to enable them to open up to non-traditional learners and to diversify income. University-business partnerships can create appropriate conditions for a higher share of private sector funding from enterprises and help universities in developing curricula and qualifications which are more relevant to the competences needed for the labour market and by students.*

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Now, what is left from the great initial promises ?

The efficiency, as one understands it through the interpretation of the European texts, turns out to be an economical use of the school joined with a severe austerity. It means to lower the education objectives to what is (or what seems to be) strictly necessary to the employers.

As for the announced equity, there is nothing left but the “equitable” share of mediocre key-competences just sufficient to produce future competitors for low skilled and low paid jobs on the labour market.

As you know, I work for a Belgian NGO named «The Democratic School». When people ask us what the expression «Democratic school» actually means, we answer that a democratic school is the one that gives every young man and young girl the weapons of knowledge. I mean, the weapons to understand the world they live in and to participate actively in its transformation.

Well between this concept of a democratic education and the so-called «efficient» and «equitable» education the European Union is building, there is far more than just words' nuance. There are two diametrically opposed educational projects, two incompatible visions confronting each other : education as a tool for emancipating and liberating people or education as a mean of reproducing and justifying their exploitation.

Thank you