

Exclusion and Violence Leave Schools at a Loss

The universal availability of primary and secondary schooling in Europe and North America has not solved the problem of unequal access to education. Nor does it guarantee social cohesion.

While western Europe grapples with issues of social exclusion and the relevance of education to the job market, central and eastern Europe struggle to cope with dwindling resources and the decline of a formerly state-supported system of free education.

Functional illiteracy, often called 'the invisible problem', is perhaps the most eloquent illustration of the failings of basic education in the region. Sue Torr, a school 'canteen lady' in the United Kingdom, remembers trying to keep her illiteracy a secret: "One night my mother-in-law said, 'Sue, what's on TV tonight? Could you look at the newspaper?' I pretended to look. 'There's nothing much on,' I said. 'What's on the second channel?' she persisted. 'Just a load of rubbish,' I said, and ran upstairs." Sue has now learned to read, but up to a quarter of the adults in twelve of the world's richest countries still cannot make out a cheque or read a prescription – a real indictment of mature education systems.

Zoom

- ▶ The mature education systems in the region offer 100 per cent coverage in primary and secondary education up to the age of 16.
- ▶ Despite universal coverage, there is a persistent 'hard core' of underachievers estimated at between 15 and 20 per cent who fail to acquire basic skills at primary school and fall behind in secondary school.
- ▶ Between 10 to 30 per cent of the adult population in the region has difficulty with basic reading, writing and numeracy skills.
- ▶ Priority Education Zones in France and Portugal are examples of positive discrimination in underprivileged areas.

Even in rich societies, education does not guarantee a job. The average unemployment rate for under-25s in the European Union is 21.5 per cent. "You study, you make sacrifices, and in the end what do you have? Nothing," says Rachida Bensmili, 22, a Paris-based business student.

The alienation of growing numbers of young people who have 'fallen through the cracks' in society – neither in school or in employment – needs urgent action, not least because it is perceived as a threat to social cohesion. A 1999 survey of OECD countries shows that their numbers range from 4.3 per cent in

Denmark to 19.4 per cent in the United Kingdom. School for them has led nowhere. "It may sound extreme, but in some cases school actually produces marginalized people," remarks Svein Osttveit, Executive Secretary of the Education for All Forum. He points to the failure of rigid, unresponsive formal school systems to cater to the learning needs of all.

Initiatives to better equip early school leavers and under-achievers for the job market are appearing in the region. They include programmes in schools and vocational training institutions, as well as work-experience projects run by private companies.



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Coping with change: a young girl in St. Petersburg, the Russian Federation, where education is struggling to keep up with rapid and profound changes in society.



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A pilot scheme of 'second-chance schools', financed by the European Commission and several public and private partners, is operating in several EU countries. The scheme aims to provide 18-to-22-year-old school drop-outs with job skills so they can make a fresh start.

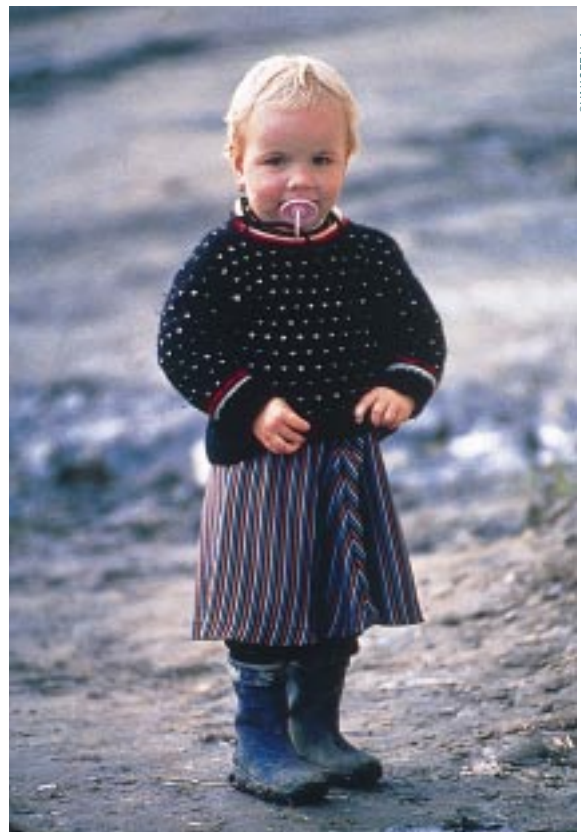
Central and eastern Europe face a different set of problems. The regional assessment confirms that the economic crisis has deeply affected the quality of education. While primary school attendance has remained stable, a combination of demographics and hard times has sent early childhood education into steep decline, with enrolment dropping from 21 million to 12 million from 1990 to 1998.

In central and eastern Europe, stories abound of dilapidated schools, teachers waiting up to ten months to get paid, canteens closing and classes held in freezing temperatures.

"Our heating system is antiquated and frequent power cuts make it dangerous to use," says Aishe Chabanova, a headmistress in Ukraine who has constant nightmares about her school blowing up. Tight budgets mean schools must rely on contributions from families. But with unemployment and growing poverty, households are also feeling the squeeze and have little to spare for education that yesterday came free. Stories abound of dilapidated schools, teachers waiting up to ten months to get paid, canteens closing and classes held in freezing temperatures. To add to existing inequalities, a two-tier system is taking root, where the best private schooling is only accessible to those who can afford it.

As a result of increasing social exclusion, violence in schools is rising in many countries of the region. In the United States, the recent classroom killing of one 6-year-old by another shows that the worrying increase in school shootings is not confined to high schools. Alarm video systems and uniformed guards are now part of many a North American school environment.

Some pupils have attempted to set fire to the school where Chantal Collin teaches in a Paris suburb. Others already run foul of the law. "Violence comes from low self-esteem and repeated failure," claims Chantal, who has responded by developing projects and activities to restore confidence in her pupils. But not all teachers have her resourcefulness, and most lack training to cope with aggression. "Today, schools are ill-equipped to deal with violence," says Kaisa Savolainen of UNESCO. "There is a strong need for non-violent strategies for conflict resolution." ■



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Waiting for a place in preschool. In Belgium, France and Iceland, 75 per cent of 2- to 4-year-olds attend preschool programmes while in Finland and Switzerland the figure is less than 25 per cent. Central and Eastern Europe have seen a sharp drop in preschoolers in recent years.

