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Education
Training
Youth

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Analysis of questions of mutual Eterest
concerning educational policy
(Action III.3.1 of the Socrates programme)

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The current crisis on the labour market not only makes the situation of young people more difficult but also makes their progression to social and occupational integration a more prolonged, diverse and complex process. The transition to employment is thus an intermediary stage between being out of work and finding employment, and is created to a large extent by employment policies. These are responsible for the gradual, discontinuous nature of young people's integration into working life. Against this background, the consequences of failure at school have never been so serious, at a time when there has never before been such a high proportion of young people staying on at school and the average level of education has never been so high¹.

The results of the research described here² show how actions and measures aimed at preventing failure at school and in professional life by promoting the social and occupational integration of young people are faced with a challenge. On the one hand, the education system establishes an implicit, increasingly stringent selection procedure in order to adapt to a productive system which is considered to be increasingly demanding. On the other hand, the education system affirms the need to combat this selection and to mitigate the consequences of exclusion, in particular through positive discrimination measures. Other issues are also giving cause for concern to those involved: how does one respect the principle of equality and yet take diversity and differences into account? This results in two types of problem within schools. Firstly, schools and other training establishments are criticised for intensifying selection and social inequalities. Secondly, schools are accused of being incapable of providing adequate education to ensure the occupational integration of the majority of young people and therefore of providing only limited assistance.

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The education system organises pupils' progress through school on the basis of a standard of "excellence" which involves selection. Various methods of classifying school failure have been adopted in the various European countries on the basis of this standard³. These definitions are based on meritocratic principles and involve unique, simple criteria which

¹ Paradoxically, the "emergence of a category described as low-skilled in relation to employment is attributable not to the failure of the education system, but on the contrary, to its extension and its tendency to become more widespread" (Alaluf, 1993: 13).

² We have based our information on reports produced in the context of research on reforms in the education and training systems to combat school and social failure in Europe, financed by the Socrates programme, and on other studies, the references of which are given at the end of the document.

³ The choice depends on the structure of the education system (organisation into a common core up to lower-secondary level (Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal, France, United Kingdom); uninterrupted uniform structure between primary and secondary levels (Denmark, Finland, Sweden); different types of education (Germany, Austria, Belgium). In the majority of countries with a common core of education, specialisation usually starts at around 15-16 years of age (Greece, Portugal, United Kingdom, Spain) or around 14 years (France, Italy). In countries with different types of education, specialisation is much earlier: 10-12 years in Germany, 12-13 years in Belgium (Crahay, 1996).

constitute the basis according to which pupils will be judged. The school thus generates classifications and assessments made on the basis of an a priori standard of excellence.

As has been seen in various countries, regulating pupils' work by keeping them down a year or reorientation has had negative effects and has, in particular, led to a lack of motivation and interest for school, a lack of self-confidence on the part of the pupil, an increase in the drop-out rate, a worsening of the conflict between the pupil and the school and the creation of a feeling of guilt on the part of the pupil. Reorientation, because of its incorporation into a hierarchy of secondary education courses, is assimilated to relegation, intensifies the processes of exclusion and stigmatisation of young people and results in an increase in social inequalities.

The school's role in generating classifications and hierarchies among individuals on the basis of standards of excellence not only helps to consolidate social inequalities, but is also, according to some (Maroy, 1997), inadapted to the new conditions of production. In a situation dominated by complexity, uncertainty and insecurity, young people will be constantly forced to redefine themselves. The use of traditional assessment criteria is not adapted to this new situation. Furthermore, creative abilities in the face of uncertainty are important nowadays and should be taken into consideration when organising the transition to working life.

It is therefore important for schools to organise themselves in such a way as to place pupils in situations in which they are likely not only to assimilate knowledge but also to utilise it in insecure and uncertain situations (Berton, 1997). The Portuguese study thus demonstrates that the difficulties young people have in developing their autonomy are attributable to the failure to promote the latter within a homogeneous, standardised education system. Moreover, this also limited the impact which the credit system might have had in this respect.

Measures taken to combat school failure which aim to give a minimum level of training to all young people have reduced the extent of the problem but have at the same time aggravated the consequences. In a situation of intense competition between those with qualifications, the increase in the average level of education places those with the lowest academic qualifications in a particularly difficult situation. For example, one study (Denoef, Denys, 1996) reveals that in Belgium 72% of jobs requiring a primary school-leaving certificate are occupied by people with higher academic qualifications. Occupational transition measures have been introduced to give these young people the necessary skills to improve their chances of occupational integration. In France, Denmark, Germany, Belgium and Finland, for example, an attempt has been made to promote the learning of attitudes to adopt in difficult situations, the transition to working life being itself one of these situations. In this context, the school has a duty to transmit methodological skills which will, inter alia, enable young people to analyse more effectively the situations with which they are confronted during their integration. Methods used to attain this objective include support measures, the promotion of active participation and representation of young people, the provision of additional resources, the redefinition of the assessment procedure, teacher training and the wish to control the pupil selection procedure applied by schools at the time of admission.

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According to experiments carried out in various countries (Greece, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany), the provision of support, advice and guidance seems to be an

interesting approach and makes it possible to strengthen the pupil's psycho-social skills: definition of a personal project and ability to identify the rules applicable to unknown situations. These guidance and advisory systems have been developed to increase young people's confidence in their own abilities and to promote the desire for personal development. Young people have thus been able to both increase and use their autonomy judiciously. Achieving this result has involved working on young people's attitudes (involvement in school, responsibility, initiative, autonomy, versatility, ability to solve problems and creativity). The development of a personal career project and the definition of a training programme adapted to the pupil's rhythm of learning have enabled numerous young people to be well integrated at school, socially and occupationally. In France an attempt has been made to achieve this objective on the basis of an individual contract. It is particularly important to instil into disadvantaged young people a feeling of power and an ability to control their own destiny, since it is precisely they who experience great difficulty in perceiving the future as something over which they have control (Guichard, 1993; Dubet, 1994).

This work on the psycho-social attitudes of young people may have adverse effects. This applies to many out-of-school training schemes, particularly sandwich courses, which have focused on adaptation to a working situation. As Rea says, such training "seems to teach more about the social conditions of carrying out employment rather than the acquisition of advanced techniques and knowledge" (1992:184). Such reports show that it is important to promote measures aimed at giving young people the means to defend themselves on the employment market and to hold the reins of their own destiny by combating fatalism.

The development of a personal project is likely to remain limited in scope if it is not promoted at institutional level. In this respect, it is beneficial to promote the active participation and representation of young people in various political, educational and social institutions. Creating a "talking space" within school, on the one hand, and in the relations which the school maintains with its environment, on the other, stimulates the sense of responsibility and involvement of young people. Some pilot experiments have been launched by associations such as Comète in Brussels (see box).

The association Comète is a good example of the dynamism of some of those playing an active role in the voluntary sector. It is part of a series of measures to help young people entitled "Actions in an open environment", which seek to prevent deviant behaviour in young people. Comète focuses particularly on those who drop out of school. Initially, Comète concentrated its activity on the individual, aiming to restore the young person's confidence in his or her own abilities and to create favourable conditions for the development of a personal project, but the association discovered the limitations of an individualised approach, which was helping to increase the feeling of personal failure. It then adopted a systemic approach. In this case, school failure is perceived as the symptom of a series of problems whose origins lie elsewhere. The pupil is offered assistance which is not restricted to the pupil but is also aimed at his or her environment (teacher/pupil relationship, relationships between the various teachers, between the school and the family, etc.). It is on this basis that guidance is developed, the aim being to identify how the various people involved may be induced to call themselves into question. In order to achieve this objective, meetings are arranged between the pupil, the school, the family and the organising authority to discuss the reasons for the present difficulties and to try to come up with joint decisions to overcome them. This involves re-establishing communication between the partners where it has broken down, and helping the pupil, his or her family and the teacher to overcome their difficulties.

This initiative encounters problems relating to the school's degree of cooperation. The dynamism and openness of the head and the teaching staff are essential for the success of the measure, but do not always exist. Teachers sometimes adopt a reticent attitude and have the feeling that they are being challenged. There is increasing frustration within the association itself at the lack of cooperation from schools or organising authorities. The association sometimes feels that it is acting as an alibi for the organising authority which is seeking to disclaim responsibility for the situation of some young people, while ensuring that they are prevented from ending up on the streets. Finally, the term "potential delinquent", which is often attributed to those who frequent Comète, may be considered to be a source of stigmatisation.

Several authors have shown that these support measures require additional resources in order to be effective, in particular in schools confronted with a variety of problems. In Germany and Belgium, in particular, it is evident that positive discrimination measures were only effective on account of the development of additional learning opportunities (small groups, remedial teaching, language courses for foreigners) and the setting up of networks for marginalised young people. The help of educational specialists, school mediators and other professionals was thus vital to create forums for discussion and to anticipate conflict. Mediation is a conflict-solving procedure based on negotiation between the parties with no hierarchical or disciplinary constraints. Mediators seek to develop or re-establish communication between pupils, teachers and others actively involved in the educational process. They must remain neutral throughout the negotiations and take into account the various points of view expressed. A study carried out in Brussels (Verhoeven, 1997) demonstrates the benefits of such practices for the management of school conflicts and highlights their adaptation to a situation in which there may be various coexisting reasons for their adoption. This work requires constant

creativity, an ability to veer away from established standards, an ability to analyse the situation in all its complexity and to reach solutions acceptable to all.

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The Danish education system has a dual objective: vocational training and general education. Its objective is to help educate citizens who will be capable of participating both in their personal and home environment and in the professional and political environment. In this context, it involves enabling everyone to make the best possible use of their intellectual abilities, providing social or psychological/educational support to those who need it. A psychologist is attached to each school; he/she is responsible for both the initial diagnosis and providing continuous support for young people in difficulty. Other professionals also provide educational support to the teachers and the psychologist. As each school also has additional resources and the support of the local authorities, it is able to implement social or psycho-educational activities independently and autonomously. Generally speaking, the wide variety of initial education makes it possible to solve most school problems on an individual basis. Inability on the part of the school to find a solution by mobilising its own support measures constitutes a failure. Such an approach requires not only material resources, but also considerable investment on the part of teachers who must be on hand and flexible.

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Recent research has highlighted the key role played by the organisation of academic pathways in transmitting the methodological skills referred to above. Emphasis was placed in particular on the importance of taking "informal" aspects of education into account, which relate to situations for which there is little a priori standardisation and definition and which are opportunities for the expression of creativity, initiative and dynamism. It is more a question of recognising the specific features of this "irrationality" rather than attempting to deny it or to incorporate it at all costs into the formalised, standardised framework of school rules.

Among the various solutions adopted to stimulate these creative skills, several countries have chosen to organise school education in training cycles. This type of organisation is intended to ensure a closer correspondence between the learning process and the young person's stages of development. The establishment of "tailor-made" learning has made it possible in Portugal and Germany, for example, to respect pupils' individual rhythms. In France, although studies are not unanimous, this type of organisation nevertheless seems to work to the advantage of those pupils most likely to fail. A similar philosophy has inspired various reforms such as the "school of success" project in Belgium, the LOGSE (Act on the general management of the education system) in Spain, etc. Such initiatives favour the development of more flexible forms of assessment and facilitate bridge-building and the process of catching up. Furthermore, it is possible, as in the United Kingdom, to acknowledge previous achievements and to reduce the frequency of penalties associated with retaking a year. Such innovations seem to be all the more effective in that they are adopted at the beginning of schooling and delay for as long as possible the moment when the pupils are divided up on the basis of different subject combinations. In order to limit the subjectivity of assessment, care is taken to develop systems based on standardised criteria established externally in cooperation with the teachers. The pupils' achievements are thus standardised, preferably according to a scale

defined at national level. However, it is important to retain the possibility of expressing a local opinion (e.g. through the class council).

In Belgium from the 1960s onwards numerous schools were organised on the basis of a system designed to promote the attitude of "learning to learn". A comparison of the achievements of pupils in traditional education with those in the new system reveals that the first are more prepared to make a sustained effort and are more disciplined, while the second have greater autonomy, spontaneity and ability to deal with uncertainty (Van Haecht, 1985; Education and Training Council, 1993-1994).

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In 1985 Finland reformed its pupil assessment methods; pupils are no longer assessed in relation to others or the class average, but in relation to educational objectives and learning criteria laid down in advance at national level and by the communes. The aim of this reform is to assess pupils on the basis of their own qualities and to induce them to acquire learning habits defined on the basis of objectives. Pupils are thus given responsibility, are involved and encouraged to cooperate. An evaluation of the whole process is performed on the basis of the progress of the class as a whole. In 1994 a new reform was introduced with a view to drawing still closer to these objectives. Formative assessment, methods of increasing self-esteem, individual assistance, etc. were introduced. It is also intended to add the possibility of self-assessment.

Such reorganisation of school systems involves the training of teachers. They are in particular encouraged to modify their concept of assessment, replacing norm-referenced assessment with formative assessment, which places emphasis on pupils' achievements rather than their shortcomings and which is also designed as a way to improve one's own teaching methods. Such training programmes have been developed in Denmark and Finland and have not been restricted to initial teacher training, but also include in-service training. In this context, countries such as Austria, Portugal and Finland have provided teachers with supplementary training to give them a better understanding of the specific features of their pupils. In this case, too, the effectiveness of these policies depends on additional resources and a general debate. This is demonstrated, for example, by experiments in Portugal and the Netherlands, where the introduction of the credit system was not accompanied by teacher training measures; teachers tended to continue with traditional methods, therefore at the same time reducing the flexibility of the new system.

Finally, in several countries such as the Netherlands and Portugal, the importance of controlling the selection procedure operated by schools when admitting pupils has been highlighted. Competition between schools is actually leading to the exclusion of some groups of young people which some schools are refusing to accept. The strong hierarchy between schools which is evident particularly in France, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany, is the result of such procedures.

As indicated above, the promotion of young people's personal projects must be done on the basis of a measure which is more preventive than defensive. This involves the more effective identification of problems at school which would make it possible to make corrective adjustments or to take measures to catch up as early as possible. Greece has attempted to develop such methods. In the United Kingdom, Germany, Finland, Denmark and Belgium, an attempt is also being made to act as early as possible in this area, also with a view to taking preventive action. However, while there seems to be a broad consensus which says that repressive methods are not very effective, many countries nevertheless allocate considerable resources to developing a means of curbing absenteeism from school, since they consider that this promotes marginal or criminal behaviour (this is the case, for example under the "security contracts" scheme in Belgium). The introduction of such systems which penalise dropping out of school results in many countries in the transition from a logic of entitlement to a logic of obligation.

The main objective of the reforms recently introduced in secondary education is to combat school failure. Decentralised in nature, they seek to detect and resolve the problem within the school system itself. Since 1993 all pupils in the first years of secondary school receive a common core of education, "basisvorming"; the selection of pupils through subject choice is thus delayed. This education comprises a range of core subjects, with the definition of the objectives to be achieved. The possibility of combining several schools is being considered, in order to offer as wide a choice of options as possible. The purpose of the reform is thus to consolidate pupils' basic skills in order to help them meet the challenges of a changing society. Emphasis is thus placed on contact with "real life". Special attention is focused on methods enabling "learning to learn". With this in mind, secondary school has been developed as a "house of study" in which pupils work in a relatively autonomous manner and receive guidance from teachers. Pupils are thus made more responsible for their learning, without, however, being left to themselves.

With regard to vocational education, a whole range of new opportunities is being offered to pupils: shorter training modules, remedial courses, guidance, more practical training, etc. It is hoped that this will enable everyone to find a pathway which corresponds to their wishes and ability. All training courses lead to a nationally recognised certificate. Although there are bridges between them, the various possible routes are nevertheless hierarchically arranged and do not all offer the same possibilities of extension. Young people from underprivileged backgrounds are over-represented on the shortest courses. Diversification of the training on offer also means that the system is not very transparent, neither for pupils nor for employers.

These reforms promote cooperation between the various players at local level: teachers, local authorities, prevention and social control agents. Since 1995 each local authority must draw up a plan aimed at deriving the maximum benefit from local resources and promoting cooperation between schools and other organisations. This is not unrelated to the link commonly made between absenteeism from school and the risk to society, which justifies the clamp-down on absenteeism from school.

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The involvement of the public authorities in the school system is based on the concept of universal law and equal opportunities, the State's role being to ensure the observance of this principle of equality through standardised, rationalised measures. Against a background of budgetary restrictions, characterised by increasingly complex situations of uncertainty and instability, this type of involvement often appears rigid and a source of inefficiency in the education system.

In view of the diversity and multiplication of causes of exclusion and school failure, a whole series of guidance and training measures have been developed to promote vocational integration. Confronted with very varied situations, these measures were in most cases intended to take into consideration the specific features of certain social groups. This wish to respect differences has thus become one way of helping to achieve equal opportunities objectives. The growth in the number of these initiatives both within and outside schools has helped to reveal the need for coordination of activities and cooperation between the various players involved. The activities have sometimes taken

the form of a "division of labour" between the school system and other players, the latter being made responsible for the future of those whom the school considers it is no longer able to help. This trend may be observed in several countries. The exploitation of young people on apprenticeships which has been highlighted also demonstrates that it is necessary to carry out checks on the existence and relevance of on-the-job training.

One set of results concerns sandwich courses. What is often apparent is the lack of vocational training and continuing training of people responsible for offering guidance to young people who have failed at school, the insufficient number of apprenticeships, lack of consistency of the system and its adaptation to the personal situation of the pupil and lack of recognition or certification of training acquired in this context. What also emerges is that the development of sandwich courses, which was based on a desire for equal opportunities, has sometimes ultimately led to new types of discrimination. Such programmes have thus tended to reproduce or worsen the hierarchy between courses, diplomas and the statuses given to the various categories of pupils or apprentices.

Measures relating to young people's academic pathways are often defensive, thin on the ground and poorly coordinated. Other problems are the unsuitability of criteria for awarding subsidies, inaccurate definition of target groups and the often compulsory nature of measures. The abolition or reduction in unemployment benefits aimed at forcing young people to enter the labour market seems, for example, to have increased the risk of exclusion and marginalisation.

Studies carried out in France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Austria and Belgium have shown how some employment policies and the emphasis on flexibility of employment might, in varying degrees, lead to the emergence of second-class jobs. The instability of such employment may make it difficult to acquire utilisable experience and is unlikely to promote the acquisition of skills. In addition, the insufficient number of jobs available creates a risk of substitution of labour at the expense of the least skilled and threatens the status of workers in general.

Finally, the development of training outside school for young people who have failed at school raises the question of certification of achievements. Certification helps place those concerned on an equal footing with young people with school-leaving certificates and also offers an opportunity to establish systems which make it possible to avoid the risks and misuses referred to above.

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This association, which is constantly seeking to adapt itself in the light of its experience, works with young people aged from 16-25 years who have failed at school and do not have any financial resources. After several months within the association, an individual plan is drawn up for each pupil with their cooperation. The plan comprises training leading to a qualification (electricity, cabinet-making, plumbing and bookbinding), based in practically all cases on practical apprenticeships, general education (active citizenship, social skills, use of leisure and free time) and a personal assignment (self-awareness, management of personal career path, etc.).

This linked work and training scheme takes place in very small groups and is based on a personalised relationship between the instructors and the pupil. It involves providing the young person with the means to overcome the obstacles (in particular his or her lack of self-esteem) which prevent them from taking full advantage of their intellectual abilities. Work is used as a means of promoting self-esteem; Norte Joven cooperates with an integration enterprise, Acnoven, where the young person may come into contact with work in a real situation. This enterprise seeks to facilitate the occupational integration of pupils, who are placed under the responsibility of a mentor and a teacher. Companies which have called upon Acnoven's services have recruited approximately a third of the young people with whom they came into contact.

The rules to be observed are defined with the pupils, in order to encourage them to "adopt" their place of training. Former trainees are monitored for at least two years after leaving the association.

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The number and diversity of those playing an active role in vocational training and occupational transition has led various countries to develop forms of cooperation which make it possible to take advantage of the complementarity of those actively involved. In Finland and the Netherlands, for example, families have been asked to take part, while in France and Belgium, coordination centres have been developed between local partners, the aim of which is to adopt an integrated approach. Given that failure at school is the result of various factors (educational, economic and social), consideration has been taken of the need to create networks to ensure the development of cooperation between schools, other training establishments, the public authorities, placement services, the social services and local enterprises. The aim of such networks (whose operating procedures may take the form of contracts) is both to use available resources as effectively as possible and to deal at the same time with the problems generated by unemployment, housing and health. Cooperation measures of this type make it possible to prevent activities intended for young people who have failed at school from being mainly activities which concentrate more on socio-cultural promotion as a means of avoiding urban unrest rather than on the development of skills which are likely to improve the chances of occupational integration.

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Created in 1982 under the auspices of the Ministry for Labour, local offices seek to promote the vocational training and integration of young people. They try to find collective, coordinated solutions to social exclusion through the joint action of the voluntary sector and the local authorities. Local offices propose a concerted policy against social and occupational exclusion. These centres coordinate various resources from the voluntary sector, schools, the social services, local communities, training centres, enterprises, trade unions, etc. They take into consideration the expectations and requirements of the young people in the area and propose a policy targeted simultaneously at combating failure at school, preventing delinquency, regenerating the neighbourhood, integrated immigrant populations, etc. Local offices ensure coordination between local and regional authorities, between the public and private sectors and have become places in which to develop new ideas and new forms of social assistance. They provide both technical and psycho-social training through a partnership system. Faced with the need to use the various resources as effectively as possible, they have made an effort to ensure that their work complements rather than competes with institutions.

As one of the potential partners for schools in this field, associations play a particularly important role. Often flexible and dynamic, they constitute the main channel for the dissemination of new ideas and new types of assistance. The voluntary sector - where it has been developed - provides fertile ground for integrating schools into their environment and, in particular, bringing about the participation of the local community in the life of the school. Encouraging such initiatives by increasing subsidies and extending margins of manoeuvre seems to be one line of action to take, however little the public authorities play the game and methods of control are defined. Associations may in actual fact sometimes act with a certain arbitrariness, thus venturing to oppose the guarantee of equal benefits for everyone. Limiting this selectiveness may be one of the objectives pursued in countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom and Belgium, which have tried to develop certain indicators which make it possible to give a multidimensional assessment of the activities of associations which receive subsidies. Such assessments are obviously complicated by the need to take into consideration not only the results in the field of training and integration, but also criteria more difficult to define, such as the development of autonomy, self-confidence, communication skills, etc. However, it is only by thus extending the assessment criteria that it might be possible to prevent integration measures intended for the least skilled from also being selective themselves by assisting primarily the highest skilled (Stercq, 1994).

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The various European countries have tried to set up systems to prevent failure at school and in professional life by reforming the education system and/or by modifying the relationship between the school and its environment. These policies, which we have looked at briefly, clearly show the difficulties which arise from the need to deal - by means of internal reforms to the education system or local measures - with problems whose origins are in most cases to be found outside these domains in the selective operation of the labour market and the unequal distribution of employment. They also reveal the constantly pressing need to take into consideration at the same time, firstly, the personal and social characteristics of pupils, which leads to individualised practices and positive discrimination and, secondly, the principles of equal opportunities on which the European social model is based.

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