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Discrimination of Children in Vulnerable Situations in Education: The Current State of Affairs and Strategies for Overcoming It

This focus issue of the Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal is dedicated to children and young people living in vulnerable situations, those whose security, wellbeing and development are at risk due to the lack of care and protection from adults and the lack of access to essential services. Various groups of vulnerable children and young people often become victims of prejudice and discrimination, thus exasperating their already burdensome living circumstances. Discrimination is followed by dropout, marginalisation and social exclusion, resulting in the development, education and wellbeing of vulnerable groups being severely jeopardised.

Worldwide efforts of international organisations, national governments and education policies to fight discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for all children are therefore one of the priorities on the political and education agenda. Global commitment to the protection of children's rights, education for all children, and improving education systems by endorsing principles of inclusive education based on antidiscrimination policy has been present since the adoption of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994), to name just the two of the most cited international documents that strive to safeguard children. However, although education systems in various countries are engaged in the task of combating discrimination, they are not truly defeating it, shedding doubt on the declared commitment. On the other hand, even when there is a genuine dedication to children's rights and an inclusive approach, reduced understanding of how discrimination against children is manifested is compromising struggles to develop inclusive policies and services (Webb, 2004). Children are still exposed to various forms of discrimination, from individuals, educational institutions and education systems.

The present focus issue reflects the need to reaffirm, strengthen and align in the centre the (lost) responsibility towards vulnerable and marginalised children. The contributions in the focus issue convey the urgent need for state institutions, governments and experts to assume responsibility in the field of education, social care and other essential services in order to provide additional support and secure the development and education of vulnerable children.

The focus issue consists of five articles that deal with diverse groups of vulnerable children, written by 14 authors from three countries. In the first two contributions, the participants involved in the studies are children and young

people, thus providing readers with a rare opportunity to understand the world of children and young people through their own eyes, rather than from the viewpoint of the adults (Cohen et al., 2007). The third and fourth articles allow readers to gain deep insights into the mechanisms generating entire “vulnerable populations” due to the harmful policies of certain governments, despite their best intentions. Finally, the fifth article deals with the viewpoints of pedagogical assistants, the closest informers about Roma children growing up in the extreme poverty of substandard ghetto settlements.

The focus issue opens with Karmen Mlinar and Mojca Peček’s paper *The Approach of Schools to Ethnic Diversity: The Perspective of Majority and Minority Pupils*. This contribution presents the first study in Slovenia to examine minority and majority pupils’ perceptions of schools’ efforts to embrace distributive equality and foster diversity recognition. The authors explore how Albanian, Bosniak, Hungarian, Serbian and Roma pupils perceive schools’ approach to ethnic diversity in comparison to the majority Slovenian pupils. The data were collected with questionnaires completed by 897 pupils from basic schools. The findings reveal statistically significant differences in the perceptions of Bosniak and Slovenian pupils regarding distributive equality, and of Hungarian and Slovenian, and Serbian and Slovenian pupils regarding diversity recognition. Furthermore, the analysis of the differences in the perception of both dimensions for each ethnic group showed statistically significant differences for all ethnic groups except for Hungarians. The authors point out that the pupils’ less positive perception of schools’ efforts to foster diversity signal underlying issues connected to discriminatory societal norms and systemic inequalities. Schools should therefore adopt a comprehensive strategy that focuses above all on the recognition of diversity at different levels, from the organisational to the pedagogical. Mlinar and Peček conclude that their study reveals shortcomings and weaknesses of the Slovenian school system from the perspective of inclusion and could therefore provide important information for political and structural reforms.

The second article, *Young People with Complex Needs as a Particular Challenge for the Education System* by Špela Razpotnik, Matej Sande, Bojan Dekleva, Darja Tadič, Mija Marija Klemenčič Rozman and Jana Rapuš Pavel, provides valuable insights into perceptions of another particularly vulnerable group: young people with complex needs. The research described in the paper draws on two national Slovenian studies about young people in psychosocial distress and represents the first first-person perspective qualitative research of their experiences and perceptions of formal support services in Slovenia. The authors are interested in how vulnerable young people view the benefits and threats derived from various social systems: family, school, peer networks, the local

community and (formal) support services. Using thematic analyses, the authors investigated these systems in terms of being supportive or threatening, from the perspective of the 32 young people with complex needs who were interviewed within the research. The results suggest the predominance of threatening factors, on the one hand, and a lack of accessible, integrated and continuous support, on the other. The authors emphasise that institutions generate a “revolving door effect”, sending young people with complex needs from one service to another and leaving them excluded. A set of recommendations for improving the existing state of affairs is presented in the conclusions: organisations and support services should network with each other and create interdisciplinary and holistic responses to the complex needs of young people, with school having a central place in this regard; activities between different support services should be more coordinated; professionals need to be trained for cooperation; and mental health specialists need to become facilitators of cooperation and reduce their expert role in diagnosing distress experienced by young people.

The third contribution, entitled *The Uncertainty of School in a Time of Uncertainty: Perspectives of Different Coalitions in the Aftermath of the School Mass Shooting in Serbia*, deals with the tragic event that happened when a seventh grader killed nine pupils and a school guard in the Vladislav Ribnikar Primary School in Belgrade. In their paper, Sanja Stojiljković and Barbara Blažanin analyse the response of the Serbian Ministry of Education to the tragedy, which, in addition to striking the immediate victims, also made the wider population of school pupils vulnerable and in need of further support. In the aftermath of the shooting, the state of shock, confusion, uncertainty and anxiety created a pressing need for clear and immediate policy interventions to restore stability and trust in the school and community. However, policies were changing in response to the main stakeholders (authority representatives, teachers and parents), revealing the great tension that arose due to their different beliefs about schooling after the tragedy. The main purpose of the study was to explore the stakeholders’ perspectives regarding the question of whether schooling should continue, and if so, how? In order to understand the different meanings of the policies and their impact on the roles of pupils within the education system, the authors use narrative policy analysis of 16 official educational documents and 53 newspapers and blog articles that included the reactions of stakeholders. The study highlights the damaging effect of inconsistency in policies on pupils’ wellbeing, and reveals the unfavourable position of teachers in the decision-making process. Above all, it emphasises the potential harmful effects of inconsistency in policies on pupils’ wellbeing and academic life. In conclusion, Stojiljković and Blažanin stress that the main concern should not have been

whether schooling should stop or continue, but how to create a line of consistent and stable recommendations aligned with the policy created.

The fourth article in the focus issue, entitled *Challenging Divisions Through Teacher Education and History Teaching: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, is written by Larisa Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Lejla Mulalić. The paper offers qualitative insights into the engagement of university teachers who work within the deeply divided education system in the post-war society of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić are in a double role: as authors of the article who are passionately presenting teaching approaches in education for peace; and as self-reflexive teacher educators who are implementing those approaches with their first-year bachelor's students and master's student teachers at the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Sarajevo. The authors emphasise that when a divided education system is based on ethnocentric views, as is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, children and young people become the most vulnerable groups, as they are the victims of the structures from the past, created and maintained by adults. In order to overpower ethnocentric perspectives within education and society, the authors are implementing alternative teaching strategies dealing with the issues of segregation, discrimination and divisiveness. Drawing on the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy and peace education, Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Mulalić aim to create a safe space for students and student teachers in their university classrooms. These classrooms become niches where future teachers have the opportunity to discuss sensitive topics, such as ethnic and religious prejudice, and to overcome the false division into "us and them". In their conclusion, the authors stress that the role of teacher educators in teaching for peace, and the role of universities in shaping the values for local and global responsibilities, become crucial in countries and education systems affected by painful histories, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the fifth article, *Dropout From the Primary Education System of Roma Children from Substandard Settlements in Serbia: The View of Pedagogical Assistants*, Stefan Milutinović and Vojin Simunović analyse factors related to the dropout of Roma pupils who grow up in substandard settlements in Serbia. The crucial – and often only – stakeholders who are actively involved in the educational process of these children are pedagogical (Roma) assistants. The goal of the study was to explore the largely overlooked perspective of these assistants on individual, school and family factors affecting the dropout of Roma pupils. The findings of the thematic analyses of semi-structured interviews with 40 pedagogical assistants identify gender as the major individual factor influencing drop out, since socio-cultural norms influence parental decisions to withhold girls from

education. The single-parent family is the major family factor, since it results in weak parental involvement in the education of children, while discrimination in schools is the major school factor, including direct discrimination by school principals and school staff who advise Roma parents to enrol their children in special schools or adult education facilities. In the conclusions, Milutinović and Simunović emphasise that a holistic approach and improvement in collaboration between families, schools and social services, as well as strengthening the role of pedagogical assistants, should enhance the support of at-risk pupils such as Roma living in marginalised communities harshly affected by poverty.

In the varia section, Sabina Višček's article entitled *The Role and Effect of Profanity in Children's Literature* poses interesting questions about the use of inappropriate language in children's literature. The analysis and synthesis of modern literary Slovenian texts suitable for the first six years of Slovenia's nine-year primary school, as well as the comparative method, showed that profanity and expletives are stylistically and semantically diverse, and that their pragmatic nature needs to be taken into consideration. In most cases, profanity and insults are justifiably placed in Slovenian literature for children. Most often, they appear as a motif; less often, they are used as the central theme (or motif) in the text. The author stresses that the reading mentor has a significant role in alerting readers to the function of profanity in the text.

The second article in the varia section, *Rural Teacher Competencies: An International Comparative Study on the Territorial Dimension of Rural Schools* by Juan Lorenzo Lacruz, Francesc Buscà Donet and Pilar Abós Olivares, presents a descriptive study of competences related to the territorial dimension of rural schools among teachers working in rural schools in Spain, France and Portugal. The results point out that the competences with the greatest mastery are those referring to the design and development of programmes, followed by professional competences and school-community relations. The authors conclude, inter alia, that there is a need to reinforce competences that are not included in training plans, but that are nevertheless considered more necessary and important for working in rural schools.

The third contribution in this section, entitled *What is the Role of Science in Post-Socialist Education and Society? Insights from a Survey of Preschool Teachers from Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia*, is written by Željka Ivković Hodžić, Lidija Vujičić and Željko Boneta. The authors present the results of a survey conducted among preschool teachers in Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia that aimed to investigate the attitudes of the participants towards the role of science in education and society. The results of the study show that preschool teachers in all three countries are inclined to a postmaterialist view of science, but that

it is possible to distinguish between two value orientations, which they named “post-materialism” and the “materialist image of the child”. Older teachers accept the “materialist image of the child” more than younger teachers, confirming a certain intergenerational value change, which authors interpreted as a shift from a collectivist to an individualistic approach to education.

The last paper in the varia section, entitled *Laboratory Use Self-Efficacy of Turkish Pre-Service Science Teachers Trained in Different Teacher Education Programmes*, is written by Oktay Kizkapan, Nagihan Tanık Önal and Asli Saylan Kirmizigül. The quantitative research presented in this paper aimed to compare the laboratory self-efficacy of 289 pre-service science teachers who attended two different science teacher education programmes in Turkey. The study results indicate significantly higher total scores of laboratory use self-efficacy of pre-service science teachers trained in the programme where physics, chemistry and biology courses were taught through theoretical and laboratory applications, compared to programmes where these courses were reduced and laboratory hours were abolished. However, there was no significant difference between the two programmes in the sub-dimension applying scientific process skills. The authors discuss the results of the study and their implications in the light of current literature.

This focus issue of the Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal ends with a book review by Nina Perger, who presents the book by Sara Ahmed entitled *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021).

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