

Social Cohesion and Education

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Issues of equity, inequality and opportunity are central to both education and social cohesion debates across countries. Much of the discourse on education access, opportunity, equality and equity is left to rhetorical margins. However, the existence of the challenges and the ability of the academic and education communities to raise and discuss them bring education centrality to many of social issues and debates.

Social cohesion is built more efficiently in a country through the raise of ethical values among students, parents and teachers, through the perception of justice, equal treatment and adherence to common value-laden norms that are facilitated by the introduction of uniform, transparent and standardized testing system; through the restoration of the integrity of academic staff (in teaching, assessments, selection, research and hiring processes), and through efficient, objective and unbiased design of national curricula.

Through creating efficient human capital, and consequently, social capital along with political, economic and social spheres, education contributes to social cohesion significantly. It creates the feelings of belonging to mainstream community among public. It incentivizes the revision of national curricula and the inclusion of histories and interests of all minorities residing in a country. The social function of education is directly related to the discussions on justice, on equal and equitable treatment of all members of society, on transparency and objectivity of assessment and selection criteria to education institutions that affect equal professional and social opportunities for all members of society residing in any given country.

More specific issues that the research covers are 1) the role of national curricula and textbooks; 2) corrupt and unethical practices in academia as the major social disrupting factors in such societies; 3) access to secondary and higher education, and assessment and selection testing processes as important factors influencing social cohesion in multiethnic societies.

In the case of measuring education effects on social cohesion, the following questions can be raised: are the variables like trust, quality satisfaction, perception of justice, participation in the mainstream society, improvement of future career chances really good measures of social cohesion? Are there any other unobservables / latent variables that might be contributing to social cohesion that are missing from discussions?

Francis Fukuyama talks about the weakening of social ties and contacts in his book *The Great Disruption* (1991). He blames the information age for being responsible for causing the human alienation. The institutions that introduce certain unified rules and systems in different spheres of human activity could be viewed as serving the purpose of re-strengthening lost social ties.

The present research assumes that standardized exams, unbiased selection process to higher education institutions, the alignment of national curricula to entry examination requirements, the feeling of academic integrity could serve as examples of contributing to social cohesion based on equity-values. The assumption made here could be that the more ethnic minorities have access to higher education and have the feeling of being treated equally by the government, the less there will be the chances of ethnic alienation and conflict, and hence, the degree of social cohesion will rise. ‘People are more likely to adhere to social contracts under certain conditions. They are more likely to adhere to contracts when they do not consider each other as cultural “strangers”’ (Heyneman, 2003: 2244).

As an instance, the cohesive role of education in post-chaotic (and often post-conflict) societies has been especially significant. In post-socialist countries of Eurasia, where the chaotic,

uncontrolled, and oftentimes conflicting, developments throughout the 1990s caused probably the greatest and most unlawful redistribution of property, resources and power in the history of humanity education and cohesion have had especially interesting crosscutting edges.

In the 1990s, under the conditions of instability, both public and private sectors became susceptible to corruption. In the majority of post-soviet countries the share of shadow economies surpassed the official GDP indicators. The *Nouveau Riche* classes, that got hold of access to major resources, information and decision-making power, formed cartels and appeared in charge of resource allocation, power distribution and regulation setting processes. Elite manipulations with resources, power and masses engendered corrupt practices in public and private spheres.

The following features of chaotic transition societies can be singled out:

1. manipulations with rules and regulations: when and where there is a lack of public information and uncertainty about how an individual's rights and interests can be protected, it is easier for cartels to manipulate with laws;
2. Ambiguous definitions of selection and evaluation criteria;
3. Ambiguity and manipulation with the concept of *quality*.
4. Blame-game, i.e. the opposing sides always blame each other in corruption and dishonest practices; power struggles involve revealing corrupt practices of opposing sides, when each cartel itself is involved in corrupt practice;
5. Adherence to particularistic politics, favoring certain nationalities and ethnicities over others; this is especially vivid in the assessment process during entrance examinations to higher education institutions or during the selection process at the job places.
6. Self-complacency of cartel members: the principle of 'earn and let others earn' in order to feel secure in the closed vicious circle of 'fellow co-thinkers' might be at work here.

7. Officials in government might receive shares from different cartels as an extra income. In return, they offer to lobby the interests of those cartels during decision-making process. This is especially true while appointing rectors and leading academic personnel in the education institutions.

Under these circumstances the sphere of education acquired double-sided features and functions. On the one hand, it appeared most vulnerable to corrupt practices that disrupted the multiethnic societies of post-soviet countries, on the other hand, in a number of post soviet countries it was exactly the reforms in education that influenced the social cohesion and brought ethnic minorities closer to mainstream societies. The research assumes that the education sphere has served as a kind of mirror reflection of the socioeconomic and political-cultural developments and transformations that have been taking place in the post soviet region after the collapse of the Soviet Union till the present day. It is an on-going dynamic process and developing sphere that overlaps the fields of sociology, social psychology and sociology of education.

Another interesting case is the Affirmative Action issue in the U.S, where the issues of ethnic / racial diversity in education access, the connection of demographic change with educational attainment are the problems that policymakers work on in order to help build a more equal society, since it is from the education that the larger socio-economic, political or cultural layers of society develop.

However, according to policymakers, education still remains to be an 'intrinsically inegalitarian' domain in Durkheimian sense. Affirmative Action has clearly shown that catering for the interests of all races and ethnicities has turned out to be an almost insurmountable obstacle to overcome. On the one hand, we have an Affirmative Action decision to make concessions for certain disadvantaged groups, however, 'the most damning charge against affirmative action is that it does more harm than good for the intended beneficiaries, by enticing

students to attend colleges where they are unprepared for the competition' (Kane, 1998), and on the other hand, we have the defenders of universal justice and equality for everybody. Promoting diversity (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 02-241) is beneficial when all the races and ethnicities are considered as equal. Therefore, affirmative action was criticized and reconsidered multiple times since the very day of its inception. When Proposition 209 was adopted, it was again attacked, claiming it had 'chilling effects' (Orfield & Miller, eds., 2000) depriving the minorities of education opportunity.

Further important issues connected with the role of education in social cohesion are resource allocation and realization of social and economic, public and private benefits of education.

Equitable distribution of education is generally connected with resource allocation and access to those resources that open up educational opportunities to different socioeconomic groups. The question that rises here is: how should equitable resource allocation, and hence equitable education distribution, be achieved in the light of complexities that are usually associated with the issues of equitable educational opportunity, access and quality.

The resource allocation process is intrinsically intertwined with estimating economic rates of return (RORE) to education. Difficulties connected with estimating economic rates of return are major arguments that cast shadow on the accuracy of estimating private and social rates of return of education that would enable the policymakers to claim the precedence of one level of education over another, and hence, fund one level of education more than another.

Multilingual education as related to politics of language, language categories, stereotypes, categories in societies, communities and groups is yet another topic that affects social cohesive functions of education. Cohesive power of language can be discussed in the framework of language policies, minority language issues, ethnic and linguistic integration.

Although not readily observable and tangible, the social cohesive functions of education transcend and affect the spheres that are directly reflected in such fields as preserving social stability, producing human and social capitals, upgrading quality of education, making it accessible for minorities and hence, opening up equal academic and professional opportunities for all members of society.