

Another Déjà vu. Where is the repair manual?

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

A lot of what we have heard today sounds like a Déjà vu to me.

- It is not news that we have huge persisting and systematic social disparities in our educational system
- It is not news that the trilingual system and its high expectation around language acquisition on the one side, and a strong immigration on the other side are at the roots of the problems we need to tackle.
- It is not news that in our educational system the parent's social status matters a lot when it comes to student's performances.
- It is also not news that students with immigration background who don't speak Luxembourgish at home, on average, show weaker results and lack behind up to two years. And, while this gap is narrowing, it does so very slowly, too slowly in fact – in regards that all pupils, no matter their backgrounds, deserve the same educational opportunities. To call these results a “relative stability” is simply not enough. We need to be MUCH more ambitious.

So, what has the minister for education done about these well-known and persisting system failures?

One answer was to differentiate the school offer and the educational programs, in hope to better match language offers with the increasingly diverse profiles of the pupils. Some are well established, like the Baccalauréat international. Some are pretty recent like the public International School in Differange/Esch. Hopefully the monitoring done by Lucet will soon provide data from these public international schools and their effects in terms of narrowing educational inequalities.

Nonetheless I remain sceptical that these schools will help to considerably close the equality gap. There is, for example, the question about access: Who attends these schools, how do parents from disadvantaged backgrounds know about these offers and will their children have the same access?

Another political answer given was to support and increase early childhood language education in kindergarten. Unfortunately, there too, we have no proof yet whether this actually is working and how. Bear in mind that many of the children who are been looked after in these institutions do not speak neither French nor Luxembourgish as their first language. If the aim really is to improve language competencies during early

childhood in order to prepare them for our German and French based elementary Schools, we then need clear and evidence-based concepts how to get there.

This doesn't mean that there aren't any concepts or language teaching programs out there, that are indeed evidence based; these should be promoted on a large scale: As far as I know a recent study on the Lauter leschteg Lauter program, developed by a professor from the university of Luxembourg, has shown promising effects on children's phonological awareness.

On the other hand, concepts and projects that do not work and do not bring the expected results should be abolished to free resources for those that do work. Or for new ones like better learning support in the classroom and after school hours.

While we are talking a lot of the deficiencies of the students, there is a huge elephant in the room that nobody dares to address: We need a more diverse teacher's community and a better teacher's education. With a strong focus on intercultural diversity, language competencies and methods of language teaching. In recruitment and in the curriculum, otherwise we are doomed to reproduce social and other inequalities and blind spots.

The sad and inconvenient truth is that teachers are not diverse and some lack intercultural skills, both essential for improving a system that is b(i)ased on specific language skills (French, German, Luxembourgish). If we are honest, we all know that the language competences of our teacher's candidates have deteriorated over the past years and the language requirements for admission are less demanding than they used to be, due to the shortage of teachers.

This is a vicious circle: lower language requirements lead to less qualified language teachers who are not apt to teach diverse student's groups and prepare them for the (high) language requirements at school.

We need responsible actors in education who evaluate themselves and who are evaluated rigorously along those objectives. And that take responsibility if they fail to achieve the agreed targets. Why not try to reduce the so-called educational gap or delay (retard scolaire) from two to one year? Or cut in half the numbers of children who have to repeat a class at the end of a school term?

Last but really not least we need an education policy that uses these insights and has a well thought through plan how to fix these deficiencies, one that specifically addresses the disadvantaged. We need clear objectives and precise benchmarks that address these systematic inequalities on all levels possible, in early childhood, in elementary schools, in secondary education, at school and at home.

Mr Meisch, where is your plan?

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