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Transparency and Educational Improvement – Friends or Foes? The Case of Croatia

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss the recent introduction of standardised assessment in Croatia in form of a school leaving examination, called the State Matura. It examines the relationship between the apparent priority of procedural justice and transparency over questions relating to educational quality in Croatian secondary education. The paper calls for more research on how issues of procedural justice affect educational quality in post-socialist settings.

Keywords: Transparency, educational improvement, friends, foes, Croatia

Proposal information

The theoretical framework relies on a reading of Sen's (2009) idea of 'comparative' or performed vs. 'transcendental' or normative justice for discussing fairness in relation to standardised assessment. For example, in a recent paper Waldow (2014) pointed out that the procedural elements of standardised examinations are not easily comparable between different country's educational systems. He noted that what gave those examinations legitimacy in each country was that they were considered fair. Different countries all refer to the same ideas of meritocracy, fairness and equality of opportunity, but those ideas take different shapes - are performed

differently - in the individual country contexts; so much so that things that would be considered fair in one country would not be considered fair in another. He concluded that the different ideas of justice worked for each context because there was a shared understanding of the relationship between performed and normative justice in each individual country context.

The question of fairness and justice is particularly interesting in former socialist countries, which either have a strong desire to be considered European, or, like the case country Croatia, already belong to the European Union.

The significance of the post-socialist education space for comparative education is that the former socialist countries underwent fundamental transformations of all areas of social life (e.g. Silova, 2009). Those transformations have affected fundamental ideas of fairness and justice in education too. There does not seem to be a shared and cultivated idea of fairness within those countries, but rather a cultivation of mistrust and corruption (Bethell & Zabulionis, 2012; Heyneman, 2004). Educational fairness in the post-socialist space can always be disputed because a shared belief in a strong institutional authority for justice does not exist. Even though it is an EU-country Croatia, like any other post-socialist country has a high corruption perception index.

The value of merging post-socialist theory with ideas about justice lies in uncovering assumptions about how education works; it is about challenging, what Broadfoot called “collective conceptual blinkers which the existing apparatus of educational assumptions represents” (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 369). Therefore, there is need to examine post-socialist education more closely and explore alternative conceptual models that explain educational phenomena. Since ideas about fairness and procedural justice have been under-theorised in the post-socialist space and often put under the ambiguous umbrella of 'educational quality', it is necessary to examine it closer. This paper does exactly that: it utilizes recent educational policy decisions, i.e. introduction of standardised assessment in Croatia to discuss the degree to which standardised assessment addresses the sense of fairness or justice in secondary education of a post-socialist country.

Methodology or Methods/Research Instruments or Sources Used

Data came from a PhD study about the introduction of standardised assessment in Croatia at the end of secondary schooling, short the Matura examination, from the teachers' perspective. Since the Matura favours the grammar school curriculum, it was important to understand how Matura changed teachers' roles both in vocational and grammar schools. This allowed learning about common types of teacher responses across different types of schools, but also provided openness to potentially different types of challenges presented by the Matura. 28 Interviews and 27 focus groups were conducted with Croatian teachers, school leaders and students between February and September 2011. Secondary data included informal observations and

informal interviews with teachers during the school visits, as well as an teacher Internet forum.

The multiple-stage approach allowed member-checking and space for investigating any issues that were omitted in the initial interview design. The main interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Consent was obtained from the participating school sites. Rather than being selected, teachers volunteered to take part in the interviews. All study participants were guaranteed confidentiality and the teacher and school names used are fictional. The interviews were analysed through a thematic analysis approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This data analysis strategy was chosen to highlight the context and allow the data to tell its own story, as opposed to checking the collected data against a pre-defined capability list or forcing it into pre-conceived conceptual categories. This paper is an extension of the study and it problematises the themes of justice and fairness in relation to the introduction of standardised testing.

Conclusions, expected out comes and findings

Although the introduction of standardised assessment meant to improve the quality of Croatian education and make it more just, neither of those two goals was achieved.

Standardised assessment Croatia has been concerned with procedural justice – with showing that the procedure of taking the test is fair, at the expense of educational quality and a concern with real educational opportunity. There is the view that procedural procedures can be more symbolic than actually effective (Stobart & Eggen, 2012). The findings from this study seem to support this. For example, the introduction of standardised testing seemed to decrease or in the best of cases obscure the opportunities to improve teaching and learning, rather than to increase them. For example, teachers found that not being able to learn from the results of the Matura examination undermined their ability to help students learn.

Furthermore, corrupt practices, such as cheating on tests continued. Students described very creative ways of cheating on tests, and most of the interviewed teachers were lenient towards students' cheating practices.

In light of those findings, this paper intends to problematise ideas of educational justice. It enriches discussions about the relationship between standardised testing and ideas of fairness in European education, by developing different conceptual links between justice, testing and educational quality. The paper wants to raise a few questions for further discussion: as international standardised assessments are increasingly affecting policy making, there seems to be little research into how domestic tests address issues of justice and educational improvement. Are they compatible at all? If so, under which circumstances?

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