

## Pupils' Perceptions of Equity in National Education Systems

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**Abstract:** This paper presents 13-14 year-old-pupils' perspectives about what they consider to be a fair and equitable national education system. It is based on responses to a questionnaire, as well as open-ended comments, involving 6,579 pupils in 6 countries (Czech Republic, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom). The emphasis in this paper is given on the responses of the Czech pupils and we use their responses to the open-ended question to illustrate some major findings. Although the Czech educational system is by researchers judged as being inequitable, the question that we deal with in this paper is, whether the system is also perceived as unjust by pupils and their teachers. Our findings show that pupils have a clear notion about what constitutes a fair and equitable national education system. In general, most students in all countries were of the opinion that a fair and equitable national education system would be one in which all students were treated in the same way, although there was also considerable support for the notion that the less able students should receive a disproportionate amount of the teacher's attention. However, the extent to which the students report that this was what they actually experienced in school differ strongly to what they report to want in terms of equity. This gap between desired equity and pupils' experiences in schools is particularly strongest among the Czech students. In the responses of all students across the nations, a common view was that teachers had pupils who were their favourites, that rewards and punishments were not always applied fairly, and that certain groups of students were treated less fairly than others.

**Keywords:** equity, equality of educational opportunity, pupils' perception, educational system, justice

In terms of the results of the PISA international study the Czech Republic ranks among countries with the highest level of dependence of pupils' educational outcomes on the socio-economic status of their families. Its education system therefore tends to be considered as one lacking sufficient equity. The main reason for this dependence is an early streaming of pupils which is conducive to inter-generational reproduction of educational inequalities, as it intensifies the initial differences resulting from the family input. There is a high degree of streaming in the Czech education system which contributes to the growth of educational disparities (for a synthesis of research into the influence of streaming on educational outcomes and social coherence – see Greger, 2004).

This paper aims to enrich the comparison between European education systems in terms of their equity by adding pupils' personal opinions on and their perception of equity. The views of 13-14-year-old students were identified via questionnaires in five European countries (Belgium, France, Great Britain, Spain and Italy). The results of the survey (excluding data for the Czech Republic) were published in studies by Baye, Gorard, & Smith (2005) and Smith & Gorard (2006), and also in the final report about the Socrates 6.1 project (EGREES, 2005). We carried out an analogous study in the Czech Republic so as to see the extent to which our outcomes differ from those in the other countries, and, most importantly, to get a more profound insight into the issue of equity in the Czech education system.

### 1. Description of research

The methodology was described in detail in another paper (Greger, 2006) and here we therefore only provide basic data about the research. The target group consisted of pupils in

the 8<sup>th</sup> year of compulsory education – i.e. grade 8 of basic school and the corresponding years of six- and eight-year grammar schools - *gymnázia* (in other countries it is the year when most pupils are 13 years old). Questionnaires were sent both to pupils and to their teachers. The data in the teachers' questionnaires were not further analysed in the original five countries due to a low rate of return. In the CR the rate of return was high both for the pupils' and the teacher's questionnaires. All schools we contacted returned the questionnaires completed. As for pupils the rate of return was 90% (N=1146), while the remaining 10% refers to pupils who were not at school when the questionnaires were handed out. As regards teachers, the rate of return was as high as 93% (N=382). The following table contains sample sizes in individual countries participating in the study.

Table 1: *Sample size: number of schools/classes/pupils/teachers*

Country	schools	classes	pupils	teachers
<b>Czech Republic</b>	41	50	1146	382
<b>Belgium (French)</b>	36	72	1632	121
<b>France</b>	37	74	835	80
<b>Spain</b>	30	39	1121	48
<b>Italy</b>	40	40	819	168
<b>UK (Wales)</b>	25	x	1026	x

The sample for the CR is unique as compared to the other countries. This is because it was selected from a list of all schools in the CR so as to represent three types of school:

- ordinary basic school
- basic school with an extended instruction in foreign languages, mathematics, science or IT, or school with classes specialising in these subjects (not schools specialising in music, fine arts and physical education)
- six- and eight-year *gymnázia*.

Another selection criterion was the size of municipality where the school is located (5 categories). In each school 1-2 classes were selected at random from a list of classes in the given year.

In a number of the countries participating in the research the samples were not representative for the entire target population of pupils. In some countries (France, Spain and Italy) only schools in certain areas were selected – e.g. City of Paris, City of Madrid, City of Rome, although even in this case a stratified random selection of schools took place. In view of the lack of common criteria for sample selection we should not attempt extensive generalisations from the data obtained. This is also why we avoid traditional statistical tests of significance, and the differences between countries are only presented in the form of a percentage of positive answers from respondents, which may suggest certain rough differences among countries and, more importantly, raise issues for further research. Furthermore, if we did compare the individual countries we would face the situation where interpretation of the identified differences would cause problems in view of the range and complexity of various factors that may be taken into account and that are specific for the

relevant national school systems. Education systems vary in many respects and therefore any explanation of these differences that is only based on some selected aspects can lead to a gross over-simplification. Moreover, subjective evaluation of reality is, to a degree, also influenced by the cultural context, and over-simplified interpretations can therefore be incorrect.

This means that, in terms of methodology, the nature of the sample used in the research is a limiting factor in relation to further analyses and data comparisons. Nevertheless, the data for the CR are representative and facilitate a larger degree of generalisation as well as further work with the differences between schools as regards their type and the size of the area where they are located. The nature of the sample also facilitates further statistical analyses including multi-dimensional methods. These, however, are not part of this paper.

Being aware of the aforementioned limitations we are careful when presenting and interpreting the results in this text. The research provides findings about pupils' perceptions of equity in school and in the education system. These are based on questionnaires completed by an extensive body of pupils in six countries. The data presented are complemented by authentic answers of pupils to open questions, which provide the pupils' views on equity and, to some degree, an insight into how pupils feel about school, what their experience of fairness is and what this concept means for them.

## **2. Selected research findings**

The first part of the questionnaire includes questions as to equity criteria, i.e. what pupils consider to be fair and equitable. This is the description of an ideal situation, how school should be organised to be fair, etc. In view of the general theories of equity we can distinguish theories identifying what, in general, is and what is not equitable, and assume that the same equity principles will apply across all areas (e.g. Rawls's theory of equity). Other theories (Walzer's in particular) point to the need for distinguishing equity principles for various areas. A definition of equity and various equity theories in the context of school and education are the subject of the work done by D. Meuret in particular (e.g. Meuret, 2001). As regards the area of our interest, we may assume that, when evaluating equity in various aspects of education, different equity criteria may be employed by pupils and by teachers (e.g. assessment, teachers' attention, reward and punishment, funding of education). As for equity criteria, we are focusing, above all, on the scope of attention and care the teacher should give to students. As the demands may differ not only for various areas but also for various levels of education, we asked the same question at both basic and secondary school. For example, we may require that teachers at primary level should give more attention and time to less able pupils who face difficulties managing the subject matter, whereas at tertiary level we assume that equal attention should be paid to all students, or even that the best ones should receive more support. Although this example concerns two levels of education that are very far from one another, we may assume that there may also be differences between inter-linking levels (e.g. basic and secondary – see an example in 2.1). Since equity criteria may also differ in various pupil groups, we present the results for some of these groups as well (males, females, less able pupils).

In part 2.2 we ask students to assess, in general, the level of equity in the education system. We can see to what extent the pupils' equity criteria differ from what they think their education system offers. This is therefore a general evaluation of the schools system as a whole, not of an individual experience, although this experience undoubtedly affects the overall perception of the system.

Part 2.3 focuses on the pupils' specific experience of school. It provides examples that may point to inequality in the treatment of various pupil groups, or in various aspects of education – marking, punishments, rewards, etc. This part offers a comparison of what goes on in various schools as viewed by pupils.

## 2.1 Equity criteria

Teachers may pay more or less attention to individual pupils depending on their capacities. To what extent do pupils agree that teachers should give equal attention to all pupils and to what extent do they believe that more attention should be paid to weaker (or talented) pupils? Answers to these questions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: *Desired equity in teacher attention* (% of pupils who choose each statement)

	Country	Male	Female	Pupils with low marks	All pupils
<b>1. For a primary school to be fair, its teachers must give...</b>					
... the same attention to all pupils	Czech rep.	63	64	44	63
	Belgium (French)	48	53	31	50
	Spain	67	69	58	68
	France	49	58	46	54
	Italy	47	51	45	49
	UK (Wales)	84	89	72	87
... more attention to the most able pupils	Czech rep.	2	1	2	1
	Belgium (French)	1	0	4	1
	Spain	3	1	4	2
	France	1	1	0	1
	Italy	1	0	1	1
	UK (Wales)	2	1	11	2
... more attention to the least able pupils	Czech rep.	35	35	54	35
	Belgium (French)	51	47	65	49
	Spain	31	30	38	30
	France	49	41	54	45
	Italy	52	49	54	51
	UK (Wales)	13	11	17	12
<b>2. For a secondary school to be fair, its teachers must give...</b>					
... the same attention to all pupils	Czech Rep.	71	74	64	<b>72</b>
	Belgium (French)	53	56	30	54
	Spain	64	67	50	65
	France	57	60	51	59
	Italy	52	54	44	53
	UK (Wales)	77	85	56	<b>81</b>
... more attention to the most able pupils	Czech Rep.	10	8	11	9
	Belgium (French)	2	1	2	2
	Spain	5	3	5	4
	France	5	1	4	3
	Italy	2	1	3	1
	UK (Wales)	9	5	22	6
... more attention to the	Czech Rep.	19	18	<b>25</b>	18

least able pupils	Belgium (French)	45	43	68	44
	Spain	32	31	45	31
	France	38	39	45	38
	Italy	47	45	52	46
	UK (Wales)	14	11	22	13

As concerns the figures in this table we must note that the answers for the CR are not fully comparable with those in other countries. This is an intention, not a shortcoming. While in all the participating countries question 1 concerned primary education (1<sup>st</sup> stage of basic school in the CR), question 2 was focused on lower secondary education (i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of basic school and lower years of six- and eight-year *gymnázia* in the CR). However, we distinguished various types of school – i.e. basic and secondary in line with the classification used in the Czech education system.

The results for the other countries have shown that, as regards the criterion of equity, it is not important whether primary or lower secondary level is concerned. Most pupils in these countries believe it to be fair if teachers at both levels treat all pupils equally (particularly in the UK is this position emphasized more than in the other countries). The second most widely advocated opinion on the part of pupils is that the teacher should pay more attention to the less able.

If we compare the answers of the pupils in relation to primary and lower secondary education - see Table 2 for the difference in answers to questions 1 and 2 - we will see that there is only a difference of several percentage points. In the Czech version we therefore opted for basic and secondary school (i.e. lower and upper secondary education), because the assumption was that the differences will be larger in the sense that pupils will be less in favour of teachers paying more attention to weaker students at upper secondary level. This has been shown from the fact that 35% of Czech pupils believe it is fair at basic school if the teacher pays more attention to underachievers and helps them overcome learning difficulties, whereas only a half of the same pupils believe the same should take place in upper secondary education. The pupils probably assume that learners at upper secondary level should be more independent. Moreover, these different views suggest a difference in the perception of the role of basic and secondary school in Czech society. It would be interesting to see whether pupils in other countries also view upper secondary education to be considerably different from the preceding levels, as the Czech version of the study revealed.

It is also interesting to see the differences between various student groups. While we do not trace differences in perception of equity between girls and boys, we can identify large differences between less able and excellent pupils (based on the question: What pupil are you considered to be by most of your teachers and classmates? - excellent/average/weaker). While 29% of excellent (and 35% of average) pupils believe it to be fair for basic school teachers to give more attention to weaker students, this view is held by a majority of the less able (54%). What is interesting is that, again, less than a half of these weaker pupils consider this to be fair in upper secondary schooling (25%).

Another question, which was specific to the Czech Republic, was also related to the support for weaker and talented students. We asked the pupils whether they think it is fair that talented students attend six- and eight-year *gymnázia* and that poor performers are placed in special schools. While only 26% of the respondents consider the concept of six- and eight-year *gymnázia* to be inequitable, most students (61%) think it is unfair to place weaker pupils

in special schools. This view is held both by the pupils who stated that the teacher should treat all pupils equally and by those who think the teacher should, for the sake of fairness, pay more attention to underachievers (an identical 61% for both groups). It therefore seems that the frequently mentioned argument supporting segregation of weaker pupils in special schools ('the schools are good for weaker performers as they are in smaller classes and get better care than in mainstream school') is not supported or reflected upon, although this interpretation goes beyond the framework of the findings and cannot be verified using the data obtained. One pupil formulated this widespread opinion when answering an open question as follows:

"We send weaker pupils to these schools because they get more attention there and can improve their knowledge" (male, an average pupil attending basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

## 2.2 Evaluation of equity in the education system

In the previous part we illustrated that most Czech students, as well as those in the other countries, prefer equal treatment for all pupils on the part of teachers. The second most frequently stated criterion of equity related to weaker students. Only 1-2% of students believe it to be fair if teachers pay more attention to talented pupils as compared to other groups (for secondary school the percentage was slightly higher). And what is the real situation in national education systems as viewed by pupils? This question is answered in Table 3.

Table 3: *Evaluation of equity in the education system* (% of pupils who choose each statement)

	Country	Male	Female	Pupils with low marks	All pupils
<b>3. In [country of test], school offers...</b>					
The best education for the most able pupils	Czech Rep.	33	35	39	34
	Belgium (French)	16	17	32	17
	Spain	22	19	20	20
	France	22	19	23	20
	Italy	15	14	9	15
	UK (Wales)	18	17	44	17
The same quality of education for all pupils	Czech Rep.	63	63	56	63
	Belgium (French)	79	79	63	79
	Spain	74	78	76	76
	France	72	74	72	73
	Italy	76	78	84	76
	UK (Wales)	76	78	56	77
The best education for the least able pupils	Czech Rep.	4	2	5	3
	Belgium (French)	5	4	5	4
	Spain	4	4	4	4
	France	7	7	5	7
	Italy	10	9	7	10
	UK (Wales)	6	5	0	6

Although the aforementioned criteria of equity favour equality in educational provision and care (... the same attention to all pupils), and, secondly, emphasize compensatory advantages for less able students, in reality most pupils in all partner countries are convinced that they get education of the same quality, but the second most frequently stated opinion is that the system offers the best education to talented pupils. In all countries this contradicts the requirement of equity as stated by pupils in Table 2. Almost twice as many Czech pupils, as compared to their peers in the other countries, believe that the Czech education system is more focused on talented individuals. However, it is also interesting to see that, in terms of comparison, the UK has far more pupils who demanded that teachers should devote equal attention and care to all students. The UK also ranks among the countries where most pupils answered that this is the reality in their education system. However, it was the UK where almost half of the pupils (44%) who are considered to be lower performers stated that the system is more focused on talented students. These pupils differ significantly from others in their evaluation of the education system, which may reflect a higher degree of sensitivity to insufficient attention for weaker pupils on the part of teachers. On the other hand, in France and Spain weaker pupils do not differ from other students in their evaluation of the system (for further discussion on these outcomes see Smith & Gorard 2006).

Can we interpret these findings in the Czech context so that the pupils are aware of the advantages talented pupils have due to their family, and of the fact that the education system is further supporting and intensifying educational inequalities rather than helping less able pupils to achieve standard performance? Can we perhaps say that the pupils reflect the system as a whole and confirm the results of international studies on Czech education, its selectiveness and a high degree of interdependence between educational outcomes and family background? Would Scandinavian countries show results that would be consistent with those in the six countries under review? The results Scandinavian countries scored in the PISA and TIMSS international studies show that they manage, to a larger degree, to level out initial educational inequalities. However, would the pupils' views confirm this? We are lacking the relevant research findings – i.e. those concerning the pupils' attitudes to equity and their perception of the respective national education systems. The data from international surveys such as PISA only show that, in reality, the differences between the best and the poorest achievers in the system are smaller and that this is caused, above all, by boosting the performance of weaker pupils and not "lowering" the outcomes of the excellent ones. But would this also be reflected in the perception of the pupils in these countries or in their criteria of equity (a higher level of preference for stronger attention to weaker pupils as compared to the countries participating in this research)?

It would be necessary to further verify, using qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, the extent to which the pupils' answers to question 3 in the table above actually reflect the state of the education system, and to what extent their answers were influenced by their personal experience of the system or school. These are other possible ways of pursuing the research further. However, both this study and many others show that the differences between countries under review are normally smaller than the differences within the countries – i.e. differences between schools in the given country. It is clear that, to a degree, pupils formulate their criteria of equity based on their own experience of school (e.g. weaker students believe the schools system is more focused on the talented as compared to other pupils). The perception may be distorted by the reference group the pupils have in mind when answering the first two questions. This is particularly true of selective school systems where the pupil population is largely homogeneous – in the CR in particular. When pupils at a six- or eight-year *gymnázium* answer the question whether teachers should pay more attention to

less able students, do they have in mind weaker students in their school – i.e. pupils who are still above-average performers as compared to the entire population, or weaker students in the system in general? In a system with a high degree of streaming into various types of school and class depending on pupils' capacities, the difference between the reference groups of a class, school and the entire population can be very significant.

### 2.3 Pupils' views on fairness in their schools

In the final major section of the questionnaire the pupils were asked to provide their views on equity in their respective school. This section included the highest number of items which were complemented by an open question where the pupils could add other points on what they believe is important in relation to fairness in education or at a specific school (a total of 35% made use of this opportunity). In some cases we use these open statements to complete the picture of fairness at school. In this section of the questionnaire the pupils commented on four topics:

- general evaluation of fairness on the part of teachers at the school the pupil attends
- fairness in relation to punishments and rewards
- fairness in student assessment and marking
- teachers' treatment of various pupil groups (the less able, girls, boys, immigrants, pupils from poor families, etc.).

Table 4: *Students' general appreciation of justice in school* (% of pupils who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement)

In my school....	Czech Rep.	Belgium	Spain	France	Italy	UK
...the teachers treat <b>me</b> fairly	75	77	78	70	78	78
....the teachers respect <b>all the pupils</b>	52	65	65	56	70	48
...the other adults in the school treat me fairly	71	73	75	60	n/a	70

While most students agree that teachers treat them fairly, a smaller proportion think that teachers respect every pupil – this is particularly the case of the UK and the CR. Over two thirds of pupils who think teachers do not treat them fairly believe that teachers do not respect all pupils. However, even the pupils who are treated justly by teachers feel that teachers do not respect all pupils. We can assume that they refer to other pupils rather than themselves, as this would be reflected also in their evaluation of the teachers' fairness towards themselves, as Smith & Gorard showed (2006). We can therefore assume that students are able to discern unfairness in the teachers' treatment of other students which does not concern them directly. Girls do not differ significantly from boys in their answers, nor are there large differences in the answers of excellent and weaker pupils. There are somewhat larger differences as regards other areas of evaluation at school level, as we will see later on.

Another subject of evaluation was fairness of rewards and punishments. The questions sought to establish how teachers distribute rewards, and whether they reward or punish always when the pupils deserve it. We also tried to see whether the chosen forms of punishment are considered to be fair by the students. The results for individual countries are presented in Table 6 below. As in other countries, over a half of students in the CR believe that if pupils receive punishment, they deserve it. The proportion of positive answers in this respect was the highest in Belgium and the CR, and Czech pupils also show the highest

percentage of those who consider the punishments to be appropriate. Generally, we can be happy with these results. In the light of this we feel surprise over some answers to the open question concerning justice in school, where pupils at one school write about physical punishment they (and the author) consider to be unfair and inappropriate.

“... Punishing pupils like pulling their hair on temples or commenting on their work in front of the whole class is unfair” (female, an average pupil at an ordinary basic school).

“Some teachers are fine, but some throw keys or chalk at us, pull our ears and hair, and in the math class the teacher speaks Russian to us and says she is a computer! I really find this disgusting” (female, an average pupil at an ordinary basic school).

However, such examples only come from one school and therefore, although the author himself experienced similar treatment at school, we hope that it is not frequent (hopefully it is an exception). In general we can stick to the assertion that Czech pupils give a slightly higher number of positive answers concerning evaluation of punishment in school as compared to their peers in other countries.

Table 5: *Students' perceptions about the fairness of punishments and rewards* (% of pupils who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement)

In my school ...	Czech Rep.	Belgium	Spain	France	Italy	UK
...when pupils get punished they deserve it	69	69	57	60	63	55
...the punishments given are fair	66	51	62	48	63	54
...some pupils are punished more for the same offence	53	69	71	76	51	70
...pupils get praised or rewarded when they deserve it	63	77	73	76	74	82
...certain pupils get praised or rewarded more than others	68	58	56	64	47	74
...it is always the same pupils who get punished	65	56	64	65	44	69
...it is always the same pupils who get rewarded	53	38	49	48	35	60

On the other hand, as regards the questions concerning rewards, we believe that Czech teachers might be less generous in awarding them as compared to other countries, since the percentage of positive answers to the question whether teachers always give rewards when the pupils deserve it is the lowest of all countries under review. We do not intend to generalise too much on the basis of one question (even though the sample is a representative one). Instead we want to point to rewards and punishments in school as an important issue for further independent research. It is also typical that while in many open-ended comments concerning fairness in school the respondents mentioned the unfairness of punishments and of their distribution, not a single pupil mentioned rewards. Only one student stated that teachers insufficiently reward the less able pupils.

“Some teachers are not fair for sure and favour better pupils, and tell off the less able more and don't reward them at all” (male, a weaker pupil at an ordinary basic school).

In their open-ended answers pupils often pointed to unfair punishments that teachers repeatedly impose on pupils with a bad reputation, although it is not always them who deserve this. These are typical examples of labelling.

“Teachers never want to hear the truth, they mostly blame outright those who cause more trouble, although this time it wasn’t them, and send a note to parents” (male, an average pupil at a *gymnázium*).

“It is always the same pupils who get notes for parents, especially from some teachers. But it is mostly because they misbehaved before and the teachers pick on them. They use double standards! Teachers don’t praise you even if you do 10 good things, but for every bad thing (misbehaving, disturbing) they punish you, send a note to parents or tell you off” (male, an average pupil at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

Some pupils also speak about unfairness of collective punishment based on the “one for all” concept.

“I think that teachers should not use the rule “one for all, all for one” because you just can’t make a good team in some classes, as there are pupils who don’t bother, who only go to school because they must and mess it up for others who want to learn something. Then the whole class suffers. There were two classes but some pupils left for a *gymnázium* and they merged us, because they say that the school doesn’t have money. Now everybody suffers because of this and we are a terrible class, you can’t teach there and it shows in marks, because teachers are hard on us because of this” (female, an average pupil of a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

“I think that the punishments we get are sometimes inappropriate, mainly for what the teachers don’t see (supposedly for running about, playing catch etc.). Or it is wrong when the whole class is given a written test as a punishment, although there are some who didn’t say a word“ (female, an excellent student at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

However, there were also positive statements pointing to the need for rules and for punishments in the case of their violation – this mainly concerned protection against aggression of some pupils towards their schoolmates.

“The pupils should realize that there is no sense in swearing at someone when they don’t take any notice of them. Pupils should be punished when they bully someone“ (female, an excellent pupil at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

„School should be fair. And when two pupils do something to another pupil, they should both get punished. There should be order in school” (male, an average pupils at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

We will conclude the section on punishments and rewards by a comment saying that the teacher can be wrong but that he/she should admit the mistake and tell the pupils concerned. This statement by an excellent male pupil at an ordinary basic school is evidence that some teachers can do this: “It happened to me that I got punished unfairly by the teacher a couple of times, but then he apologized.”

As many of the pupils’ open-ended statements on the fairness of rewards and punishments suggest, this is an extremely sensitive topic where injustice is perceived the most strongly. Another such topic is any form of student assessment – in the Czech system

this particularly concerns marking. Pupils in all countries state that, when allocating marks or assessment, teachers take account both of performance and of the effort put into the relevant work. Pupils in all the countries under review gave positive answers in this respect (see Table 7).

Table 6: *Students' perceptions about the fairness of marks* (% of pupils who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement)

In my school...	Czech Rep.	Belgium	Spain	France	Italy	UK
the marks given by the teachers reflect the effort made by the pupils	79	79	81	79	75	81
pupils receive fair marks	68	73	72	72	64	82

While in the UK, for example, pupils expressed the same degree of agreement to the question whether teachers award fair marks as to the first question (...the marks given by the teachers reflect the effort made by the pupils), in the CR and in Italy there was the largest difference in answers to the two questions, although most pupils still believe that grading is fair. However, it is interesting to focus on the group of pupils who are considered to be less able by both the teachers and schoolmates. It shows that the proportion of Czech pupils who do not think marking is fair is larger (40%). However, even some excellent pupils (28%) state that teachers give unfair marks. More interesting than these average figures are the actual examples of unfairness in marking given by the pupils. The pupils commented, above all, on the forms of examination and student assessment. One female pupil expressed disagreement with normative assessment which is based on comparing the performance of an individual with that of his/her classmates carrying out the same task (for details see Slavík 1999 and chapters 9 and 10 of this publication).

“There is just one thing where I think it is unfair, and that is in comparing written tests and then deciding the marks based on the best test. Then those who only give basic information can't match others who write everything in detail” (female, an average pupil at a *gymnázium*)

“Justice in our school is quite all right, except for some small things – for example the teacher says ‘Give a one-word answer and don't elaborate on it!’ Then somebody (a good pupil) does elaborate on it and the teachers sets up a marking scale based on this elaborate answer and the others get lower marks. But when a weaker pupil gives a detailed answer, then it is not done like this. But otherwise fairness is absolutely fine” (female, an excellent pupil at a *gymnázium*).

Another pupil believes it is more objective and equitable to use written tests. He particularly prefers multiple-choice tests, which can avoid the situation described by his female schoolmates. Moreover, he points to examples where behaviour is included in the overall student assessment. This is how some authors explain why girls normally get better marks than what corresponds to their test results. On the contrary, boys tend to have lower marks but show constantly better results in tests as compared to girls with the same mark.

“I think that school is not always fair and not always the same standard is used. It's very much up to the teacher who teaches us the subject. Basically I think that there should only be multiple-choice tests and you would get a mark for a certain number of points, which would eliminate this favouring of some pupils. Also the school report should only reflect

average marks and not behaviour. When someone misbehaves, it should be projected into his behaviour mark and not into others, which is what is most common, by the way!” (male, an average pupil at a *gymnázium*).

Another set of answers concerned labelling. Some pupils feel that teachers place them into categories of the good and the bad at the beginning and it is difficult for them to get rid of this label. And these are not only concerns of those affected, but their schoolmates notice this very clearly, as an average female student at a *gymnázium* confirms:

“When someone falls out of a teacher’s favour, the she gives him bad marks. Once this teacher tested us for reading. The girl who was being examined read almost everything fine and got 3. She wasn’t a very good student but her reading surely deserved better than 3. I think that teachers should treat all equally.”

“Some teachers favour some students, they call them pet names and when they examine them, they get better marks than other pupils whose answer was completely the same, but they got a lower mark!” (female, an excellent pupil at an ordinary basic school).

These statements support the assertion made earlier that pupils are also sensitive to unfair treatment of their classmates. This, again, increases the importance of formative assessment with a stress on self-assessment by the pupil and, possibly, peer assessment based on clear criteria set in advance (perhaps with direct involvement of pupils in their definition). As we can see, pupils are not only sensitive to the issue of assessment, but they themselves have an idea as to what proper assessment should be like.

The final part of the questionnaire related to school contained questions about teachers’ treatment of various student groups (see Table 8). Again, there is not a large difference between Czech students and their peers in other countries. Most pupils believe that teachers do no favour pupils with rich parents, Czech nationality, etc. However, most Czech students think that teachers treat hardworking pupils better. One interesting finding is that more Czech pupils as compared to their counterparts in other countries feel that teachers treat girls better than boys. In all countries a much larger number of boys than girls did not agree with this statement (the difference between girls and boys ranges between 17% and 33%). In the CR, however, a far larger percentage of representatives of both sexes admitted that teachers do treat girls better than boys. They document this in their comments (of course, it was boys who most often pointed out the favouring of girls):

“I want to point out that our new teacher privileges girls and I think it’s because he doesn’t have enough experience” (male, an excellent pupil at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

“In my opinion teachers almost always favour girls, which is not fair. Also, when someone misbehaves, say, for one month, and then stops, the teacher mostly bears grudges against him and keeps sending notes to parents and punishing him. School is often not fair in marking either, teachers mostly give better marks to their favourites” (male, an excellent pupil at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects).

There was also one girl, an excellent student at a basic school with extended instruction in some subjects, who felt it necessary to speak up on the favouring of girls: “Teachers should not privilege girls”.

Table 7: *Students' perspectives on the treatment of different groups of students* (% of pupils who strongly agreed/agreed with each statement)

In my school....	Czech Rep.	Belgium	Spain	France	Italy	UK
teachers don't have pupils who are their favorites	40	44	40	33	38	34
the teachers treat the girls better than the boys	43	20	30	24	17	35
the teachers treat the pupils with rich parents better than the other pupils	12	14	7	11	4	9
the teachers treat pupils who come from <test country> better than those who have come from abroad	17	14	11	19	6	8
the teachers treat the most able pupils the best	75	42	49	56	34	38

As regards the other groups, students expressed their views particularly on less able students to whom teachers should give more attention and give them better treatment than they often experienced in their school. It was often the weaker pupils who voiced their opinions:

“Teachers should not put down weaker pupils!” (female, a less able pupil at a basic school with extended teaching of some subjects).

“We should have better teachers. The ones we have put us down, and sometimes don't bother about us, I mean us, the weak ones” (male, an average pupil at an ordinary basic school).

Often it was even the able students who would notice that teachers belittle the less able and do not respect them properly:

“Teachers could give more respect to the less sharp. And shouldn't take to someone during the very first examination (female, an excellent student at a *gymnázium*).

“I don't like the way that teachers favour the best pupils and speak highly of them. They call them pet names and speak sharply to others. They soften marking rules because of them to make sure that they don't get too bad a mark.” (female, an excellent pupil at an ordinary basic school).

## Summary

This paper presents perceptions of students in six countries about how they view equity in their national education systems, what they consider to be fair in general and with what experience and attitudes they leave school. Many pages have been written about the role of a teacher as an example for students, and about possible negative implications of a mismatch between the values the teacher proclaims and his/her behaviour in reality. Perhaps even more pages have been written about a hidden curriculum, i.e. about what pupils get out of school that is not explicitly set out in either national or school curricula. There is no need to emphasise that the ways in which teachers treat pupils, and the pupils' own experience and that of their classmates can influence their civic and moral attitudes and values more than what they are taught as part of social sciences or ethics.

It is clear from the research outcomes that the differences between countries in the perception of equity are not very large, and that there are far larger differences between schools within individual countries. Moreover, there are even considerable differences in evaluation of individual teachers' fairness and their treatment of pupils. With the help of open-ended comments made by pupils we have added some new perspectives on certain important aspects of education on which pupils reflect, which they assess as being more or less equitable and which can influence their further development and their attitude to school and education. Rather than leading to the formulation of conclusions at international level, these research outcomes bring us to the micro-cosmos of school and the complexity of the relationships between its actors.

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