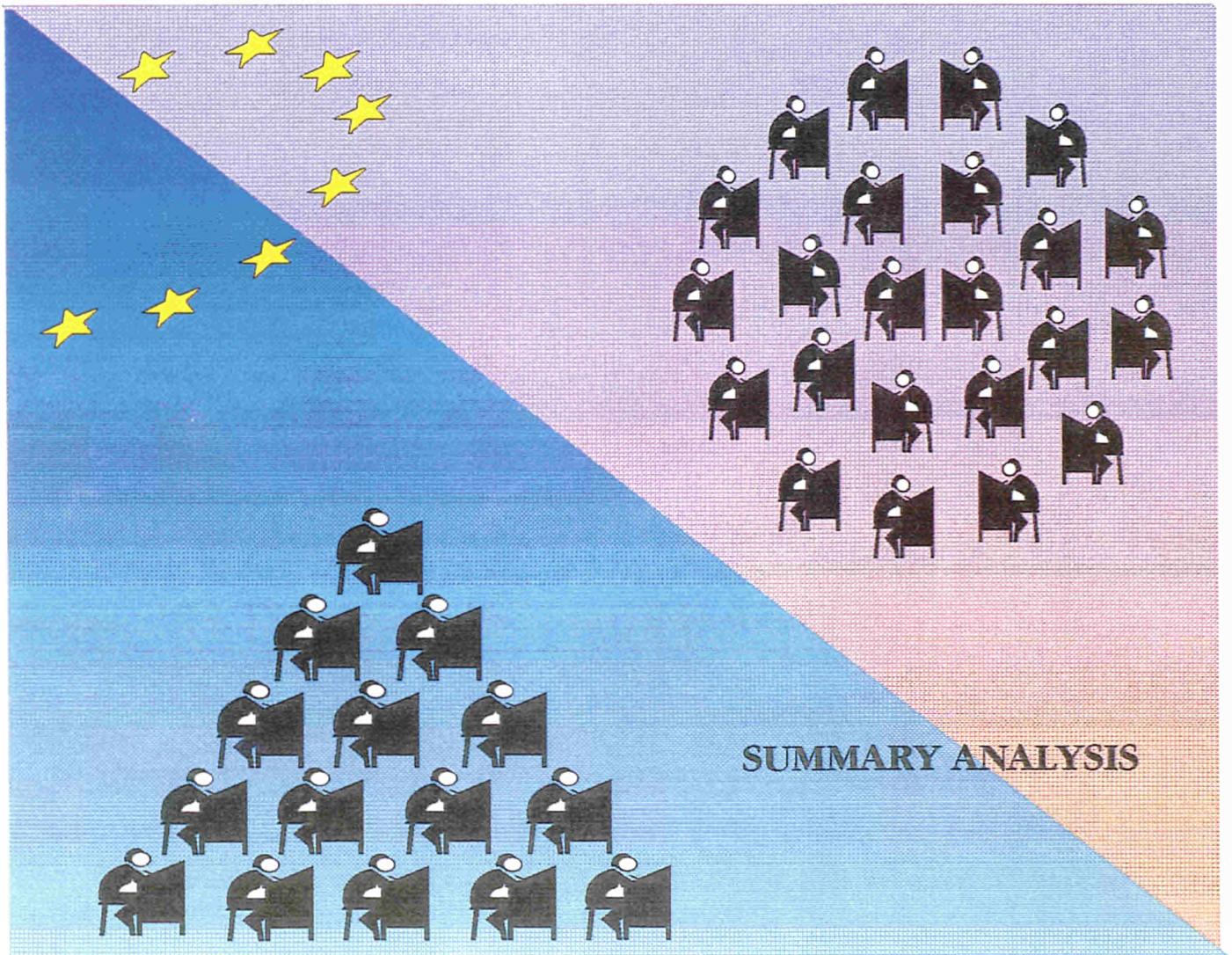




**MEASURES TO COMBAT SCHOOL FAILURE:  
A CHALLENGE  
FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPE**



**TASK FORCE  
HUMAN RESOURCES  
EDUCATION  
TRAINING  
YOUTH**

Commission of the European Communities





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A CHALLENGE  
FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF EUROPE**

**SUMMARY ANALYSIS**



**T A S K F O R C E  
H U M A N R E S O U R C E S  
E D U C A T I O N  
T R A I N I N G  
Y O U T H**

Commission of the European Communities

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## FOREWORD

School failure, social exclusion and unemployment have become key policy preoccupations both in the great majority of the Member States of the European Community and at Community level. The Commission of the European Communities recognises the challenge which the tackling of these scourges presents to the balance and dynamic of the construction of Europe. In June 1992, under the Portuguese Presidency, it gave its encouragement to the organisation of a meeting of education Senior Officials on the subject of school failure.

In the context of this meeting, the Task Force, Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth invited EURYDICE, the education information network in the European Community, to prepare a working paper on the situation in the Member States and the measures they have introduced to combat school failure. Following this meeting, the European Unit of EURYDICE has undertaken with the network a study entitled "**Measures to Combat School Failure: A Challenge for the Construction of Europe**" which is to be published in December 1993.

In order to present an overview of the main elements in this document to a wider public, a separate summary has been prepared at the same time as the study. This contains a critical analysis and a discussion of some key issues connected with school failure. The European Unit would like to thank Marcel Crahay for his contribution to this summary, which has been written in collaboration with Arlette Delhaxhe, head of EURYDICE's Studies and Analyses section.

Luce Pépin  
Director of the EURYDICE European Unit

November 1993

<p><b>This summary analysis was written under the sole responsibility of the authors. It does not necessarily reflect the position of the Commission of the European Communities or of the National Units of the EURYDICE network.</b></p>
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## 1. FROM SCHOOL FAILURE TO SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Out of a total population of 340 million in the European Community, it is estimated that there are 53 million people (or 15%) living below the poverty line. Worse still, there are now more people excluded from prosperity today than in 1975, when it was estimated that there were 38 million. This is a sorry state of affairs, and the objective set out in Article 2 of the Treaty of Rome - "*The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and progressively approximating the economic policies of the Member States, to promote ... an accelerated raising of the standard of living...*" - is still a long way from being achieved.

The mechanisms which lead to social exclusion are complex, and we do not intend to explore them here. Economics plays a crucial role. However, for the individual, the level of training achieved is a major factor. Young people's employment prospects depend on their qualifications. Those who successfully complete a higher level training course are three or four times less likely to be the victims of unemployment than those who have only received basic training. In short, any inadequacy in training results in a risk of social exclusion which becomes greater as the economy stagnates.

Schools cannot be expected to take upon themselves the complete eradication of the problem of social exclusion, but they can assume the task of ensuring that a maximum number of young people are put in a position to play an active part in the economic and cultural life of the European Community.

Here again, the findings are disquieting. A study entitled "*Les qualifications de scolarité obligatoire et de formation professionnelle*" (Qualifications in compulsory schooling and vocational training), carried out for the European Community by J. Gordon (1990), reveals that slightly more than 10% of young people aged 15 and 16, or some 550,000 from a population of five million, leave the school system without any qualification.

The Member States are nevertheless making a considerable financial investment in education. Data gathered by the OECD within the framework of its INES (International Education Indicators) Project have shown that the countries of the European Community allocate between 9.1% and 11.6% of their budgets to education<sup>1</sup>. This indicator would suggest that the financial outlay of the Member States on education is of the same order of proportion. Another indicator, however - public expenditure on education per pupil, calculated in US dollars<sup>2</sup> - reveals a distinct variation in education expenditure per pupil; this is probably a result of disparities between national budgets.

Is it possible to establish a link between the scale of Member States' financial investment in education and the proportion of pupils arriving on the labour market without qualifications?

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<sup>1</sup> By way of comparison, it is worth noting that, amongst other OECD countries, Japan allocates 11.7% of its budget to education, the United States 13.7%, Sweden 9.6% and Switzerland 14.7%.

<sup>2</sup> Expenditure per pupil, in national currency, is calculated by dividing the expenditure on a given level of education by the number of full-time equivalent pupils. The result is then converted into US dollars by dividing it by the purchasing power parity exchange rate between that country's currency and the US dollar.

Table 1, which is based on data in the document published by the OECD (1992) and from the Social Observatory of the Commission of the European Communities (G. Room, 1991), provides useful pointers for examining this hypothesis.

**Table 1:** Expenditure on education (OECD) and percentages of pupils leaving the education systems without any qualification (G. Room).

Member State	Public expenditure on pre-school, primary, and secondary education per pupil (in US dollars). Source: OECD (1988 figures)	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure (1988)	Percentage of pupils leaving secondary education without a certificate (G. Room, 1991)
Belgium	2,838	10.5%	
Denmark	3,726	11.6%	
FRG	2,263	9.1%	12% (1988)
Greece			36% (1987)
Spain	1,354	9.7%	23% (1988)
France	2,360	10.2%	19% (1986)
Ireland	1,412	11.5%	8% (1989)
Italy	2,546	9.4%	11% (1988)
Luxembourg	5,190	10.2%	
Netherlands	2,094	10.9%	26% (1986)
Portugal	1,295	10.7%	
United Kingdom	2,430	11.4%	8% (1989)

It is obviously not possible to establish a systematic link between these various parameters. For example, France has a rate of 19% of pupils who leave the education system without a certificate despite its investment of \$2 360 per pupil, whereas Ireland has only 8% of pupils who leave the system without a certificate despite a lower rate of investment in education (\$1,412). Public expenditure on education per pupil is roughly comparable in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands (\$2,263 and \$2,094 respectively); however, only 12% leave the system without a certificate in the Federal Republic of Germany whereas 26% do so in the Netherlands. It would also be wrong to conclude that the converse is true, i.e. that less investment in education is accompanied by a lower rate of pupils leaving the system without a certificate. Spain is an illustration of this point; it devotes only \$1,354 per pupil and has a high rate of pupils leaving school without a certificate.

As early as 1966, J.S. Coleman noted that in the United States it was impossible to establish a direct link between financial investment in education and academic outturn. Moreover, the above type of correlation shows the difficulty inherent in using the comparative approach.

Each country has its special characteristics as regards the organisation of its education system and its own criteria for awarding certificates. The rates of those leaving without certificates are at least as much a reflection of these differences as they are of those in relation to financial investment.

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL FAILURE AND ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS OF THE MEMBER STATES

In theory, it is easy to define failure at school. In his *Dictionnaire de l'évaluation et de la recherche en éducation*, G. De Landsheere defines failure as "a situation where an educational objective is not attained" (1992, p. 91). In reality, school failure reflects different situations, depending on the education system. It is impossible, for instance, to equate failure at school with the need to repeat the school year, on the one hand because this has been abolished in several education systems, at least in primary education, and on the other hand because in countries where it is still practised, repetition of the year may in fact reflect completely different levels of attainment. In the French Community of Belgium, for example, A. Grisay (1989) has been able to demonstrate that with an identical level of achievement measured according to a standardised test, a pupil could succeed with distinction in one school and fail in another.

Failure at school takes different forms according to the education system in question. To understand how schools contribute to social exclusion, it is necessary to try to understand the structural organisation of the education process and the individual procedures for awarding qualifications under each system.

There are three major differences between education systems, according to whether or not:

- the practice of repeating the year is used as a tool of educational management;
- there are different educational streams at lower secondary level;
- certification at the end of any level of education is based on an examination, whether centralised or not.

In some countries, the practice of repeating a year is considered educationally positive for pupils encountering difficulties. In other countries, promotion to the next class is automatic. Between these extremes, there are education systems which permit the repetition of the year at the end of each cycle, whether of two or of three years. Nowadays, the scope for repeating the year is limited in all countries.

**Table 2:** Repeating the year in the Member States of the European Community

Level	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
<b>Belgium</b>	possible each year maximum: once	possible each year	possible each year
<b>Denmark</b>	automatic promotion	automatic promotion	free promotion
<b>FRG</b>	possible each year (except first year)	possible each year	possible each year
<b>Greece</b>	automatic promotion	automatic promotion	possible each year
<b>Spain (after the reform)</b>	possible at end of cycle	possible each year (except 1st year)	possible each year
<b>France</b>	possible at end of cycle	possible each year	possible each year
<b>Ireland</b>	automatic promotion	automatic promotion	automatic promotion
<b>Italy</b>	possible each year	possible each year	possible each year
<b>Luxembourg</b>	possible each year	possible each year	possible each year
<b>The Netherlands</b>	possible each year	possible each year	possible each year
<b>Portugal</b>	possible at end of cycle	possible each year	possible each year
<b>United Kingdom</b>	automatic promotion	automatic promotion	automatic promotion

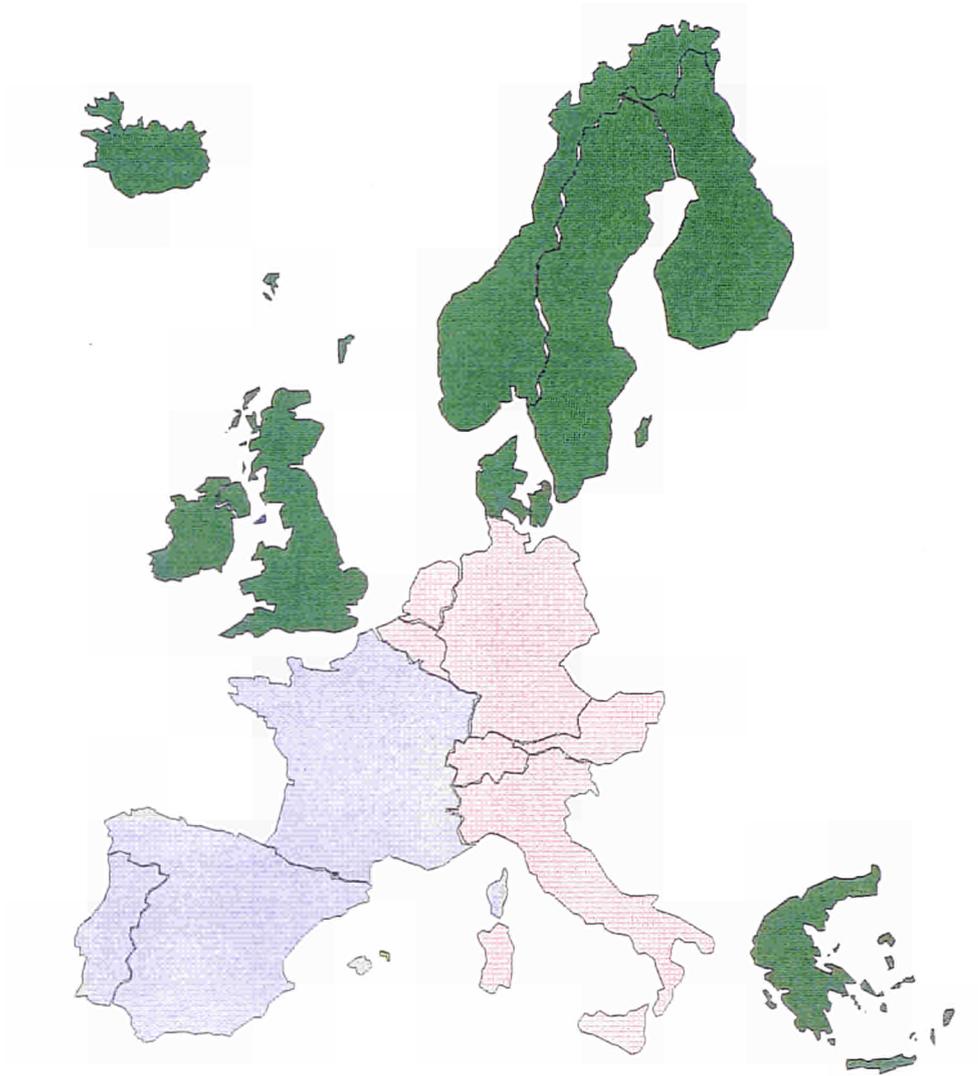
In organising a common core curriculum for lower secondary education, France, Scotland, Spain, England and Wales, Greece, Italy and Portugal have opted for a type of organisation in which the question of career guidance is postponed to age 15-16. As in the case of all the northern European countries (Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), Denmark has adopted a unified structure; there is continuity of education throughout compulsory schooling, with no break between the primary level and the first level of secondary. On the other hand, the Benelux countries<sup>3</sup> and the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as Ireland, Northern Ireland, Switzerland and Austria, require their pupils to choose an educational stream either at the beginning, or from the second year, of secondary education.

Maps 1 and 2 give an overall picture of the positions adopted by the Member States as regards both promotion to the next class (with or without repeating the year), and the organisation of lower secondary education.

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<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands introduced a law in 1992 to reform lower secondary education. This law provides for the gradual introduction of a common core curriculum as from September 1993. The new structure is called *basisvorming* (basic education).

# PROMOTION TO THE NEXT CLASS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION



Pupils are promoted automatically



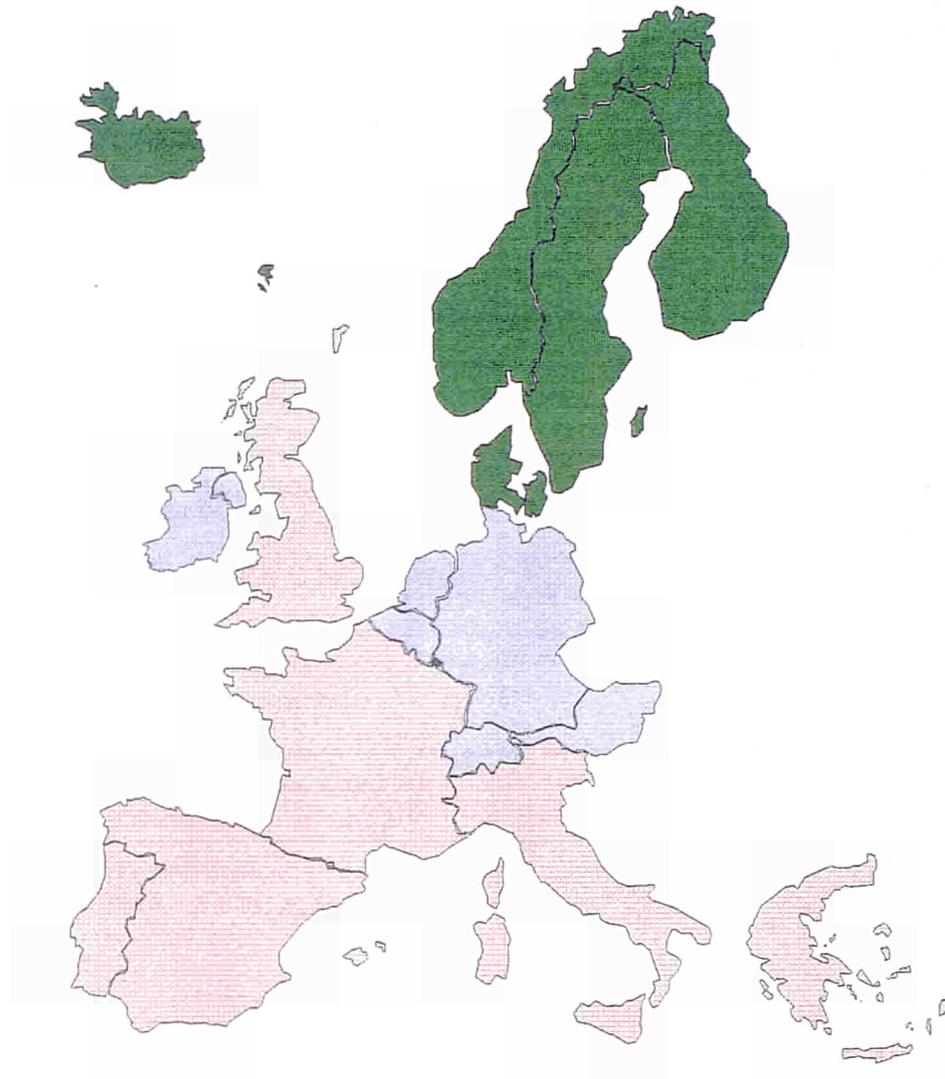
Obligatory repeating of the year possible every year



Obligatory repeating of a year possible at the end of a cycle



# ORGANISATION OF SYSTEMS OF LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION



-  Single continuous system
-  Common core curriculum / Common general education
-  Differentiated branches or types of education



The education systems of the European Community also differ from each other as regards the organisation of the methods of assessing and awarding certificates to pupils. In some countries, pupils must take external standardised tests<sup>4</sup> (prepared and/or supervised by approved bodies) and the award of school leaving certificates depends, at least partially, on the results of these tests. In other countries, assessment of pupils and the award of certificates to them are the exclusive responsibility of the teacher, and are generally based on a combination of continuous assessment and tests. Table 3 indicates how diverse these situations are.

**Table 3:** Certification with or without examination, and final assessment methods used for the award of certificates in the Member States

		End of primary level	End of lower general secondary level	End of upper general secondary level
<b>Certification with examination</b>	Local assessment without external tests	Belgium, Italy	Belgium, Italy, Greece	Belgium, Greece
	Local assessment with external tests		Denmark (optional), France, Ireland, the Netherlands <sup>5</sup> , United Kingdom	Denmark, FRG, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, United Kingdom
<b>Final certification without examination</b>	Local assessment without external tests	Greece	Denmark, FRG, Spain, Luxembourg, Portugal	Spain, Portugal
	Local assessment with external tests			
<b>Neither certificate, nor examination</b>	Local assessment without standardised tests	Denmark, FRG, Spain, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom	The Netherlands <sup>5</sup>	
	National assessment for selection and educational guidance purposes	Northern Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands (optional)		

<sup>4</sup> The standardisation of a test is taken to mean "the exact definition of the methods for using a test. First standardisation factor: all pupils in the same category take the same test. In addition, the conditions for administering and correcting these tests are standardised" (G. De Landsheere, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> In the Netherlands, pupils in the pre-university stream (*VWO*) and the *HAVO* have neither examinations nor certificates. Those finishing the lower general secondary cycle (*MAVO*) receive a certificate.

Most Member States have established systems of external assessment at the end of upper secondary education. Four countries are the exception to the rule - Belgium, Greece, Spain and Portugal. France and the United Kingdom, Ireland and the Netherlands also use such a system at the end of lower secondary education. In the Netherlands, pupils can take standardised tests at the end of primary school. These tests contribute to the assessment of the pupils' attainments in order to provide them with educational guidance towards one of the secondary education streams. In Northern Ireland and Luxembourg, entry to traditional general secondary education (Grammar School and *lycée général* respectively) depends on pupils' success in a national examination.

It should be emphasized that some countries carry out national testing not for certification purposes but in order to assess performance. This is particularly the case in France and the United Kingdom. These assessments of performance are carried out at the primary and lower secondary levels. France also undertakes assessments at the beginning of 5th year of secondary education in the *lycées*.

These differences in the education systems call for closer examination. What, aside from the individual cultural characteristics of each Member State, has led one country to opt for automatic promotion, or the organisation of a common core curriculum, or external assessment using standardised tests, while others have made the opposite choices? More specifically, we shall examine the scientific literature in relation to this diversity of organisation.

### 3. SHOULD PUPILS BE MADE TO REPEAT THE YEAR?

Research literature abounds with references to this subject. In 1974, G.B. Jackson was able to refer to over 200 studies. His extremely rigorous examination of this literature led him to assert that the negative effects of repeating the year largely outweighed the benefits that could be expected from it. A little less than ten years later, C.T. Holmes and K.M. Matthews (1984) applied the modern technique of meta-analysis to the most thorough research on the subject and confirmed G.B. Jackson's<sup>6</sup> conclusion.

It is no doubt on the basis of this work that all Member States are tending to limit the scope for making pupils repeat years. Admittedly, policy in this area ranges from the more radical to the more hesitant. Denmark and the United Kingdom have opted for automatic promotion throughout primary and secondary education. At the other extreme, Belgium and Luxembourg have provision for repeating at the end of every year, although there is a trend - at least in Belgium - to limit repeating so that pupils cannot be required to repeat each year in the primary school more than once.

Countries in which promotion is automatic can also point to the results of international studies on educational success. The IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational

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<sup>6</sup> A detailed review of this literature can be found in M. Crahay (1993 b), *Faut-il faire doubler?* (Should they repeat the year?) Service de Pédagogie Expérimentale, University of Liège.

Achievement) has, since the beginning of the 1960s, concentrated its efforts and the ingenuity of a vast number of researchers on comparisons of the academic success of education systems in subjects as diverse as mathematics, the sciences, foreign languages, reading and civics. The Scandinavian countries and Japan, which have abolished the practice of repeating the year generally, have results which are above the international average. Close examination of the studies published by the IEA indicates that it is impossible to establish any absolute connection between automatic promotion and the effectiveness of the education system. If, for example, we take the latest international study on the reading skills of pupils aged 9 and 14, the most successful countries include most of those which have opted for automatic promotion (Finland, Sweden, etc.) as well as some which authorise repeating at the end of every year (Switzerland). The results of these international comparisons do, however, refute the claim that high rates of failure at school would be the price to pay for a quality education<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the message of the research is clear - **whereas repeating the year is most frequently detrimental to the development of the child, automatic promotion does not resolve all the problems either.**

Repeating the year, which is ineffective, is frequently also the result of subjective decisions on the part of teachers. This renders the practice unjust and leads us, as we will see later, to suspect disparities in local assessment. What is even more serious in our view is that it has now been shown that repeating the year shakes pupils' confidence in their own learning abilities. C. Dweck (1984) coined the term "learned helplessness" to denounce this practice.

This American researcher demonstrated that repeating the year implies a negative assessment which affects the individual. The damage is all the more serious when the pupil's teachers, parents, and classmates attribute educational problems to intellectual ability, holding the view that intelligence is innate. In short, the child learns to interpret difficulties not as obstacles to be overcome but as the very proof of lack of ability. This process ends in fatalism and resignation.

#### **4. SHOULD EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE OF PUPILS AND SPECIALISATION BE POSTPONED?**

It is to T. Husen that we owe the basic line of thinking which has led to in-depth comparisons being made between countries with different staying-on rates<sup>8</sup> after compulsory education. According to Husen, the measures adopted in Europe to increase access to general secondary education have run into objections of the "standards will suffer"-type.

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<sup>7</sup> A detailed examination of the results collected by the IEA over the last three decades can be consulted in M. Crahay (1993 a), *Echec scolaire et efficacité des systèmes d'enseignement* (School failure and the effectiveness of the education systems), Service de Pédagogie Expérimentale, University of Liège.

<sup>8</sup> The staying-on rate is generally taken to mean the ratio between the number of pupils in a certain age group who are still in school and the number of young people in that age group overall. In the present case, T. Husen looks more specifically at rates of attendance in general secondary education.

He argues that, "in as far as it is observed that the greater the proportion of an age group enrolled in general secondary education, the lower the general results, this objection is valid. For example, if enrolments increase from 20% to 50% of the age group, as has happened recently in some European countries, the average results of these 50% will be lower than those obtained by the 20% previously selected on a more rigorous basis" (1979, p. 106).

For this reason, studies which compare the performance of pupils of 20 or 30 years ago, who attended a grammar schools, *lycée* or *Gymnasium* reserved for less than a quarter of the age cohort, with that of pupils who today attend schools open to 80-90% of adolescents of the same age, must be regarded as having only relative validity. Similarly, it is barely meaningful to compare average scores in mathematics in a country with a staying-on rate of 75% with the scores in a country where only 20% of the age group have the opportunity to take advanced courses in mathematics.

It is for these reasons that the IEA has, since the 1966 study on mathematics, usually carried out several types of comparisons. One traditionally covers the national averages obtained from the total sample; the others cover the average results of the highest 10%, 5%, 4% or 1% in all countries. The trends observed when such an analysis is carried out are clear, the differences between countries being less when only the performances of the top percentage bands are considered.

In 1966, T. Husen took as an example the comparison of scores in mathematics obtained in the United States, where a common core curriculum is followed, and the Federal Republic of Germany, where pupils are selected for different types of education at the beginning of secondary school. It was found that the total sample of American pupils, corresponding to 75% of 17-18 year-olds, obtained the lowest average (13) of all the countries participating. On the other hand, the top 4% obtained an average of 33, the same as for the top 4% in Germany which, at the time, could be considered the more selective country, since the staying-on rate was only 9% in upper secondary general education (*Gymnasium*).

Similar findings have been obtained from data collected in the course of other comparative research carried out by the IEA. A summary of this research can be found in the work of T. Husen, *L'école en question* (The school in question) (1979). According to this author, "the conclusion which can be drawn from the surveys carried out by the IEA is that general (comprehensive) education, through its openness and the absence of selective examinations at primary and lower secondary levels, appears to be a more efficient strategy for providing, throughout their compulsory education, for all the talents in a country. The bigger the net, the greater the possibility of catching fish" (1979, p. 112).

In general, those who advocate the organisation of a common core curriculum in lower secondary education can draw on two conclusions repeated several times by the IEA, to the effect that

- selective education systems do not create a higher percentage of intellectual elite; and
- there is no systematic connection between the percentages of pupils with high scores and those of pupils with low scores.

In short, the formation of an elite cannot necessarily be achieved at the price of greater selectivity, by relegating the less gifted to the less prestigious, and probably less stimulating, streams or making them leave the education system altogether.

## 5. HOW SHOULD THE ASSESSMENT OF PUPILS BE ORGANISED FOR PURPOSES OF CERTIFICATION?

### 5.1. From the culture of excellence to the culture of failure

The assessment of pupils is a delicate matter and the traps into which teachers can fall have now been clearly identified. The most important is called the **posthumous effect** (1947): whatever the distribution of ability at the beginning of the academic year, the distribution of marks at the end of the year is by and large in the form of a Gaussian (normal) distribution.

According to this "law", teachers tend to adjust the level of their teaching and their appraisal of pupil performance so as to maintain from year to year approximately the same normal distribution of marks.

Accordingly, on the basis of a test given to all the pupils in a particular age group, two average pupils in different classes can obtain different results in the examinations organised by their respective teachers. A pupil in a class where the majority of pupils are weak will probably be marked up, and may even be considered one of the best pupils in the class. The other, however, if he is in a class in which most of the pupils are better than he is, runs the risk of being marked down, and may even be considered by the teacher **too weak** to be promoted to the next year.

More fundamentally, we may suspect teachers of using normative evaluation where assessment based on objectives should be used. It is true that psychometry has accustomed us to interpret pupils' scores in tests of learning or intelligence by placing them in a statistical distribution. The performance of one individual is judged against that of the others. This practice has spread and has become **good practice**. Today, most teachers imagine that the assessment of their pupils' work should lead to a ranking of pupils.

These assessment practices may be considered an example of the **culture of excellence** which, according to the Geneva sociologist P. Perrenoud (1984), characterises the way schools operate. According to Perrenoud, the school builds hierarchies of excellence. In our understanding (or *habitus*) of excellence, "Excellence has no social value except when it is not accessible to all" (Perrenoud, 1984, p.70). Furthermore, "there is a meritocratic model within every school ... according to which, having given everyone the same educational opportunities, those who reach the highest levels of excellence can be considered the most deserving. The hierarchy of excellence thus acquires an unassailable legitimacy and may even be transformed into a moral hierarchy, in particular ... wherever success appears to depend especially on the pupils' work, on their willingness to submit to formative disciplines and on their perseverance in their efforts" (p. 81).

Teachers, believing that they are supposed to distinguish the good pupils from the weak and setting out to produce a rank order of pupils, are inevitably led to favour discriminative questions and to draw up for each test a - frequently artificial - scale of values which ideally will result in a normal distribution of marks.

**At school level, the culture of excellence can easily turn into a culture of failure.** There is a lot of research which shows that there is a considerable arbitrary element in teachers' decisions on repeating the year. Shut away in the microcosm of their classroom and driven by an ideology of excellence, teachers tend to pitch their teaching at their **best** pupils and therefore to make demands which go beyond the requirements of the curriculum; their tests are also set at the level of the best pupils, which inevitably leads them to underestimate the attainments of the weakest pupils in their classes, and to place an absolute rather than a relative value on their judgment.

## **5.2. Towards an evaluative culture of success.**

Supporters of an **education of success** adopt the opposite view. For them, the school's task is not to set up hierarchies of excellence but to stimulate the greatest number of pupils to learn as much as possible. Summative assessment should therefore be based on reference criteria, that is to say, it should assess the pupil in relation to the skills to be mastered.

More important still, assessment should have a **regulatory** function. This would ideally include two aspects:

- a **feedback** aspect which would permit the pupil to assess what has been learned in relation to the objectives to be attained; and
- a **guidance** aspect, which would enable teaching to be adjusted or redirected more appropriately towards the mastery of the skills in question.

**Use of standardised tests and external assessment is doubtless one means of countering the vagaries of local assessment.**

**In Denmark, the concept of assessment with marks appears only in the final three years (8th, 9th and 10th), and only in those subjects which the pupil will be offering in the final school leaving examination.** External assessment is carried out parallel to the internal assessment undertaken by teachers. All pupils sit standardised tests in the 8th, 9th and 10th years. The papers are corrected by the teachers, who have standardised marking scales allowing them to place each of their pupils with respect to all other pupils in the age cohort. Levels of achievement are defined. Teachers can thus assess the attainments of their pupils by using a much wider frame of reference than the microcosm of their classroom.

Since the Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA) introduced a national curriculum, schools in the United Kingdom have used standardised tests to supplement their own internal assessments. In England, for example, National Curriculum Tests are used at the end of each of the three cycles which make up the compulsory curriculum, 5-7 years, 7-11 years and 11-14 years. At the same time, schools are obliged to report on pupils' academic progress and

their general development in the form of a Record of Achievement, or **RoA**. Pupils are also expected to contribute to their own RoA by introducing their own assessment of their progress. Parents receive regular reports based on these different evaluative elements.

In France, pupils have to sit standardised tests at four points during their schooling. Two of these (4th year of *collège* and the *baccalauréat*), involve the use of external assessment for certification purposes. In the other two (at ages 8 and 16), these assessments - which are organised at the beginning of the year - focus on areas of basic skills and fulfil a regulatory function, their purpose being to assist teachers to detect the pupils' weaknesses at the beginning of a cycle and to combat them by the use of differentiated teaching methods and remedial measures. In this approach, as in that used in Denmark and the United Kingdom, the aim is not to take the place of the teachers but to give them the tools to implement their control procedures. External assessment gives teachers the means of identifying pupils' attainments in relation to those defined at national level and of identifying any gaps in their knowledge. If **the weakest** in a class reach the minimum level of achievement, the teacher can be reassured and dismiss any idea of having them repeat the year. If most pupils reveal particular gaps in their knowledge, the teacher knows where, and on what, teaching effort needs to be concentrated.

Since the Somersed experiment (1982) in Kenya, it is recognised that the content of an external test has repercussions on teaching, and that what is generally known as a **backwash effect** is to be expected. In other words, careful design of tests to be taken by all pupils at certain stages of education can have an influence on the way teachers organise their teaching.

## **6. SHOULD PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION BE PROMOTED?**

The role assigned to pre-school (nursery) education differs from one Member State to the other. Some Member States have structures which are compatible with early education. In France and Belgium, 30% of children attend nursery classes from the age of about 2 years and 90% attend school at age 3. Since the 1990 reform (*LOGSE*), Spain is also going in this direction. On the other hand, although it is optional everywhere except in Luxembourg, where it is compulsory, the education of children at age 4 is general in most Member States, with school attendance rates close to 60%.

Northern Ireland is a particular case, in that compulsory primary education begins there at age 4.

In all the Member States, pre-school education has been assigned the task of ensuring the social and affective development of the child. There are, however, differences of emphasis both as regards the respective roles of the family and the pre-school centres and as regards the importance to be given to early learning. Denmark and the Federal Republic of Germany, which are countries where the Protestant ethic continues to predominate, stress the educational role of the family and tend to limit the function of pre-school centres to developing children's social skills and their general awareness. Elsewhere, and more particularly in France since 1881, and in Belgium, Spain, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal, pre-school education has been assigned the dual function of the social development of the child and preparation

for initial learning. In these countries, pre-school education of children is seen as a means of promoting educational success. French studies have shown the positive influence of the length of pre-school education on the rest of a child's studies<sup>9</sup>. Paradoxically, the highest rates of educational backwardness are also to be found in some of these countries. On the other hand, in several of the countries in which pre-school institutions do not have the specific task of laying the foundations for subsequent education, these rates are much lower, or even nil. In fact, we have an astonishing conjunction here, in that most of the countries which promote the development of pre-school education also have a tradition of repeating the year. Should we see in this the other side of the same phenomenon - the importance given to early cognitive learning? Should a study perhaps be made of the sequences and rates of learning in the various Member States? Are some in more of a hurry than others? Is there any advantage to be gained from such pressure?

In no way are the achievements of pre-school education being called in question. However, one may wonder whether those Member States which have placed their trust in structures on nursery school lines fully appreciated the implications of their choice. The financial and social status of pre-school teachers is still the least enviable in the whole teaching profession. Fortunately, their qualifications have recently been subject to reform in several countries. Since 1992, in the recruitment of pre-school teachers in Luxembourg, particular weight has been given to the examinations in teaching skills. In 1990, in Italy it was decided to transfer the initial training of such teachers to the universities, and the law will be brought into force in the near future.

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<sup>9</sup> C. Durand-Prinborgne, *L'égalité scolaire par le coeur et la raison*, (Educational equality based on sentiment and reason) Paris, Nathan coll. Education, 1988.

Gedram, *Echec et maternelle: avant six ans déjà la sélection* (Failure and nursery school - selection even before the age of 6), Paris, Syros, 1980.

N. Bouyala & B. Rousille, *L'enfant dans la vie. Une politique pour la petite enfance*. (The child in life - a policy for early childhood) Paris, Report to the Ministry for the Family, 1982.

The study by J. P. Larousse, A. Mingat & M. Richard, *La scolarisation maternelle à deux ans: effets pédagogiques et sociaux* (Nursery education at 2 years - the educational and social effects) in *Education et Formation*, n° 31, April-June 1992), sponsored by the DEP, indicates that, although education at 2 years is more cost-effective than measures to reduce class sizes in primary school, it would not benefit children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 7. HOW CAN TEACHER TRAINING CONTRIBUTE TO ERADICATING FAILURE AT SCHOOL?

Diversity continues to be the rule as regards the training of teachers, each Member State having its own special features. Most of them have, however, opted for some form of initial training linked to, or within, the universities. Table 4 gives an indication of this.

**Table 4:** Initial training in the EC Member States - Links with universities

Level	Pre-school	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
<b>Belgium</b>	non-university	non-university	non-university	university
<b>Denmark</b>	non-university	non-university	non-university	university
<b>FRG</b>	non-university	university	university	university
<b>Greece</b>	university	university	university	university
<b>Spain</b>	university	university	university	university
<b>France</b>	university	university	university	university
<b>Ireland</b>	non-university	university	university	university
<b>Italy</b>	non-university	non-university	non-university	university
<b>Luxembourg</b>	non-university	non-university	university	university
<b>The Netherlands</b>	non-university	non-university	non-university	university
<b>Portugal</b>	non-university	non-university	university	university
<b>United Kingdom</b>	university	university	university	university

Initial training thus takes place in the universities for teachers of **all levels** in Spain, France, Greece and the United Kingdom. The Federal Republic of Germany almost fits this pattern, except that pre-school teachers only receive training as instructors. Four countries - Belgium, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands - favour non-university level training for pre-school, primary and lower secondary teachers. Luxembourg and Portugal have opted for university-level training for all of secondary education but not for nursery and primary education.

According to an OECD study<sup>10</sup>, most industrialised countries are now aware of the need to ensure that teachers have a sound training in their subject. It is also important for them to be convinced of the need for teachers to have pedagogical training and for them to understand the different ways in which pupils learn. In most EC Member States, the learning difficulties

<sup>10</sup> OECD, *L'enseignant aujourd'hui* [Teachers today], Paris, 1990.

of pupils are not specifically covered in teachers' initial training courses. Nevertheless, in Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal, future teachers are made aware of the problems of pupils with difficulties in mother tongue and mathematics. Scotland has established a specific qualification in the teaching of pupils with special educational needs, which is awarded by the teacher training institutes.

Several Member States are currently making a major effort in the field of **in-service training**. For some time now, Denmark has had a very well-developed system of in-service training. Since the major reform of its education system in 1990 (*LOGSE*), Spain has considered in-service training of teachers as a right and an obligation. Since 1991, primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands have had a training budget to organise their own training initiatives for their teachers. In Belgium, a considerable budget has been available for retraining teachers since 1990.

It appears that, in in-service training, the development of awareness of the problem of failure at school and of the solutions to this problem is no more current practice than in initial training. In-service training for teachers is still too frequently limited to updating teachers' knowledge of their own subjects and a few study days.

Teachers, however, are a key element in the combat for the educational success of the greatest possible number of pupils. According to a study by A. Mingat, "it is more important to know which teacher a child is to have than to know whether his father is a labourer, a manager or whatever"<sup>11</sup>. Other surveys, unfortunately limited to Belgium and Switzerland, indicate that most teachers do not consider themselves responsible for the failure of their pupils (G. Pini, 1992; V. De Landsheere, 1993). As they remain convinced of the hereditary nature of intelligence, they consider this the principal cause of the pupils' difficulties. They also blame the home environment, the negative influence of television and pupils' lack of effort. Even worse, most teachers admit that they have little knowledge of the techniques of formative assessment and the strategies of differentiated education. In short, it is to be feared that too many teachers still consider their task to be the transmission of knowledge, whereas they are increasingly expected to be not only subject specialists but also teaching specialists.

The initiatives which several Member States have taken, with the objective of getting teachers to plan their teaching taking into account the individual characteristics of the pupils, are therefore to be welcomed. Since 1992, teachers in Greece are required to follow a three-month training course every two years on the new teaching and assessment methods. In Portugal, under the Education for All Programme (*PEPT*) of 16 May 1991, a Centre of School Resources in the Year 2000 was established. This centre is responsible, in particular, for the training of practising teachers with a view to preventing pupils from dropping out of education. Luxembourg is preparing a programme of educational retraining for the teaching of languages at primary level and in the lower cycle of technical secondary education. This programme includes an initiation into differentiated teaching methods using new textbooks and materials.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Mingat, *IREDU*, University of Dijon, research carried out between 1982 and 1985, quoted by R. Rivière (1991) *L'échec scolaire est-il une fatalité?* (Is failure at school inevitable?) Paris, Hatier.

## 8. THERE IS A PILOT IN THE PLANE, BUT ... DOES HE HAVE AN INSTRUMENT PANEL?

The organisation and management of the education system is a difficult business for at least two reasons:

- The characteristics of an education system are interactive. A change in one parameter may affect the overall balance, either by causing a dynamic effect, the positive aspects of which exceed expectations, or by having unwanted effects on other aspects of the system.
- Every education system is the product of a society's history. Its characteristics are the result of a lengthy process of refinement during which the conflict of pressures from various interest groups has been resolved.

This is why it is dangerous to claim that a measure which is effective in one country would have the same results in another.

Despite these reservations, comparison of education systems is nonetheless valuable. It invites decision-makers in each country to see the organisation of their systems in perspective, and it can lead to their identifying other patterns of organisation which might be effective in their own countries. It may equally reassure them as to the aptness of the choices they have made.

Today more than ever, scientists are reluctant to see their answers as definitive. The key word is **fine-tuning**, which should be distinguished from the automatic adjustments which occur in every social organisation. But tuning implies that objectives are explained and that systematic procedures are established for information gathering. Similarly, we can speak of the steering of education systems. Several Member States have already introduced sound steering procedures; others are studying the possibility. Could we perhaps imagine the **concerted steering of the education systems of the Member States?** With common indicators in place, it would be possible to analyse the development of education systems in the European Community so as to identify both where they are going off course and where they are succeeding. A pool of knowledge will gradually emerge from our observations of European education systems, which could be useful to all Member States. Each would be able to take advantage of innovations tried out elsewhere and, as appropriate, draw inspiration from them.

Such a project would imply the adoption by Member States of a list of common indicators. With its project on education indicators (INES), the OECD has started something along these lines. Unfortunately, not all Member States are participating in this systematic collection of information. The IEA has also demonstrated the importance of dialogue in the field of comparative research in education. The decision of the Commission of the European Communities (Task Force Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth) to undertake research to establish the indicators considered most useful for the development of Member States' education systems is therefore to be welcomed.

The political will to increase the effectiveness and the fairness of education exists in all the Member States of the European Community while the measures adopted vary from one to the other. No doubt this diversity reflects the individual characteristics of each, but might it not also reveal uncertainty as to the most effective solutions?

Today, however, we have some sound facts:

- Repeating the year is only exceptionally of help to pupils encountering difficulties.
- The early selection of pupils for differentiated streams is as prejudicial to the fairness of an education system as it is to the emergence of an intellectual elite.
- The organisation of external tests helps to offset the subjective prejudices of teachers.

These facts do not resolve all the problems but help us to avoid the wrong answers. What is certainly important as of now is for politicians and scientists to join their efforts and to build on what has been achieved. In other words, the broad outlines of a tried and proven solution should first be established. At the same time, there should be investment in research into new methods of teaching, teacher training and cooperation with parents, to enhance current knowledge on education, with the ultimate aim of increasing the intellectual and human potential of the European Community.

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**The Education Information Network**  
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**Educational cooperation in the**  
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The education systems in the twelve EC Member States vary considerably and this variety, which is the result of historical and cultural factors, is itself a source of wealth. In order to ensure that this diversity does not become an obstacle to the free movement of people, it is essential to provide effective information on the operation and structures of the education systems.

It is also vital for each country to benefit from the experience of its Community partners and thus contribute to the development of European educational cooperation.

In February 1976, the Council of the European Communities and the Ministers of Education adopted an action programme in the field of education (1) and agreed among other things to set up an information network.

This information network, known as EURYDICE, is designed therefore to underpin educational cooperation within the European Community.

It was recognised in 1990 as the chief instrument for providing information on national and Community structures, systems and developments in the field of education (2).

Each Member State has, in accordance with its own distinctive education structures, designated at least one Unit to participate in the network and the Commission of the European Communities has set up the EURYDICE European Unit.

The functioning of EURYDICE is based on cooperation among all the Units. In addition, the European Unit coordinates and animates the network.

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(1) Official Journal n° C38, 19.02.1976, p.1.

(2) Official Journal n° C329, 31.12.1990, p.23.



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