



Politics of Education

From emancipation to selection



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About this whitepaper

In the past decades, the role of education has shifted from a system of emancipation and inclusion, to a system in which strict selection has become an important means to reach the top. This has resulted in the loss of values such as the right to education and the right to development. In addition, we support talent in education, but do not wish for people to pay a high price for a rat race to the top. How do we approach this paradoxical attitude? In addition, how do we view diversity in education?

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of our virtual round table meeting. Several articles were written as an inspiration for the round table discussion. We would like to acknowledge the authors of these articles, the round table report, and the introduction to this whitepaper: R. Anthony Buck, Ghila Amati, Muhammad Faisal Khalil, Joshua Amiel Marasigan, Willemijn De Gaay Fortman, and Prof. dr. Matthias Smalbrugge.

Politics of Education

Introduction written by Prof. dr. Matthias Smalbrugge



Education has been considered for a long time as one of the major mechanisms enhancing social mobility. Indeed, one of the leading ideas of the Enlightenment was the conviction that knowledge could benefit the whole of society in many respects. Knowledge was regarded not only as a theoretical framework allowing us to understand the surrounding world, but also as a tool of social dynamics. Knowledge, once it was shared, belonged to no one in particular, it was common property. In that sense, knowledge was one of the key elements of desired social equality. Your background did not matter any longer in a debate, what mattered was your knowledge. It was for that reason that Napoleon stimulated education for all and tried to forge a national education system that would also produce equal opportunities and hence social mobility.

That was the 19th century and one might hope this would still be the case. Unfortunately, it is not. Gradually we became aware of the fact that education is no longer producing equal opportunities, but rather functions nowadays as a highly sophisticated selection tool. Its aim once was to create such equal opportunities by focusing on individual qualities and merits, supposing these qualities existed without being obliged to take into account one's environment or context. This proved to be a very unfortunate misunderstanding. Personal qualities and merits were indeed personal, but persons were not objective entities that could be isolated from their context. On the contrary, individuals were not that

individual but were deeply influenced by the context they lived in.

This discovery had two consequences. On the one hand, the context in which one lived either stimulated or slowed down one's personal qualities. On the other hand, education proved to be unaware of the blind spots it suffered from due to the selection process. Having as a consequence that knowledge itself could no longer be considered as an objective common ground that could be shared with everyone as long as one had the capacities to acquire this knowledge.

Education became a sieve that selected the best. Meaning, those who had the right background and fitted into the system they were already prepared for. Those who did not have the right background obviously had less chance to be selected. The danger was a clear one. Knowledge and those who mastered knowledge belonged to a certain class, forming their own bubble. What once started as a great project to foster equality, had become an instrument of selection. Did women have the same chances as men, did people of colour have the same chances? Probably not.

All this seems to be a tragic development and many deplore it. But this is only half of the story. For, notwithstanding the exclusive character of education (in particular higher education), selection is widely considered as needed and as inevitable. Especially when it comes to education. In sports, at the conservatories, art schools and ballet academies, the best are intentionally select-

ed. Moreover, universities also practice more and more selection at the gate.

Hence, education cannot only be blamed for being transformed into a selection tool. It is also what we are striving for. We do have in our society a contradictory attitude towards equality and selection. Apparently, we need both, we want both. At the same time, we obviously prefer not to address this difficult combination of these contradictory approaches. These conflicting attitudes have caused a crisis in our education system. That is why we organise this round table.

A last element that needs to be mentioned. Is there any relationship between religion and education? Of course there is. But in general Christianity has followed the societal tendencies it partly shaped itself. It found itself back in the same contradiction as the rest of society insisting on the equality of all men, but at the same time recognising the need of selection.

Politics of Education

Report written by Willemijn De Gaay Fortman



An educational paradox confronts us. On the one hand, we believe in the ideal of social mobility in which education enables the individual student to climb the social ladder. This ideal of social mobility represents a narrative of education as a way to escape the frames and conditions within which you were born and a chance to expand and develop new ones. Obviously, this view makes education a very powerful and emancipating tool. At the same time, social mobility is under pressure because of global competitiveness as a result of a shift towards selection based on talent. Students have to compete with the best in the world, thereby reducing education to a selection tool. On the other hand, we pursue the ideal of social engineering, an ideal that reduces education to an individual fast-paced rat race where there is no room for failure. As a downside, education has been taken over by the economy and has become part of economic discourse. In fact, a rat race is an economic concept that implies an economic frame of thinking. Education is constantly perceived as an environment of scarcity while it should be an environment of abundance. This paradox poses some interesting questions such as what is happening in education, what the role and responsibility of education itself is in solving the major issues in education, and what values are represented in education. We discussed these topics and issues with participants involved in the education sector.

Education as a vehicle for the economy

There are a number of drivers in terms of developments in the labour market that force us to have a conversation about whether to guide students to professions and areas where there is plenty of work. Examples that show that economic principles push education to adapt are abundant. For instance, a large portion of the student population chooses economics-oriented education. At the same time, much work can be found in healthcare, education, and technology, but only few students choose this path. An explanation is that economics-related studies provide certainties in terms of work, income, and status. One may wonder what exactly the mission of education is, and whether teachers should guide students more actively towards courses where they have a better chance of getting jobs. A related question that pops up is whether education is meant to be facilitative in preparation for a profession. We may assume that we do not only learn for our profession but also for our personal and social life. The educational mission towards qualification is not only issuing diplomas, but much broader in a way that education stimulates personal development and socialisation. In turn, this contributes to the development of talent and society in a positive way. Looking at education from an economic perspective, however, implies that from an early age, teachers label their pupils in a certain way, thereby losing the idea that a human is much more

than the sum of labels. Consequently, this approach bears a risk of students who carry related stigma into their adult lives.

The cognitive perspective on learning

In higher, academic, levels and in the objectives of primary and secondary education, education is completely reduced to cognitive knowledge and skills that are pushed in a certain direction. Nowadays, skills have to be useful and students have to gain a large amount of knowledge. It is expected that if students gain enough knowledge, citizenship and democratisation will automatically follow, just like how they will become as a person and how they should function as adults in society. Enough knowledge would ensure that people will act responsibly and mature and will have equal opportunities. Furthermore, cognitive performance is assumed to be neutral, so will be the same for individuals of high and low classes. Unfortunately, reality is more stubborn. Humanities have become collateral damage and are seen as barriers to the skills we need to function in society or that can make us function in society. The contemporary task is to evolve in such a way that we serve our meritocratic society and neoliberal economic system, meaning the old Humboldtian system of Bildung has been abandoned.

However, it is not necessarily the case that education is merely reduced to cognition. We also see a counter

“[S]ocial mobility is under pressure because of global competitiveness as a result of a shift towards selection based on talent.”



trend. Looking at child care, primary education, and university, we are at the point of a pendulum swing back. The direction that we have been following for the last 20 to 30 years has set the norm of nominal studying that is also highly valued in the social context. The SAT has reinforced this evolution in primary education. In addition, there have been tendencies in politics that have aspired the cognitive, meritocratic ideal which views education from economic principles and motives. Now, in a number of places, it has become visible that education based on cognition is not sufficient anymore. Elements such as Bildung, community service learning, and broad personal development are being introduced to students at some universities.

The education battle of public perception

There is a difference between the question of higher education and values of education, and the question of different education sectors, that is to say the layers in education that should be taken into account. In higher education, it seems good to focus on cognition but when it comes to pre-vocational secondary education (the Dutch VMBO), which half of the Dutch students attend, one has to take other skills and competencies into consideration. It seems strange that we label those students with a grade level that we undervalue and believe

that they do not meet certain standards. That feeling is not only a problem of education, but a huge social problem. Many people with an average education and a job are not able to get a house and include their families in society. Essentially, education is a mirror of our society. We have been running faster and faster. You should borrow more money and you have to work hard for your mortgage. These new obligations and expectations and the impact of these obligations are reflected in our schools. Parents often expect their children to follow senior general secondary education (the Dutch HAVO). The basic assumption of parents is that with this knowledge, their children will at least have a somewhat simpler and practical life. This clearly shows the importance of degrees for practical survival in society and to live a dignified life. But more fundamental, the degree and job you get represent social esteem and recognition. Higher education enjoys a level of status and prestige. What message do we give to people who do not reach that level and do not have the cognition to participate in the system? We are constantly bringing the message that they are worthless. This rat race is reflected in schools, which is why parents believe higher education is better for their children's future.

Therefore, there should be recognition of practical skills. Appreciation for pre-vocational secondary education and other secondary education levels should return.

Social engineering and education

Another starting point to define the problems in education is social engineering. Social engineering is the use of centralised planning to manage social change and regulate the future development of a society. It can be argued that social engineering is a fundamental ideal of our society that is on the level of unspoken ideals which cannot be discussed, because they are among the presuppositions of our society. Education has become a definitive part of an unspoken view that we must shape the world to our liking. After we have shaped the physical space to our liking, we are now also shaping the mental space to our liking. The liberal regime has not brought more freedom, but instead extends the ideal of social engineering down to the soul level. The complex issue about change in education is that the change that has taken place is not just a change at the policy level but at all levels, including ethics and epistemology. As a consequence, there is little mental space and therefore reality is simplified: etiquettes are imposed that are not virtuous. Education has now become a kind of facility service for your individual life project. Related to that, education is less and less owned by vital communities but increasingly interpreted as a public amenity. That aligns with education as fulfilment of one's individual life project. The ideal of social engineering connects with Michael Sandel's concept of meritocracy. The general idea is that hard work eventually will pay off and that

success solely depends on how you choose to develop yourself. All those people who fail owe it to themselves. The question is whether we should want to carry this message into our teaching. According to Sandel, this has a desocialising effect. This undermines the construction of society, the motivation to take care of each other. Meritocratic ideals go hand in hand with the idea of social engineering to build society.

Education as the great engine of personal and community development

The current way of thinking that can be identified with social engineering considers education as a place where appropriate employers are produced for the economy and future we think we know. In this view, education's only task is to offer spare parts for society. Recovering what was originally the mission of education and restoring the pedagogical perspective is what should be on top of the agenda. What can education itself do to restore some normalcy to this faltering machine? In what way can we revive what the power of education actually is and become more visible? What is the essential vision of education?

The question to start with is what the educational task is. The task of education is not only to teach cognition and professional skills, but also to make clear what ethical dilemmas they will encounter in their

professional practice, roles one will have in a broader system, and what responsibility this entails. Education thus helps shape the personal and professional identity and pride of students. Here lies the chance of education. So that education is not only a facilitator of the student's individual life project. The school is the building site of society. Personal development should be the starting point in education. The paradox remains. We favoured in the eighties the idea that education should not be 'one size fits all'. Taking it from there, individual capacities became the leading idea. At the same time, this produced a highly individualised character of education. The intention was perhaps partly a good one, the outcome was not.

The aim of education must be guiding people who are able to think critically, ask critical questions in society, know who they are, what they stand for, and what is important, and are taught how to deal with loads of information. This is an attitude that contributes to democracy and civic education. Students need to be prepared for the unexpected to counterbalance the concept and ideal of social engineering. To create a feeling of solidarity and dignity, a starting point can be putting pre-vocational secondary education students in the same class with pre-university (the Dutch VWO) students which comes down, once again, to the idea that selection at a later stage would allow individual capacities to be more visible. Then again, this would undermine education as the building block of a community.

Discomfort in the value debate in education

It is difficult these days to discuss the topics of civic education and democracy. There seems to be much discomfort in society when discussing the topic of values. The effects of neoliberal thinking are becoming more and more visible. Classes such as life ethics are increasingly losing out. Difficult subjects in society are avoided and this applies equally and increasingly to education due to social media platforms, in which the ideal of social engineering is central and nuanced thinking is not addressed. Educational institutions will not succeed in getting young people on that track because young people are greatly attached to social media platforms such as TikTok, from which they adopt mindsets and ideas.

The tension in values between the individual and the community is increasingly under pressure. Communicating to students that individuals are part of an organisational culture is more important than ever. Students should know that what goes wrong in companies cannot be reduced to problems caused by individuals, but that it has to do with the organisational culture and context individuals are part of. It is not about building the moral compass of the individual, but about addressing the organisational culture.

“The tension in values between the individual and the community is increasingly under pressure.”



Appendix

The politics of education: An overview

Written by Muhammad Faisal Khalil



Particularly since the end of the Second World War, education has become a significant domain of politics, with both policy and power playing a crucial role in determining who receives an education and for what purpose. A century before, American essayist, poet, and popular philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) had questioned why political leaders were becoming interested in mass public education: “‘If you would rule the world quietly, you must keep it amused.’ I notice too that the ground on which eminent public servants urge the claims of popular education is fear; ‘This country is filling up with thousands and millions of voters, and you must educate them to keep them from our throats.’”¹ Arguably, post-war developments in education saw Emerson’s apprehensions move at an industrial pace, with mass education used as the “right way keep their perspectives and their understanding and narrow,” in the words of public intellectual and linguist Noam Chomsky, in order to “discourage free and independent thought and frighten them into obedience.”²

The promises of post-war education

The demand for education at a mass scale sprang up after the Second World War. Urbanisation, the growing affluence of populations in North America and Europe, the shift away from the norm of a single working parent, and the need to meet the industrial requirements

of modern scientific technology, all raised the demand for education, including secondary and higher education.³ The rise of independent nations and post-colonial nationalisms also meant that education had become an instrument of national development. The quantity and outreach of education increased significantly, particularly to reduce illiteracy and build national solidarities. Between 1950 and 1970, as a result, the number of universities in many countries doubled or trebled across many countries.⁴

While the demand for the provision of mass education enhanced the right to education, and raised the expectation for social reconstruction, it also transformed it into a core political institution of any post-war nation. The bureaucratic and managerial revolutions in the early 20th century transformed education into a more instrumentalist tool, using schooling, students, and curricula to build a certain view of not only a nation but also a certain kind of economic and political life.⁵ Politics was now able to significantly determine who received an education and for what. In *Class, bureaucracy, and schools: The illusion of educational change in America*, Katz argues that the developments in mass education reforms intended to train and socially discipline school children into ‘working-class’ men who were able to ‘perform’: take direction from supervisors, work independently, and produce results that were evaluated and certified.⁶ Easterly further explains this by maintaining that as economic development “proceeds and physical capital rises, the return to skills increase and industrial

capitalists would be willing to invest in mass education so as to gain a skilled labor force to complement their physical capital.”⁷

There is politics in education

This emphasis on performance also meant that the wartime dream of “daring the school to build a new social order was increasingly lost.”⁸ Education was used less and less as the most important social institution for maintaining democratic ideals and securing democratic government. As Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak note, people undergoing education were ill-informed to meaningfully participate in electoral democracies.⁹ Education did not articulate alternative visions, leaving people ill-informed about issues and letting leaders run unopposed by emphasising reputation rather than policy differences.¹⁰ Chomsky’s appraisal of the politics of education in particular reflects the negative relationship between education and democracy that politics mediates. According to him, the education had been repurposed in the twentieth century to part for the maintenance of “the intelligent minority,” while at the same time keeping “the middle men out and ignorant.” Otherwise, the poor “would take their voting power to divide the property of the riches.”¹¹ Bourguignon and Verdier support Chomsky’s appraisal by arguing that an ‘oligarchy’ opposes widespread education because educated peoples are more likely to demand political

power, i.e. democracy.¹² Even if the country is already ‘democratic’, more educated peoples will be more likely to be politically active and thus more likely to vote for a redistribution of income and power away from the ‘oligarchy’.¹³ Hence, the oligarchy will resist progressive mass education even in a democratic society.¹⁴

As Katznelson and Weir note, for a significant time, only the Roman Catholic Church had serious reservations about these developments, “because their schooling involved social culture and religious enlightenment as much as preparation for work.”¹⁵ The Roman Catholic Church was particularly sensitive in noticing these developments because of explicit marginalisation of religion with scientific-realist education in schools and universities in North America and Europe. To be sure, this shift in the politics of education remained largely unidentified in the decades prior to 1960. The idea of an educational system free of politics was so persuasively implemented by political institutions, such as calls to “get politics out of the schools and get the schools out of politics,”¹⁶ that the politics of education was detected very late in 1959 with the publication of the seminal essay ‘Toward an Understanding of Public School Politics’ by Thomas Eliot in the *American Political Science Review*.¹⁷ Eliot specifically argued that scholars had thoroughly neglected the political dimensions of education and its implementation. Only decades later did the impact of these developments on the humanities start to be globally recognised. In August 2017, for example,



the World Humanities Conference Liège in Belgium organised with UNESCO declared: “The humanities were at the heart of both public debate and the political arena until the Second World War. In recent years their part was fading and they have been marginalized. It is crucial to stop their marginalization, restore them and impose their presence in the public sphere as well as in science policies.”¹⁸

Education for difference

Politics, it can therefore be argued, has determined the way in which education has existed. In the UK, for example, the shift in political ideology also meant that the norm of a modern form of publicly-funded, compulsory mass education came under fire. Starting with the Conservative-led coalition in 2010, public funding was drastically reduced under the policy for austerity. By 2020, according to the UK Institute for Fiscal Studies, England’s state schools reported suffering the biggest fall in funding since the 1980s.¹⁹ This political effort to shrink funding for education in the UK, either to students or university, has had a harsh impact on theology and the study of religion in particular. It has meant cuts in the financing of their research and teaching; their lower share of or even elimination in the space and structure within the university; and their evaluation by methods typical of scientific activity, resulting in policies that deem these subjects weak on

social impact.²⁰ Indeed, the impact of Conservative Party reforms in higher education has been so harsh that theology and the study of religion started to rapidly disappear during the Conservative tenure. A recent report found that since 2012, when higher tuition fees were introduced, the number of students studying Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) degrees fell by a third. Major theology schools in Bangor University, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Sheffield were either closed or phased out.²¹ As recently as April 2021, the University of Chester, which has an Anglican foundation, issued redundancy notices to the ten remaining academic staff in its department of theology and religious studies. Calling it an “unnecessary act of vandalism,” as many as 800 religious leaders and academics protested this move in a letter organised by the TRS-UK, the TRS departments’ professional association in the UK.²² The letter stated that the redundancies would “severely damage the capacity of a flourishing department to continue its significant contribution to TRS disciplines nationally and internationally.”²³ The department, the letter highlighted, has an “outstanding record” in securing funding for research, having secured £2.5 million in the past cycle, which is “an exceptional sum for a Humanities department.”²⁴ Sir Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, explains that the disappearance of theology and the study of religion in UK universities is caused by a policy preference for

money-making disciplines: “The obvious line is to go for is those disciplines that provide lots of money very quickly — medicine is clearly at the extreme end of that — which is a problem for those disciplines regarded, quite wrongly, as marginal, like music.”²⁵

UK schools in the most deprived areas were worst affected by the government’s austerity policy. A study by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) confirms this: disadvantaged young people became less likely to achieve the required education by age 19, with educational attainment extremely poor among ethnic groups and young people with additional needs.²⁶ This was evidence of how the education determined by political priorities was leading to the exclusion and marginalisation of more vulnerable communities. Conservative Party reforms in higher education in the UK were also significant: they sharply increased the maximum tuition fees for UK and EU undergraduates at English universities. An analysis of the UK’s funding and regulatory framework, also by the LSE, revealed that the role of central government in England increased under the Conservative Party and that of local government declined.²⁷ Communities in England were now less able to determine the kind of education they needed.

Moreover, as Professor Jacqueline Stevenson, Director of the Lifelong Learning Centre and Co-Director of FLaG, University of Leeds, points out, this marginalisation has directly extended to many religious students themselves. These students, Stevenson argues, have

been marginalised by the policies and practices of UK higher education that assume that “UK higher education is (and should be) a secular space.”²⁸ This, Stevenson adds, “secularises students so religion becomes irrelevant fairly quickly; and/or that religious students are the cause of (potential) threat and so need to be managed.”²⁹ As a result, religious students frequently have their religious freedom reduced on the higher education campus. The use of education by politics to exclude and marginalise religious students is also evidenced by the recent developments in France. On 7 April 2021, as part of a larger bill, ‘Strengthening Republican Values’ introduced by President Emmanuel Macron to fight “Islamist separatism,” the French Senate approved a series of bans on religious practice in the context of education.³⁰ It banned Muslim prayer at universities and also other religious activities deemed to affect educational activities across the country, prevent Muslim families from giving their children a home education, and stop hijab-wearing mothers from accompanying children on school trips.³¹ Critics argue that this is the political use of education to exclude Muslims and their identity from French society. French legal scholar and commentator Rim-Sarah Alouane says that French politicians are weaponising *laïcité* — specifically, the division between private religious life and public secular life in education — to not address extremism but control Muslims.³² For example, hijab-wearing mothers targeted by the bill are not civil servants and as a consequence, religious neu-

trality can be not imposed upon them.³³ France, it follows, is using *laïcité* to limit the increasing participation of Muslims in the civic and social life of France: “Sadly, for many in our political elite (across the political spectrum), a good Muslim is an invisible Muslim.”³⁴

The paradoxes of education

The provision of and right to education, particularly since the Second World War, to mould and use people diametrically contrasts with what educational progressives of the 20th century had originally imagined: the emancipating and democratising role of education in social and political life.³⁵ While publicly-funded mass education was of use to political elites, this form of education has come into question with recent developments in countries, like the UK. The reduction of public funding for education in the UK highlights the role of education as a tool to socially exclude certain kinds of people and maintain certain kinds of socio-economic differences. This specific paradox of education — to exclude and marginalise people to maintain social selection instead of social mobility — is most strongly felt in the context of education in France, which has invalidated the participation of Muslims as Muslims in public life with targeted reforms in its national educational system. With this profound instrumentalisation of education by politics over time, it is important to pause and reflect whether a more benevolent politics of education is possible at all.

“UK schools in the most deprived areas were worst affected by the government’s austerity policy.”

The myth of meritocracy

Written by R. Anthony Buck



There is a popular notion that the educational systems found typically in European nations are or at least ought to be meritocratic,^{1 2 3 4 5} similar notions surround the global education system as a whole.^{6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13} Education, then, is structured theoretically to select for merit, or at the very least it is advertised as such. Many societies stress that getting a good education will yield good jobs. But also that the best students will do the best in education and then get the best jobs. Let's assume the education system really does work this way. That leaves a major question: what actually counts as merit? What property in the student is the system selecting for?

From various perspectives of the system the priority is the same: finding and/or producing this merit in students through education. For this reason, many parents sacrifice to ensure their kids are well-educated. Many students work hard to pass their exams, graduate, and procure a good job. Teachers meanwhile focus their energies on getting students through their courses. But while this is a description of what happens, it fails to reveal either what merit actually is or whether the system that seems obsessed with merit succeeds at being meritocratic, or at least meritocratic in the way that the popular notion would entail. In fact, the only thing these perspectives demonstrate is that the popular belief that education is meritocratic fuels the pursuit of merit.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the sociological research on the correlation between socioeconomic background,

education, and social mobility by students is more tenuous than the culture surrounding educational attainment would have people believe.^{15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27} The evidence is even mounting against education rewarding academic talent, to the extent that even popular journalists as well as sociologists have called educational meritocracy a myth.^{28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42} But if this is true, then the merit that the educational system rewards is less academic merit than some other social value. The question is: what is that other value?

What merits in meritocracy?

Meritocracy assumes a kind of structured selectivity, one based on 'deservedness'. Theoretically, one has earned it and therefore meritocracy promotes society equity. However, what makes a particular person or group deserving can vary. The traditional myth of meritocracy holds that the person who proves themselves as a 'good student' regardless of background gets rewarded not just with good grades but with a better socioeconomic position. The myth of academic meritocracy promises *social mobility* if one sits somewhere below the top of the socioeconomic strata or *social immobility* if one already sits at or near the top. It is the offer of social mobility that people seek in education, not the acquisition of talents or skills in themselves, but talents, skills, and credentials that translate to social mobility, including (but not limited to) economic stability and cultural approval.

However, in other ages merit was not defined as academic capability but membership within a ruling, hereditary, elite class, one which one could only be born, married, or entitled into, namely the monarchy or nobility. In that system, it was believed the nobility deserved their position, not by virtue of academic talent but of good lineage or title. Alternatively, athletic competitions are widely held to be meritocratic. Players earn their socio-cultural position by being good at playing their sport. During the apartheid of South Africa, merit was often allocated on the basis of ethnicity, coming from a 'good' ethnic background made one deserving of society's opportunities. The options then for what counts as merit in 'meritocratic' systems can be very diverse. Just because something calls itself a meritocracy, does not mean what it says counts as merit is what actually counts as merit in the system.

Even if we constrained the varieties of merit in education to those subjects and skills immediately related to learning, what counts as merit can still differ drastically. For example, the skills necessary to learn how to repair cars are very different from the skills necessary to learn how to cook or paint, and just as different from learning how to solve problems in theoretical physics which are still distinct from the skills needed to learn how to speak German as native Maltese speaker.

“Meritocracy assumes a kind of structured selectivity, one based on ‘deservedness’.”

Meritocracies: sliding scales and mobility fails

Moreover, merit is not just a question related to the individual students, but even to the structure and sub-divisions of education itself, when it comes to funding, social networking, and cultural prestige. For example, the investment and push for STEM education, which refers to the cluster of academic and employment fields involving science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and educating students with the skills to succeed in those fields.^{43 44 45} This push for STEM education frequently comes at the expense of social sciences and humanities. As such, it suggests the educational structure is not only being optimised for the merit of particular kinds of students but particular kinds of academic fields. The question is: why do these fields merit extra investment? How can a field merit rewards and how can a student merit rewards?

Sociological assessments of the relations between student socioeconomic backgrounds, academic merit, and socioeconomic outcomes suggest that education rewards not so much the students who are academically the most talented, but those who *already* have a privileged background. Thus, normally education does not reward academic merit but class background. It predisposes the have's to have more and the have-not's to have less, or at the very least maintain their station in social stratification.^{46 47 48 49}

How fields and students acquire merit may intersect. For it is often those demographics that historically have done poorly in STEM that also tend to face poor conversion of education into social mobility. In which case, prioritising STEM in universities and even in primary and secondary education could be an example of class stratification pressures, that is, rewarding those segments of the society that already occupy positions of dominance by making it even harder for those in lower socioeconomic to be socially mobile. This is because by making STEM fields more culturally prominent and intensifying the structure in its selection for STEM candidates, those from the upper classes with greater access to the education, resources, social connections, and family will have an advantage, especially since current occupants of STEM positions do not come from a working-class or lower background.⁵⁰ For what makes a student to appear to merit the best opportunities in STEM is strongly correlated to class, not simply celebrating the fields. Likewise, the educational attainments and socioeconomic status of parents seem to influence students' choice of STEM subjects. One study suggests students who have a parent with a STEM degree are more likely to choose to study STEM while for others the perception that STEM subjects are more easily convertible into economic capital may incentivise them to study STEM subjects instead of social sciences and humanities.⁵¹

Moreover, as Bourdieu and Passeron noted *per exemplum* of the French educational system, the scale of class stratification is relative to the range of possibilities

as a whole. On paper it can look as though education will enable social mobility, but movement upwards in a system that is scaling upwards itself can mean a net failure of social mobility.⁵² In fact, when explaining why STEM deserves investment, the legitimation is that a large proportion of available jobs in the future will be found in STEM-related fields.^{53 54 55} Initially, this may seem to be a push to ensure people from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds can secure jobs that are relevant in the increasingly digitalising global economy, and thus offer a chance at social mobility. However, what this means in practice is that what lower- and middle-class jobs will look like are changing for developed economies. According to an EU report, there will be 60 million new jobs in STEM-related fields worldwide in the next 5 years. The EU is pushing to have as many of their citizens have the skills to acquire these jobs.⁵⁷ Globally speaking, the EU is trying to reduce social mobility of other nations relative to their own by ensuring that as many of their own people as possible acquire these STEM jobs which are expected to be more economically rewarded relative to other kinds of professions in the global economy. For a developing nation these jobs may mean social mobility from their local perspective, but the EU retaining a strong share of these jobs would mean social immobility from a global perspective.^{58 59} This is because Europe would remain economically and socially 'competitive' — i.e. dominant — by retaining a higher share of the economically

better-rewarded jobs available in the world economy.⁶⁰ ^{61 62 63} However, inside Europe, these jobs might not mean social mobility for all those people who acquire them, because their economic value is relative to the distribution of economic rewards at a global scale.^{64 65}

Thus, it is very possible, rather, that we are seeing a transformation in what it means to be working class in developed economies, from the manufacturing and service sector to the digital technology sector. Simultaneously, we are also probably seeing places like the USA, UK, and the EU using their present global dominance to secure not social mobility for their own people but social immobility for their own populations relative to developing or maturing economies. The push for STEM is merely part of the means to this end. Yet, this could mean both the social mobility of lower classes in developed economies and the humanities and social sciences in the cultural hierarchy of education become collateral damage as developed economies attempt to maintain dominance over both developing economies and each other during the world's fourth industrial revolution.^{66 67}

So, education may involve some talents or skills being cultivated, but at the same time education today is not so much a meritocracy based on talent as a form of social structuration heavily correlated to class and global economic dominance. Despite this, much of the initial push for education among the lower classes came out of religion in the hope of offering them better

chances at social mobility. Religion wanted people to have access to greater societal equity of opportunity and reward based on talents and achievements rather than class, title, or ethnicity. So, how do Europe's Abrahamic religions view meritocracy today?

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on meritocracy

No religion is a monolith, of course, so making categorical judgements on what a particular religion as a whole might think about meritocracy as the operative concept in education is difficult at best and far beyond the scope of a short article like this. Thus, all that we can say here is both provisional and anecdotal.

Judaism seems to offer both examples of celebrating merit as the organising principle of society and problematising meritocracy. On the one hand, meritocracy is celebrated as a morally superior system, one which presents itself in the Torah. Thus, one would want to uphold it on some level as even a cultural value for the Jewish community.⁶⁸ On the other hand, others question how meritocratic even the best meritocracy could be, recognising that merits even if assigned by virtue of genetic talents or features would operate on the basis of grace, not merit.⁶⁹ Another perspective notes Jews' own history and tradition wrestled with meritocracy, concluding the problem of evil forced

them to recognise the world does not operate by this principle of merit.⁷⁰

Christianity at its theological core problematises merit as much as it recognises its necessity. On the one hand, Christ's sinless life and innocent death reveals both the need for humanity to have merit before God through lived righteousness and justice as well as paradoxically how human society can refuse to acknowledge that kind of merit as positive merit, opting instead to consider Jesus's meriting of capital punishment. Yet, like some of the Jewish awareness of meritocracy depending more on grace than merit, a diverse range of Christians have pointed out that modern 'meritocratic' societies subvert both merit and grace. Pope Francis has argued the myth of meritocracy only serves to legitimise inequality.⁷¹ American Evangelical Chris Colquitt suggests meritocracy highlights the human need for grace as it promotes a society full of hubris and humiliation.⁷² Similarly, Ethiopian theologian Theodros Assefa Teklu contends meritocracy implies scarcity and competition, suggesting society should rather be structured around collaboration and mercy.⁷³

Islam tends to support meritocracy as a method for allocating positions and resources, though potentially detracting positions exist. One Islamic perspective argues that *taqwa* is an essential principle found in the Quran, which implies the notion of meritocracy, such that not only did Pakistan intentionally seek to build its modern state on meritocratic ideals, but that early

Islamic nation states Mecca and Medina were built on meritocratic ideals.⁷⁴ Many medieval Islamic philosophers and scholars held meritocracy as a societal ideal, based in part on passages in the Quran, even if in the history of Persia/Iran meritocratic outcomes were often compromised.⁷⁵ Likewise, in 2020, Indonesia's Abdul Mu'ti has said that meritocracy (with other democratic values) is aligned with Islamic ideals.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, an education researcher notes that for 20th-century Iraq, notions of merit were always held, but what counted as merit was at times changed or renegotiated in relation to notions of moral formation.⁷⁷ Thus, whether or not it is actually possible, many adherents of Islam would likely support a meritocratic education system. However, with the embedded traditions of both giving alms⁷⁸ and non-usurious banking,^{79 80} it is also probably wise not to assume Islam would adopt a meritocracy that rewarded class rather than academic merit uncritically.

Meritocracy meritless?

Thus, despite religion's early push towards a meritocratic structure for society through education, the growing consensus of sociological research that education does not lead to truly meritocratic outcomes would likely trouble many members of the Abrahamic religions. In particular, it must be remembered that the reason to push for meritocracy through education was precisely to free the lower classes from oppression and

intergenerational social immobility. It was not because they thought education made a person deserving of wealth. Rather it was pragmatic. They thought they could use the educational system to make the powerful see the value that the poor and downtrodden already possessed without an education. So, the historical motivation for Christians' push for education in Europe was precisely to make life not just better but more fair for the average person. Thus, as religious people look around and see the failure of meritocracy to be both meritocratic and promote social mobility, it should surprise no one that they are agreeing with the sociologists and arguing it is time again for a change.

A better way forward than meritocracy based on early Christian community

But what unique resources can religions bring to this issue of meritless meritocracy? Or even what could religions do themselves about this issue? Religions have both unique perspectives and support to offer in addressing these issues in education, outlined briefly for the Abrahamic religions' perspectives above. It would be presumptuous to speak for all of them. Jewish and Islamic scholars and leaders can speak for themselves, and do so both more effectively and authentically than this present author could. The present author can theologise authentically from a Christian perspective,

however, and sketch out briefly what Christians might offer in terms of solutions or support.

First, historically, Christianity has been very interested in expanding and investing in education, as well as enfranchising people through it. The modern university as a place for learning arose out of Christian, often monastic, communities, e.g. Oxford, Cambridge, Salamanca. Moreover, literacy and education for the poor has long been a focus of Christian activity wherever it has gone. If the poor are being overlooked or disadvantaged by the current system of education, Christianity can do what it has done in the past and start new schools and universities especially for the poor, at which they provide scholarships for education and/or tutoring or even larger denominations could pay for them outright. Likewise, Christians could simply refuse to value educational qualifications in their own companies, organisations, and churches.

Alternatively, if the meritocratic system does not mainly reward students for academic performance but for the overall relationship they maintain with all the types of capital, including the economic, social connections, and educational and cultural capital,⁸¹ then even if Christians sought to provide education to the disenfranchised the goal to use education to make life better for those people will not be achieved. The issue is both social immobility and the adverse effects of poverty, rather than access to quality education. To face this kind of problem, churches would have to do something far more radical,

if they wanted to generate the kind of situation where someone's gifts, talents, and hard work would be noticed and rewarded in society and not merely their socioeconomic, ethnic, or educational background.

Let me suggest that if Christians were willing to undertake the radical steps described in Acts 4.34, that is if they were willing to hold their goods, incomes, homes, wealth, reputations, talents, social connections, etc. as shared among the community, distributing to everyone in need in (or even adjacent to) their communities, then there might be a chance for the disadvantages that many in society face to be overcome. Perhaps it is possible for modern people to say about Christian communities "There was not even a poor person among them, because all who were owners of fields or houses were selling them and bringing the amount of money they were sold for and putting it before the feet of the apostles. And they were distributing it to each person as much as anyone had a need."

Of course this is radical, some might even suggest idealistic, but importantly something like this sidesteps the question of meritocracy to the extent that it removes the greatest threat to each person's wellbeing. That is, whether or not someone succeeds in a 'meritocratic' system they would not have to starve. It fights merit with grace. Likewise, it means that such a community would rise as a *group*. It challenges the operative assumption of hyper-individualism present in the myth of meritocracy. It is this perpetuated myth of individual merit and success that hides the fact that the meritocracy *in*

practice deems one's socioeconomic affiliation the meritorious value not solely one's individual talents or efforts. But if a community could grow as a *community*, then — even if the social mobility was slower — it might over the years prove more successful. Regardless, it provides a context where the theological values of collaboration and grace are honoured above merit. Moreover, it provides a place where each person's individual gifts and skills can flourish and be discovered and recognised, but not simply for that individual's isolated benefit but for their community's. Reframing of the issue towards cooperation and mercy follows what Teklu advocated above. The community can work together consciously for social mobility for everyone within it — rich and poor alike as brothers and sisters.

Is the myth of meritocracy too strong to dispel?

All these solutions, however, still operate on the assumption that giving people more education, more tools to educate themselves, and more tools and opportunities to play the game of meritocracy will lead to better outcomes. That is, it ultimately believes that with the right help someone could beat the system designed less to grant social mobility than ensure social immobility for the vast portion of society, so the poor stay poor and the rich stay rich, regardless of their individual talents or efforts. Some may think

“Religion wanted people to have access to greater societal equity of opportunity and reward based on talents and achievements rather than class, title, or ethnicity.”

Christianity too marginalised or too underfunded in modern European societies to make a difference either in lobbying for a change or leading a change. But every societal revolution towards justice needs a bold marginalised figure like Rosa Parks willing to suffer to bring it about. Perhaps churches will be ignored or hated more, but it is also possible that taking a stand on behalf of the oppressed against the myth of meritocracy will be just the push society needs to move towards doing the right thing.

If *education* is at least partially a rigged game (as the numerous sociological citations above show), then merely giving people *education* will not solve the problem. Even those with great education cannot translate it into social mobility, because the mythic meritocracy in education selects not for academic talent or effort but for that plus other elements that it labels academic talent. It is a nexus of factors involving several types of capital, including economic status, social connections, cultural and ethnic values, parental educational attainment, structure of the academic environment, access to education, among others.

Despite these challenges, religious traditions can work together to find a better path forward for education than maintaining a myth of meritocracy. They generally want people in society to be rewarded for what they actually do. But they also see the limits of doing only this. As sketched out above the Christian tradition does suggest the possibility of a radical path

of cooperation and grace. Churches could collaborate to give every one of their people not only the economic or educational capital to improve their lot in life, but the social connections and spiritual support as well. If it was modelled well, this communitarian approach to education and society could catch on, or at the very least stand in marked contrast to a system that uses the promise of merit to maintain a law of class, a kind of sociological legalism which Christian theology has long argued offers more death than life.

Perhaps communities of radical grace and collaboration could dispel the myth of meritocracy, of competition, with all the burdens it brings on all involved. Perhaps the rat race can give way to collaborative grace. Or perhaps the myth will live on, unaffected by any religion’s noble attempts to either expose, refute, or reform it. But one thing is clear: if no one does anything, education will never be a force for social mobility or rewarding talent, only the self-perpetuating system towards the myth of meritocracy.

Sexual education in Europe

Written by Ghila Amati



LGBT discrimination in schools

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey published in 2015, most EU member states argued that the school curriculum does not include any information about sexual orientation and gender identity.¹

Moreover, the report found that in EU member states there is extensive discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.² Finally, the survey showed that many LGBT students across the EU prefer not to reveal their sexual orientation in order to avoid discrimination. This phenomenon makes it more difficult for institutions to help them in time of need.³

Even though some EU countries have implemented policies that attempt to end this discrimination against the LGBT community, according to the report, these policies are not sufficiently widespread.⁴ In this article, we will analyse several recent developments regarding this topic in a number of representative EU countries.

The case of the UK

The British Department for Education (DfE) approved new guidance regarding gender and education in September 2020. According to the new guidance, all children in England will receive education about LGBT, including sex and relationship education.⁵ The new

guidance added that teachers should not “reinforce harmful stereotypes” and that the material taught should be “age appropriate and evidence based.” Moreover, pupils should not be taught they might be of a different gender based on their character or dress.⁶ The reason for these limits — the DfE argues — is that “[w]e are aware that topics involving gender and biological sex can be complex and sensitive matters to navigate.”⁷

This caused a wave of both positive and negative responses in the UK. On the one hand, Dr Shereen Benjamin, lecturer in primary education at the University of Edinburgh, argued that “This clarification from the DfE is welcome and helpful [...] Suggesting to children that it is possible to be born in the wrong body is misleading, regressive and potentially very harmful, and it is good that the DfE has clarified that this should not be done.”

On the other hand, several LGBT groups have protested against this new guidance. The director of education and youth at the LGBT charity Stonewall — Mo Wiltshire — claimed that the document is unclear and confusing for teachers and might harm LGBT students rather than help them: “We’re particularly concerned by some of the confusing wording on teaching about trans identities, which only tells teachers what they shouldn’t teach about, rather than what they should.”⁸

The example of Sweden

Sweden is a well-developed country in terms of sexual education.⁹ In 1955, it was the first country that made sex and gender education compulsory. Since then, Sweden has kept updating its school curriculum on the topic to stay up to date with the changes of time. In 2011, new laws were approved that were supposed to improve gender equality in schools.¹⁰ Sex education in Sweden goes beyond the simple subject of sex and includes alcohol and mental health.¹¹ In general, Sweden supports open sex education that attempts to eliminate the prejudices and taboo that often characterise conservative countries.¹²

Yet, despite its progressive sexual education approach, a survey published in 2011 by *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* found that 96% of female students and new graduates in Sweden are unsatisfied by the covering of sexual assault in Swedish schools and that the sex education lessons taught them very little about sex. Students also said they did not receive enough information on gender issues.¹³

The case of Germany

In 2016, Germany approved a sex education reform. Among Germany’s 16 states, as of 2016 only Berlin,

“Sex education in Sweden goes beyond the simple subject of sex and includes alcohol and mental health.”



Brandenburg, and Hesse assumed new policies that include discussing the LGBT community when teaching sexual education in classes. Moreover, it is emphasised that teachers should be open and welcoming towards different kinds of gender identities and ways of life.

For instance, in the region of Baden-Württemberg, the “acceptance of sexual diversity” was included in guidelines for teachers. Moreover, the Hessian ministry has gone even further and has stated that teachers must introduce discussions about sexual and gender diversity even outside sex education classes, such as in subjects like Maths and English, by giving for instance mathematical problems that include gender diversity.¹⁴

As a response to the new reform, some have claimed that the “acceptance of sexual diversity” is a form of indoctrination.¹⁵ Moreover, the new reform caused protests and demonstrations in Hamburg, Hessen, and Baden-Württemberg. According to the website of *Demo für Alle* (DW), 1.5 million Germans joined the protests. However, this large number of people was not confirmed by the police. The leader of the movement, Hedwig von Beverfoerde, stated that the new reform would lead to a degradation of the family.¹⁶ The DW movement was backed by the Christian Democrats party under Chancellor Angela Merkel’s leadership and the nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD).¹⁷

On the other hand, LGBT rights groups such as Lesben und Schwulenverband (LSVD) approved of the change. Markus Ulrich, member of the group, stated

that “[t]he idea is to show children that there are different ways to love and live” and that “for example, in maths, a teacher could set a question that includes a gay family ... Or in English when they study Romeo and Juliet, they could ask about other types of relationships that are sometimes disapproved of.”¹⁸

The case of Poland

Poland has undergone recent changes to sexual education as well. In February 2019, Rafał Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw, declared in writing that he supported LGBT rights.¹⁹ Moreover, he promised to conform to the World Health Organisation instructions and incorporate LGBT in the Warsaw sex education curriculum.²⁰ The Law and Justice (PiS) party responded negatively to the new reform, arguing that this will sexualise children.²¹

The leader of the party, Jarosław Kaczyński, argued that LGBT rights are “an import” that intimidate the existence of the Polish state.²²

According to the Daily Telegraph, the Warsaw declaration is responsible for the contrasting phenomenon of LGBT-free zones in Poland.²³ ‘LGBT-free zones’ are cities and regions in Poland that are openly against LGBT ideology and that actively forbid LGBT demonstrations or events.²⁴ In June 2020, around 100 cities had become LGBT-free zones.^{25 26}

The case of Italy

Italy is one of the few European countries in which the subject of sexual education is not obligatory in the school curriculum and each school can decide when, if, and how to teach this subject.²⁷ In February 2021, the school principal of a high school in Italy forbade two training courses on abortion and gender identity scheduled in the school. He claimed that the class about abortion would have “instigated people to have an abortion,” while the class about gender would have given false information as “gender identity does not exist.” The episode was published by some students on Instagram and went viral — thereby re-opening the debate on sexual education in many Italian newspapers.²⁸

According to the results of the national survey on sexual and reproductive health of adolescents by the Ministry of Health, published in 2019, the vast majority of Italian adolescents get information on the internet. Less than half turn to friends, and only one in four to family members. Almost all the students, however, stated that schools should guarantee the right to information on sexual and reproductive health: starting from elementary school (11%), middle school (50%), or high school (32%).²⁹

The history of sexual education in Italy goes way back. The first bill that encouraged initiatives of sexuality classes in public schools was promoted by

“[F]amilies and parents think that education on these topics should be given by the family and fear that discussing sexual matters will cause students to practice them early.”

the Communist Party in 1975. From then on, dozens of bills were proposed by different politicians from different Italian parties, but nothing concrete came out of it. Sexual education in schools though, is opposed by the Catholic Church and — according to the scholar Valeria Ferraretto — the Church wants to keep these issues as taboos.³⁰ Moreover, families and parents think that education on these topics should be given by the family and fear that discussing sexual matters will cause students to practice them early.^{31 32}

In 2015, Renzi’s government approved a law that promoted “education for gender equality, the prevention of gender-based violence and all discrimination.” However, the guidelines for the implementation of these principles may or may not be implemented by institutions, and the decision to teach this subject is still subjected to economic and ideological views of the single schools.^{33 34}

Is there a general tendency?

In this article, we have analysed the position of several EU countries regarding sexual education, especially regarding issues of LGBT and gender. On the one hand, the more secular countries have undergone some sort of change in sexual education and have opened themselves to a more progressive approach. On the other hand, some more religious and conservative countries — like Italy — lack educational tools on this matter. Yet,

even in the more secular states, harsh voices of protest are making themselves heard, showing that conservative approaches in the EU are still very powerful. It will be interesting to find out whether Europe will keep moving towards a progressive approach, or rather that political and economic changes will change the direction of this liberal tendency.

Islam and the educational gender gap in Europe

Written by Joshua Amiel Marasigan



Educational gender gap: Layers of marginalisation

Gender inequality when it comes to education is still a prevailing reality in Europe. According to the web dossier on equal access to education by the official website of the European Union, gender inequality persists in this area.¹ The European University Association (EUA) also sees a disparity when it comes to women in leadership positions in educational institutions in Europe. Out of the 47 member countries of the EUA, only 12% have female rectors and only 28% of the member countries have full professors who are female.² Even the process of curriculum building and the production and reproduction of knowledge are still dominated by male voices.

The gender gap is very much connected with other societal factors such as class, ethnicity, and other minority markers. Most European women who follow Islam, for example, have all of these markers in mind, especially when it comes to access to quality education and the most remarkable reminder of their being Muslim: the hijab. How then does the performance of Islamic femininity interact with European secularism when it comes to education and the building of the curriculum in the European educational system?

Secular paternalism and Muslim women's education

In 2003, former French President Jacques Chirac set up the Stasi Commission to reflect upon the application of the constitutional principle of secularism, known in France as *laïcité*. After interviewing more than 140 representatives which included teachers, intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders, and equal-right activists, the Commission acknowledged the tensions building up between freedom of worship and the neutrality of the State, especially in the widely public-funded French education system.³ Following the conclusions of the Commission, the French Parliament voted to ban all “symbols or garb which show religious affiliation in public primary and secondary schools.”⁴

The prohibition of religious head coverings for Muslim women in France, according to Cécile Laborde, is a paternalistic performance of the French state.⁵ According to her, it is an imposition by the republic on Muslim women that mimics patriarchal impositions on women regarding behaviour, modesty, gender roles, and other cultural codes which have been taught in schools. While autonomy is being upheld by the French republican educational system, the kind of autonomy that is being reproduced by the curriculum entails a detachment from one's religious identity in order to not be ‘brainwashed’ or manipulated by religious extremists.⁶

According to the point of view of the paternalistic state, the religious head covering of Muslim women is not just a religious marker but a hindrance to intellectual autonomy and free decision-making.⁷

Laborde sees a tension between the appeals of Muslim women to reclaim their agency by wearing their hijabs as their marker for individual expression and the classical ideal of individual autonomy expressed by the hijab ban. The presupposition of autonomy that is detached from religious identity is critiqued because religious expression can also be an exercise of one's freedom, particularly in settings where there are already wide gaps in education for women.⁸ Sandra Feder would interject that banning the headscarves in French public schools have been a major obstacle for Muslim women to even finish their education, citing that discrimination caused by the policy became a major factor for this injustice.⁹ Limiting women's educational access due to a piece of clothing therefore becomes counterproductive when there is already a gender disparity in knowledge production for those who advocate for women's autonomy which includes freedom to express religious belonging in the public sphere.

More ‘classical’ French feminists, on the other hand, supported the recommendations of the Stasi Commission. Prominent French feminist intellectuals such as Élisabeth Badinter and Sylviane Agacinski claim that “always and everywhere, the veil has represented submission to male authority.”¹⁰ According to them,



“There are existing barriers to women in education.”

wearing a hijab is a practice rooted in patriarchal notions of gender roles and women’s modesty, conspicuously displayed by head covering. In certain contexts, familial and peer pressures leave many young women with no other option than to wear the hijab. Julie Muret, from the association *Osez le féminisme*, considers the hijab as a hindrance to the emancipation of women, as it is a sign of “inferiorising and delegitimising women in the public space.”¹¹

Interestingly enough, French feminism seems to branch into two different trends that pursue the same end — gender equality and the fight against patriarchy — but through different means. One perspective seems to look at a particular religious expression as a hindrance to the emancipation of women and an imposition by patriarchal structures. On the other hand, some of these women view the freedom of religious expression as a venue where one finds true womanhood and at the same time, emancipation from societal impositions.

While the debate is far from being settled, Belgium provides us with a practical example to contribute to the ongoing conversation. After some years of appealing to the education authorities by Islamic interest groups, Belgium rescinded its ban on the hijab in educational institutions in Wallonia (French-speaking part of Belgium), which is a stark contrast to the *laïcité* applied in France. Francophone Muslim women in Belgium welcomed the relaxation, with one of them saying that

it will impact them in such a way that they will be able to be financially secure and determine themselves.¹² Note that she did not even mention freedom of religion in her statement regarding the matter. If the state’s goal is human flourishing, and that goal is shared by Islam,¹³ then this shared ideal can be a crucial principle for policy-making for marginalised and disadvantaged sectors which includes religious minorities.

Negotiating the place of women in education

There are existing barriers to women in education. As it is, women on the basis of their sex are negotiating their place in the current structures of knowledge production in the European context and adding a barrier based on religious expression is counterproductive to the flourishing of Muslim women. These hindrances are already reinforced by the context around them, particularly by their parents and peers; life is difficult enough for women particularly in more marginalised backgrounds. While women are determined to learn and to surpass their hurdles, it is being made more difficult for them by the patriarchal structures that have been reinforced by their cultural contexts both in their religious communities and in the public sphere.¹⁴

Before even talking about women taking leadership positions in European educational institutions,

addressing barriers imposed by the state for women belonging to religious minorities should be addressed. It is counterproductive for the state to impose educational sanctions on the basis of religious expression or affiliation since it is its duty first and foremost to help society progress, and religion remains to be an important sector of society. Perhaps a *laïcité* that is open to dialogue and includes instead of imposing barriers would be beneficial for sexual minorities and religious minorities to be able to engage with society. Doing so will provide the opportunity to elevate the discourse in policy-making and leadership particularly in the production, reproduction, and dispensation of knowledge.

No woman, regardless of religious affiliation or socio-economic background, should be left behind, especially in this regard.

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 59. PARADOX
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 62. The Supply of and Demand for High-Level STEM Skills
 63. Infographic: How the STEM Crisis is Threatening the Future of Work
 64. Note already there are distinctions between 'white-collar' professional STEM jobs, blue-collar STEM jobs, and technical STEM jobs. The 'hidden' part is specifically the non-professional class of STEM workers. Thus, a STEM job does not automatically mean social mobility, just the type of training/skills/qualifications needed to do the job. Cf. The Hidden STEM Economy
 65. STEM jobs eventually led to stagnating wages for many earners, cf. STEM Careers and Technological Change
 66. The Fourth Industrial Revolution and digitization will transform Africa into a global powerhouse
 67. Home Regulation for the Fourth Industrial Revolution
 68. Sephardic Temple – Joseph: The Birth of Meritocracy
 69. Mayanot Parshat Bamidbar: Jewish Meritocracy
 70. Meritocracy or Not?
 71. Pope in Genoa: condemns meritocracy; attitudes to migrants and challenges priests over vocations crisis
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Sexual education in Europe

1. Professionally speaking: challenges to achieving equality for LGBT people
2. Professionally speaking: challenges to achieving equality for LGBT people
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5. Teaching children about diverse families: BOLD
6. Government issues gender identity guidance for teachers in England
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9. Swedish sex education has time for games and mature debate
10. International experts love Sweden's sex-ed. 96% of students don't
11. Swedish sex education has time for games and mature debate
12. (Boethius, 1985).
13. (PDF) Sex education in Swedish schools as described by young women
14. 'It's not all anal sex': the German schools exploring love, equality and LGBT issues
15. Wave of protests against sex education reform in Germany
16. Wave of protests against sex education reform in Germany
17. Wave of protests against sex education reform in Germany
18. 'It's not all anal sex': the German schools exploring love, equality and LGBT issues
19. Polish ruling party whips up LGBTQ hatred ahead of elections amid 'gay-free' zones and Pride march attacks
20. Polish ruling party whips up LGBTQ hatred ahead of elections amid 'gay-free' zones and Pride march attacks
21. Polish towns go 'LGBT free' ahead of bitter European election campaign
22. Poland Is Holding Massive Pride Parades. But How Far Have LGBTQ Rights Really Come?
23. Polish ruling party whips up LGBTQ hatred ahead of elections amid 'gay-free' zones and

- Pride march attacks
24. European Parliament slams 'LGBTI-free' zones in Poland
25. Polish Towns That Declared Themselves 'L.G.B.T. Free' Are Denied E.U. Funds
26. Poland: LGBT-free zones and ban on Pride marches
27. Bisognerebbe fare educazione sessuale a scuola.
28. Quanto servirebbe agli studenti italiani un po' di educazione LGBT
29. Bisognerebbe fare educazione sessuale a scuola.
30. Sex Education In Italy: A Missed Opportunity?
31. Bisognerebbe fare educazione sessuale a scuola.
32. Scuole, stop al progetto sulla «parità». Interviene Segnana: no alla teoria gender
33. Bisognerebbe fare educazione sessuale a scuola.
34. Scuole, stop al progetto sulla «parità». Interviene Segnana: no alla teoria gender

Islam and the educational gender gap in Europe

1. Equal access to education | Capacity4dev
2. Female university leadership in Europe
3. Rapport au Président de la République de la commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République, Commission de réflexion sur application du principe de laïcité
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10. Sylviane Agacinski: les mises en garde d'une féministe contre les dérives du féminisme, Eugénie Bastié, in Sylviane Agacinski: les mises en garde d'une féministe contre les dérives du féminisme
11. Égalité, voile, genre... Féminisme, la bascule des générations, Marianne Meunier, Blanche Marès, Isabelle Cormaty, in *Égalité, voile, genre... Féminisme, la bascule des générations* : 11/09/2020
12. Lifting of hijab ban in southern Belgium offers hope for Muslim women
13. The Idea of Happiness in the Qur'an
14. Equal access to education | Capacity4dev

