

# Changing societies and four tasks of schooling: Challenges for strongly differentiated educational systems

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**Abstract** Changing labour markets, increased calls for selection and excellence, and increased diversity and individualisation have repercussions on how educational systems can prepare youth for work, optimise knowledge production, achieve equality of opportunity, and socialise students into active civic engagement. This paper discusses four central tasks of schooling and examines to what extent societal developments challenge education policy to deliver on the tasks at hand. Particular attention is given to the challenges Europe’s strongly diversified educational systems are currently facing. Both the Netherlands and Germany, for example, have been offering vocationally-oriented pathways alongside traditional academic higher education for some time. But today’s ongoing changes in job descriptions, mainly due to ever-accelerating technological developments, are causing a risk of skills obsolescence which can only be avoided by continuous upskilling and/or reskilling of a sufficiently flexible workforce. Overcoming differences of intelligence as well as differences of diverse socioeconomic, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds by way of education is another challenge, as is fostering “soft” skills and political awareness. This paper investigates the effectiveness of current education systems in preparing citizens for a functioning modern society.

**Keywords** Inequality · Vocational education · Civic engagement · Comparative education · Skills obsolescence · Upskilling · European educational systems · The Netherlands · Early tracking

**Résumé** Quatre tâches fondamentales pour l’instruction dans des sociétés en mutation : défis aux systèmes éducatifs fortement différenciés – La transformation des marchés du travail, les appels croissants à la sélection et à l’excellence, la

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diversité et l'individualisation accrues ont des répercussions sur la manière dont les systèmes éducatifs peuvent préparer les jeunes au monde du travail, optimiser la production des connaissances, réaliser l'égalité des chances et socialiser les élèves à un engagement civique actif. L'auteur présente quatre tâches fondamentales pour l'instruction et examine dans quelle mesure l'évolution des sociétés empêche les politiques éducatives d'être à la hauteur de ces tâches. Il porte une attention particulière aux défis que rencontrent actuellement les systèmes éducatifs fortement différenciés en Europe. Les Pays-Bas et l'Allemagne par exemple proposent tous deux depuis un certain temps des filières à vocation professionnelle, parallèlement à l'enseignement universitaire traditionnel. Mais l'évolution actuelle des définitions de postes, due en grande partie à l'accélération constante des innovations technologiques, comporte le risque de l'obsolescence des compétences, qui ne peut être évitée que par l'actualisation permanente des compétences et/ou la requalification d'une main-d'œuvre suffisamment flexible. Surmonter les différences intellectuelles ainsi que celles entre les divers contextes socioéconomiques, ethniques et linguistiques par le biais de l'éducation constitue un autre défi, de même que la stimulation des qualités humaines et de la conscience politique. Cet article explore l'efficacité des systèmes éducatifs actuels à préparer les citoyens à une société moderne et opérationnelle.

## Introduction

The two most important questions concerning the role of education in society are: what should education do? And: does it do that well?

Maybe the answer to the first question is more stable across time than the answer to the second one. On a general level, the *tasks* of education are to a large extent independent of the context in which people are educated. For example, one of the tasks of education is that it should prepare youth for the labour market, which has been a central goal of educational institutions for more than a century. Yet, given the normative character of the question as to what education should do, the central goals of education are potentially subject to change when norms change. At the onset of formal education, for instance, the labour market task was not in the picture. Literacy skills were not (primarily) aimed at creating an educated workforce, but first served religious purposes and later helped in socialising the elites into the right social circles, where reading comprehension and understanding Latin were important skills.

On a general level, the central tasks of education are relatively stable across time, as we will see below. However, the answer to the question whether a particular educational system is successful in *realising* those tasks is much more dependent on the context in which people are educated, or, in other words, on the society which youngsters are growing up in. Preparing youth for the labour market, to take the same example, today requires equipping them with different skills than before. Hence it is relevant to examine the consequences of societal change for the demands we need to make on the educational system, and to evaluate whether our educational institutions live up to their central tasks in a changing society.

In this paper I shall first highlight what I see as the four central tasks of education. Then I will discuss three societal developments that change the demands on our educational institutions. The main question underlying this analysis is: which challenges are educational systems facing as a consequence of the following three areas of social change: (1) changing labour markets; (2) a quest for selection and excellence; and (3) increasingly diversified and individualised student bodies?

I will summarise what I see as the big challenges for many contemporary European educational systems in response to the main developments described, in particular systems which are of a strongly stratified and vocationally-oriented nature. Such systems are in place, for example, in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and the Czech Republic. The paper concludes with three recommendations as to how educational systems might be better organised to deal more adequately with the three societal changes.

### **Four central tasks of education**

Education can be seen as having four central tasks in contemporary societies (see also Peschar and Wesselingh 1999; Van Kemenade 1981; Fend 1974 for similar approaches). We might think of these tasks as “functions” of education, because we can assess whether an educational system functions well by assessing the quality of its outcomes. Thinking about these functions helps us to determine the curriculum. So, whereas the prime task of education is to educate, to let children grow in important respects, it is through the analysis of functions that we can assess in which domains growth is desired. It should be noted that the goals are general and do not specifically refer to one particular level of education. Yet, evidently, one goal may be particularly addressed at a restricted set of levels of education, whereas another goal may apply more generally.

As a first task, education needs to prepare youth for the labour market (*the labour market task*). This task implies that education teaches skills that are productive for work, and thereby help school leavers in optimising their labour market opportunities, and employers in optimising their production. Education policy concerning this function focuses mostly on the vocational and higher education sectors when it comes to this function.

The second task is that education should efficiently sort students into tracks according to their talents and interests in order to optimise the production of knowledge and skills (*the optimisation task*). Students are not equally equipped with different kinds of talents, and have different interests in different kinds of work and lives. Education can help to place students on a path which is conducive to finding their destinations. The educational system may be able to sort students optimally so that those with a high level of learning ability have the opportunity to reach higher levels of schooling than those with lower levels of learning ability. Moreover, optimisation not only refers to vertical differentiations between levels of achievement and attainment, but can also relate to optimising the match between personal interests and talents and choice of field of study. In this context one can think of a potential improvement of the interest in the fields of science, technology,

engineering and mathematics (STEM) by minimising the “loss” in STEM interests among children with sufficient mathematics skills. The optimisation task implies that efficient learning is created when the matching process is optimised. By consequence, the “total” production of knowledge and skills is then optimised (given a particular budget for education). The optimisation task is not restricted to one particular educational level; education policy concentrates on maximum performance at all levels.

The third central task of schooling is that education should provide equal opportunities to children from different backgrounds in terms of ethnicity or socioeconomic status (*the equal opportunities task*). Given the pivotal role of education in shaping individuals’ lives, a society which strives for equal opportunities for all its citizens should focus centrally on education in realising this. In sociological terms, equality of opportunity should be distinguished from equality of position. Equality of (socioeconomic) position refers to equality in terms of distribution (of income, quality of life, access to vital services etc.). A particular (for example income) distribution may be more equal than another, because the dispersion<sup>1</sup> is lower. By contrast, equality of opportunity does not refer to the distribution per se, but rather to the chances that different people have to obtain a particular position in the distribution. An equal distribution in terms of dispersion may be unequal in terms of opportunities (e.g. when the dispersion in skills is low but one’s position in the distribution is strongly determined by one’s social background), and an equal opportunities distribution may be unequal because it has a wide dispersion. However, according to some sociologists there is a clear linkage between the two, for two reasons. First, theoretically the two conceptions of equality are hard to separate. Inequality of position can be directly linked to inequality of opportunities, as large inequalities lead to strong differences in children’s chances in education (Breen and Jonsson 2007; Swift 2001). Also, one could maintain that equality of educational opportunities is promoted if equality of position is granted at earlier stages in the educational career. Second, empirically it appears that equal societies in terms of dispersions are also more equal in terms of opportunities (Kenworthy 2008; Duru-Bellat and Suchaut 2005).

The fourth central task of educational institutions is to socialise citizens into active civic engagement (*the socialisation task*). In other words, education should contribute to preparing youth for active citizenship. The formation of active citizenship cannot be fully delegated to the responsibility of private caregivers. Schooling can have an operative role in it, as it can help to create equality in civic competences. Civic skills partially overlap with the skills required for the labour market (i.e. the socialisation task partially overlaps with the labour market task). For instance, general cognitive skills are assumed to contribute to labour market productivity and to being informed about politics and thereby to political participation. But civic skills are typically taught in designated social studies classes specifically devoted to knowledge about politics, about formal institutions and about current affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> In statistical terminology, dispersion refers to the spread of values around the mean. Larger dispersions (i.e. larger variances) imply more inequality in terms of distribution of outcomes.

Within a given educational institutional structure, some of these four tasks may be more easily met than others. A system which optimises efficient learning may, for example, perform less well when it comes to equality of opportunity (Brunello and Checchi 2007; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2007, 2010). This implies that, in the design of educational institutions, governments have to face policy trade-offs when a particular institution serves one task but thwarts another.

Another trade-off is the one between labour market preparation and equality of opportunity. It is well known that a strong vocational educational sector helps youngsters in the transition process from the educational system to the workplace (Müller and Gangl 2003; Wolbers 2007; Van de Werfhorst 2011). For instance, youth unemployment is lower in countries with a strong vocational sector (Breen 2005). Yet, there still is a significant social class effect on choice for vocational versus generic types of schooling. In a scenario where people enrolled in vocational secondary programmes have fewer opportunities to enrol in tertiary education, strongly vocationally-oriented systems may be enlarging social class differences in the attainment of a tertiary-level degree (Hillmert and Jacob 2003).

A lesser-known trade-off is between the tasks of labour market preparation and citizenship education. It may be that educational systems which perform well in the preparation for the labour market perform worse when it comes to the socialisation task of schooling. This could be the case if early selection in the educational system, combined with a strong vocational orientation, leads to improved labour market signalling<sup>2</sup> but at the same time increases variation in citizenship competences. A well-known view on social justice is that principles of justice depend on the domain of life we are looking at (Walzer 1983; Miller 1999). A domain-specific conception of justice criteria may imply that equality should be the governing principle in issues related to the relation between the state and its citizens (i.e. politics), and merit should be the governing principle in the labour market (Miller 1999). We then easily see that educational systems are operating precisely at the crossroads of these principles. Schooling should aim at both increasing the visibility of the merits/skills obtained, which is promoted by diversification, tracking and vocational orientation, *and* at equalising the kinds of knowledge and skills which promote democratic equality. I will go into this trade-off more extensively below, as it tends to be overlooked in current thinking of educational design.

### Three societal trends and their implications

The fulfilment of the four central tasks of education delineated above is challenged by the effects of three current societal developments. The challenges they present and the questions we need to ask can be outlined as follows:

1. *The changing labour market.* Three issues are at stake here. First we need to evaluate whether our educational institutions produce the knowledge and skills

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<sup>2</sup> In social science terminology, labour market signalling theory implies that employers are uncertain about the expected productivity of workers, and use signals, such as educational qualifications, to obtain more information.

employers are currently looking for. Second, the issue is whether it is at all feasible for education to produce the required knowledge and skills, or whether perhaps other institutions (such as the family or the labour market) are more efficient in tackling this task. Third, we need to assess what the implications are for inequality of opportunity if the changing occupational structure favours children/youth from the middle classes more strongly than working-class children/youth.

2. *Call for selection and excellence.* As a consequence of educational expansion, institutions for higher education are increasingly building forms of selection and diversification into the system. Universities are for example introducing honours and research Master's programmes, expanding their PhD programmes and setting up highly selective university colleges. How do these developments relate to inequality of educational opportunity? To understand this, we need to understand processes of educational choice better than we do today. Following sociological theories of educational decision making, I will focus on selection per se, and on differentiation of tuition fees often related to selection.
3. *Increasing diversity and individualisation.* At all levels of education, the target group has in many Western societies increasingly diversified in terms of ethnic origin. At the same time, through increased individualisation, people's opinions and behaviour may be less strongly influenced by institutions and structures such as the family, religion and social class. What are the implications of such a diversified and individualised society for the central tasks of education? In particular, I will discuss the implications for the task of citizenship education, for two reasons. First, increased diversification may call for more open, "cosmopolitan" forms of citizenship education, and second, increased individualisation may put an extra burden on schools to teach the kinds of citizenship skills and knowledge that we deem important for every member of society.

In order to better understand the dynamics of these societal changes and the resulting necessity of adapting our educational systems to equip youth with the knowledge and skills required for modern societies to function well, it is instructive to look at each of the three changes and their implications in more detail.

### Changing labour markets

As mentioned above, one of the main developments currently challenging the educational system is the changing labour market. Two changes are important here: the changing occupational structure and an increasing demand for upskilling due to technological developments and flexibilisation.

Let us begin with the changing occupational structure. The 20th century saw a pattern of decline of the primary industries (agriculture, fishing, etc.), a growth and later decline of the secondary sector of industry and manufacturing, and a steady growth of tertiary and quaternary sectors (private and public service sectors, respectively). In Europe, the class of professionals and managers has grown from 23 to 31 per cent of the population, and in the Netherlands from 31 to 46 per cent

(Breen 2004; Ganzeboom and Luijkx 2004). The manual working classes have been in decline in the Netherlands. Some scholars have therefore proposed alternative class categorisations which are better suited to deal with the increasingly diverse middle class and the declining working class (Oesch 2006). For the present purposes it is especially relevant to investigate whether changes in the occupational structure present serious challenges for what we teach in our schools. In other words, does our educational system prepare students well enough for the changing occupational structure?

But it is not only the class structure which has changed. Also within occupations there are labour market developments which may have profound effects on the kinds of skills and knowledge we need to teach to students. Due to technological developments in particular, upskilling of the workforce throughout their career is more necessary than ever before (Allen and De Grip 2012). Many skills are at risk of becoming obsolete, because technological developments have changed the job tasks. Moreover, an increasing flexibility in labour contracts puts demands on individuals' ability to work for different employers and in some cases even in different trades, certainly in periods of economic recession like the one we are seeing now. The orientation towards competence-based learning in the regional educational centres (Regionale Opleidings Centra, ROCs) of Dutch vocational MBO schools,<sup>3</sup> a development that mirrors the emergence of vocational schools in Germany alongside the apprenticeship system, originates from the declining long-term usage (and increasing flexibility) of acquired skills. It is no longer sufficient to learn specific knowledge and skills on vocational subjects. Rather, we should equip students with general skills and work attitudes that make them more likely to be able to develop new skills once they have joined the labour force. We need to prepare workers for a career full of lifelong learning, where continuous upskilling is needed for changing occupations and mobility across businesses and organisations.

Related to this is the increasing importance attached to so-called "soft skills" in addition to technical and cognitive skills for successful employment. Soft skills, sometimes also termed "people skills", enable good interpersonal communication and include elements such as politeness, intuition and tact. There are three different views on the importance of soft skills. First, in line with the lifelong learning perspective mentioned above, providing workers with particular work attitudes and competencies improves their ability to avoid skills obsolescence by upskilling. In other words, soft skills have become more important across the occupational structure. Second, there are some scholars who stress that these non-cognitive skills have always been important; only neoclassical labour economists have failed to see this because their model of education is principally oriented towards cognitive skills (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 2002; Heckman and Kautz 2012). Then there is a third view which stresses that soft skills are more relevant for some occupations than for others. Moreover, the growing sectors of employment are precisely those sectors with "people-processing occupations" where soft skills are required (Jackson 2007; Jackson et al. 2005; Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). Irrespective of these views, it is

<sup>3</sup> MBO stands for *middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*; intermediate-level vocational training.

clear that employers do not only have a particular interest in cognitive and technical skills, but also in social skills and certain kinds of personality.

### Implications of changing labour markets

The first implication of both labour market changes (a changing occupational structure and an increasing call for upskilling) concerns the balance between specific/vocational and generic skills<sup>4</sup> (Van der Velden 2006). More generic skills are needed. Teaching vocational skills may be less relevant in a rapidly changing economy, as these may be quickly outdated. Employers need skills that allow for flexible acquisition of new skills, which are typically generic in nature. Moreover, the growing sectors of employment are in various kinds of services where vocational skills are less needed, and the shrinking sectors are the ones where vocational skills were traditionally more important (skilled manual work). Indeed, as the life-cycle analysis of Eric Hanushek et al. (2011) demonstrates, a trade-off emerges between short-term gains from vocational education and long-term gains from general education.

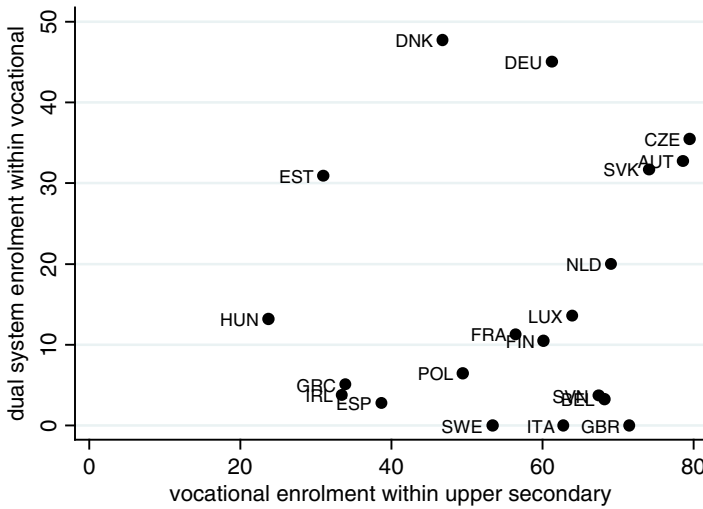
The vocational sector is quite strong in many European countries, including the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Figure 1 shows two indicators on the vocational orientation of educational systems for 20 European countries: the enrolment in vocational education as a percentage of total upper secondary enrolments, and enrolments in a regulated and coordinated dual system (i.e. a combination of school- and work-based learning) as a percentage of upper-secondary vocational enrolment. It can be seen that, among systems which have a large proportion of students in vocational education and training, a great variety exists in how this training is organised. In some countries, a large fraction of vocational enrolments are in the dual system (Germany, Denmark, Czech Republic), a scheme which is completely absent other countries (England, Italy, Slovenia).

There is much to be said for a strong vocational component in vocational schools at upper secondary and tertiary levels, as youth unemployment rates are lower in countries with a more strongly developed vocational sector, especially in the dual system (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013). Due to the vocational orientation of these education systems there is a clear transparency of the skills that are acquired in educational programmes. There is a clearly demarcated labour market where employers have influence on the curriculum. The big challenge is how to organise vocational programmes so that they effectively deal with these changes (Blossfeld 1992). Employers' influence will contribute to "devocationalising" the vocational programmes, as it is in their interest to create a workforce that acquires more generic competences that help to avoid skills obsolescence. The biggest skills shortage that employers see in their workforce does not concern occupationally relevant/technical skills, but rather general and social skills, and personality, as many studies have

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<sup>4</sup> Generic skills, e.g. being able to read and write, to solve (mathematical and other) problems etc., facilitate (*generate*) further learning.





AUT=Austria, BEL=Belgium, CZE=Czech Republic, DNK=Denmark, EST=Estonia, FIN=Finland, FRA=France, DEU=Germany, GRC=Greece, HUN=Hungary, IRL=Ireland, ITA=Italy, LUX=Luxembourg, NLD=Netherlands, POL=Poland, SVK=Slovakia, SVN=Slovenia, ESP=Spain, SWE=Sweden, GBR=Great Britain.

**Fig. 1** Vocational enrolment and dual system enrolment in different countries. *Sources:* Vocational enrolment: OECD (2006); dual system enrolment: OECD (2007)

shown. Indeed, the competence-oriented learning model currently being introduced into vocational curricula is heavily influenced by employers’ representative bodies.

However, focusing too strongly on those skills might perhaps make vocational programmes *too* general. The question would then be what distinguishes vocational schools from general educational institutions. If the overlap between vocational and general education becomes too large, employers may increasingly prefer graduates from general education, which in turn would make vocational programmes a less attractive option for students from middle class backgrounds. This would potentially increase social inequality of educational choices (in terms of choosing between vocational and general tracks). As a consequence of this, people educated in vocational programmes would become more strongly negatively selected (particularly with regard to those soft skills learned at home). This would not only affect their relative position in the labour market, but could also lead to behavioural changes of employers against people educated in vocational education (Solga 2002; Gesthuizen et al. 2011). The big challenge is for vocational schools to find a way of dealing with the paradoxical situation of making vocational education more general while at the same time maintaining its distinctive character.

A rather neglected but highly relevant second implication is that a greater demand may evolve for soft skills which are *not* primarily learned in school, but rather originate from the social class of origin (see Jackson 2007; Jackson et al. 2005; Goldthorpe 1996). Many service occupations (also at the higher end of the income distribution) require social skills and manners because of the large human interactional component of their duties. Examples are positions in hotel and

restaurant management, and in retail. This trend, if true, would mean that increasing functional matching of jobs to individuals' productive capacities, as implied by the concept of meritocracy,<sup>5</sup> does not automatically imply stronger selection and reward on the basis of education, but could also imply stronger selection and reward on the basis of skills acquired at home. Irrespective of whether or not social and personal skills can be classified under the rubric of merit, it is true that these skills are increasingly relevant for productive reasons; employers reward these skills because they are functional to them.

A third, broader implication of these trends is that the neoclassical economic understanding of education and skills may be losing ground. The reasons why education pays off on the labour market may increasingly be in line with alternative theories which have been proposed since the 1970s, but have reappeared more recently (Bowles et al. 2001; Breen and Goldthorpe 2001). In particular, education may not only indicate productive skills, as argued in neoclassical economics (in the direct sense proposed by human capital theory, or in the indirect sense in terms of signalling/screening for earlier ability), but also indicate other personal attributes. The question is, then, how we can organise our educational institutions in such a way that we equip our students with skills, knowledge and competencies that respond to the changing labour market demands, even in contexts where education should produce more than general cognitive skills.

A fourth implication of changing labour markets results from the views of Alison Wolf (2002) and Edward Wolff (2006). Wolff (2006) shows for the United States that the empirical relationship between education and economic growth is ambiguous. Wolf (2002) argues along similar lines for Britain, concluding that education mainly sorts students according to the abilities they already had before entering schooling. She furthermore develops a provocative viewpoint, and argues that tax payers are paying for education whereas employers benefit from it as a screening device to select job applicants on the basis of ability. Why should we spend so much tax money on increasing workers' skills and qualifications, an effect which employers could achieve with their own efforts if the government did not pay for the skills production through education? Given the need for continuous upskilling, Wolf's view may become more relevant as education is finding itself less and less able to provide skills which are productive for a whole career. However, it must be borne in mind that labour market preparation is not the only task of education.

### Call for selection and excellence

A second trend that affects education in contemporary society is the increasing demand for selection and excellence within educational levels. This can be seen most clearly in universities, where different forms of selection have been implemented. Many Bachelor's degree programmes now offer an honours class

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<sup>5</sup> The sociological concept of meritocracy refers to a reward principle whereby merits (e.g. educational certificates, ability, effort) lead to a better position within society and the effort of attaining these merits is rewarded for example in terms of a better salary than people without these merits receive.

for their best students, which usually comprises of additional course offerings to students with good grades in the first year. Study progress is monitored more effectively, so that advice (or coercion) can be given to malperforming students to drop out of the programme. Some universities have set up university colleges which are highly selective and offer broad Bachelor's programmes in sciences or humanities. At the Master's degree level, there are an increasing number of strongly selective Master's programmes alongside more accessible Master's programmes which are in fact only redefinitions of existing full university degrees in the Bologna agreement. For instance, in the Netherlands highly selective "Research Master's" programmes have been set up in close connection with research institutes and research schools, often as a first phase in graduate training towards a PhD degree.

Selection and excellence are now more often implemented than in the past not only in research universities, but also in second-tier tertiary institutions. In the Netherlands, for instance, vocational colleges are now offering Master's degrees, and some have even started up PhD programmes in collaboration with (mostly foreign) universities.

So where does this increasing emphasis on selection and excellence come from? One important explanation for the emergence of the discourse of selection and excellence is educational expansion. Educational expansion plausibly affects credential inflation, when the supply of graduates exceeds demand. Credential inflation implies, in its turn, that employers need other sources of information to discriminate between applicants. The positional nature of schooling, where not only the amount of skills is relevant, but particularly one's relative position in the pool of applicants, implies that distinctions are sought *on top of* the already existing distribution. So, if the "old" educational system had a university degree as the highest possible achievement, in a system where many youngsters enter this level, additional diversification is then developed above this highest level of education. Hence, variation in selection in Master's degree programmes is a logical consequence of educational expansion.

This does not mean to say that employers really need graduates from excellent and selective programmes for the skills they have mastered, implying that they would fare better in comparison with a situation in which these same applicants came into the workplace with "just" a normal university degree from the unselective system. Plausibly, the production of skills would be far more efficient if we increased diversification in the lower ranks of higher education. And in fact this is what has been done in the Netherlands in implementing the Bologna agreement by issuing new university Bachelor's degrees. Yet, as educational sociologists have long argued, such diversification *below* the highest standard degree does not lead to as much of an efficient production because educational decision makers (I mean students here), in their uncertainty, opt for the higher (Master's) degree even if a Bachelor's degree would offer the relevant skills. Given that education is a positional good,<sup>6</sup> employers prefer Master's graduates even for jobs where a

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<sup>6</sup> In sociological terminology, a positional good is a scarce good of which not the absolute amount, but the relative amount within a population is important.

Bachelor's degree would be sufficient. Adding selection *on top of* the existing structure does not have the same unintended effects.

### Implications of the call for selection and excellence

A first implication of an increased emphasis on selection and excellence concerns the dissemination of the logic of excellence to preceding levels of schooling. Will the trend towards more selection in higher education lead to more ambition among secondary school students before graduation? This may partly be expected, as students may increasingly benefit from good performance. If they do well in secondary school, they may also be more likely to be chosen for selective programmes. Yet on the other hand it is uncertain whether secondary school students are already concerned with issues of selection *after* admission to university, certainly when it concerns small programmes catering for only a limited number of students. Few students will know much about the existence of selective programmes before university enrolment, and those who are aware of them may be particularly students from well-educated backgrounds (see below).

A second implication concerns the issue whether employers pick up the variability in the selectivity of programmes. It is likely that employers search for additional selection criteria when they are confronted with a labour force which has been educated in mass higher education, certainly if supply exceeds demand (credential inflation). Graduation from a selective programme is likely to function as such an additional selection criterion to employers.

A somewhat neglected issue concerning increased forms of diversification and excellence within higher education is the impact it could have on inequality of educational opportunity. To illustrate the impact of selection within higher education on educational inequality we need to focus on theories of educational decision making. It is difficult to maintain that only meritocratic factors can be allowed to affect educational outcomes, because it is difficult to define what meritocratic characteristics are. The argument that only productive capacities may be rewarded is untenable, as there are many productive capacities which are not meritocratic. Another argument which maintains that only attributes for which individuals are responsible themselves may be rewarded is also untenable, if only because we are willing to reward intelligence in schools, which is likely to be partly genetic.

Instead of focusing on meritocratic features, it is better to focus on the educational decision making process, to get insight into those factors which explain the level of schooling attained by students of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and to think of policy measures that promote equality in this respect. Such explanations feature two important effects: primary effects and secondary effects (Jackson 2013). Primary effects refer to differences in educational outcomes that result from differences across social classes or ethnic groups in (demonstrated) learning abilities. Children/youth from more advantaged social backgrounds perform better in school tests at a particular point in the educational career, which partly explains more ambitious schooling choices after this point. The secondary effect refers to the effect of social origin on educational choices *irrespective of* (or

on top of) differences in learning abilities. Even among children/youth of equal learning abilities, those from more advantaged social backgrounds make more ambitious schooling choices than children/youth from lower-class backgrounds. Clearly educational inequality is not only a consequence of variations in learning abilities, but also of variations in choices conditional upon learning abilities.

Each of these two effects needs its own explanation. How can we explain that students from different social origins and ethnic groups score differently on standardised school tests? Many theories have been proposed, and in particular theories about different schooling cultures seem appropriate to explain the primary effects. But it is perhaps more important, certainly from an educational policy perspective, to consider how we can explain the fact that even among students who score equally in school tests, children/youth from different social classes still vary in their educational choices. Cultural theories arguing that social classes differ with regard to their affinity to the school culture seem less valuable here. Rather, it seems that such secondary effects are better explained from a far more rational perspective on educational decision making (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe 1996; Morgan 2005; Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007).

An important element in choice processes is the information people have at their disposal about the alternatives in question. It is likely that the amount and the reliability of information on different schooling options (including dropout) vary across social and ethnic groups. When, at a branching point in the educational career, someone has to make a choice about continuation, they need various pieces of information.

First, they need to be aware of the possible alternatives. Which programmes are there to choose from? In the transition from primary to secondary education, there may seem to be few information differentials – school pupils typically know which options are available. In the transition from secondary to tertiary education, a stronger information differential is likely, when students from more advantaged social backgrounds receive better information about the possible alternatives through a more active role of parents in the selection process, or because their parents went to university themselves and are aware of the different options.

Second, one needs information about the (labour market and other) opportunities that open up with a particular qualification. Here strong information differentials can be expected. Children/youth from higher social classes are plausibly better informed about the relative advantage in the social structure that a university degree offers.

Third, information affects the beliefs of children/youth about the difficulty level of a new educational programme. Social class may again have a strong influence here, because educated parents can inform their offspring that university completion is predominantly a matter of putting in effort, whereas the role of intelligence is modest. Working-class children/youth, by contrast, hear that one needs the intelligence of a true Einstein to be successful at the higher educational levels (Breen 1999).

Now let us relate the information differentials thesis to the existence of strongly selective and less selective programmes. Would children/youth from different social classes have different information at their disposal about the selective programmes

available to them? This is very plausible. First of all children/youth from different social classes vary in their knowledge of the existence of such selective programmes. Such information differentials can quite easily be overcome. Second, it is likely that children/youth of higher social origins have better information about the benefits one reaps from such selective programmes. In an age when a large fraction of a cohort enters higher education, it is essential to think of one's relative position in the educational distribution, not only of getting a mass university degree. It is likely that children of well-educated parents are more aware of this, and anticipate their educational choices accordingly. There would then be a "secondary effect" of social origin on enrolment in selective programmes independent of class differences in fulfilling admission requirements.

### Increasing diversity of society and individualisation

A third trend in society concerns two developments which have strong implications for what I see as the fourth central task of schooling: preparing for active citizenship. This trend is a combination of two distinct processes: increasing individualisation and increasing ethnic diversity of society.

Increasing individualisation concerns the process that individual life courses and choices are increasingly detached from the influence of institutions such as the family, religion, social class or politics (Beck 1992). Although empirically contested by some (De Witte and Scheepers 1999; Duyvendak and Hurenkamp 2004; Goldthorpe 2002), certain aspects of individualisation are clearly taking place, such as a decrease in household size, declining membership rates of religious organisations, and more volatile voting behaviour across elections.

The two processes of increasing individualisation and increasing ethnic diversity are not by definition related. Individualisation could in fact be held back by immigration if immigrant groups show less individualisation than the native population. Yet both processes have severe implications for citizenship education, in particular because citizenship education has to deal with increasingly divergent backgrounds in schools and classes. Teachers can no longer take a particular set of values and attitudes among their pupils for granted.

### Implications of individualisation and increasing diversity

Before I go into the implications of individualisation and increasing diversity for citizenship education, let me first discuss the implications of increasing ethnic diversity for equality of opportunity.

The implication for equality of opportunity concerns the question whether our educational system works well for the promotion of equalising educational opportunities by ethnic background. It is true that migrant children, including the second generation, perform worse than children of majority populations, mostly by primary effects of ethnicity on school performance. Given a particular level of school performance and social class, however, research has shown that ethnic minority children in fact display rather ambitious schooling choices (secondary effects) at the start of secondary school (Van de Werfhorst and Van Tubergen 2007).

Yet, early dropout is also much higher among ethnic minority children than among youth of majority descent (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2003). Moreover, in the kind of systems with more diversification at the lower secondary level under scrutiny here, ethnic inequality in terms of secondary school performance is higher than in more comprehensive school systems (Cobb-Clark et al. 2012). Given that secondary school performance is highly influential on the probability of enrolment in tertiary education, this could lead to larger ethnic inequalities in tertiary participation in strongly stratified countries compared to comprehensive systems.

Now let us take a more detailed look at the implications of increasing diversity and individualisation for the formation of active citizens. Active citizenship has often been related to political participation, and citizenship education has been regarded in that perspective too (Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Niemi and Junn 1998). The question then is: how can education contribute to active political participation? A more widely encompassing view of citizenship education has recently been put forward. This view holds that we should educate students to be “members of society who are able to participate in an active, responsible and critical way in a rapidly changing, pluralistic society” (Ten Dam and Volman 2003, p. 119). Participation in society, according to this view, is broader than just participation in politics or work. In this vein, political research on participation has extended the focus from politics to issues such as voluntary membership, as it is illustrative of the democratic functioning of societies (e.g. Putnam 2000).

What are the implications of increasing diversity and individualisation for citizenship education? First of all, if we accept that the “principle of justice” in the domain of democratic participation should be equality, then the state should optimise democratic equality (Miller 1999). Each citizen obviously has the right to vote and be elected in political elections, but there is systematic variation across social groups in their likelihood to use their democratic rights. From political science it is commonly known that individual resources and networks are important drivers of political and social participation (Brady et al. 1995). If it is the state’s responsibility to optimise democratic equality, one channel to do so is through the educational system. Through education, equalisation of individual resources (i.e. civic competences) may be promoted. This equalisation is particularly important in a society where the backgrounds of individual students are increasingly diverse, both in terms of ethnicity and in terms of their attachment to institutions such as the church, social class and family. Or, put in a slightly less ambitious way, albeit with the same consequences: the state should avoid increasing inequality of the resources/civic competences that students acquire in education. In an increasingly pluralistic society, the educational system may be the primary channel through which commonly esteemed behaviours and values can be promoted.

Importantly, those commonly esteemed behaviours and values should not be too specifically oriented towards a particular culture. Otherwise citizenship education becomes education towards subscribing to those norms which could be considered legitimate by the dominant groups in society, but not by others. This is particularly challenging in globalised societies today, very different from Durkheimian times<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) is generally regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology.

when education was thought to socialise children much more narrowly into the norms and values of one particular culture.

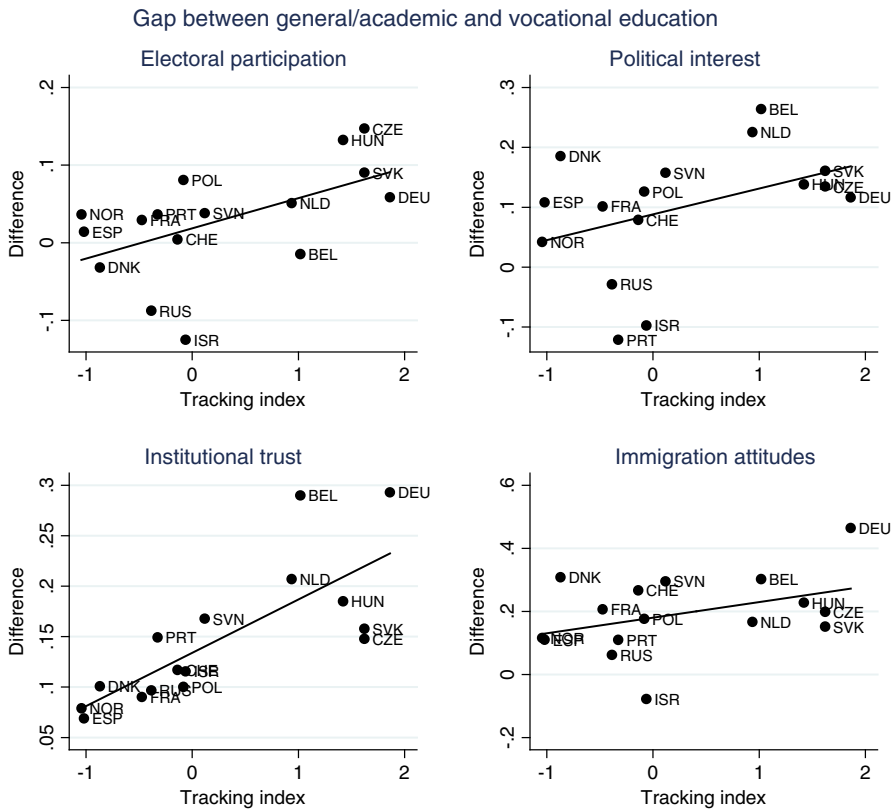
More important is the formation of critical individuals who know their rights and their way through society, and have the “cosmopolitan” competences to defend their views and interests, *and* understand the views of others, in a diverse society (Osler and Starkey 2003). Politics (in the broader sense of the term, including social movements and other intermediary groups) is an important arena where such potentially conflicting interests should be put forward. Also, in a liberal conception of citizenship education it is emphasised that education can teach about personal liberty *and* the individual rights incorporated in a liberal democracy (Macedo 2009). Both cosmopolitan and liberal perspectives of civic education offer useful tools to define relevant basic values to be taught in contemporary society without those values being restricted to those held by the dominant group in society.

The educational structure of a stratified educational system, with its early selection and strong vocational orientation, is ill-suited to provide the same kind of citizenship education to all of its younger citizens. Youngsters come to develop their identity and personality during early adolescence, and it is precisely at this stage that students are separated into different classes and school buildings, largely on the basis of cognitive achievements. As qualitative research by Geert ten Dam and Monique Volman (2003) has shown, citizenship education towards the enhancement of social competences varies between secondary school types. In the (higher) academic track, citizenship education is strongly oriented towards the development of critical thinking, whereas in the (lower) prevocational track it is more strongly oriented towards the formation of instrumental skills, such as social skills, which improve one’s chances in life.

So how do educational systems relate to the gap in civic engagement between graduates from academic and vocational tracks? Figure 2 plots this gap for four indicators of active civic engagement: electoral participation, political interest, trust in institutions, and tolerant attitudes towards immigrants. This was done for 16 European countries<sup>8</sup> taking part in the European Social Survey rounds 1–4 (2002–2008; ESS 2012a, b, c, d), for people younger than 45. The civic engagement gap is plotted against an indicator of tracking in the educational system, based on a factor analysis on age of first selection, the number of tracks available to a typical 14-year-old student, and the proportion of the total length of compulsory education that is tracked (Bol and Van de Werfhorst 2013). For most countries, this figure shows that, within the group of students whose highest educational attainment is upper secondary education, civic engagement is higher among graduates from upper secondary *general* education than among graduates from upper secondary *vocational* education. This can be seen by the (mostly positive) value on the y-axis. Moreover this difference becomes larger in more strongly tracked schooling systems. This might be explained by differences across education systems in terms of the amount of attention that citizenship skills get within tracks. From the study of

<sup>8</sup> The 16 countries plotted in Figure 2 are BEL = Belgium, CHE = Switzerland, CZE = Czech Republic, DNK = Denmark, FRA = France, DEU = Germany, HUN = Hungary, ISR = Israel, NLD = Netherlands, NOR = Norway, POL = Poland, PRT = Portugal, RUS = Russian Federation, SVK = Slovakia, SVN = Slovenia, ESP = Spain.





**Fig. 2** The gap in civic engagement between graduates from upper secondary general/academic and upper secondary vocational education. *Electoral participation* at latest national elections (0/1). *Political interest* (one item ranging from 1-4). *Institutional trust*: trust in (1) the country’s parliament, (2) the legal system, (3) the police, (4) politicians, (5) political parties, (6) the European Parliament, and (7) the United Nations, varying from 0 (“no trust at all”) to 10 (“complete trust”); the scale is taking the average over standardised items and runs from -2.3 to +2.3. *Immigration attitudes*: (1) Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]’s economy that people come to live here from other countries? (2) Would you say that [country]’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries? (3) Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? The average is taken over standardised items, with a scale ranging from -2.4 to +2.3. For an explanation of the 16 country acronyms, see footnote 9. *Sources*: European Social Survey rounds 1-4 (ESS 2012a, b, c, d)

Ten Dam and Volman (2003) mentioned above, it may be expected that citizenship education gets much less attention in vocational programmes than in general programmes (in subjects like social studies, history), and has a different content less strongly emphasising critical thinking and political interest formation.

As argued above, there seems to be a conflict between the labour market task and the efficiency task of schooling on the one hand, and the socialisation task on the other. In order to perform well in terms of labour market integration of school leavers and efficient learning, schooling systems should differentiate students and offer vocational programmes, preferably in the dual system. In other words, such

educational systems focus on the differentiation of school leavers, so that qualifications acquire a useful signalling function on the labour market. However, with regard to the socialisation task, schooling systems should offer equality of (civic) learning. We would want the educational system to *reduce* rather than to increase individual differences in knowledge about institutions, current affairs, the political system and democratic attitudes. Such an aim would require that we offer equal citizenship education to everyone, certainly at primary and secondary schooling levels. Such a commonality in citizenship education may be hard to realise in a system that (a) strongly differentiates pupils, and (b) has a strong vocational component.

What does this say about ethnic minorities? First of all, a strongly diversified educational system not only selects on the basis of demonstrated ability, but also (directly and indirectly) on the basis of social class and ethnicity. The reason for selection is efficient learning, as the total production of knowledge and skills may be increased by tracking and selection. A recent development in many education systems is in fact to strengthen the basic skills (such as literacy and numeracy) in response to perceived decline of these skills in the past decades, and also in the face of the high performance of Asian countries in international student tests in mathematics and literacy. But the evident downside of selection is that it also implies that students are separated for classes where efficient learning may not be the first priority, such as social studies, sports and history. Rather, with regard to the types of competences developed in these subjects, the primary focus should be on equality and bringing people together who are separated for classes where efficient knowledge production is central (e.g. mathematics, languages). Thus groups which should benefit from joint education in other fields are separated through the selective system on the basis of social class, ethnicity and cognitive skills. This may be detrimental to mutual understanding of social and ethnic groups and equality of citizenship.

Table 1 summarises the various implications of the three societal developments for education's four central tasks.

**Table 1** Three societal trends challenging four central tasks of education

Four central tasks of education				
<i>Three societal trends</i>	<i>Labour market preparation</i>	<i>Optimisation of knowledge and skills</i>	<i>Promote equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Socialisation</i>
Changing labour market	Providing relevant competences?	Should the taxpayer pay for providing a signal?	Relevant skills: originating from social origin?	
Desire for selection and excellence	Increasing signal in times of educational expansion?	Selection and allocation in advanced tracks in higher education?	Social inequality in access to advanced tracks?	
Increasing diversity and individualisation			Ethnic educational inequality?	Equality in Citizenship education?

## Conclusion

In this article I have analysed whether educational systems adequately prepare youth for contemporary Western societies with a changing labour market, increasing calls for selection and excellence, and increasing diversity and individualisation. In sum, I see several challenges to educational systems, especially systems of a strongly stratified nature.

First, during the phase of compulsory education (up to the age of 16 in the Netherlands), tracking is mostly harmful to equality, unnecessary for the increasingly complex labour market, and has the effect of increasing inequality of citizenship. If some form of tracking were desired to maximise the skills and knowledge production in education, such tracking might be better combined with untracked classes for subjects (e.g. sports, social studies and history) where citizenship competences are taught. Adequacy of enrolment in cognitive tracks may then be monitored regularly during the first stage of secondary schooling. It may be sensible to promote broad orientation years within tracked systems.

Second, at the primary and secondary levels we should not reduce standardised testing. Test scores can form an effective basis for monitoring cognitive track placement, and for selection in later stages of education (Bol et al. 2014). Standardised tests help to reduce inequality and at the same time foster the increasing call for selection and excellence. It may be worthwhile to promote further selection and excellence in higher education. Not only is more selection needed for the labour market, but the logic of selection and excellence may also trickle down to upper secondary education.

Third, if we are able to equalise and optimise citizenship competences at the first stage of secondary education, the vocational component of upper secondary and tertiary systems may be maintained in strongly vocationally oriented systems such as those of the Netherlands and Germany. Vocational education can be aimed at contextualising generic skills in a vocational domain (Van der Velden 2006). Reducing the vocational orientation of educational systems may not be the best strategy to cope with the increased demands for general and soft skills, as vocational training systems help to smooth the transition from school to work. Yet we should not be ignorant of the labour market's increasing demand for (contextualised) generic competences in vocational programmes. A strong influence of employers on vocational curricula would strengthen the position of school leavers on the labour market. And once we have done as much as we can to optimise efficient learning, reduce inequality of opportunities, and equalise and optimise civic competences, the smooth transition from school to work will be a strength of vocationally oriented systems that we may want to maintain.

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