

# **Progress, emancipation, excellence, fairness.**

Revisiting the foundations of progressive education

**Dirk Van Damme**

## Contents

- 2 Prologue: What happened to progressive education?
- 3 The common core of progressive education and its critics
- 6 Social progress
- 9 Upliftment and emancipation
- 12 Excellence
- 16 Fairness
- 20 Epilogue: The limits of educational expansion
- 22 Conclusion

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## Prologue: What happened to progressive education?

Much of what has been considered progressive in education, say, in the 1970s or 1980s, when I graduated and entered the fascinating world of educational research, has today either been radically consigned to the dustbin of history or requires a serious update. Over the past decades, new ideological winds have blown into the world of education. From the Anglo-Saxon world, a conservative ideological storm is blowing away many rotten pillars of the old progressive consensus. In several countries, right-wing nationalism has imposed its own agenda on education.

Not much resistance has yet emerged against this ideological attack on progressive education. On the contrary, progressive thinking suffers from ideological and intellectual sclerosis. It has dug itself into old certainties, into social determinism accusing the school of reproducing social inequality, into the scientifically outdated constructivism that has had such a detrimental impact on what happens in classrooms and how teachers define their role, or in the naive mirages of softish child-centred and self-directed learning. The progressive educational discourse has difficulties productively confronting conservative ideas that fundamentally question these certainties.

Maybe the most serious challenge for progressive thinking comes from the grave decline in students' learning outcomes as measured by large-scale international assessments such as PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA in several North American, Australasian and European nations. Many factors contribute to this decline and no satisfactory comprehensive scientific explanation is yet available. Still, conservatives have started blaming the education reforms of the past decades, which were, to varying degrees, inspired by the progressive consensus. In their view, these reforms and practices have lowered educational standards. In several countries, education ministers are now trying to turn the tide by moving away from these progressive reforms.

It is not exaggerated to say that progressive education is close to losing the ideological battle. In this context of ideological confusion and conflict, it is necessary to re-examine and redefine the foundational concepts of progressive education. In this paper, I shall explore five fundamental intellectual threads that can be woven together into such a new vision. However, before doing so, I will attempt to define the historical heritage of progressive education.

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## The common core of progressive education and its critics

Providing a precise definition of progressive education is extremely difficult, as it changes with space and time. There is no homogeneous philosophical or pedagogical tradition on which progressive education is based. Different pedagogical legacies of, for example, Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel or Dewey are woven into what we now call progressive education, but there remain important differences between these intellectual origins. The child-centred pedagogical reform movement of early twentieth century Europe is not similar to the educational reforms John Dewey advocated for in the 1930s in the United States, nor to what the proponents and legislators of comprehensive schooling defended in the 1950s and 1960s in England and France (Reese, 2001). Also, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of liberation differs from the movement for competency-based education at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### Five core ideas

Yet, there is a common core in these various movements and traditions, which can be summarised in the following five core ideas.

**1. An optimistic (some would say, 'romantic') vision of human nature, the natural development of children and the spontaneous learning of the autonomous child.**

This vision goes back to the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and has been incorporated into ideas on child-centred pedagogy, experiential and inquiry-based learning, real-world problem solving, learning-by-doing and the learner's ownership of learning. More recently, social-constructivist theories of learning, building on Lev Vygotsky's insights, emphasise that knowledge is socially constructed and that learning occurs by learners constructing their own understanding, by building on experiences and in the context of social interaction.

**2. The emphasis on a relevant education.**

Education should prepare learners for real-life challenges, by making education practical and meaningful, so that learners acquire the skills applicable to their lives and careers. Education should focus on competencies that prepare learners for the real world, such as problem solving, communication and creativity, rather than on abstract knowledge. This core idea has fostered the development of competency-based education, that aligns education with skill needs in the workforce. A relevant education, which transcends disciplines, and connects to the lifeworld of children, also makes learning more motivating.

**3. A holistic approach to learning.**

Progressive education looks at 'the whole child', including not only intellectual and academic skills, but also emotional, social, physical and ethical dimensions of growth. Schools should nurture emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and creativity. All children have talents, however different they can be, and education should enable the development of those diverse talents. Cognitive development through academic learning should be accompanied by play, education in the arts and building social relationships, in order to foster the harmonious development of the whole child.

**4. The relevance of education for the community and the functioning of a democratic society.**

This idea, which goes back to John Dewey's contribution to progressive education, emphasises collaborative learning, social interaction and group work, participatory decision making in schools and classrooms, and critical thinking and inquiry. Learning happens within specific social and cultural contexts and communities.

**5. The concern for equity and social justice in education.**

Ideas about equity and inclusion, human rights, empowerment and social justice are deeply rooted in progressive education.

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All individuals and social groups should have equal access to meaningful education and equal opportunity to develop their potential. Paulo Freire emphasised that education should enable learners to understand and challenge social injustice. Marxist versions of progressive education tend to see schools as systemic forces and reproducers of inequity and injustice, and are still far from realising their potential as ‘the great equaliser’.

In various forms and mixtures, these five core ideas have nurtured and inspired progressive educational reform movements and policies. In several countries, these ideas have nourished educational innovations and reforms, leading to structural reforms of the education system, the revision of curricula, innovation in teaching methods and changes in teacher training, etc. Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, the influence of these ideas on education policies and classroom practices was noticeable.

### Criticisms

From the late 2000s onwards, criticism of these reforms and innovations inspired by progressive educational ideas started to enter the field. Some of these criticisms were not new. Some originated from conservative or right-wing political movements with a fundamentally different worldview. However, the most relevant criticisms came from politicians or intellectuals who share the fundamental values of social progress and equity.

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In the Netherlands, the social democrat Jeroen Dijsselbloem chaired a parliamentary committee critically examining educational innovations of the past decades. The report, published in 2008 by the Dutch Parliament, was a virulent attack on the perverse effects of various progressive reforms that erode

education quality, with especially the most vulnerable students as the first victims.<sup>1</sup> The report did not lead to major changes, as the most powerful change agents in the system, in the ministry, the teacher training colleges or the inspectorate, were all convinced that they were pursuing the right reforms. A similar example from Europe is the critical review of decades of progressive, social-constructivist pedagogies and reforms in Sweden, by Henrekson and Wennström (2022). They argued that social-constructivist pedagogy, emphasising experiential learning and de-emphasising teacher-led instruction, has led to a decline in standards and undermined educational quality, as is evident in the sliding performance of Swedish students in international assessments.

In the US, the most prominent critic undoubtedly was E D Hirsch Jr (2016). He criticised the prevalence of skills over knowledge and argued that favouring student-led learning resulted in the fragmentation of the curriculum – from which especially poorer students were the victim, since they were deprived of a knowledge-rich and culturally enriching education. Similarly, Natalie Wexler (2019) critiqued progressive education for its emphasis on student-centred, skills-based learning at the expense of systematic content knowledge. She argues that this approach has widened educational inequities and contributed to poor literacy outcomes, especially for disadvantaged students (Wexler, 2019). Also, while initially a supporter of progressive education reforms, Diane Ravitch, a renowned education historian and defender of public schools, became a prominent critic, contending that such approaches undermine educational standards and accountability (Ravitch, 2010). She has expressed concerns about the lack of emphasis on a coherent curriculum. She also pointed out that progressive education idealises children’s innate ability to learn independently, underestimating the critical role of direct instruction and teacher guidance.

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A very powerful wave of criticism came from the scientific field of cognitive science and brain research. New research on learning, leading to the ‘science of learning’, introduced radically new insights on cognition, memory, attention, language, etc (Kuhl et al, 2019). Many of those findings contradicted the legacy of progressive education, especially on the role of self-directed learning and discovery-based learning. The cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham criticised progressive education for its misalignment with cognitive science. He argues that, based on research on how the brain works, discovery and inquiry-based learning are inefficient and frustrating for students, and that students achieve better outcomes with well-structured content and teacher-led instruction (Willingham, 2009 and 2020). In one of the most cited articles in psychology, Kirschner et al (2006) wrote a devastating critique of constructivist theories of learning.

These and other criticisms of progressive education had a strong impact on education policymaking. An important example is the Conservative education minister Nick Gibb in the UK. He strongly criticised the lack of rigour, the decline in educational standards, the overemphasis of generic skills at the expense of knowledge, and the ineffective teaching practices in English schools. He introduced a structured curriculum reform emphasising knowledge, and supported reforms to standardised testing and public examinations to reduce grade inflation. Whether these reforms are responsible for the remarkable rise of England in standardised international tests, such as PISA and TIMSS, over the past years, remains open to debate, but his reforms clearly left a huge mark on education policy in the UK. More generally, the legacy of the Conservative government in education is remarkable. The new Labour government has great difficulties in developing an alternative vision.<sup>2</sup> In fact, all social-democratic parties in Europe are in a state of deep confusion regarding education policy.

In 2025, after decades of progressive education having a great impact on the education agenda, it is clear that the pendulum swings back the other way. In several countries, new governments and new education ministers want to break with the perceived progressive consensus of the past. The decline in scores on international tests is often used as a political incentive to criticise the past and to do things differently.

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In this changing political, intellectual and ideological context, progressive education is deeply on the defensive. Some react by just reiterating the old doctrine and dismissing criticism as just another case of right-wing conservative ideology. However, the intellectual and scientific rebuttal of some of the basic tenets of progressive education is too serious to dismiss. Several aspects must be accepted and adequately addressed in educational policy and practice. For example, the case for a coherent and well-structured curriculum, or for well-designed instruction, is too convincing to reject. However, the question then arises of whether the foundations of progressive education still hold. Rather than trying to address every single criticism of progressive education, in this paper I shall attempt to reassess its foundations. What are the fundamental grounds on which progressive education is built? I shall address this by discussing four foundational ideas: progress, emancipation, excellence and fairness. By reconceptualising these foundational ideas, I shall also address some of the relevant criticisms.

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## Social progress

The first thread is that of social progress, or rather the appreciation of education as one of the engines of social progress. Obviously, progressives have a worldview based on the intrinsic positive nature of progress. Many people take education, as we know it, for granted, but education has a history, which is deeply linked to the social progress of humanity. This understanding remains the very basis of any progressive vision of education.

### The historical argument

Throughout history, education has been a very important driver of social progress. Contemporary thinkers about the major processes in the history of human development, such as Oded Galor in his magisterial *The Journey of Humanity* (2022, and also see Galor, 2024), attach great importance to the role of education, the growth of knowledge, the process of human capital formation, and the development of an educated society. Humanity was able to escape the Malthusian trap because knowledge and education gradually became important, making it economically more important to invest in fewer but better-educated children. Galor corrects Marxist historiography – which ignored the role of education in the early industrial period, or placed it solely in a perspective of oppression and cheap labour – by emphasising how early in the industrial revolution education and knowledge became the keys to opening the door to economic growth and productivity. A thorough examination of the determinants of economic growth and development in the United Kingdom since 1270 concluded that the main driver was education (Madsen and Murtin, 2017). Also, it was not the ‘Protestant work ethic’, as Max Weber thought, which was responsible for economic prosperity in Protestant areas, but the development of better education in those areas that led to greater literacy (Becker et al, 2009).

According to the great historian Joel Mokyr, in his magnificent *A Culture of Growth* (2017), the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution – the periods during which modern education systems were constructed – were the consequence of a change in culture in Western Europe. This change occurred between 1500 and 1700, a period that brought about a change in beliefs about people’s ability to use science to control their destiny and, especially, the natural world. The Enlightenment, taking off in the late seventeenth century and lasting through the eighteenth, encouraged a quest for ‘useful knowledge’ – that is, science and technology – which resulted in permanent and sustained command over the forces of nature. The printing press, the spread of literacy and education opened minds to new ideas and new ways of thinking elsewhere, and reduced attachment to old ideas. Modern education systems have their origins in this nexus of modern ideas, incorporated by thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, about scientific progress and economic progress that profoundly shaped modern European societies.

Another author who wrote a thoroughly documented history of humanity – in which demography, education and religion formed the dimensions of European economic and cultural development in recent centuries – is the French historical demographer Emmanuel Todd. In his *Lineages of Modernity* (2019), he describes how the spread of literacy, under the influence of demographic developments and Protestantism, created the social and cultural conditions for the knowledge explosion and the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, and the economic take-off in the eighteenth century. Montalbo (2021) also noted how the expansion of primary education in France during the nineteenth century, and the development of basic skills in the population, stimulated economic growth.

In a fascinating new study, Almenhem et al (2023) have analysed 173,031 works printed in England between 1500 and 1900, and documented how British culture evolved

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to manifest a heightened belief in progress associated with science and industry. Their analysis yields three main findings. First, there was a separation in the language of science and religion, beginning in the seventeenth century. Second, scientific volumes became more progress-oriented during the Enlightenment. Third, industrial works – especially those at the science-political economy nexus – were more progress-oriented beginning in the seventeenth century. It was, therefore, the more pragmatic, industrial works which reflected the cultural values cited as important for Britain’s takeoff (Almelhem et al, 2023).

*the West has shifted to a culture of risk-aversion.*

Many other references and examples could be given. Recent historical literature increasingly points to the role of education and human capital in social progress. Literacy and education have been the engines of social progress throughout our history. There is no reason to assume that education is not also the engine of future progress.

However, the challenges facing progressive education might have to do with a wider, more general phenomenon of a shift away from a culture of progress. As John Burn-Murdoch (2024) noted in a brilliant commentary: ‘a culture of progress made the West, but over recent decades western culture has been moving away from values of progress and betterment’. As is visible in the marked decline of words related to progress, improvement and future, and a real rise in words related to caution, threats, risks and worries, the West has shifted to a culture of risk-aversion.

### **Educational innovation**

There is a lot of research, also based on longitudinal data, which shows that education has a strong impact on all kinds of dimensions of social progress, both at an individual and societal level – such as economic growth,

productivity, income, work, poverty, but also health, wellbeing, quality of life, social participation, political participation and so on. What is more, as educational expansion increased and society became more scolarised, the impact of education on all these indicators also gradually became stronger. Today, education has become virtually the most important distributor of opportunities and benefits for economic and non-economic outcomes that are related to social progress. This finding becomes even stronger if one not only looks at quantitative growth (number of years of education, educational attainment), but also takes the quality of education into account. Econometric research shows that including quality indicators about learning outcomes in productivity models greatly increases the predictive value of those models (Égert et al, 2022). This clearly means that the quality of education plays a role in the extent to which education stimulates social progress.

However, not all education automatically contributes to social progress. In the history of education, one can find many examples to the contrary. Education served many masters and many interests, but the progressive forces that saw education as a means to progress and upliftment, including from poverty, have been a very important factor in the history of education. Progressive forces have made education the engine of social progress by ensuring that education is relevant and contributes to the knowledge and competencies that matter.

This implies that education itself must always be prepared to innovate, but the nature and content of that innovation are of enormous importance. It is precisely on this point that current conservative education discourse falls short, by continuing to falter on the statement that things were better in the past. Looking back nostalgically at the past can be understandable, but is rarely a good advisor. It certainly is true that in the recent past it has happened all too often that education has fallen prey to poorly conceived and ideologically inspired innovation. However,



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understanding that education is changing, and must change to continue to fulfil its function for social progress, is critically important.

In their wonderful book *The Race Between Technology and Education*, another book that has had a major impact on me, Harvard historians Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz (2008) reconstruct how education tried to keep pace with technological acceleration during the twentieth century (and also see Fadel et al, 2015). Education appears to have adapted very slowly and with difficulty to the new circumstances and needs in the first and second industrial revolutions, which resulted in social misery. When education keeps pace with or even anticipates technological developments, it helps to foster prosperity. This was done, for example, by adjusting the curriculum. During and after the second industrial revolution, which was based on electricity and technological innovations induced by the physical sciences, far-sighted educational systems began to adapt their curriculum to include natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry and later biology. This was always accompanied by major struggles with conservative forces.

There are many ways in which education has been an engine of social progress in the development of our societies. Of course, this happened primarily by fostering knowledge and spreading it across broad sections of the population, and passing it on to new generations. The growth of literacy and numeracy as basic skills was and remains very important for productivity and social development. However, the development and transmission of more advanced knowledge and skills, which led to technical skills, scientific progress and the development of modern professions, have also been of enormous importance for the development of human civilisations.

### **Social and emotional skills**

However, it is not just about knowledge and cognitive skills. Education also ensures the development of non-cognitive skills. The

non-cognitive dimension of education has become an important focus of scientific research in recent years and a crucial part of a modern progressive vision of the curriculum. Social and emotional skills, such as conscientiousness, openness, curiosity and so on, are today recognised as legitimate goals of education as important as cognitive skills. Among other things, they help to understand why good education also has so many positive effects on the non-economic dimensions of social progress (Kautz et al, 2014; and also see Deming, 2017; OECD, 2015). Why are better-educated people generally healthier, even when controlling for income, social status, employment and even cognitive competence? Why does education in developing countries increase the use of contraception? Because education moves the locus of control from the outside to within the individual and develops the skills that enable people to take care of their health and that of their loved ones. Education is truly the crucial key to social progress and development (Spiel et al, 2018).

### **Educational aspirations**

Today, we see this reaffirmed in emerging economies and in developing countries. Wherever countries are making clear leaps in indicators of human development, such as reducing poverty, reducing child mortality or increasing life expectancy, education investments and expansion are a crucial part of the strategic mix. China is a very clear example of a country where governments and families have made tremendous efforts over decades to grow and improve the quality of education as a strategy of development (OECD, 2020). The social importance attached to education in China is unimaginably high, compared to our standards in Western countries today. We see similar developments in many other countries in Asia, the Arab world and even in Africa. Anyone who, like me, has travelled to those countries and regions, has spoken to policymakers and visited schools, will agree that in these countries the social commitment to education and the passion to secure the future through

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education is very impressive. Compared to this, developed welfare states in Europe or North America look tired and rudderless.

Closer to home and looking at our own history, it is still clear that education has played an enormously powerful role in the development of our current prosperity and the quality of our society. Particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, a high-quality and expanding education system has created the conditions for economic growth, social cohesion and political democracy. The crucial question seems to me to be to understand why the engine of social progress is sputtering and how we can get it running again.

## Upliftment and emancipation

As mentioned above, not every education fulfils this role as an engine of social progress. There must be a basic pedagogical value present for education to play its role in progress, and that basic value is upliftment. Upliftment is a term not frequently used in English, but it is a very powerful concept in many European languages. It comes close to the words *Bildung* in German or *verheffing* in Dutch. In English, the word ‘emancipation’ might be more familiar, although it also is not commonly used. Still, it is in these concepts of upliftment and emancipation that I shall situate the second foundational idea of progressive education: the power of education to expand the potential of individuals and social groups.

*Throughout history, education is at its best when lighting that fire of enlightenment, knowledge and emancipation.*

In her masterful biography of the great renaissance humanist Erasmus, Sandra Langereis (2021), tells about his studies at a Latin school in the Hanseatic city of Deventer, where Italian humanist teachers were of great influence. In contrast to most other schools,

this one did not focus on memorising and reciting ancient Church Latin, but rather on studying the original texts of classical Roman writers and their examples, Greek literature. The humanist fire was kindled in Erasmus and the humanist in him was born. Reading the classics and studying the sources also created a climate of scientific freedom and openness of thought. This is a great example of how excellent education leads to intellectual upliftment, replacing mind-numbing indoctrination. Throughout history, education is at its best when lighting that fire of enlightenment, knowledge and emancipation.

## The making of education as emancipation

In the early modern period, education aimed at upliftment and emancipation gradually took shape against a background of capitalist development and state formation. The pedagogy of poverty, in which the old charity was replaced by more rational systems of public poor relief, attempted to civilise the poor and to remove them from the spiral of poverty through basic education.<sup>3</sup> During the Enlightenment, modern progressive views on education gradually took shape, including in the ideas of pedagogues such as Comenius, Pestalozzi and Condorcet. They founded the modern view of the function of education as individual and social upliftment and emancipation. The pursuit of upliftment gradually became more important from the end of the eighteenth century, although it was regularly overrun by conservative educational views that prioritised deference, discipline and moralisation. However, without the development of modern ideas about knowledge and education, the industrial take-off would never have happened (Mokyr, 2005). Progressive education has stronger roots in the pedagogical thinking of Comenius and Condorcet than in Rousseau.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, liberal pedagogical ideals of upliftment took shape. An important social-pedagogical reformer such as François Laurent, from my

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native town of Ghent in Flemish Belgium, was an outspoken exponent of this. Through popular education, in addition to other sociopolitical interventions such as savings banks, Laurent wanted to improve the lot of the working class and help them progress (Simon and Van Damme, 1993). Of course, this also involved views that today we would describe as paternalistic and patronising, inspired by the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie. However, reducing such ideals of pedagogical upliftment to the interests of the ruling class detracts from their contribution to social progress. Another example of popular upliftment from the same progressive-liberal corner is the *University Extension Movement*, which, following England, also gained a foothold in Flanders. Socially engaged professors began to spread their scientific insights through lectures in Dutch as a form of popular education (Van Damme, 1992).

In the course of developing its ideas about popular education, the early European social democracy further elaborated this tradition of humanism, Enlightenment and progressive liberalism, but also radicalised it. In his famous speech ‘Wissen ist Macht, Macht ist Wissen’ of 1872, Wilhelm Liebknecht, the leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), defined keeping knowledge and education away from the working class as the essence of bourgeois rule:

*Knowledge is for the rulers; ignorance for the ruled. (...) There has never been a ruling caste, a ruling estate, a ruling class that has used its knowledge and its power to enlighten, educate and nurture the ruled, and which has not, on the contrary, systematically cut them off from true education, the education that sets you free.*

By taking control of education, it would finally make knowledge available to the working class. Despite the radical rhetoric, social democracy placed itself fully in the tradition of the Enlightenment ideal of popular upliftment.

The social democratic aspiration for upliftment has remained very lively throughout the twentieth century, at least in the first three-quarters of it. Many social democratic politicians regarded popular education as a crucial strategy for the emancipation of the working class (Steele, 2007; and Gougoulakis, 2016). Many schoolmasters and teachers were inspired by the aspiration for advancement and they were therefore strongly represented among party members. In addition to a good command of basic skills and the acquisition of scientific knowledge, popular upliftment also included a certain dose of civilisation. In that spirit, social democracy was an important driving force in the development of democratic and Enlightenment-oriented education in the second half of the twentieth century, in addition to other strategies such as cultural participation or the development of popular libraries. The development of a network of accessible public libraries, for example, was, in addition to education, a very important strategy of upliftment, with strong positive effects (Karger, 2021).

### **The demise of emancipation**

For many reasons, this social democratic aspiration has indeed been lost in several European countries. In response to, but also influenced by the radical neoliberalism of the 1970s and 1980s and by a cultural relativism creeping in through philosophical postmodernism, knowledge transfer, popular upliftment and cultural participation were dissipated as social democratic goals and values. They were increasingly seen as patronising and paternalistic. This meant that the soul of emancipation disappeared from the social democratic education project. Since then, progressive educational thinking has gone astray. The purpose of education disappeared from the focus of social democratic education policy. It was now only about ‘equal opportunities’, but equal opportunities for what?

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The ideal of individual freedom, which challenged the progressive idea of upliftment, was seen as paternalistic and opposite to the idea of emancipation. Individuals will decide for themselves where they want to go and all kinds of ideals of civilisation and development, which were seen as prescriptive, stand in the way of this. Progressive thinking embraced the emancipation of the individual, no longer the emancipation of the collectivity.

*In our modern society, education is perhaps the institution that most effectively stimulates the emancipation of people. That is why education should remain a progressive idea par excellence.*

The relativism in so many aspects of educational thinking is a direct offshoot of this. If there are no longer generally applicable standards for emancipation – such as standard language, scientific thinking, civilised manners or higher culture – but only free individuals who make their own choices, then shared values become very fragile and community building cannot occur.

A further blow to the ideal of upliftment came from the growing popularity of Marxist analytical frameworks and other variants of sociological determinism. Marxist authors who became popular with progressive educators in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Gramsci or Althusser, saw education as an instrument in the hegemony of the ruling class. Upliftment was therefore seen as a dangerous expression of false consciousness. In the same vein, without being a Marxist in the narrow sense of the word, the brilliant French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed a strongly deterministic

theory of reproduction, in which education reproduces the existing social and cultural power relations in all kinds of ways. A little later, Michel Foucault joined the list of thinkers who had, and continue to have, a profound influence on progressive thinking about education. Critical pedagogy, with thinkers such as Henry Giroux, emphasised the political nature of education in a system of power relations, thereby severely conditioning and restricting the idea that education is emancipatory.

The consequence of Marxist frameworks and critical pedagogy was that views on social mobility and even equality of opportunity were seen as illusory. Every study of social inequality in education was seen again and again as a confirmation of the reproduction thesis. Social progress, upliftment, emancipation, they became illusory castles in the air of the naive, which only masked and concealed the real power relations. Bourdieu had, and still has, a profound influence on progressive educational thinking in Western Europe, and many educational researchers remain entangled in this thinking. By denying the basic pedagogical principles and values, faith in the school and optimistic views on education in general were undermined. Curiously enough, relativism, individualism and sociological determinism became objective allies in undermining the educational aspiration of upliftment and emancipation.

For me, social progress and social upliftment are two inextricably linked themes. In our modern society, education is perhaps the institution that most effectively stimulates the emancipation of people. That is why education should remain a progressive idea par excellence.

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## Excellence

A third thread is the concern for the quality of education and educational excellence. Education can only play its role in social progress and upliftment in the contemporary social, economic and cultural context if it is of excellent quality. Poor quality education delivers nothing and costs society a lot by producing young people who lack essential basic skills.

In recent decades, excellence has acquired a rather negative connotation in the world of education. It is associated with old education systems that focused on selection, rather than on fair opportunity for all, and on excellence for the elite and failure for the rest. Education policies, often inspired by pseudo-progressive thinking, started a real battle against excellence in education. Egalitarian views on equality of opportunity instigated policies to contest elite schools, even though they offer excellent education. Progressive educators and policymakers often did not see a problem in lowering standards for the sake of equity or inclusion. Conservative critics of progressive education have repeatedly problematised the trade-off between quality and equity and their arguments have contributed to the renaissance of conservative education policies.

Unfortunately, these arguments have never been addressed adequately by progressive educators (Strike, 1985).

The loss of trust in educational excellence is an important dimension of the current ideological confusion. We must realise that by abandoning the quality of education or, worse, accepting lower quality standards for the sake of equal opportunities, the function of education as an engine of social progress and emancipation is put in great danger. When only an equal opportunities program remains as the core of progressive education, it is not surprising that the interest in the quality of education disappears. That has indeed happened in many countries which were inspired by progressive education policies in the years around 1990 and 2000.

The erosion of the quality of education has become a very serious challenge in many countries. It is visible in the rapidly declining scores on international surveys of learning performance such as PISA, PIRLS or TIMSS. It has been documented in numerous reports. It is felt by teachers in the workplace, by inspectorates, by parents and by employers.

### The erosion of quality of education

Due to the lack of reliable data for the period preceding the first PISA survey of 2000, the start of the decline is difficult to date but, in most countries, it may have occurred sometime in the early 1990s. During that period, quite radical policy measures were implemented, which had an impact on the curriculum and didactics, inspired by a radical variant of constructivism as a pedagogical theory. In retrospect, it is remarkable that this turnaround came without significant criticism or any serious intellectual debate. The consensus among progressive educators was indeed that education needed to be overhauled. The effect of this policy change on the real quality of education took more than a decade to materialise but, from the mid-2000s, the first signs of the decline in learning outcomes began to become visible.

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In terms of the curriculum, policy changes were made that sought to achieve equal opportunities by lowering standards. Although many will deny this, in fact, a policy of levelling down was implemented, at best for social reasons, at worst through nonchalance, relativism and a general aversion to excellence. The outcomes of this policy were detrimental, first of all

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to disadvantaged children. Grade inflation, research shows, mainly affects the most vulnerable groups (Nordin et al, 2019). Levelling down and inflation of standards also mean that people need more and more education to continue to enjoy its benefits (Van de Werfhorst, 2009). The bar was effectively lowered, and low expectations, especially for the most vulnerable students, became the norm. A discourse around wellbeing filled the emptiness that resulted from abandoning excellence and ambition.

There was also a fairly drastic change from a knowledge-rich curriculum to a strongly competency-oriented curriculum. Knowledge was no longer important, as long as students developed the functional skills to be active in society. This also included criticism of memorisation; learning the multiplication tables was dismissed as useless parrot work. Reading short newspaper clippings and extracting the central idea from them replaced reading literary texts and books. Writing essays and dissertations disappeared from the curriculum. The trend towards a more competency-oriented curriculum was and is an international movement, and was a necessary correction to an overly knowledge-oriented curriculum but, under pressure from constructivist lobbyists, many European countries opted for a very radical variant of this idea. It will be quite a challenge for progressive educators to once again advocate the value of a knowledge-rich curriculum, in balance with competencies (Hirsch Jr, 2020).

In addition to the curriculum, didactics is an area where the causes of quality erosion must be sought. Since the early 1990s, a disinterest in subject-specific didactics has been noticeable, also and especially, in teacher training and in-service training for teachers. Wrong choices have also been made. In particular, this is clearly the case in language education, where the shift towards a communicative, functionalist paradigm has occurred. The consequences of this shift for the language competencies of young people are dramatic, as the results of PIRLS 2021 recently showed.

A final dimension of quality erosion, related to the previous one, has been the movement towards experiential or self-discovery learning. In the pedagogical discussions of recent decades, much attention has been paid to the question of whether we should evolve from ‘teacher-centred’ to ‘learner-centred’ education, and whether instruction should not be replaced by experience-oriented learning. The consensus in the field, which goes by the term ‘constructivism’, strongly advocated student-oriented and experience-oriented learning. This has also been an international trend. Constructivist ideas became dominant in teacher training, pedagogical support practices, inspection and government policy. In the meantime, scientific research has evolved and the worst ideological excesses have disappeared from the literature. There has been a convincingly strong refutation of essential parts of the constructivist paradigm (Kirschner et al, 2006; Kirschner and Merriënboer, 2013). At the same time, there is renewed interest in the importance of direct instruction. Experience-oriented learning has proven to be detrimental, especially for young learners in nursery and primary education. Also, for students in secondary or tertiary education, experiential learning can supplement instruction if the necessary prior knowledge is present.

*There was ... a fairly drastic change from a knowledge-rich curriculum to a strongly competency-oriented curriculum.*

The biggest mistake of progressive educational thinking over the past decades has undoubtedly been either to naively ignore reflection on the decline in educational quality or cynically and consciously to leave it to the conservative field. Progressive educationalists and experts still do not seem to be able to deal with the theme of declining educational quality, perhaps also because many comfortable certainties would have to be questioned. Many see the problem of declining education quality

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as something that only pro-excellence experts are concerned about. However, this erosion of quality touches the essence of the progressive education narrative and the role of education in individual emancipation and social progress. After all, the biggest victims of this quality erosion are the most vulnerable students who are no longer given the knowledge and skills to cope in society, let alone progress. It is not by denying the problem of quality erosion that the emancipatory role of education will be protected.

### **The impact of migration and diversity**

Conservatives often blame migration and increasing diversity in society as a cause of educational decline; in fact, they have a contradictory impact on the evolution of educational quality. On the right side of the political spectrum, the conclusion is made very quickly and very easily, with the responsibility for declining education quality being placed solely on the large influx of migrants. There are certainly indicators related to migration that correlate with the evolution of educational quality. The sharply increased influx of children and young people with a migration background has placed strong pressure on schools and the education system as a whole. Without a doubt, migration has presented enormous challenges to our education systems. The language problem is certainly an important dimension of this, but also the distance in values and norms between the countries and regions of origin on the one hand and the school environment of developed Western European countries on the other. However, it may also be the case that this cultural distance has been magnified by education and has led to the culture of low expectations that has affected so many migrant children.

At the same time, it is certainly the case that the relatively strong impact of migration on education quality is also the result of the failed integration policy. In many countries, too little effort was made to stimulate migrants to acquire the language of the country of arrival. Many migrant families still speak the language of origin at home, even though

they have been here for several decades and the language of origin has gradually become poorer over the years. We know from PISA and other surveys that the percentage of people with a migration background who still speak their mother tongue at home is very high. This does not make the acquisition of the school language any easier for children with a migration background. The home language that is not the language of instruction therefore has a strong impact on performance on international tests.

This created a remarkable and often internally inconsistent cocktail of pedagogical views regarding students with a migration background, sometimes with hidden racist elements. This cocktail included the downward spiralling of low expectations, and a tendency to set the quality bar of education low enough so that the success of migrant children was not endangered. The perverse spiral of low expectations also often translated into a study choice and orientation policy that oriented young migrants away from ambitious tracks and failed to sufficiently translate their talents ambitiously.

Yet the impact of migration on education quality is not unambiguously negative. As a middle class began to develop in migrant communities, the view that education was the path to social mobility and social progress also developed. Talented migrant young people's aspirations to succeed in education and thus build a better life grew and continue to grow. The motivation to do well at school is often higher among these ambitious migrant youth than among native youth. Education is gradually producing well-educated and motivated young people with a migration background who can make it in professional environments. These are often young people who overcame the odds of social deprivation, racism and the culture of low expectations, and it took a lot of courage and perseverance to do so. Sometimes teachers find it difficult to appreciate this aspiration of students with a migrant background.

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## The social cost of quality erosion

The point here is that the often well-meaning views of educators who think that opportunities can be improved by lowering the quality bar, adjusting expectations and thus compensating for inequality, are doing these young migrants a disservice. In their motivation and ambition, these young people often have to overcome the barrier of naive views on equal opportunities.

A direct consequence of the quality erosion in education is that more and more young people are leaving education without the essential basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. That is a social drama whose disastrous consequences we will notice. This not only concerns problems in the labour market and the macro-economic consequences, but also consequences regarding social exclusion, marginalisation, health, poverty, housing and political participation, up to and including crime. The social cost of low literacy is grossly underestimated, but it is heading straight for us (OECD, 2010).

However, the social cost of quality erosion goes further than the already enormous problem of low literacy. We also see a clear decline at the top of the distribution of learning outcomes, as measured in PISA, for example. Lower percentages of top performers in PISA mean a sharply declining influx of excellent students at universities, which in the long term translates into fewer talents for research, development and innovation and a shrinking talent pool for cognitively demanding professions. Such a decline in no more than fifteen years, with no end in sight, which is taking place in several European countries, will inevitably have consequences for economic productivity, prosperity and quality of life.

That is why macroeconomists are increasingly concerned about the quality development of education systems. In international research into human capital, attention shifts from purely qualitative indicators, such as the number of years of education, to quality

parameters, such as the scores on international surveys, for example PISA. Although many other aspects are relevant to productivity, it is undeniable that the quality of education is one of the explanatory factors for the stagnation in productivity growth that our country is showing. This is particularly worrying for future growth in prosperity, which will have to be able to cover the costs of aging and the climate.

*the social cost of quality erosion goes further than the already enormous problem of low literacy.*

Fortunately, the first signs of a turnaround are also visible here. Quality of education is gradually becoming an important educational policy issue, although there are still countless people who do not want to talk about it and prefer to deny the problem. In several countries, education ministers have started to put the theme on the table. That is a good thing, but not enough. It will take much more outrage to actually turn the tide, and progressives need to realise that they need to take this issue to heart and not leave it to conservatives. In the meantime, however, the quality erosion will continue.

Teachers and schools themselves have not been the responsible actors in the quality erosion. The driving forces were academic pedagogues and educational experts, teachers in teacher training courses, professionals in support structures and in-service training, and civil servants with important roles in educational administration. Teachers often offered passive resistance to the successive waves of badly conceived innovation policies and continued to teach as usual. However, this also implied that the few valuable elements in those innovations were passed over and that they lost ownership of the pedagogical debate. An essential lesson is that professionals in education, teachers and school leaders in the first place, must take the lead in educational innovations.



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## Fairness

A fourth thread concerns the social ambition of education policy.<sup>4</sup> Social relations and inequalities influence education, but education itself also structures society. From the moment that equal opportunity replaced the old aspiration to upliftment as the dominant discourse, progressive thinking has started to focus almost exclusively on that social dimension. As I said, I think this one-sidedness is an impoverishment of progressive thinking, but equality of opportunity is of course an important theme. Education must give a fair chance to every child, every young person, every adult to grow and succeed. Principles of equity and justice must be paramount in education. Together with quality, fair opportunities are necessary to allow education to play its role for social progress, but both go together; equal opportunities for mediocre-quality education are not equal opportunities.

### School does not reproduce inequality

A lot goes wrong with equal opportunity in education, but I do oppose the statement that education simply reproduces social inequality or is itself responsible for social inequality. I am convinced that, also due to the great social concern and commitment of teachers at the grassroots level, the school is more likely to alleviate social inequality than to strengthen it. Recent research suggests that it is not so much that learning at school is uneven for children from less advantaged environments compared to children from advantageous environments. Progress in learning at school happens at approximately the same speed and equally well for both groups (Koedinger et al, 2023; Avvisati and Givord, 2023). In other words, as experiences during the COVID crisis have taught us, without the mitigating impact of education, social inequality would be much greater. When school disappears, social inequality increases.

A recent Dutch study concluded that only two per cent of inequality in learning outcomes is due to what happens in the classroom.

Moreover, the school worked more in favour of children with weak socio-economic background characteristics. The school therefore compensates for inequality (Stienstra et al, 2022). In his wonderful book *How Schools Really Matter. Why Our Assumption About Schools and Inequality is Mostly Wrong* (2020), American educational sociologist Douglas Downey has written a brilliant refutation of popular misconceptions about education and inequality. Education does not exacerbate social inequality, on the contrary, it alleviates it. There is a lot of convincing research material that shows that we can no longer talk about the inequality-reproducing role of education in the traditional sociological way of education.

### The deficit of equal opportunity

Unfortunately, much has indeed gone wrong in education in the name of equal opportunity. Quality erosion, low expectations, credential inflation and so on are often the result of misunderstood equal opportunity thinking. The equal opportunity discourse does struggle with fundamental deficits and problems. Much research on inequality in education provides a distorted picture, because it does not control for several relevant factors. Prior pedagogical experiences and learning effects, as well as cognitive and non-cognitive dispositions of students, are rarely or never controlled for. There is enormous fear in progressive circles to think about the impact of genetic factors on intelligence, for example.

*Together with quality, fair opportunities are necessary to allow education to play its role for social progress, but both go together; equal opportunities for mediocre-quality education are not equal opportunities.*

Many social scientists recall with horror the pseudoscientific theories of more than half a century ago about genetics and intelligence, which fuelled racism. In response, however, they want nothing to do with genetics, even though scientific research has improved

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enormously in the meantime. Kathryn Paige Harden's plea that the impact of genes on unequal educational performance should be a crucial topic for progressives is therefore absolutely correct (Harden, 2021).

*The equal opportunities discourse is often about poverty, marginalisation and exclusion, while it should also be about the middle class and the successes of social mobility and meritocracy.*

Better understanding and recognition of genetic factors, intelligence and aptitude, through education, will inevitably also lead to a stronger insight into individual differences between pupils and students. Recognising individual differences is frequently perceived to be at odds with the pursuit of equal opportunity, which is so strong in education. To a large extent, equal opportunity policies in education come down to denying and even eliminating differences. Education standardises and reduces differences. Instead of an opportunity policy that allows individual differences to be expressed and developed, the dominant vision of equality of opportunity reduces the diversity of talents. For example, the old equal opportunity ideal has led to pushing all children into the mould of a general education, which has hampered the growth and prosperity of technical education.

### **Meritocracy**

Another difficult problem for the equal opportunity discourse concerns the social purpose of education. In the classical ideal of upliftment, the answer is clear: that social purpose lies in social mobility. Equal opportunity through education means that everyone has the opportunity to progress socially through high-quality education. For social democrats, social mobility through education was an important social task. In the heyday of the ideal of upliftment and during the educational expansion after World War II, education provided an enormous

opportunity for social mobility for the socio-economically weak sections of the population. As established for Denmark and Estonia, the chances of social mobility for those groups through education increased sharply in that period (Karlson and Landers, 2021; Saar, 2010). The basic value underlying social mobility through education is meritocracy, namely the attribution of status, prestige and power to those, regardless of their background and social origin, who manage to develop their talents into merit, in most cases through a successful educational career.

In his brilliant historical reconstruction of the idea of meritocracy, Adrian Wooldridge defines meritocracy as follows.

*A meritocratic society combines four qualities, each admirable in itself. Firstly, it prides itself on the extent to which people can progress in life based on their natural talents. Secondly, it tries to ensure equal opportunities by providing education to all. Third, it prohibits discrimination on the basis of race and gender and other irrelevant characteristics. Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage and cronyism.*

(Wooldridge, 2021)

Indeed, meritocracy is the link between equal opportunity and social mobility.

Meritocracy and social mobility have led to the growth of an educated middle class. In itself, the expansion of the middle class in developed societies is a success story of equal opportunity in education. Yet the middle class is a difficult issue for progressives, because it no longer places the engine of social progress and emancipation on the working class and the social struggle from below. Progressives tend, also in the education debate, to first and foremost declare solidarity with the most disadvantaged in society. The equal opportunities discourse is often about poverty, marginalisation and exclusion, while it should also be about the middle class and the successes of social mobility and meritocracy.

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In their masterful book *Democracy and Prosperity: Reinventing Capitalism Through a Turbulent Century*, another book that has had a major impact on myself, Iversen and Soskice (2019) delve deeper into the formation of a middle class through educational expansion and how this has contributed to the development of prosperity, the social welfare state and democracy. In the twentieth century, educational investments have led to the emergence of well-paying middle-class jobs, innovation, social prosperity and the reduction of poverty, as well as the development of social services and democratic political systems. A large part of the middle class has been affected, not by nepotism, but by education-driven social mobility. This success story is not told enough, even by progressives, who are often the product of these developments and often belong to the middle class themselves. In the vision of Iversen and Soskice, the educated middle class will continue to be the engine of social progress in the twenty-first century and will be the social force that must provide answers to the challenges of our time.

For sure, social mobility has not eliminated social inequality. Social mobility has even created new social inequality. The expansion of higher education, and the social polarisation caused by the increase in highly skilled workers, have further increased social inequality (Carnoy, 2011). This is also the breeding ground for the criticism of meritocracy formulated by Michael Sandel and currently finding strong support among progressives (Sandel, 2020). According to Sandel, the meritocratic narrative has created new inequality through the gap that has opened up between the highly educated segments of the population and those who have not been able to enjoy educational success. Social polarisation has in turn led to political populism. The downside of meritocracy is that less successful people blame themselves and that structural mechanisms of poverty and social deprivation disappear from view.

This is a convincing, but also one-sided argument, which is also strongly coloured by the American context. It remains very unclear how a democratic knowledge society could function without a form of meritocracy that allocates the best talents to the right positions. I do not read Sandel's criticism of meritocracy as a plea against social mobility or an education without opportunities, on the contrary. I do interpret it as a plea for stronger fairness in education and more effective education policy.

### **From equity to fairness**

The concept of fairness is more ambitious than the concept of equality of opportunity, which limits social justice to securing opportunities. The distinction in political philosophy between 'minimal' or 'formal' equality of opportunity and 'fair' equality of opportunity is useful here. Fair distribution of opportunity goes beyond eliminating discrimination and prejudice, not only seeking to provide a child from a poor family with the same educational opportunities as an equally able child from a wealthy family, but requiring the education system to create a level playing field to compensate for the deficiencies of underprivileged children. It is not just about the absence of barriers, but about ensuring that all students ultimately have a 'fair' chance to succeed. The concept of fairness is at the same time general and very specific, because what is fair for one person or social group may not be fair for another.

*For sure, social mobility has not eliminated social inequality. Social mobility has even created new social inequality.*

There is evidence that young children have an innate sense of fairness and have already developed the ability to make fair judgements by the age of twelve months, and have a well-developed sense of fairness by the time they enter kindergarten, when they are three or four years old (McAuliffe et al, 2017). Most people

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have a good sense of basic fairness and make moral judgements accordingly, but gradually incorporate contextual information into these judgements. Also, in our multicultural world, people in many different cultures share some basic ‘common virtues’, to use Michael Ignatieff’s phrase, such as tolerance, forgiveness, trust and honesty (Ignatieff, 2017). For example, honesty is a very fundamental and powerful ethical imperative.

The problem with the concept of fairness is that it can easily mean very different things. For some, it is synonymous with radical equality of outcomes. There is only fairness when everyone is equal. On the contrary, educational opportunity should solely be a function of choice and effort, as it is fair that differences in talent and ability be compensated by society. Another confusing reading of the concept of fairness is when it is linked to ‘merit’ (Dobrin, 2012). In this view, it is only fair that the more talented or harder-working students get higher grades and better jobs. This is of course a highly individualistic interpretation that seems to contradict social justice. In contrast, there is an approach to equity that links it to need. To achieve the common good, people must be treated differently, based on the different needs they have. A social justice interpretation of fairness thus differs from both a radical egalitarian and a radical individualist notion of justice.

Another potential problem with the concept of fairness is that it goes beyond objective interpretations of fairness and introduces a subjective element into the conceptual definition. To some extent, honesty is ‘in the eye of the beholder’. What is seen as ‘fair’ by one person may differ from the perception and interpretation by others. Some people may think it is fair to organise special remedial and compensatory interventions for some disadvantaged groups, while others may think that these are unfair, to the extent that they are disproportionate or lead to disadvantaging others. These subjective aspects are not necessarily problematic, as there are no absolute standards of social justice.

In democratic societies, social justice is always under negotiation and people rightly have different views and sensitivities.

A possible source of disagreement about fairness is that the concept attempts to combine elements of the environment and personal effort. Most people will consider it unfair to provide extensive support mechanisms to disadvantaged groups or individuals if they do not make the necessary efforts to benefit from those measures. However, the optimal balance between structural measures and personal effort is open to subjective judgement. This includes the risk that prejudices and highly partisan views will influence the judgement of what is considered ‘fair’.

### **Fairness remains a challenge**

Still, let me emphasise that fairness remains an extremely important policy objective in education. There are still very harmful forms of discrimination and exclusion in our education systems today, based on all kinds of characteristics of pupils and students that should be completely irrelevant to educational success. Prejudices, underestimation of talents and possibilities based on stereotypes, and the like, are unfortunately a daily reality. Combating this remains a paramount educational policy objective, but the same is true for the detrimental impact of low expectations on disadvantaged learners.

Our contemporary educational systems are not yet well enough adapted to achieving fairness, because they still carry too much of the functional characteristics of social selection. Today, society no longer needs education systems that select only the very talented individuals and bring them to excellence. Today we must have education systems that bring as many children and young people as possible to the highest possible learning outcomes. Selection of some, but leaving many others behind, no longer is acceptable.

However, the way in which we conceptualise fairness has a huge impact on how we

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shape that policy. A deterministic view of reproduction has too many empirical and conceptual flaws and leads to many perverse effects, which are harmful to everyone. A too radically egalitarian vision of equal opportunity leads to levelling down, low expectations and unfairness. Ultimately, it is simply a matter of fairness. When a girl with a migration background is advised not to embark on an ambitious study, based on a questionable assessment of her talents and all kinds of prejudices, that is simply very unfair.

## Epilogue: The limits of educational expansion

After having reviewed the foundations of progressive education, by looking at past and current trends, the question arises of whether the future development of education will follow the same trends. Education as an engine of social progress has led to strong institutionalisation of schools and universities. Educational expansion has continued over recent decades, with the result today that more than half of 25 to 34-year-olds in OECD countries have a higher education qualification. Would a highly developed society have some kind of optimum level of education attainment, beyond which further educational expansion no longer offers further benefits in terms of social progress and equal opportunities? I am convinced that the answer to that question is positive and that we need to think about how we should institutionally frame people's lifelong learning in other ways. That seems to me to be one of the most important questions for the future of education.

Schools and universities, by which I mean all the different educational institutions, are, if properly designed, very effective organisations for teaching and learning. They offer powerful learning environments that are not yet matched by alternative environments. However, despite trends of

differentiation and flexibilisation, these are institutions that standardise very strongly and offer one story of success. Historically, this standardisation has been necessary for educational expansion. Academic success at school remains a very important route to social advancement and a good life. However standardisation is currently reaching its limits. The school does not serve all learners equally well. There are young people for whom school is no longer the most suitable environment. Loss of motivation, school fatigue, and even aggression, are no longer exceptional phenomena, and they can only partly be explained by social deprivation and segregation. At the same time, alternative paths to success are opening up for young people. One of the problems of the school today is that it no longer has a monopoly on social mobility. Rich footballers, pop stars and influencers suggest – rightly or wrongly, that is not the point – that you can also get there in other ways.

*After having reviewed the foundations of progressive education, by looking at past and current trends, the question arises of whether the future development of education will follow the same trends.*

My belief in the school as a powerful learning environment with professional teachers is and remains great, but that is precisely why I think that schooling is not the best solution for all challenges. For example, for vocational training: many teachers in vocational education do their utmost and often succeed in motivating students and training them to become professionals. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult. I am very convinced of the opportunities that alternative routes to vocational training can offer, in collaboration with companies and the professional field. Schools are not keen on this and protect their monopoly, as evidenced by the very difficult development of dual education pathways

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(also due to manifest policy errors). We must recognise that this complex society may no longer benefit from clear learning paths and that, if education is to retain its role in social progress, it itself also benefits from less standardised views on learning.

As far as higher education is concerned, we must take seriously the signals of overeducation and credential inflation. Through massification, higher education itself has undermined exclusivity as a route to social success. For now, the return remains still high enough, but mainly because the highly educated are displacing the middle-skilled and pushing them to the bottom. However, the erosion of the added value of higher education has undeniably started. The future does not lie in more and more education. We must keep in mind that further expansion of higher education may also be counterproductive.

*Perhaps we are approaching the end of an era in which education was the privileged space for the development of knowledge and the acquisition of competencies.*

The idea is that ‘more of the same’ is not a good recipe for restoring the role of education in social progress. The role of education in social progress has been thought of as an ever-progressive educational expansion, but where are the limits of that expansion? Perhaps we should dare to question in a fairly radical way the dynamics of educational expansion, which has given us so much in recent centuries and decades. This does not mean a plea for the end of the school or for ‘de-schooling’, but a plea for imagination in thinking about the future of education. The fact that the engine of social progress is sputtering today may also have to do with the fact that it has already clocked up a lot of miles.

The concept of lifelong learning is fundamental in this discussion. I shudder at a vision of lifelong learning that boils down to the accumulation of educational programs and qualifications. Promoting lifelong learning should not mean taking more and more courses. The attractive thing about the concept is that in principle it allows for a broad view of learning as a meaningful human activity, up to and including informal learning – and is still the most important way through which people develop knowledge and competencies.

Perhaps we are approaching the end of an era in which education was the privileged space for the development of knowledge and the acquisition of competencies. Schools and universities are still powerful learning environments, but cracks in the success story are becoming increasingly apparent, including the trend of overeducation or the problem of students who can no longer be intrinsically motivated. We should not try to maintain the school’s monopoly with all possible efforts.

Partly due to technology, learning as a human activity is in full swing to escape the institutional boundaries of the school. In a society where learning can develop in so many spaces of human existence, it may no longer be necessary to encapsulate such learning so strongly within an institutional framework. By the way, that idea does not constitute a break with historical development. The processes by which learning, knowledge and education became the engine of social progress, which I outlined at the beginning of this paper, were certainly not always tied to institutional developments. The development of literacy, made possible by the technology of printing and the religious-cultural context of Protestantism, preceded the institutional development of the school and the educational policies of developing nation-states. Perhaps we are experiencing something similar right now.

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## Conclusion

Progressive education is not dead – quite the contrary. However, some parts of the building need refurbishing if it is to survive the conservative tide successfully. For this, the foundations deserve to be reinforced. Based on the foundations of social progress, emancipation, excellence and fairness, a strong house can be built that can withstand the ideological storms and provide a safe haven for twenty-first-century educators – a house big enough to have plenty of rooms to offer space to multiple households that share the same foundational values.

The five core ideas discussed at the beginning of this paper still offer a lot of inspiration. In this paper I do not contend that twenty-first-century progressive education should break with its past. In several instances, however, the pendulum has gone too far or has swept in the wrong direction. Several arguments brought to the debate by the critics of progressive education need to be addressed constructively, but the following basic tenets will still hold.

1. A naïve version of child-centred pedagogy can be replaced by a sophisticated view of teaching and learning, in which teacher-led direct instruction provides the basis for self-directed learning and self-regulation of autonomous individuals and communities.
2. A relevant education does not entail an exclusively competency-based education, but requires a balance between knowledge, skills and competencies.
3. Education that nurtures the virtues of truth, beauty and goodness, as Howard Gardner has advocated (Gardner, 2012), simply is impossible without a holistic view of the human potential.
4. More than ever, education has to serve the purpose of human flourishing in a democratic society, which requires critical thinking and inquiry, social relevance and engagement.
5. More than any other system in contemporary societies, education is about equity and fairness, so that the potential of every human being can blossom.

## Endnotes

1. [www.parlement.com/id/vhnnmt7mtyqi/parlementair\\_onderzoek](http://www.parlement.com/id/vhnnmt7mtyqi/parlementair_onderzoek)
2. [www.economist.com/britain/2024/12/29/labour-lacks-good-ideas-for-improving-britains-schools?](http://www.economist.com/britain/2024/12/29/labour-lacks-good-ideas-for-improving-britains-schools?)
3. This was the topic of my doctoral dissertation (in Dutch): Van Damme, D (1990) *Armenzorg en de staat: comparatief-historische studie van de origines van de moderne verzorgingsstaat in West-Europa (voornamelijk achttiende tot begin negentiende eeuw)*, Ghent University.
4. This section is largely based on a paper written for the Center for Curriculum Redesign: Van Damme, D (2022) *Curriculum Redesign for Equity and Social Justice*. [curriculumredesign.org/wp-content/uploads/Curriculum-Redesign-for-Equity-and-Social-Justice-CCR.pdf](https://curriculumredesign.org/wp-content/uploads/Curriculum-Redesign-for-Equity-and-Social-Justice-CCR.pdf)

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### About the author

**Dirk Van Damme** (PhD, Ghent University, Belgium) was Senior Counsellor in the Directorate for Education and Skills at the OECD in Paris, and Head of the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. Before joining the OECD in 2008, he was professor of educational research (Ghent University, Belgium), counsellor for several Flemish education ministers (1992–2000), General Director of the Flemish Rectors' Conference VLIR (2000–2003), and chief of staff of Flemish education minister Frank Vandenbroucke (2004–2008). He published extensively on education policy and evaluation and was a board member and expert to various quality assurance agencies and international organisations. His personal interests are the science of learning, comparative analyses of educational systems, lifelong learning, governance in education, and the use of research in education policy and practice. He is now an independent consultant, as well as Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Curriculum Redesign in Boston, MA, USA, and board member to the National Growth Fund in the Netherlands.

### About the paper

The author argues that it is timely and necessary to re-examine and redefine the foundational concepts of progressive education. He starts by outlining its historical heritage and then explores what he sees as fundamental intellectual threads that can be woven together into a new vision, discussing specific issues relating to social progress, upliftment and emancipation, excellence and fairness. One of his closing thoughts is that, particularly with technological advances, in a society where learning can now develop in so many spaces of human existence, it may no longer be necessary to encapsulate such learning so strongly within an institutional framework.

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