

Committee: Social Humanitarian and Cultural Committee

Issue: Addressing the issue of biased education systems as a means of systematic educational reform

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of education both on an individual and societal level is unequivocal. Education is an opportunity for upwards social mobility and therefore it is extremely important for the less privileged, who wish to improve their socioeconomic status. Moreover, education equips the citizens with the necessary information and cultivates their critical thinking so that they cannot be easily manipulated.

In all aspects, education is crucial and yet there are many educational systems around the world that are biased in their nature leading to the exclusion or marginalization of many students. The reasons for the current status quo might range from mistakes made in the educational policy to purposely undermining specific groups of the population. Whatever the reasons might be, biased education systems deprive their citizens of one of the most important and fundamental human rights – the right to education. The deprivation of the right to education has several negative consequences on the individual as well as on the society - which can only prosper when all its members prosper.

Therefore, the need to rebuild a fairer, more inclusive, just and free-of-prejudice educational system is imperative to ensure that all citizens' rights to education are adequately protected. Additionally, it helps ensure that the personal development of all citizens is promoted and, by extension, the development of the society is promoted. The dire need to ensure the fair provision of education to all is also delineated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically SDG 4, which 'ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. As repeatedly highlighted by the United Nations, 260 million children were out of school in 2018, while the

Covid-19 pandemic intensified the challenges that educational systems face, which augments the concerns that education will become less inclusive. Therefore, the need for systematic educational reform is imperative.



Figure 1: UNESCO's poster showing data on illiteracy and exclusion from education

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Education

Education has been defined by sociologists as 'the deliberate process, outside the family, by which societies transmit knowledge, values, and norms to prepare young people for adult roles and prepare adults for new roles.'¹

Illiteracy

Illiteracy is 'the inability to read or write, or the actual or perceived state of being uneducated or insufficiently educated.'²

Educational System

'An education system is an arrangement that consists of at least one teacher and one student' and 'must be intentional, where a teacher actively attempts to guide student learning.'³

Educational Bias

Educational bias constitutes a violation of the right to education through the discrimination, marginalization, exclusion or provision of low-quality and insufficient education to specific individuals based on their social status, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or disabilities.

¹"." Encyclopedia of Sociology. . Encyclopedia.com. 16 Jun. 2021 ." *Encyclopedia.com*, Encyclopedia.com, 14 July 2021, www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sociology-education.

²"." Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language. . Encyclopedia.com. 16 Jun. 2021 ." *Encyclopedia.com*, Encyclopedia.com, 14 July 2021, www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/education/education-terms-and-concepts/illiteracy.

³ "Education System Definition and Meaning." *Top Hat*, 16 Sept. 2019, tophat.com/glossary/e/education-system/.

Adult Education

Adult education is defined as the ‘education specifically targeting individuals who are regarded as adults by the society to which they belong to improve their technical or professional qualifications, further develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge with the purpose to complete a level of formal education, or to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies in a new field or to refresh or update their knowledge in a particular field.’⁴

Systematic Reform

Systematic reform with regard to education refers to changes in the educational system on different levels such as elementary, secondary and higher education that will have an impact on all stakeholders such as teachers and students, which may differ in the objective, but ‘reflects a consistent educational policy’⁵ aimed at actualising common goals.

Human rights

The United Nations has defined human rights as ‘the rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.’⁶

⁴TVETipedia Glossary, unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary/filt=all/id=41.

⁵“Systemic Reform Definition.” *The Glossary of Education Reform*, 29 Aug. 2013, www.edglossary.org/systemic-reform/.

⁶“Human Rights.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Causes of biased educational systems

An amalgamation of various reasons has led to the existence of a deeply-rooted educational bias. Ingrained sexism, racism, homophobia and discriminatory treatment, in general, creates an implicit educational bias. According to the United Nations in 2018, all these prejudices made education an elusive dream for 260 million children. Educators might not deliberately try to discriminate against their students, but due to the underlying stereotypical notions that dominate in some societies, they do so by favoring those students who fit their description of the 'ideal' and 'normal' student, while they discriminate against those who do not. This is reflected in the participation of students with disabilities, as according to Human Rights Watch only 150,000 out of the 1.5 million students with disabilities enrolled during the period 2018-2019.

The ingrained stereotypical perceptions are underpinned by the system through outdated educational material such as books and policies that perpetuate them. However, educational bias is not always implicit. Many educational policies can be targeted to undermine specific populations so that they are excluded from the educational system in order to make their socioeconomic development difficult. Lastly, underfunding can be a crucial aspect of educational bias that disproportionately affects those from low-income backgrounds. The fact that only 18% of the poorest youth worldwide manages to complete secondary education is testament to the existence of such educational biases.

Types of bias

Educational bias has manifested itself in many ways. One of the most common is gender bias, which leads to the different treatment of genders. Evidence suggests that female students have far fewer educational opportunities to STEM subjects as opposed to male students, who dominate the field. This type of educational bias is very much perpetuated and reiterated through outdated books that promote traditional gender roles. For example, literary texts taught at schools might unconsciously further encourage sexist stereotypes. Furthermore, educational bias could be based on sexual orientation. In many countries such as Hungary, showing homosexual content to an underage citizen is illegal, which clearly marginalizes members of the LGBTQ+ community. Recently, a decision of the United States Supreme Court shows the lack of understanding and awareness on issues

pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community – where a transgender student won a lawsuit against a Virginia Country school, which accused him of using the bathroom of the gender he identified with. This delineates the complete lack of infrastructure and initiatives to accommodate the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and the fact that many educational systems have a deeply rooted homophobia, which leads to the marginalization of several students.

Moreover, race is also an important aspect of educational bias. People from a race different or in minority compared to the majority race usually underperform in tests compared to students of the majority race, which suggests the existence of educational bias due to race.

Lastly, religion can also be a factor causing educational bias. Religious bias can be reflected in the curriculum and textbooks which usually contain erroneous and derogatory information for other religions leading to educational bias.

However, it must be noted that educational bias can be both deliberate and covert. The former refers to all the educational malpractices that lead to the deliberate exclusion and marginalization of the specific groups. The latter often manifests itself with the privileged treatment of specific groups and the perpetuation of stereotypes through education without being deliberately done by educators.

Problems associated with biased educational systems

Education plays a pivotal role in instilling values and knowledge to individuals, which helps them assert their independence and not be manipulated and dependent on others. According to the United Nations Secretary-General, who has repeatedly underlined the importance of education, 'Education is the key to personal development and the future of societies. It unlocks opportunities and narrows inequalities. It is the bedrock of informed, tolerant societies, and a primary driver of sustainable development'⁷. However, when education is provided inadequately or not at all, citizens do not enjoy its benefits resulting in various problems arising from illiteracy.

⁷ “The Future of Education Is Here.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/en/coronavirus/future-education-here.

To begin with, an array of economic problems is associated with illiteracy. This is because financial independence and someone's socioeconomic status are inextricably linked with the education they have received. This means that an illiterate person is far more likely to find a low-paid job or no job, while their career perspectives are significantly narrowed as they do not possess the necessary qualifications to pursue a better job. However, the impact of illiteracy goes beyond the individual, as it affects society and its economy. In 2018, it was estimated by the World Literacy Foundation that the money spent on social programs, unemployment and welfare benefits amounted to £800 billion.

Moreover, illiteracy preserves and encourages a vicious cycle of inequalities, social exclusion and discrimination. Since illiterate people are trapped in low-paid employment or are unable to find jobs, they are unable to improve their socioeconomic status and escape their adversity. It has been proven that girls that do not receive education are more prone to child marriages and financial dependence. Therefore, illiteracy perpetuates inequalities and leads to injustices such as domestic violence towards women.

Furthermore, illiteracy has been associated with health problems. Those who are illiterate are more susceptible to not adhering to hygiene measures and adopting poor health behaviors. This is reflected in the higher hospital admissions rates of illiterate people, while there is little compliance with medical advice, as they do not acquire the necessary knowledge to understand its importance, which can lead to catastrophic repercussions for their health.

Adult Education

Many adults are victims of educational bias as, when they were children, they were not offered the opportunity to attend school and they remain either unskilled or low-skilled adults. Those adults usually come from disadvantaged populations and they are susceptible to experiencing financial hardships. According to UNESCO, the number of uneducated adults reached 781 million. However, even governments that are willing to reduce educational bias neglect adults that are uneducated and they focus solely on children's education. Certainly, education concerns children to a great degree, but also adults who could not receive an education due to educational bias(es) must be given a second opportunity.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

India

An array of grievances is associated with the Indian educational system. To address the ingrained bias that exists in the educational system, India passed the 2009 'Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act' according to which every child had the right to receive a high-quality education. Nevertheless, despite the legislative action that has been taken, the de facto discriminatory practices did not cease to exist. According to government figures, 6 million children are still out of education, while the dropout rates are poignant especially for the disadvantaged populations. One of the main reasons that contributes to exclusionary policies in education is the impact of the caste system in India according to which someone's life is dependent on the sins that they committed in their past lives and hence they must remain at the status that they had at their birth, which hinders people's ability to develop on a socioeconomic level. Additionally, racial and gender bias are also key reasons that exclude large parts of the population from receiving education.

People's Republic of China

The Chinese educational system is accused of adopting biased and discriminatory practices. For example, many human rights activists argue that the Chinese educational system is hostile to children with disabilities. Despite China's signing of the 'Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities' and the reassurances of the government, activists and people with disabilities argue that there is no adequate provision by the state. The data regarding people with disabilities is misleading. Moreover, the educational system is also biased when it comes to rural populations. Despite the rapid economic development that China has experienced over the last decades, people living in rural areas, and especially in the impoverished vast areas of Western China, face an utter lack of attention by the government. Testament to the hardships of rural populations were the photos that came to the attention of the public and showed children in China descending a dangerous ladder after their lesson.



Figure 2: Photograph showing the hardships faced by rural Chinese students

South Sudan

South Sudan is one of the countries that experiences the greatest gender disparity in education. Almost 3 out of 4 girls are excluded from education, which jeopardizes their life and independence. Girls who do not receive education are more prone to child marriages, financial dependence, poverty, violence and even diseases such as AIDS.

Sweden

The Swedish educational system is an example of inclusivity and equitable provision of education. The curriculum taught in Swedish schools is the same regardless of gender, social status, race or ethnicity. The absence of major discrepancies in the Swedish educational system is undergirded by the adequate funding through a system which bounds by law the local authorities to funnel the state funding and taxes into the educational system. Furthermore, there is significant improvement with regards to the provision of education to people with disabilities, as several governmental decrees ensure the provision of special education.

United States of America

The racism and sexism that are deeply rooted in American institutions are mirrored in the educational system. Until the 1960s, Afro-Americans, Latinos and Americans were segregated. After decisions of the Supreme Court that condemned the segregation in the educational system, the situation improved, but until today, Afro-Americans and Latinos have fewer educational prospects and face higher dropout levels. Moreover, when it comes to higher education, in many areas such as sciences the participation of women is far less compared to men.

African Hope Fund

The African Hope Fund is engaged in various attempts to provide free and quality education to all. Those attempts range from providing poor students with money so that they can attend school to building new schools and libraries. The African Hope Fund actively helps children in many African States such as Zimbabwe or Botswana through the cooperation with other nonprofit organizations.

United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is one of the main bodies of the United Nations that focuses on issues pertaining to education such as the bias that exists in many educational systems around the world. UNESCO discusses and cooperates with almost 300 non-governmental organizations. Through continuous dialogue, consultation and collaboration, stronger global partnerships are built in order to ensure equitable access to education for all. UNESCO addresses both long-term and current issues such as the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. To ensure the recovery of education from the pandemic, UNESCO has exerted diplomatic pressure on all governments to prioritize the immunization of teachers so that students can safely return to schools.

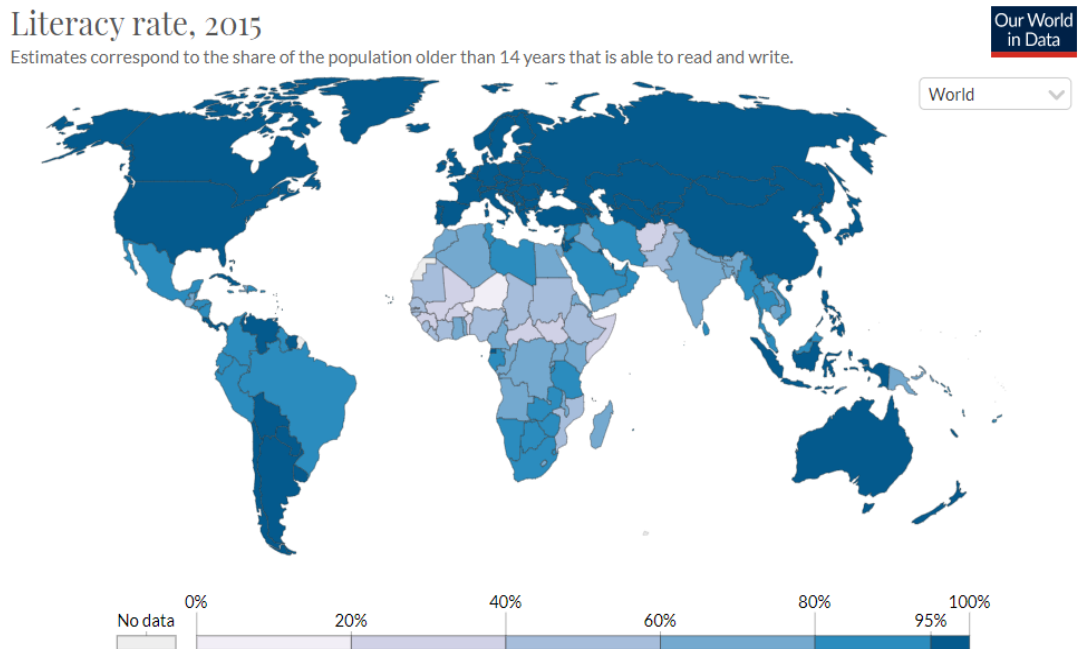


Figure 3.0: Map showing the literacy rates, 2015

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
10 th December, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed.
14 th December, 1960	The Convention against Discrimination in Education was signed.
16 th December, 1966	The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was signed.
18 th December, 1979	The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women was signed.
20 th November, 1989	The Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed.
20 th March, 2009	The Human Rights Council Resolution for the Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the Right to Development passed.
19 th December, 2016	The Resolution on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In 1948, the founding document of human rights was signed. The ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ safeguards the right to education under Article 26, according to which elementary education must be free, while secondary and higher education shall be available to everyone. Therefore, any discriminatory practices within the educational system violate the principle that education should be accessible to everyone.

Convention against Discrimination in Education

The ‘Convention against Discrimination in Education’ was signed to ensure that all educational systems are inclusive and free of bias. In Article 1, a wide range of practices are described as discriminatory behavior, which is condemnable and illegal. Moreover, there are

many recommendations on ways that the educational systems could be improved and discriminatory practices erased.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (A/RES/2200)

The 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' came into force in 1976 and ensures the accessibility of all to education. More specifically, Article 13 recognizes the right to education as a fundamental human right and should be provided to everyone regardless of their religion, race, sex, sexual orientation or ethnicity.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Education must begin from a very young age and most elementary students are children. The 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' acknowledges the right to education as an inalienable right of all children that should be protected and provided to all despite their status.

General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child (A/RES/71/177)

The 'Resolution on the Rights of the Child' further establishes the right to education as an inherited and inalienable right protected by international law. More specifically, Clause 14 promotes free and inclusive elementary education for all, while ensuring availability and accessibility of secondary education.

Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women

The 'Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women' condemns all forms of gender-based bias and discrimination, which is extended to education. According to Article 10, women must be offered the same educational prospects. Moreover, stereotypical notions of men and women at all levels of education should be eliminated so that stereotypical perceptions are not regurgitated.

Resolution for the promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (A/HRC/41/L.26)

The 'Resolution for the promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development' also acknowledges the right to education for all and urges all member states to comply with their obligation as set by international law and create regulations so that the educational system is free of any prejudice whatsoever.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

The issue of discriminatory educational policies and biased educational systems has preoccupied many countries and organizations, which have taken numerous measures and initiatives to achieve a systematic educational reform.

To begin with, the European Union has taken action to eliminate any acts of discrimination. Through the signing of the 'European Convention on Human Rights' and specifically Article 2, everyone is granted the right to education. In addition, Article 14 ensures that there is no discrimination in the enjoyment of the rights protected by the convention and therefore establishes the principle of equal treatment which applies to education. Furthermore, the European Union adopted the so-called 'European Pillar of Social Rights' that consists of 20 principles, the first of which is the protection of education, training and lifelong learning.

On a different note, there is an array of discrepancies in the provision of education in a number of African states. As a response, the members of the intergovernmental organization African Union have signed the 'African Charter on Human and People's Rights'. Article 17 of the said Charter ensures that every individual without any exception shall have access to education. Moreover, another organization the 'African Education Foundation' actively fights for the protection of the right to education in West Africa through the building of schools, libraries and learning facilities. Lastly, an initiative that encouraged inclusivity within the educational system was the abolishment of school fees in several countries such as Mozambique, Malawi, Kenya, Ghana and Ethiopia.

Finally, the World Bank has also made significant attempts to promote education for all and especially in less economically developed countries. Only in 2020, World Bank funneled \$5.2 billion into educational programs. Moreover, as a response to the financial shock that countries faced due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which also has a significant impact on the funding of education, the World Bank has provided 54 countries

with further financial aid amounting to \$2.6 billion for educational purposes. The aforementioned solutions have made a significant contribution to the improvement of education when it comes to matters of inclusivity. However, in many educational systems biases are deeply rooted and therefore legal initiatives and further funding cannot alone overturn the de facto discrimination that exists. In order to fight discrimination and bias in education and build a fairer and more inclusive educational system, there must be true willingness both from the state and the educational institutions to change the roots of their beliefs and practices.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Despite the complexity of the topic, there is a variety of measures that can be taken both on a national and international level to address the biases in educational systems and eventually, achieve a systematic educational reform.

Compliance with international standards

A very important step towards eradicating bias from education is the creation of an adequate legal system that ensures the equitable and universal provision of education. For this purpose, all states must abide by the existing international legal framework through the adaption of domestic legislation to international standards. More often than not, states are signatories of treaties, conventions and resolutions that protect the right to education, but they are reluctant to make the indispensable modifications in the domestic legislation so that the domestic legal framework also protects the universal and fair provision of access to education.

Establishing transparency

Many states frequently pledge the end of biased and discriminatory practices in education, but fewer are those which actualize these pledges. This is usually because of the lack of transparency. To ensure more transparent procedures, both intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations can play a crucial role in supervising the progress of the countries on educational matters as well as advising them on how they can positively restructure the practices of the educational system. Moreover, the states themselves can also take measures on a national level through the creation of national independent bodies that will ensure compliance with the anti-discriminatory policies in education.

Revision of educational material

The revision of outdated educational material could be a catalyst for change. Much of educational bias is implicitly perpetuated through educational material such as textbooks. The revision of this material to ensure that it does not promote any stereotypical perceptions combined with the revision of the curriculum, which could include lessons on human rights and discrimination, can also significantly contribute to the elimination of educational bias and achieve a systematic reform.

Provision of education for adults

Most solutions to the bias of the educational system revolve around children's education. Nevertheless, there are many cases of adults, who were excluded from education in the past, and there are little to no provisions for them. Member States must understand that adults also have the right to education according to international law and they also deserve to have an opportunity to achieve upwards socioeconomic mobility. One measure that could be adopted by Member States is the creation of 'second opportunity schools', which will provide education to all adults that did not have the opportunity when they were younger.

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