

More research is needed into why France's education system is failing the country's growing multicultural population

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France has a history of universal education that stretches back more than a century. However, this system has been marred in recent years by a decrease in student achievement, and recent reforms to address this problem have been less than effective.

[Paola Mattei](#) calls into question the French education system's 'republican' foundations and argues that further research is needed into the social and economic reasons why some students have lower educational outcomes.



Since its establishment in 1886, the French educational system has remained a stable, virtually unchanging public institution. Grounded in the principles of universalism, uniformity, and equality of opportunity, the educational system embodies the virtues of French republicanism. However, in recent years, the increasing gap between the fundamental principles of the French nation state and the process and outcomes driving the educational system highlighted the societal transformation occurring in France.

The purpose of the French system and its policies is to enable pupils to overcome inherited disadvantage and poverty through the means of a state-based education. Its 125-year history underscores the challenges faced in the effort to create change and increase social mobility through education. However, the value and strength of French republicanism is under pressure as a growing immigrant population is transforming the traditional French nation state into a much more multicultural nation.

The implementation of the reform principle of positive discrimination in 1981 marked a divergence from tradition universalism with a differentiation in school types, funding schemes, and a general decentralization of the state system. Despite the attempts of these reforms, efforts, France has experienced an [increase](#) in the proportion of low achievers from 15.2 per cent in 2000 to 21.8 in 2006. The French education system is failing to achieve its goals, both by its own national measures and against European educational standards. This recent decline in pupil achievement, challenges the extent to which the notion of equality of opportunity is an effective tool for overcoming ingrained social and economic disadvantages. There is a growing divergence between France's traditional educational values and outcomes for pupils.

Historically, the education system has embodied France's political values and traditions in its policies, priorities, and practices. One of the fundamental tenets of France's republicanism is universalism. Its manifestation in education policy dictates that all pupils are entitled to equal rights and treatment within the system. In this centralized system, schools must provide one secular, uniform curriculum while the French state is charged with the role of monitoring this provision.

Within France, student achievement varies across a wide spectrum. In 2009, the government administered exams in French reading and math to assess student achievement, comparing the RRS and RAR schools (which receive the additional funding through positive discrimination reforms) with all other schools. At the end of primary school 79.4% of students were reading at or above the standard competency level in RRS schools, 76.6% in RAR schools, and 89.9% in all other schools. At the end of Collège, the gap widened with competency levels of 68% in RRS schools, 50.6% in RAR schools, and 81.6% in all other schools.

These statistics show that the extra funding for priority education areas is not effectively closing achievement gaps for disadvantaged students. Nationally, the percentage of low achievers in the entire student population in French reading doubled from 1997-2007 from ten to twenty per cent. Alarming, the percentages of students with low reading achievement in the priority education zones are all above twenty per cent, especially at the end of Collège; this means that a disproportionate percentage of low achieving students are found in schools receiving increased funding. These schools educate a predominantly disadvantaged student

body; however, the empirical evidence shows that additional funding and increased resources are not adequately addressing the challenges present in the education system. Thus, the question emerges whether these results are the effects of systemic failure or whether there are societal forces at work that impede educational achievement for disadvantaged pupils.

This is all a good start. Now, there is a real need for further empirical studies to better understand the connection between the changing demographics of the French population and educational outcomes. Socio-economic background has a greater influence on outcomes in France than other OECD countries, but, contemporary research focuses primarily on the issues stemming from rising numbers of pupils leaving primary school with substandard literacy and numeracy levels. A wider research lens is required to analyze and then address the challenges confronting the education system. This must include a look at the social and political forces contributing to social disadvantage as well as educational low achievement.

For instance, the priority education reforms initiated in 1981 have failed to produce the desired academic gains, primarily measured through literacy and numeracy test scores. These reforms target schools that educate disadvantaged students, many of whom are immigrants coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. Despite the conspicuous absence of empirical evidence to support its efficacy, the reforms were re-instated in 2006. This non-reform alludes to an “institutional inertia” and calls into question the French principles of education as they are extended to a multicultural citizenry.

The 1981 reforms were a landmark divergence from universalism, but the next steps taken by French educational policymakers will prove whether these actions are towards a modernization of republicanism to best care for the modern citizenry, or a demarcation of the devaluing of republican rhetoric. To truly look for equality of outcomes above equality of opportunity, the social forces that strengthen the negative effects of ethnicity and socio-economic background must be further researched and addressed.

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