ABSTRACT

The objective of improving «meritocracy» enjoys a large, bipartisan consensus among Italian policymakers, as well as widespread popular support. «Investing more in education» is indeed a saying that can be very easily heard in political debates. But do public policies really provide a valuable contribution to promoting equal educational opportunity in contemporary Italy? Our paper tries to answer this challenging question, first, by reviewing the most updated evidence on social inequality in Italian education and, second, by considering the key features of educational policies and reforms aimed at promoting meritocracy in schools and universities. We focus on three particularly concerning forms of inequality: gender, social class and ethnicity. Finally we argue that an adequate discussion on the state of educational inequalities in the country is lacking, and that the growing statements for more meritocracy are not followed by policy measures which could significantly ease the «burden» of inequality.

Keywords: Inequality of educational opportunity – Italian public policy

ESTRATTO


Parole chiave: Diseguaglianza nelle opportunità scolastiche – Politiche pubbliche italiane
1. Introduction

«Meritocracy» is currently a very fashionable word in Italy. It enjoys a large, bipartisan consensus among policy-makers, as well as widespread popular support. «Investing more in education» is yet another saying that can be very easily heard in political debates. But what is the reality of policies to promote equal opportunities in education in contemporary Italy? Our paper tries to answer this challenging question. On one side, we will shortly review the most updated evidence on social inequality in Italian education. On the other side, we will match this evidence with a sketch of the key features of educational policies and reforms aimed at promoting meritocracy in Italian schools and universities.

Let us first delimitate the rather wide-ranging goal that we have just set for this work. First of all, for reasons of space we will focus primarily on educational attainment, that is to say on the final outcomes of educational participation in terms of levels (and types) of qualifications achieved. This does not mean that we will ignore other educational outcomes, such as literacy, school marks and other forms of school achievement. We will rather try to spell out the key role of academic performance in the making of social inequalities in educational attainment. In other words, educational attainment is our main explanandum, but academic performance figures among the most important explanatory factors that we will call into question.

We have decided to focus primarily on three forms of social inequality in educational attainment associated with gender, social origins and migratory background of students. Thus, we will not discuss the territorial divide in school participation. If we consider educational attainment, differences between Northern and Southern regions currently look modest, both in upper secondary and in tertiary education. This reflects the marked educational expansion experienced by the Southern regions during the ’90s. Of course, this area has closed the gap only with regard to educational attainment, but it still faces a considerable disadvantage when it comes to reading and mathematical literacy outcomes (Bratti, Checchi et al., 2007). Given our focus on educational attainment, this problem will not be examined here. Besides, it may be noted that this issue is widely discussed in the public debate, perhaps even disproportionately in comparison with the other forms of social inequality (e.g. ethnic inequalities), which look no less troubling, but currently receive much less attention.

2. Gender inequality in education: a not so troubling issue?

In contemporary Italy gender affects significantly educational attainment, as female students enrol more often in general, pre-academic schools (licei) at upper secondary level; they are also more likely to attain an upper secondary degree, to enrol into university and to achieve a tertiary degree. Hence, their secular disadvantage in education has not only disappeared; it has recently reversed into an advantage, which does not stop increasing, albeit at a slow pace (Istat, 2001). Given the various forms of disadvantage that women face both in family arrangements and in the labor market, their success in the educational arena is usually not perceived as particularly troubling. Indeed, it may be even regarded positively as a sort of compensatory mechanism with respect to other forms of inequality faced by women (e.g. in family arrangements or in the labor market). Furthermore, the observed gender differentials in favour of women cannot be too easily labelled as a form of gender inequality. After all, we know that female students are more disciplined in the classroom, spend more time to study at home and show higher involvement towards academic subjects and, more generally, cultural activities. Not surprisingly, they get better school marks, which explains to a large extent, if not entirely, their advantage in education. In other words, gender differences in effort and school preferences drive gender differences in academic performance, which in turn drive gender differences in educational
attainment (Barone, 2009). Is this a form of social inequality?\(^1\)

Unfortunately, there is another side of the coin, which happens to be too often neglected by policy-makers, as well as by academic scholars: gender segregation within educational levels. In particular, in university education women are massively concentrated in academic fields that are poorly rewarding in the labor market such as the humanities, teacher education, social work, nursing (Barone, 2010). Given the strong connections between school and labor market outcomes, it comes as no surprise that gender segregation in education translates into gender segregation in the occupational arena. In turn, the segregation in pink-collar ghettos is associated with lower earnings, weaker employment protection and poorer career prospects for women (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007).

Hence, educational institutions still cooperate quite actively with labor market institutions to produce gender inequality. Unfortunately, there is rather little to say about educational policies to contrast gender segregation in Italian education, other than pointing out that they are completely missing. Academic scholars have their own responsibility in this state of affairs, as they have paid very limited attention to horizontal differences within educational levels, thus promoting the simplistic diagnosis that «women do better in education». Such a diagnosis can be found even in the most accurate and progressive policy documents on Italian education\(^2\) and, of course, it explains the lack of attention on the issues of gender segregation. In turn, the opacity of the problem gives an important contribution to its persistence. It has been noted that gender segregation is so resistant to change precisely because it is not perceived as a form of tacit discrimination (Charles & Bradley, 2002). Parents, but also teachers, are most often unaware that the «natural» dispositions of girls and boys are continuously produced and reproduced in daily routines imbued of gender stereotypes. When they encourage girls to enrol in care-oriented secondary tracks and tertiary fields of study (e.g. teacher training schools, pedagogy, social work, etc.), they are most often unaware that they are thus contributing to setting the seeds of the future disadvantage of women in the labor market. Of course, gender segregation in school and in the labor market is not a peculiarity of Italy (Bradley, 2000). What is distinctive of this country is the lack of attention on this issue on the side of both academic scholars and policy-makers, whereas this policy issue is much more debated in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries. Of course, if gender preferences for specific subjects and fields are related to socialization dynamics, they are a difficult target for policy-makers. However, the activities of school orienteering at the end of lower and upper secondary education can play an important role to override gender stereotypes of parents and teachers that are likely to push girls towards gender-labelled school paths, even when their achievement in the mathematic and scientific domain is above the average. Indeed, in recent cohorts the traditional disadvantage of female students in the mathematical and scientific domain has weakened considerably. It is small in primary and lower secondary education and widens in later school transitions mostly as a consequence of gender-stereotyped choices at the upper secondary level that lead to an over-representation of male students in math-intensive tracks (OECD, 2009). Unfortunately, school-orienteering in secondary education is one of the best-known weaknesses of Italian schools, and the awareness of its egalitarian potential is extremely weak.

3. Social origins and the illusions of educational expansion

The influence of social origins on educational attainment has been continuously declining over the past six decades (Ballarino & Schadee, 2006; Barone et al., 2010). The problem is that

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\(^1\) Unless we argue that male students face discrimination by (female) teachers, though the empirical evidence does not support this claim (Neugebauer et al., 2010).

\(^2\) The most recent and telling example is the so-called *Libro Bianco* published under the auspices of the Ministry for Education in 2007.
this decline takes place at an impressively slow pace. After six decades of economic modernization and school expansion, family background still heavily affects students' educational opportunities. Furthermore, its influence has weakened slowly in all European countries, but at least in some other nations this slow decline has involved all social classes (Breen et al., 2009). To the contrary, in Italy we detect a marked decline of the disadvantage of the agricultural classes but an extremely weak change for the urban classes. Given the small size of the agricultural classes over the past four decades, one could say that not much has changed after the economic boom of the '50s and '60s, which therefore represents the key period of educational equalization in Italy. The sons and daughters of farmers, who had been previously marginalized from our school system, enjoyed a steep increase in their chances of educational attainment at all levels, including upper secondary and university education. However, with this important exception, the relative distances between social classes have changed very little. Furthermore, inequalities between social groups involve not only the highest level of education achieved, but also the type of education attended: the upper classes exhibit a marked preference for general, pre-academic tracks (licei) and for Faculties that give access to the liberal professions, such as law, medicine or architecture. It is not difficult to appreciate the importance of these «horizontal» differences for dynamics of intergenerational reproduction. Also in this respect, very little has changed over the past decades (Schizzerotto, 2002).

The above-summarized evidence suggests that economic growth and educational expansion have a limited potential to contrast social inequalities in education, which are easily pushed at the next educational level. This is what happened after the 1962 reform that removed tracking in lower secondary education in favour of a comprehensive lower secondary school (scuola media unica). This reform also raised compulsory education to 14 years. It was a very progressive, innovative intervention for that time. Not surprisingly, it promoted school expansion in lower and upper secondary education, yet it had a very limited impact on social inequality (Fort, 2007; Barone et al., 2010). In particular, the above-mentioned disadvantage of farmers had begun to decline before the reform and this trend did not accelerate after it. In 1969 a new reform reduced tracking in upper secondary education: all upper secondary graduates were allowed to enrol into university, which had always been the monopoly of students from the general, pre-academic tracks. After the 1969 reform, Italian universities opened their doors to students from the two vocational upper secondary tracks (istituti tecnici and professionali). Again, this reform promoted some educational expansion, but its impact on social inequality turned out to be rather negligible (Ballarino & Schadee, 2006).

In 1999 an important reform of university education, approved in the context of the so-called Bologna process, introduced the «3+2» model. Here again, the main purpose of policy-makers was to enhance the overall level of educational participation. Enrolments into university, had been rapidly declining in the course of the '90s (CNVSU, 2009). In order to revert this trend, the long and selective university studies had to look more «appealing» for students and their families. In particular, two key innovations were introduced (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). First, the old four- or five-year university courses were replaced by 3-year bachelor courses, which could be followed by additional 2-year master courses. Second, the study workload to achieve the new university degrees was constrained and limited in the context of a reorganization of teaching and student assessment based on the so-called university credits (crediti formativi). Hence, the time, the direct and indirect costs, as well as the efforts needed to attain a university degree were substantially reduced by the 1999 reform. According to the promoters of this reform, this would make university education more attractive for upper secondary graduates, and more so for those from the lower social groups who are more sensitive to the costs and to the risks of
the investment in education. In other words, the expansion of tertiary education was expected to promote also a reduction of social inequalities. Empirical evidence suggests that the reform has been very successful in expanding enrolments in education, at least in the first years of its implementation (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). Unfortunately, differences between social groups have been eroded to a rather limited extent, and only as a consequence of a ceiling effect: upper class students had already reached complete saturation of enrolments into university education, so that any further expansion of university enrolments would necessarily erode their advantage — simply because they could not do any better (Barone & Fort, 2010). At the same time, the 3+2 reform has created a new differentiation within tertiary education, that is to say between bachelor and master degrees. There is evidence that students from the upper classes continue more often to the master level (Argentin & Triventi, 2010). In other words, the reform has not only favoured a limited reduction of the absolute distances between social classes at the entry into university education via a ceiling effect; it has also opened the space for a new form of inequality within university education by creating a new distinction between bachelor and master degrees. Furthermore, the growth in the number of university graduates and the resulting credential inflation of university degrees is favouring an impressive expansion of post-lauream, professional training, but here again students from the upper social strata are in a privileged position (Argentin & Triventi, 2010). On the whole, it is rather difficult to describe the 1999 reform as a successful egalitarian policy.

What is the problem with these educational reforms? How can we make sense of their rather limited success in fostering equality of educational opportunity? Our answer is that they were inspired by a «formalistic» philosophy. They changed the formal rules regulating educational careers, but they affected only superficially the mechanisms constraining school participation of the lower strata. The example of the 1999 reform is rather telling. We have just seen that, according to its promoters, it was supposed to enhance university enrolments, particularly in favour of students from the lower social groups. However, this would obviously raise the number of university freshmen with financial constraints in need of some economic support. Hence, the 3+2 reform should have been accompanied by a strong public effort to support these students with student loans, tax exemptions, scholarships, etc. It makes little sense to make university education more attractive for the lower social groups while at the same time preserving the economic hurdles that hinder their participation. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened. The 1999 reform enhanced university enrolments, but it was not accompanied and sustained by a growth of the public funds allocated to scholarships. Not surprisingly, the rapid increase of enrolments translated into a substantial increase of students entitled to receive a scholarship and into a substantial decrease in the share of students who actually received it (CNVSU, 2009). It is probably easier to redesign the formal geometry of educational institutions than to invest massively in the educational opportunities of students from less affluent families.

Economic constraints are not the main hurdle hindering educational participation of students from the lower social groups, at least not in recent cohorts. Cultural barriers play the key role. Here again we see the formalistic approach of Italian policy-makers. University education in Italy has always been conceived as the appropriate domain for upper class students from the general, pre-academic tracks. University professors take for granted that students master concepts and skills that can only be learnt in the licei. For instance, in the humanities some basic knowledge of philosophical concepts is most often taken for granted, but only students from the licei actually possess it. Thus, when students from vocational tracks enrol into university education, they must adapt to a linguistic and conceptual universe that looks rather unfamiliar to them. Not surprisingly, they face high risks of dropping out. Indeed, the 1999 reform has enhanced university enrolments of students...
from these vocational tracks, but it has also enhanced their drop-out rates. If we keep in mind the strong overrepresentation of low social groups among students from these tracks, we can further understand the egalitarian failure of this reform. History repeats itself: this kind of failure replicates very closely that of the 1969 reform, which opened access to universities to all upper secondary graduates, while leaving completely unchanged the pedagogical practices of university education. Quite interestingly, the 1999 reform prescribes that universities monitor each year the competencies of their freshmen and organize remedial, introductory courses for those students in need of additional support. This key task has been either ignored or accomplished in a very superficial way (CNVSU, 2004). It is certainly easier to redesign the formal geometry of educational institutions than to adapt their pedagogical practices to the needs and competencies of students from less educated families.

4. Ethnic inequalities: a «new» form of educational inequality?

Between 1998 and 2008 the presence of children with migratory background (CMB) in Italian schools has increased by 6.4 times, switching from 85,522 in 1998 to 629,360 in 2008. In percentage CMB have grown from 1.1% to 7.0% of the whole student population in primary and secondary education in less than one decade. All available forecasts predict a further expansion in the coming years. The incidence of these students is unbalanced across the different educational levels, being higher in primary, lower secondary schools, even lower in upper secondary schools and almost negligible in university education.

It is important to keep in mind that CMB represent a highly heterogeneous population with regard to at least three essential features: nationality, time spent in the host country, and family background. These features play an important role in shaping (and differentiating) their school outcomes. In particular, CMB display systematic lower rates of school attendance and attainment at all levels, but large differences exist between nationalities (Strozza, 2008). For instance, students from North-Africa, Indian Sub-continent and Ex-Yugoslavia happen to be the most disadvantaged, while students from Eastern Europe tend to perform better. CMB also experience more than natives the problem of school delay, but this problem is much more accentuated for those who have arrived at older ages and who have spent less time in Italy (Dalla Zuanna et al., 2009; Invalsi, 2010). CMB face higher risks of experiencing school failures and of dropping out, but again this risk varies considerably by nationality and age of arrival in Italy, as well as by the occupation of their parents (Casacchia, Natale, et al., 2008).

Moreover, large differences between CMB and natives exist also with regard to upper secondary school choice (Barban & White, 2009; Checchi, 2009; Canino, 2010). The former are more likely to enrol in short vocational tracks (i.e., istituti professionali and regional vocational training). This differential enrolment pattern — which has obvious consequences for their chances of attending and succeeding in university education — reflects at least to some extent differences in previous academic performance. Indeed, with regard to learning achievement — measured either through standardized test scores (e.g., Pisa, Pirls, Timms) or through marks — empirical evidence points to the existence of an ethnic disadvantage, which is higher in reading and writing subjects than in scientific subjects and in mathematics, but here again large differences exist between nationalities (Casacchia, Natale, et al., 2008; Mantovani, 2008a; Amistadi, Bazzanella, & Buzzi, 2009). However, previous academic outcomes only partially account for

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3 Foreign students are defined by Miur (the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research) as those students, born in Italy or abroad, who have a non-Italian citizenship.

4 These figures largely reflect the demographic distribution of foreign population, which is a relatively young population.
the ethnic differential in upper secondary school choice. If we compare a foreign and a native student with identical academic performance in lower secondary education, the former is more likely to enroll in vocational education and training. To sum up, the ethnic disadvantage in education involves school performance, the highest level of education attained and the type of education attended: these three aspects are strictly intertwined.

In line with findings for most European countries (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007; Heath, Rothon, et al., 2008), the main explanation for the ethnic gap stresses the importance of socio-economic background, given that parents of CMB are heavily overrepresented in the working class. In this sense, ethnic inequalities in education are a new, and particularly concerning, form of the old social inequalities associated with the social class of the parents. Indeed, once controlled for socio-economic background, the ethnic gap shrinks down significantly. This suggests that a substantial part of the observed gap is indeed attributable to the lower economic resources of the immigrant population (Mantovani, 2008b; Dalla Zuanna, Farina, et al., 2009). Still, if we compare a foreign student and a native student both from the working class, the former is much more likely to exhibit poor school performance. Social class matters, but it does not tell the whole story. Further explanations for the ethnic gap are to be searched both at the family and at the school level. Language spoken at home and proficiency in the host language are obvious candidates. This problem is, of course, strongly associated with time spent in the country: it is mostly relevant in the case of immigrant students who have just arrived in Italy, but loses explanatory relevance for other CMB (Giovannini & Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Casacchia, Natale, et al., 2008; Mantovani, 2008b). According to Dalla Zuanna et al. (2009), further explanations are to be searched in the family, where CMB happen to receive less support in doing homework and tend to develop lower academic expectations.

All in all, CMB cumulate a twofold disadvantage: the traditional disadvantage associated with class, plus an additional, specific disadvantage associated with ethnicity. For this reason, they should be the privileged target of egalitarian policies. But what has been done so far to contrast their school failures? The Italian situation is characterized by the absence of a general, coherent policy framework to promote school attainment of CMB. Of course, they are (formally) granted equal rights and several policy documents stress the importance of intercultural education and provide guidelines and recommendations to promote the integration of CMB in Italian schools.6

Unfortunately, providing these students with real opportunities for educational promotion as well as encouraging the implementation of new curricula and of innovative teaching methods would require a substantial public financial investment, which governments are extremely reluctant to undertake. Resources for Italian language support, intercultural mediators and additional school support are heavily missing. In academic years 2008/09 and 2009/10 the Ministry has financed some specific school projects in areas displaying a high share of CMB aimed at preventing dropout and at helping the social integration of these students. Unfortunately, the lack of financial resources and the heavy budget constraints of schools are likely to undermine the feasibility and large-scale implementation of these interventions.

Easy, costless solutions are, again, more appealing. Two are worth mentioning. First, the introduction of a cap of 30% on the presence of CMB in each class. This new rule is going to be

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5 More accurate analyses are needed in order to shed light on the decision processes which lead CMB and their families to prefer these less rewarding school paths. From a policy perspective, more focused activities of educational guidance are often regarded as a potentially precious tool to be further developed.

6 Law no. 40/1998 has formally recognized the value of intercultural education and some other general principles of social and school inclusion of CMB. Other governmental acts have provided some guidelines that schools should follow (e.g., Circolare Ministeriale 24/2006). It is worth mentioning also the creation of the national «Observatory for integration of foreign students and intercultural education».
gradually effective in academic year 2010/2011. It aims at avoiding ethnic segregation, which is supposed to hinder the academic performance of CMB. However, if we do not count second generation immigrant students, who generally exhibit a sufficient language proficiency, classes which exceed this cap are around 1% in primary education and 2% in lower secondary schools (MIUR, 2010). Hence, this new measure is not likely to be the solution to the current problems of CMB, at least not at lower educational levels. Ethnic segregation is rapidly gaining relevance in upper secondary vocational tracks. At the same time, in those relatively few cases of high ethnic segregation, this measure is going to pose new logistic problems, since CMB students living in highly ethnic concentrated neighbourhoods will have to enrol in more distant schools (and it is still unclear who will pay for that).

The second policy-measure involves «lower class enrolment», that is to say the practice of enrolling CMB in one class behind that corresponding to their age as they enter the Italian school system. Even though officially discouraged, this practice is quite widespread. It is motivated by the need to deal with CMB with inadequate language proficiency, in a context where specific financial resources to support them are lacking. Dalla Zuanna et al. (2009) argue that this practice, although motivated by the effort to enhance the language development of CMB, represents for them an additional source of cumulative inequality, primarily because it hinders relations with class mates of the same age and secondly because it may affect negatively their self-esteem and future academic outcomes.7

Facing the lack of systematic efforts at the national level, schools take their own initiatives. Indeed the most relevant activities to support CMB originate at the local level on the initiative of single schools or teachers, particularly in northern regions, where immigration is more widespread. Hence, we assist to the proliferation of local initiatives on a voluntaristic basis, often in cooperation with local authorities and ONGs. These initiatives comprise, for instance, welcome activities to CMB, specific interventions to foster the involvement of their parents, new forms of intercultural education with laboratories on arts and music, etc.8 Unfortunately, good intentions are often not enough. Cnel (2008) notes that «teachers often face the problems of the integration of immigrant pupils in solitude and without the required training» and adds that «projects for the integration of immigrant pupils and for promoting intercultural education are too often based on limited resources», concluding that new forms of cooperation and synergies between schools should be encouraged, but also that stable financial resources should be invested to support the educational attainment of CMB.

5. Concluding remarks

Let us go back to our opening question: what is the reality of policies to promote equal opportunities in education in contemporary Italy? Our diagnosis is that, first, the growing pleas for more meritocracy in education have so far remained on the ground of generic statements that are not followed by a more focused discussion on the current state of educational inequalities in Italy. The case of ethnic inequality is perhaps the most telling one: while everyone agrees that we need more meritocracy in Italian education, the issue of the ethnic disadvantage in education is absent from the public debate. Even though it is fairly obvious that this disadvantage represents a striking violation of the meritocratic principles, the connection between promoting meritocracy and sustaining the edu-

7 The authors speculate that delay can affect future education decisions, since students with delay mostly underestimate their skills and their future academic potentials and therefore have higher probability of choosing shorter school tracks or to leave school earlier.

8 With regard to good practices implemented by schools, the project «Interculture» promoted by Fondazione Cariplo is worth mentioning. The project, which has been carried out by Asvapp and Ismu, reviews a few projects implemented by schools in Lombardia and provides policy indications for future initiatives.
educational attainment of CMB has hardly ever been established. Meritocracy is something else. It proves equally difficult to ensure any visibility in the public debate to social class inequalities in education. Social class is perceived as an old-fashioned concept holding little relevance nowadays. Because of its leftist ideological connotations, it can hardly be a feasible target for educational policies. As a consequence, the persisting influence of parental occupation, as well as of parental education, is not a target for educational policies in Italy. Again, meritocracy is something else, and it is also perceived as something else from reducing gender segregation in secondary and tertiary education, even though this phenomenon overtly favours undeserved gender inequalities in the labor market. The noticeable opacity in the public debate of these marked, ascriptive forms of social inequality in a period of enthusiastic debates on meritocracy is quite striking.

Our second conclusion is that, mostly as a consequence of the first point, these ascriptive inequalities have never been a key target for educational policies, which have rather aimed predominantly at promoting educational expansion. The assumption was that such expansion would suffice to contrast social inequalities in education. Unfortunately, a massive amount of empirical evidence undermines this belief. In particular, even though the influence of family background has somewhat declined over the past six decades, this trend is not attributable to educational reforms and proceeds at a very slow pace, so that social inequalities in education currently remain very strong. This suggests the need for more aggressive, egalitarian policies. Equality in education cannot be the side-product of educational expansion.

This leads to our third and final conclusion. What kind of educational policies do we need, then? Our answer is quite simple: we need to intervene more directly on the specific mechanisms that hinder the educational participation of the most disadvantaged social groups, rather than promoting a generalized educational expansion. For instance, in the case of university education this means:

a) ensuring that all students entitled to receive scholarships actually receive them, and that they get an adequate amount of money for the costs that they will have to sustain. It is important to keep in mind that foregone earnings account for most of the economic burden of participation in education. Therefore, some financial compensation for these «hidden» costs would be of critical importance;

b) arranging activities of educational guidance at the end of lower and upper secondary education with a specific focus on the information problems of CMB and of working class students. In particular, it would be important to prevent the risk that these students and their parents overestimate the difficulty of more demanding educational paths (e.g., general pre-academic tracks or continuation to university), or that they underestimate their occupational returns, whereas native upper class parents have more often first hand information concerning the value of these options;

c) ensuring that universities really assess the skills and competencies of their freshmen, organize adequate introductory courses for them and ensure a systematic tutoring, so that also students from vocational schools are given a real chance to succeed in university education. This requires a well-organized, massive investment of economic and human resources, not just a few hours of lesson at the beginning of the academic year.

These are just two examples of what we have in mind. If we have learnt anything about social inequality in education, it is its stubborn resistance to change. Promoting meritocracy in education is not an easy task. We have too many times tried to erase social inequalities with cheap, formalistic reforms primarily aimed at promoting educational expansion. It is now time to acknowledge that promoting equality of opportunity in education is a real public investment. Promoting meritocracy means exploiting more adequately the abilities, dispositions and motivations of all students, and of all future
workers. The gain for our society and for the
economy can be noticeable, but this investment
requires a substantial amount of money and of
highly focused efforts. Policy-makers may not
be happy to hear this message, but this should
not prevent scholars to stress the contradictions
between words and reality in current national
debates on meritocracy.

9 The most common sentence to be found in current texts
of educational reforms is «without any additional bur-
den for the public budget». A corollary of this work is
that this sentence should be used a bit less often, if we
are to preserve any hope that social inequality in educa-
tion can be erased.

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