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INCUBATORS OF CITIZENSHIP.

ON THE VALUE(S) OF KNOWING

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Once upon a time, education was the main driver of emancipation. People were no longer obliged to follow in their father's footsteps; their future depended on their own talent and effort; everyone could get ahead. Meritocracy held out a promise.

And that is still true for many young people around the world. They are hungry for knowledge and they hope – and know – that education builds a bridge to a better life, a life in which they can swap poverty for personal growth and a reasonable standard of living. You can't blame the young people of Africa, the Middle East and China: to them, Europe, and certainly the Netherlands, are the promised land. Many of the refugees who arrive here are youngsters seeking a better life for themselves. The West holds out that promise because it can give them a good education and the opportunity to work. I saw that for myself in 2010, on the eve of the World Cup in South Africa, when I accompanied Dutch football hero Frank Rijkaard to the townships of Soweto, where he was giving a football clinic. Children, including a striking number of girls, came from far and wide – many of them wearing worn-out shoes, dingy clothes, without schoolbags or any other supplies – for just one thing: to play football with Rijkaard, perhaps with the dream of attending school in the Netherlands one day and building a career as a football player. I saw it again in 2013, when I accompanied the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra to São Paulo as Minister of Culture. The orchestra performed two concerts there on a world tour marking its 125th anniversary. Between the two concerts, I visited the *favelas*, the slums that surround the city. We went to a school with extremely tight security, where we were taken to the music room. Children dressed in school uniforms were practising a piece of music together with the utmost concentration. For more than thirty years, children from the slums of São Paulo have received intensive music lessons at this school. They study music theory, voice and an instrument six hours a week. The results are impressive: not only does this programme help children to develop the necessary discipline and social skills and offer them better prospects for the future, but it also provides them with

food and clothing and helps to improve safety in the neighbourhood. Education, and certainly music education, gives them hope for a better life in which they can swap relentless poverty and violence for prosperity and personal development.

I met one of the boys who grew up in this slum, Lucas Bernardo da Silva, that afternoon in the Escola de Música do Estado de São Paulo, the São Paulo Conservatory. It is diagonally opposite the city's concert hall, in a neighbourhood that everyone is advised to avoid if at all possible. When I arrived, I heard music pouring from all the windows and doors. There was no air conditioning, the windows were wide open and the paint was peeling off. We went to the top storey, where Tjeerd Top, first assistant principal violinist of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, was giving a master class. One of his pupils was Lucas Bernardo da Silva. They were practising Mendelssohn's first violin concerto. It was hot and clammy and you could smell the sweat in the air. I saw the holes in Lucas's shoes and his frayed shirt. And then he began to play. All I heard then was the beauty of the music and the tears streamed down my cheeks. What a privilege it was to be there, and how impressed I was to see how a good education and music can give someone hope for the future. The value of education is interpreted in terms of other values in this case: opportunities, personal growth, engagement and beauty. Lucas was one of the few pupils to be given a scholarship a year later to study at the Amsterdam Conservatory. His dream came true.

For refugee students, the chance to come to the Netherlands is also a dream come true, opening the door to another world, with new opportunities ahead. When I was vice-chancellor of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in 2011 and 2012, I saw how refugee students hungered for knowledge and how much they wanted to go further and leave a life of misery behind. We had more refugee students then than we had ever had and we wanted to guide them as well as we could. But it wasn't always easy, not for reasons of intelligence or perseverance – they had plenty of both to spare – but because of cultural issues, isolation, and the pattern of expectations among their instructors and fellow students. We then started working closely with the UAF, and that helped. Many of these students subsequently earned their diplomas with flying colours.

But what about the promise of education as a driver of emancipation in the Netherlands in a more general sense? In recent years, the discussion has turned from emancipation to the new divisions that are emerging, divisions in which not all young people have the same opportunity to develop to their full potential. This problem is much broader than education,

but schools and schooling are a crucial factor. Meritocracy is at risk of degenerating into a dichotomy of high-educated winners and low-educated losers, whose paths rarely cross any more. Comenius's dream, that all children can enjoy a good education and develop into engaged citizens, is under pressure.

How did we get here? Let's go back to the beginning. Before Michael Young invented the concept of meritocracy in 1958, the Netherlands had Frederik van Heek, a sociology professor. In 1945, he published a study entitled *Rising and falling on the social ladder. A study of vertical social mobility*. Van Heek felt that in a modern and highly industrialised society, social status should not depend on background or environment, but on education, knowledge and skills. Now it must be said that in his day, people had very little opportunity to climb the social ladder on their own strength. If you were a child born in an underprivileged environment, you would probably remain there for the rest of your life. Unless you had a teacher who looked beyond your father's occupation and recognised your talent. Unless you had parents who believed in you, and who were willing to make their case with the school headmaster. Unless you were capable of fighting your way to the top on your own as the *son* of a shoemaker, baker or rubbish collector – after all, primary school was considered more than sufficient for many daughters.

But that was far from being the case for many pupils. That is why, in the early 1960s, Van Heek initiated his celebrated 'Talent Project', a major study of the relationship between social environment and educational attainment. He hypothesised that many children from lower-class backgrounds did not attend secondary school or go on to higher education even when they were gifted enough to do so, and that society wasted a great deal of talent that way. And of course, he was proved right. In the more than fifty years since then, the idea that the underprivileged would always be underprivileged changed completely.

Education did indeed become the main driver of emancipation. In 1960, about eight percent of the working population aged between 18 and 25 entered higher education; by 2015, 48 percent of 30- to 35-year-olds had attended tertiary education.

But although so many more youngsters have had access to education since the 1960s, and in particular to higher education, I observed in 2014 – and the Education Inspectorate confirmed this a year later – that not all pupils receive the education appropriate to their abilities. Of all secondary school graduates who have taken the same final examination, those from more privileged backgrounds are *five times* more likely to enter higher education.

Early selection at the end of primary school is one of the weaknesses of the Dutch education system. So far, we have compensated by allowing pupils to work their way up through the academic system, level by level. But that is becoming more difficult as schools step up their requirements and parents exert more pressure. Smooth transitions are especially important for pupils whose background denies them certain tools – in the form of income, high-educated parents, and social and cultural capital – because they often discover their talents later or need more time for personal growth in education. Long ago, giving precisely those children an opportunity to develop was the whole purpose of school. What we are seeing today, however, is that schools are often more inclined to avoid risk than create opportunities. Secondary school recommendations are becoming narrower, there are fewer comprehensive junior secondary programmes, transitions remain a hurdle, and selection thresholds have been raised. High-educated parents compensate by contacting the teacher or school principal, talking to their children about educational options, helping them with homework, and paying for tutoring and exam preparation and remedial courses – all things that they are better equipped to do and can better afford than their low-educated counterparts.

This is certainly not the result of a deliberate policy, but of a series of complex factors over a longer period of time, and not only at schools. That is why we cannot view this as an educational issue alone, and certainly not as a problem faced by individual pupils and students. It is a broad social problem. What we need, then, are broad social solutions.

Renowned American sociologist Robert Putnam, who wrote about the opportunity gap in his book *Our Kids*, says that studying social mobility is like an astronomer studying the stars: you see what happened many years ago, not what is happening now. Inequality can grow without it being obvious, in other words. And that is what makes it so difficult to change. How can we make education an incubator for talent again? And ensure that every pupil who has the desire and ability can take the next step along the path?

We can change the structure of education, for example by making the final primary school examination less absolutist, by training teachers not to be biased in their assessments, and by helping them resist parental pressure. We can encourage comprehensive junior secondary school programmes (financially), continue to encourage pupils as they work their way up through the academic system, and encourage schools to offer homework classes. These were in fact actions undertaken by the equal opportunities coalition that I set up in the wake of the Education Inspectorate's alarming report. More opportunities for pupils to work their way up through the system, more cooperation, comprehensive schools and programmes, and more

collaboration with other partners, from child and youth workers to local employers: this is how we can support youngsters and give them the self-confidence they need to make the most of themselves.

We also need to address the issue of educational level, in which a persistent opportunity gap between low-educated and high-educated feeds social inequality. In the emerging contours of a class society, pupils in preparatory vocational secondary education – VMBO in Dutch – are very conscious of being at the bottom of the hierarchy. That is certainly painful when the crowning glory of a pupil's eight years of perseverance is a recommendation to enter VMBO, in the same way that a barely passing mark may be evidence of tremendous motivation – or of someone capable of much more who couldn't be bothered. A class society based on educational level exists in part by virtue of the value that we attach to cognitive skills, particularly literacy and numeracy. But if we want our education system to do justice to what people are capable of and to what they are, we need to move towards a broader approach to learning, towards an education in which knowledge, skills and *Bildung* – the process of personal and cultural maturation – are more evenly balanced and have equal value. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls it the 'capabilities approach'. What are people capable of? What options are realistic for them? How do we encourage individual talents, even when they don't slot neatly into the system?

But even these changes are not enough. We need to do more. We will not only have to change the way we teach, we will also have to change the way we live as a society: *Bildung* and citizenship have become more important than ever in education. We will have to teach young people to venture outside their comfort zone and to look beyond the boundaries of their own 'timeline', to understand that *one* story is never the *only* story.

We have invested in citizenship education in recent years. *Bildung* has become a prominent part of a new investment policy in higher education, critical citizenship has been added as an important skill in vocational education and training, and citizenship has become a more important part of the curriculum in primary and secondary education. We also offer teachers guidance on how to teach citizenship, because it involves more than simply learning about parliament and the rule of law. The point is for pupils to learn critical thinking, to examine their assumptions and what is happening around them, and to look at things from the other person's point of view. There are many different ways to learn these things, but the arts and culture are indispensable to that process. The arts and culture introduce pupils to a different

way of expressing themselves and being in the world, for example not only through sport but also through music or dance. A solid grounding in the arts and culture not only introduces children to beauty, it also challenges them to develop a creative, inquisitive attitude, a flexible and open spirit, and to see the world through the eyes of others. That is why a good grounding in the arts and culture is indispensable to encouraging citizenship.

Equally relevant is to learn about other cultures, about history and about how people co-exist. Young people therefore need to learn not only school subjects but also about themselves in relation to the world around them.

‘Whether or not they have made the world we live in, the young must learn to be at home in it, to be familiar with it,’ said Eleanor Roosevelt. ‘They must understand its history, its peoples. Their customs and ideas and problems and aspirations. The world cannot be understood from a single point of view.’

Part of that learning must involve talking about the rights, duties and responsibilities of citizens towards one another and towards society as a whole. It isn’t always easy to have these conversations, especially when values and convictions clash. For example, where does my freedom end and yours begin? Is what’s good for me good for others too?

These are questions that are raised everywhere: on the job market, in the football club, on the street, in the neighbourhood, and at the campsite. Young people must have the opportunity to practise at school – the ultimate democracy in miniature – what it means to co-exist in a free and open society.

Incidentally, the capabilities that I’ve mentioned here are not only important for citizenship but are also increasingly being cited as twenty-first century skills. Encouraging pupils and students to empathise with others, develop a moral compass, think critically, get a feel for the unwritten rules of the workplace – these are the very factors that prepare students for society and the jobs of the future. And these too are paths through which education can create opportunities.

If we want to do justice to what people are capable of and to who they are, then we need to recognise not only the mastery of cognitive skills but also creativity, the ability to work with others, resilience, curiosity and perseverance, because they are all important elements of citizenship. These capabilities are crucial to empowering young people to think in terms of

opportunities rather than limitations. They are indispensable to their developing a feel for the context in which they work, and an awareness of their role and responsibility in that context.

In other words, education is not just about the labour market and personal growth. It also helps to train engaged citizens. It produces engaged citizens who provide the power and oxygen that sustains our democracy. The urban planner who not only knows about the technical aspects of developing a cultural centre but also has ideas about social cohesion in neighbourhoods. The traditional ‘standard-bearers’ such as police officers, teachers and nurses, who have to keep reinventing themselves because their authority is no longer accepted without question. Sociologist Richard Sennett is right to say that skills are not just a box of tricks. Twenty-first century skills are not merely a recipe for a flexible all-round worker.

The way in which people use generic skills in society is always tied to their personality and attitude and embedded in the context and ‘ethics’ of a profession, responsive to the demands of the setting or situation and tied to someone’s definition of ‘good’ work.

Think, for example, of the artist who worked with researchers and physicians to develop a skin graft based on spider silk, which turns out to be a good supporting structure for growing new skin for burn victims.

There are many ways to shape the connection between knowledge and social cohesion, but no one can do it alone. Cooperation is crucial and that is why it is such an important part of citizenship. And no one can do it ‘out of the blue’, so role models are essential. They can inspire and offer guidance to youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds and show them how much is possible if they seize the opportunities that come their way. In her study *The Transcendent Child*, Lilian Rubin shows why some children transcend their social class while others do not. According to Rubin, the meaningful outsider is a crucial factor. That may be a teacher, or a sports coach, or a neighbour who sees potential in a child and encourages its development. Role models can inspire children to pursue their dreams and show them how much is possible if they seize the opportunities that come their way. I like the fact that so many professionals and business people across the Netherlands are involved in extracurricular and after-school initiatives such as the Weekend School, Jinc, the Urban Academy and Studio-Moio. Young people enrolled in these programmes meet their heroes and heroines, their role models, and are inspired by them to try things they had never thought of before.

And conversely, young people who come from completely different backgrounds can use their own experience to inspire and help others to overcome existing barriers. For example, when we help refugees get an education, not only do we create opportunities for them but they in turn create opportunities for other students –the opportunity to learn about themselves and to look at their own reality through another person’s eyes.

I told you about the refugee students who I met as the vice-chancellor of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. What moved me personally was not only their enormous drive and tenacity, but also how, through them, the regular Dutch students got to know the world of refugees. They saw that even people from entirely different backgrounds can learn a lot from each other; they learned that it takes unbelievable courage to chart your own path and that freedom should never be taken for granted; they also saw that people their own age, who had lost everything, still had the discipline to spend a week studying for an exam.

They sometimes found these stories very confrontational. And an experience like this *is* very confrontational for students. They suddenly see an unfamiliar world up close. It forced them to leave their comfort zone – a crucial facet of *Bildung*. I think such experiences are critical to learning to empathise with others. Refugee students literally carry the international world to the doors of the university.

Our laureate today, Mardjan Seighali, carries that world with her too, and is an inspiration for others. The work undertaken by Mardjan and the UAF is part of a long tradition in which academic institutions not only serve as incubators but also as sanctuaries for knowledge workers, artists, professionals and intellectuals. In many cases it was their critical attitude, creativity or independent thinking – qualities that we nourish in *our* students – that led to their being the first to flee a dictatorship or war-torn country. For centuries, countries and academic institutions that *are* free have taken in refugees and migrants, many of whom have enriched society.

The Jewish family of Spinoza, one of the greatest philosophers the Netherlands has ever known, fled here from Portugal in the sixteenth century.

The writer Kader Abdolah, who has authored 15 books in incomparably nuanced Dutch, fled Iran to escape the ayatollahs.

Dancer Michaela DePrince was adopted from Sierra Leone by American parents and is now a soloist with the Dutch National Ballet.

At age eleven, Tigranne Hakobjan fled to the Netherlands with her mother from Armenia and is now studying commercial economics.

Aram Hasan ended up in the Netherlands 15 years ago as a Syrian refugee, completed his medical studies thanks to the UAF, and now offers psychiatric counselling to traumatised refugees.

And although Amino Ali Obead from Somalia had to get used to the Netherlands, she learned the language and now works as a pharmacist's assistant so that she can build a better future for herself and her children.

Yes, even Marten and Oopjen, you know those famous paintings by Rembrandt that were purchased jointly by the Dutch and French governments four years ago (and about which I will not bother you anymore about the political and diplomatic ins and outs that I have experienced, except that I was happy with that joint purchase; such a collaboration fits into a European tradition), were refugees. From Antwerp to the Dutch republic in their case.

And ... there is another example Not long before the aforementioned Spinoza, Comenius arrived in the Netherlands as a refugee.

After a protestant revolt in Prague failed in 1618, the Catholic Habsburgs tightened the ropes. Comenius, who sympathized with the protesting Protestant nobles, had to go into hiding, and after Protestantism was finally banned and punishable, he fled his native country to Poland in 1628.

The tragedy of his life was that he could never return after the peace arrangements of 1648, when the Czech countries remained under the influence of the Catholic Habsburgs.

In 1656, again after acts of war in Poland this time, he was invited by Laurens de Geer to settle in Amsterdam, which he also did.

The Amsterdam of its time accommodated many religious and political refugees who have enriched the city and culture with their ideas and presence. As a resident of that city, I am proud of that; as administrators of the university of applied sciences and university of that city, I have tried to continue to stimulate that thought, and as a current fellow citizen, working in the government city of The Hague, I am trying to make my contribution to that philosophy, knowing that it is under pressure.

And our laureate today, Mardjan Seighali, fled Iran and paid a high price, as she was forced to leave her family behind. But her tremendous willpower enabled her to take charge of her life and grow into a leader and communicator, into an active and engaged citizen, and into the director of the UAF.

Mardjan and all the others I mentioned came not only to get something for themselves but also to give something in return. They gave back to our society and enriched it with their new outlooks, new skills, and new networks. With their beauty. With their courage. With their inventions and ideas. Imagine if we had shut the door on them.

We must cherish this. Let education be more than the domain where we gain knowledge; in the spirit of Comenius, let it also be an incubator for citizenship and co-existence and a safe haven for dissidents and exiles.

Teachers play an essential role in all this. They can encourage citizenship and social cohesion in their teaching. And coincidentally or not, it was precisely for that reason that I introduced a grant programme, the Comenius Teaching Fellow Grant, in my previous capacity as Minister of Education. The teachers of today are educating the future standard-bearers of our values. They are influencing and sustaining the generation that will be helping to maintain our society in the not too distant future. Once they assume their place of leadership, the students of today will face complex situations involving multiple possible truths.

Today's teachers are preparing their pupils and students for this eventuality. That makes heavy demands on their skills. But skills alone are not enough. Education is changing constantly. That means that teachers also have to be innovators and inventors. They must be given – and they must claim – latitude to be curious, engaged, creative and inquisitive, together with their fellow teachers *and* their students. I regard Comenius as an important source of inspiration in that respect. He was a seventeenth-century innovator. His idea of connecting and showing students the relationship between disciplines was very new. He was a fierce advocate of continuous learning pathways. He believed in lifelong learning. And he was ahead of his time in using pictures, maps and other visual aids, because he believed that children learn not only from words but also from real-life examples. It was in that spirit that I established the Comenius Teaching Fellow Grant, to give twenty-first century teachers and academic leaders latitude to innovate and improve their work. The award-winning teachers are members of a Comenius Community in which they inspire and learn from one another and

work on innovation, progress and social cohesion – a Community of teacher-inventors, teach-innovators and teacher-crusaders.

The Netherlands has always been home to freethinkers and creative spirits. We are not only a country of merchants and clergymen, but also of artists and inventors. Our nation derives its stature from a successful combination of cooperativeness and pragmatic problem-solving – we might also call it creative pragmatism, or practical creativity. Whatever we call it, we're still good at it.

Our society is based in part on the talent, ambition and tenacity of nurses, IT professionals, economists and artists who left their homes behind and built a new life here, and in doing so not only took care of themselves but of us too.

Population groups are like disciplines in that regard. It is important for them to cross paths and intermingle – at school, on the playing field, in the neighbourhood, and everywhere else. We need to recognise the added value of the other and, for example, to stop thinking of refugees as people who have come here to get something; we must also see them as people who have something to contribute.

Comenius was an educationalist, so it is appropriate to emphasise teaching in a prize that bears his name. But that is not the only reason. Comenius was also a reformer, a theologian and a philosopher. His message transcended education. We can think of education as society in miniature, reflecting all of society's themes – and anyone who did not know this already certainly knows it now, after the success of the Dutch TV show *De Luizenmoeder* – but in fact, the themes that Comenius addressed in reference to education also apply in every other social community and are, in fact, universal.

What is essential is to create opportunities for everyone, to have the opportunity for personal growth whatever your background, and to learn to co-exist in harmony even when opinions differ.

That is not always easy, but it is necessary. There is much at stake in the divided world in which we live, at school, in the job market, in healthcare, in cities and in the countryside. What hangs in the balance is nothing less than our future. And while we don't all have to think alike in that future, we should respect one another, we should be curious about the world of others, and we should understand that no one has a monopoly on the truth. We need incubators in which to debate and dissect, assess and discuss such essential values as equality,

justice, solidarity and uniqueness. If we forget that, we would be robbing ourselves of a great deal.

In the spirit of the laureate and the organisation for which she works, the UAF, let me therefore close with a quote by one of the world's most famous refugees, in fact probably the most famous 'refugee professional': Albert Einstein.

In October 1933, with Nazism on the rise and just a few days before his departure for the United States, he addressed a packed Royal Albert Hall in London. He said:

'If we want to resist the powers which threaten to suppress intellectual and individual freedom, we must keep clearly before us what is at stake, and what we owe to that freedom which our ancestors have won for us after hard struggles.

Without such freedom there would have been no Shakespeare, no Goethe, no Newton, no Faraday, no Pasteur and no Lister.

There would be no comfortable houses for the mass of people, no railway, no wireless, no protection against epidemics, no cheap books, no culture and no enjoyment of art at all.

It is only men who are free, who create the inventions and intellectual works which to us moderns make life worthwhile.'

History has revealed the truth of Einstein's words. Let us nurture knowledge, defend freedom, and protect those who are under threat. That is how new incubators of knowledge and understanding arise. And yes, sometimes this leads to an insight that turns the world upside down, like Einstein's theory of relativity. More often, however, patterns of cooperation, of engagement, emerge: incubators in which new forms of co-existence – of freedom and solidarity – are developed. The laureate is a perfect example of that. In the spirit of Comenius.

Let us cherish that, keep remembering, and continue to actively shape in the future. Incubators of citizenship occur everywhere; in education, social organizations, work, politics and just in the contacts around us. That's why I like to end up with an assignment for you and myself; cherish, and organize those special places, small or large, wide or narrow, locally or internationally. Without that exchange of knowledge and fears, of ideas and desires, and of experiences and hope, we remain trapped in our own right. And we see enough of that today.

More than ever, we need incubators for citizenship. Incubators that cross geographical boundaries, but also philosophical and sociological boundaries, as well as physical laws. To make the boundless and the unthinkable conceivable.

To keep connecting what binds us; being human.