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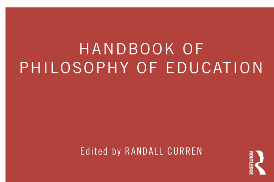

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15

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY: WHAT *SHOULD* IT MEAN?

Gina Schouten

On the face of things, the social ideal of equal educational opportunity is a broadly unifying one, especially in the United States. Many of us prize equal opportunity generally (McCall 2013), and education is integral to that ideal (Howe 1997). But, as others have pointed out, this appearance of unity is more apparent than real, and the broad commitment to equal educational opportunity masks deep *dis*agreement about just what that ideal calls for (Coleman 2012; Howe 1997; Jencks 1988; Temkin 2016). That's because there is no *one* social ideal to which fans of equal opportunity refer when they invoke that slogan. Instead, diverse ideals with widely divergent political implications go under that heading, such that those across the left-right spectrum can claim that their suite of policy commitments advances equal opportunity. This is no less true once we narrow in on education. This chapter considers some apparently plausible interpretations of equal educational opportunity and ultimately defends one – what I'll call "radical educational equality" – as an ideal of educational justice genuinely worth striving for.

We can distinguish conceptions of equal educational opportunity along several different dimensions (Westen 1985). I focus on two. First: *How demandingly egalitarian* is equal educational opportunity? Second: What does it favor equalizing opportunities *for*? By mapping it along these two dimensions, I stake out what I take to be a plausible and coherent interpretation of equal educational opportunity. That interpretation shifts our thinking about equal educational opportunity from a matter of equal opportunity *for* education to a matter of equal opportunity *through* education. I argue, finally, that we can make the ideal of equal educational opportunity helpfully action guiding by distinguishing between *what it is to realize educational justice* and *what reasons for action educational justice gives us here and now*.

I focus on primary and secondary schooling, and what equal educational opportunity should mean in that context. In considering equal educational opportunity as a family of *principles* or *ideals*, I don't definitively answer any normative questions about what *policies* we should embrace in those contexts. Such answers require not only ideals or principles but also *rich understandings of the facts on the ground*. This chapter is about the ideal of equal educational opportunity that I think should *guide* answers to normative policy questions, which questions also rely on empirics that this chapter will largely not engage. In closing, however, I do briefly address the question of how the ideal I defend can provide helpful guidance.

In actual political practice, the ideal of equal opportunity can often serve to excuse starkly *unequal outcomes*. For that reason, it's easy for leftists and progressives to get fed up with this ideal that can mean such different things to different people but seems almost never in practice to yield

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*meaningful*equality. My brief is this: We should not give this ideal over; rather, we should fight for the *right* interpretation of it, and then fight to realize it.

15.1. How Demandingly Egalitarian?

A first tempting answer to the question of what equal educational opportunity requires invokes the democratic ideal that differential treatment requires justification (Jencks 1988). Assuming students are all *equally entitled* to the goods of education, equal educational opportunity might call for equal *treatment* understood to mean that *equal resources* should be invested in each. This "*equal inputs*" standard is more complicated than it seems, because the most educationally important resources are themselves complicated goods—difficult to quantify and measure, and imperfectly correlated with dollars spent. A teacher might prefer to work in a suburban school with relatively advantaged students even if she could (hypothetically) earn a higher salary at an urban school serving less advantaged students; if so, a fixed amount of funding will purchase a less valuable educational input at the disadvantaged school than it does at the privileged school. A further complication is that schools are unequally well-situated to exploit economies of scale. Several suburban schools might share an educational specialist – a music teacher, for example, or an expert in teaching non-native-English-speaking students – who rotates among schools over the course of the school day. Rural schools will have more trouble managing such arrangements because schools are farther apart. For these reasons, the measure of dollars spent per student is a quite rough proxy for valuable educational resource inputs.

In any case, the equal inputs ideal isn't an ultimately plausible understanding of equal educational opportunity. In very unequal societies like the United States, equalizing educational inputs across students does not translate to equal educational opportunity. Students arrive at school unequally prepared to make good use of educational resources. This unequal preparation is due in large part to differences in social class, which can give rise to educationally-salient differences among children in terms of their health, neighborhood structures, security, and stimulation outside of schools, and in the childrearing strategies their parents deploy (Lareau 2003; Rothstein 2004). For any set amount of per-student resources, then, some students will flourish and others will flounder, and this unequal preparation is due to unequal educationally-salient opportunities outside of schools. Against this backdrop, an equal inputs strategy of educational provision will do little more than reinforce unequal opportunities that already exist.

In an influential paper on educational justice, Christopher Jencks notes these problems with equal inputs as a conception of equal educational opportunity, and considers alternative construals of that ideal, all of which license some inequalities in *inputs* to respond to or offset differences among students in terms of their preparation to learn or other seemingly relevant criteria (Jencks 1988). One possibility is to allow educational resource allocation to track *students' effort*. Especially when we think about the most fine-grained level of resource allocation – teachers allocating their time and attention in individual classrooms – we might think that students who work hard should be rewarded with extra educational investment. This is a construal of equal educational opportunity because it directs us to *equalize* educational resources *conditional on* equal effort. And, to be sure, differences in effort are often salient considerations for the purposes of theorizing just allocations of resources. For example, plausibly, adults who spend relatively more time working and relatively less time on leisure are, other things equal, entitled to a greater share of the rewards of work than those who spend relatively *less* time on work and *more* on leisure. The idea that rewards should track effort is deeply embedded in much thinking about equal opportunity as a principle of justice: We want to equalize *opportunities*, not *outcomes*, precisely so that individuals can make their own tradeoffs between work and leisure. Separately, we might have the pragmatic aim of rewarding effort so as to *incentivize* it. But our commitment to equal opportunity is generally coupled with a principled conviction that those who work hard within a fair system of social rewards are *entitled to* the rewards they gain by virtue of their effort and deferral of leisure.

But, like equal inputs, this "*moralistic*" construal of equal educational opportunity is ultimately implausible. Whatever we think *generally* about conditionalizing access to social goods on effort, I've argued elsewhere that such conditionalization is misplaced when it comes to the social good of primary and secondary education (Schouten 2012a). Students are not fully-formed agents whom we are right to hold deeply responsible for their choices. They are *agents-in-formation*. Part of the purpose of education is to help them develop into adults who *can* rightly be held accountable for their choices. Sometimes, that will mean basing treatment on effort. For example, teachers might rightly praise students for working very hard, so that those students can come to value hard work. But teachers should do so only insofar as it serves *developmental* purposes – insofar as it constitutes an investment in students' development into mature agents.

This example relies on a distinction between principled and pragmatic cases for conditionalizing treatment on effort: We have a *principled* case only when effort really does influence what students are entitled to. We have a *pragmatic* case when rewarding effort serves extrinsic ends that we have reason to value. I am here denying that there is a good principled case, in primary and secondary education, for conditionalizing treatment on effort. But that denial is *consistent with* there being a *pragmatic* case. Teachers may praise hard work if habituating students to be hard workers serves the students' own interests. But pragmatic considerations justify conditionalizing treatment on effort only within the parameters set by students' *actual educational entitlements*. Withholding a privilege for developmental purposes is one thing. Withholding valuable educational resources, like instructional time and attention, is inappropriate assuming students are entitled to equal opportunity along *some* dimension or other.

Defenders of the moralistic construal of equal educational opportunity might rejoin that the principle calls for favoring hard-working students only when doing so comes at no cost to others. But this rejoinder is unsatisfactory. Schooling involves allocating scarce resources among students. Any allocation will impose costs on some – and confer benefits on others – relative to alternative feasible allocations. We can agitate for more funding for education, and teachers can work to make their instruction a positive sum game. But for any amount of resource or resource capacity, tradeoffs among students will need to be made. The task of a principle of educational justice is to guide us with respect to those tradeoffs. Moralistic equal opportunity allows allocation choices to be made on the basis of calculations about student effort, and in so doing fundamentally misunderstands a morally significant fact about childhood: Children should not be held responsible for converting educational resources into actual meaningful goods. To make this vivid, consider the fact that education is mandatory in our society until age sixteen. We do not allow children to choose to forego the life outcomes which education enables them to attain, because we deem the outcomes so important and judge that children under the age of sixteen lack the necessary degree of agency to be held responsible for converting – or failing to convert – educational opportunities into positive outcomes (Harel Ben-Shahar 2016; Schouten 2012b).

So moralistic equal opportunity fundamentally misunderstands the role of responsibility attributions in determining children's moral entitlements. It also fundamentally misunderstands the role of education in *shaping* students' intellectual values and dispositions, and thus in *developing* their fitness to bear responsibility attributions. Just like other forms of academic preparation, inclination to exert effort and to value educational opportunities is itself largely a product of students' social circumstances – including social circumstances that schools can affect. So, inclination to exert effort is also an *output* of education. Education should not treat student effort as a fixed point to justify unequal educational investment, but as an aim of education itself. Whether or not students are taught within their families and communities of origin to value education, the schooling process itself should help them to develop into hard workers disposed to recognize and utilize valuable opportunities, educational and otherwise. Whether students have these skills and dispositions coming *into* schooling is a circumstance largely beyond their control; as such, it does not license unequal educational investment.

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In fact, a commitment to equal opportunity suggests not only that we should refrain from conditionalizing investment in students on factors outside of their control; it suggests that we should *offset* diminished educational opportunity due to factors outside their control. The intuitive pull of equal educational opportunity, after all, is that it's unfair for students to have less favorable life prospects due to unchosen social contingencies. This is just what makes *education* such an important site for thinking about justice in the first place: Schools are the institutions in society that seem best equipped to set students on equal footing with respect to all that will come after – to *equalize* life opportunities in the face of *un*equal starting points. This natural thought leads us to a conception of equal educational opportunity that favors *compensating* students for initial educational disadvantage: to put it colloquially, a construal that favors evening things out between students with educational advantages – for example, with lots of books at home and adults at leisure to read to them – and those without such advantages. This construal of equal educational opportunity is more progressive than those we have considered so far. To make it more precise, it directs us to invest educational inputs *un*equally so as to achieve more equal educational *outputs* – for example, to draw the most experienced teachers to the schools serving the most disadvantaged students so as to improve their access to learning compared to the students who are already – on average – relatively well set on that front. The aim is to break the link between social class background and subsequent educational achievement – in opportunity terms, to enhance the opportunities of disadvantaged students to attain the goods to which education serves as a gateway by offsetting the influence of social class background on learning.

At its heart, the ideal of equal opportunity reflects an aspiration for a social system in which individuals' position reflects the choices they make and the effort they exert – a system in which life prospects are less about circumstances beyond our control and more about the choices and behaviors that are in some morally relevant sense *due to us*. I think this aspiration captures the sense of equal opportunity *across* the political spectrum, but that upon reflection, it pushes us toward the more progressively egalitarian construal of that ideal just described. In describing that construal just now, I focused on the aim of offsetting *social* disadvantage – the educational disadvantage characteristic of kids whose caregivers must work long hours that limit time for play and reading, for example. But notice that, if we care about mitigating disadvantage due to circumstances beyond students' control, we have as much reason to mitigate *naturally-caused* disadvantage as *socially-caused* disadvantage. We have as much reason, for example, to act with special concern for a student who struggles in school due to a naturally-caused hearing impairment as we do to act with special concern for a student whose hearing impairment results from environmental injustice (Schouten 2012b). As John Rawls makes the case, "[t]here is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune" since social contingencies and natural abilities are "equally arbitrary" from a moral point of view (Rawls 1999: 64–65).

If Rawls is right that social contingencies and natural assets are equally morally arbitrary, that's plausibly because both equally fall outside of individuals' spheres of responsibility: We no more control our natural endowments than the social circumstances into which we're born. This suggests that a construal of equal educational opportunity that favors offsetting *only* social disadvantage is unstable: The equal opportunity case for offsetting social disadvantage *also* favors offsetting *natural* disadvantage, and on the same grounds. Insofar as we found the case for progressive equal educational opportunity compelling, then, we should feel compelled to go yet a step further. Equal educational opportunity favors offsetting social *and* natural disadvantage: investing extra resources *not only* in those students whose prospects are low due to their social class background, *but also* in those whose prospects are low due to their *natural* endowments, like innate intelligence.[1] Call this principle "radical educational equality": Educational resources should be distributed so as to favor disadvantaged students with disproportionally large shares of educational resources – whether those students' disadvantage is due to unearned social circumstances or unearned natural circumstances – so as to break the link between

students' unchosen social and natural circumstances – including effort level – and their subsequent educational achievement (Brighouse & Swift 2014; Harel Ben-Shahar 2016).

In his audit of equal educational opportunity principles, Jencks considers a version of equal educational opportunity equivalent to radical educational equality, but he rejects it on the grounds that it constitutes a principle of equal educational *outcomes* rather than equal educational *opportunities*. He has a point. Once we acknowledge that among children, effort should be regarded as itself unearned – as due to just the sorts of background contingencies that equal opportunity directs us to neutralize in order to "level the playing field" – it does begin to look doubtful that radical educational opportunity approves any educational inequalities at all. But, contra Jencks, this observation is not a reason to reject radical educational equality as a construal of equal educational opportunity. Equal opportunity, and the motivating insight that it aims to codify, may simply be more stringently egalitarian than many have presumed (but see O'Neill 1976). Plausibly, *equal opportunity* for some goods requires competitors to be *equally positioned* at the outset of competition for those goods – and *equal positioning* entails some degree of equality of condition along some dimension. If this were true anywhere, it would be true along the dimension of primary and secondary education. As Harry Brighouse argues, "the intuition which gives this principle its appeal is the idea that it is unfair for some people, through no fault of their own, to have a worse start in life than others, especially with respect to the basic skills and information required for living a full and rewarding life in a modern society" (Brighouse 1995: 415; see also Cohen 2008: 60; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Temkin 2003; Arneson 1989). Educational justice matters in large part because education serves as a gateway to later life course goods including income and wealth, further (competitive) educational opportunities, secure jobs, health and longevity, and social status. Because of its position as a gateway to these rewards, a fair distribution of educational goods for students is one that promotes equal opportunity in the competition for the rewards that accrue *outside* of schooling.

Universal provision of education has long been regarded as crucial to ensuring that all have a fair shot to compete for unequally distributed social and economic rewards. If universal *provision* isn't enough to ensure fair competitions for those rewards, then we should conclude, not that something has gone wrong in our understanding of fair competitions, but that an ideal of fair competitions for life course goods turns out to have more robustly egalitarian implications for education than we might initially have thought. Indeed, our political discourse reflects this change, to an extent: In the domain of compulsory education, we no longer talk about equal access; instead, we talk about troubling inequalities in output: achievement gaps between students' learning, as measured by conventional indicators like standardized tests, along lines of race and social class. If educational justice consists in equalizing opportunities in the *subsequent* competition for social and economic advantage, then the fact that radical educational equality calls for equal educational outcomes is no grounds for rejecting that principle. Equal educational *outcomes* are crucial to ensuring equal *opportunities* in competitions subsequent to education.

15.2. In Defense of Radical Educational Equality

Suppose it is true that, even if equal opportunity turns out to be more demanding than we thought, we should not on that basis conclude that we have arrived at a misunderstanding of what equal opportunity calls for. Still, you might think – and plenty have argued – that under those circumstances we *should* start to doubt that ideal is worthy of pursuit (Wilson 1991). If equal educational opportunity really does require equal outcomes along some educational metric in order to secure equal opportunity for subsequent life course goods, perhaps we should reject the ideal of equal educational opportunity altogether. For one thing, it seems impossible to realize. So long as students arrive at school vastly unequally prepared to learn – as they will do so long as severe injustice outside of schools persists – schools cannot equalize their educational achievement (Rothstein 2004). Radical educational equality seems utterly unattainable.

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But it is no mark against a principle of educational justice that it is not fully realizable so long as other social institutions remain deeply unjust. This is a fact that we must contend with in non-ideal theorizing. Compare social inequities and higher education admissions. One might sensibly think – I don't say it's true – that a just system of admissions for colleges and universities should ideally be fully race- gender- and class-blind *and* result in equal representation across race, gender, and class. But because of systemic social injustice, this is currently unattainable. We might favor one of these outcomes and sacrifice the other or aim for some balance that sacrifices a bit of each. That doesn't mean we were wrong about what we should want; it means only that some local ideals are unattainable when global injustice persists.

A deeper problem for radical educational equality lurks: Even granting that the ideal is impossible fully to realize, it calls for radically favoring disadvantaged students in the allocation of educational resources, up to the point at which students are equally well educated. This includes, plausibly, investing disproportionally in students with serious cognitive impairments and severe social disadvantage with the aim of *equalizing* educational outcomes between them and their more advantaged peers. At this extreme, disproportionate investment in the less advantaged appears tantamount to *depriving* the *more* advantaged. This can easily seem unfair to the more advantaged. Moreover, at some point, disproportional *educational* investments in disadvantaged students might not work to those very students' *ultimate* advantage. At some point, plausibly, it will be *ultimately* better for the worst off that education develop and orient the human capital of the most talented, whose later pursuits could benefit all of us.

Some theorists respond to these worries by giving up on equality – of opportunity or otherwise – and instead embracing *adequacy* principles of educational justice. Defenders of adequacy principles argue that we should not construe the justice aim of education as requiring that we *equalize* students' educationally; all that is required is that we educate all students so that their prospects are *good enough* (Anderson 2007; Gutmann 1999; Satz 2007; Tooley 1995). Adequacy theories demand that educational resources be distributed so that everyone has a level of educational success adequate for some specified level of functioning in society. Adequacy theorists differ in their criteria for an adequate education, but argue, against equal opportunity in education, that ensuring everyone is adequately educated is all that justice demands. Because adequacy is less demanding than equality, it avoids many of the worries that radical educational equality provokes. Above and below the threshold for an adequately good education, inequalities are irrelevant from the perspective of justice. What we owe to those students who have unfairly diminished prospects for attaining positive life course outcomes is not that we bring them up to the level of their more advantaged peers, but that we educate them *well enough*.

But the apparent objections to radical educational equality can be met without resorting to a less demanding adequacy principle. To see how, we need to distinguish between, first, the *considerations that inform* what we should do, and, second, *what we should do* once *all* relevant considerations are taken into account. Plausibly, promoting equal opportunity is only one part of what primary schooling should do, and thus only one among the considerations that should inform schooling policy (Brighouse & Swift 2008, 2009; Temkin 2016: 257). If that's right, then we can't point to cases in which *it would be bad* to promote equal educational opportunity without regard for other considerations and infer from those cases that equal educational opportunity doesn't matter. We can surely infer that it is not *all* that matters; we cannot infer, however, that it is not the right way to construe educational justice as one among the things that matter. Considered within this context, radical educational equality can simply disavow the apparent counterintuitive implications regarding over-demandingness (Brighouse & Swift 2009; Harel Ben-Shahar 2016). When educational justice comes into conflict with other values, it must be balanced against them. But observing that values can be in tension with one another under some circumstances does not compel us to reject any among those values. Equal educational opportunity may call for equal educational outcomes as

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radical educational equality holds, but the need to attend to other considerations constrains how far we should pursue that ideal.

Beyond equal opportunity, we should care about equipping students to serve capably and ethically in the positions of service and leadership throughout society (Anderson 2007; Callan 1997; Gutmann 1999). And we should care that all students are safe, cared for, and stimulated in school, and that schooling contributes to, rather than detracting from, their enjoyment of childhood wellbeing (Brighouse 2005; Macleod 2010, 2016). These considerations constrain the extent to which we should, all things considered, divert resources from the most advantaged students to the least advantaged. Radical educational equality may indeed require depriving advantaged students if we cared *only* about equal opportunity. But thinking about equal opportunity as *one among* the considerations of educational ethics enables us to defend radically demanding conceptions of equal educational opportunity without those conceptions shipwrecking on alleged implausible implications (Brighouse & Swift 2009).

15.3. Opportunities For What?

I wrote in the introduction of this chapter that I'd stake out a particular construal of equal educational opportunity by mapping it along two dimensions. In the first section, I considered the question of how demandingly egalitarian equal educational opportunity really is and argued that a radically egalitarian principle is most in keeping with the motivating insight of that ideal. I now want to consider the second dimension and explore its connections with the first. What are the opportunities that equal educational opportunity ought to be construed as regulating?

We *might* think of equal educational opportunity as demanding equal opportunities for *academic* outcomes. In embracing *radical* educational equality, we see that equal *opportunity* collapses in its demands into equal *outcomes* – and, given the motivation for it, that collapse is not a liability. This means that when we turn to the question of how to construe the opportunities, equal opportunity for *academic* outcomes effectively means *equal academic outcomes*.

But academic outcomes are an unappealing way to construe the opportunities that matter for equal educational opportunity. Even holding in mind that we're theorizing *only one consideration* bearing on normative questions about education, it's implausible that the value of equal educational opportunity fixates so narrowly on academic outcomes. And, properly construed, equal educational opportunity can call for equal *outcomes* without calling for equal *academic* outcomes. For the purposes of theorizing educational opportunity, we should measure advantage and disadvantage using a metric of all-things-considered life prospects, rather than short-term academic success (Brighouse 2000; Schouten 2012b). This includes prospects for realizing *all* the goods that add up to a flourishing life: for example, the ability to derive meaning and purpose from making a contribution to society, the ability to maintain social relationships that bring meaning and enjoyment, or the ability to devise and pursue personal projects that one finds stimulating and expansive or even just enjoyable (see Curren & Metzger 2017).

Like my case for radical educational equality, my case for construing opportunities in terms of all-things-considered life prospects draws on the motivating insight of the principle itself. A metric of all-things-considered life prospects coheres with our reasons for caring about equal educational opportunity. Justice in education matters because of the strong correlation between education and later life course outcomes. When we think about educational advantage and disadvantage, then, we should think beyond test scores and college readiness. We should think about the constituents of ultimately good lives to which education is a gateway.

This point helps us connect the question about the demandingness of equal opportunity with the question about the nature of the opportunities it regulates. On a metric of *academic* success, radical educational equality might indeed call for a tremendous redirection of resources away

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from the academically most gifted. After all, elevating the SAT scores of the most socially- and naturally- disadvantaged to the level of the most advantaged would fully exhaust educational resources and then some. But that's not the right way to think of the "equal outcomes" that radical educational equality calls for. If equal outcomes are to be construed instead as (roughly) equal prospects for leading good lives, then radical educational equality plausibly requires significant investment in the most academically gifted students. This investment may focus, for example, on expanding the skills of highly promising students and orienting them in ways that raise the likelihood that they will subsequently deploy their skillsets to the advantage of the least advantaged (Schouten 2012b). Meanwhile, direct educational investment in the least advantaged need not aim exclusively at elevating their academic outcomes. Raising their prospects for leading good lives might mean ensuring that their schooling be supportive of their emotional and social development, that they have opportunities to develop meaningful and rewarding friendships, and that they learn to enjoy intellectual pursuits. In short, by shifting our focus from equality of academic accomplishment to equal prospects for living good lives, we can expand the range of educational strategies on offer for investing meaningfully in the prospects of disadvantaged students (Schouten 2012b).

I argued in the previous section that radical educational equality does not have the implausible implications its opponents charge it with because equal educational opportunity is only *one* consideration bearing on normative questions about education. Now we can see that radical educational equality avoids many such alleged implications *even when equal educational opportunity is considered in isolation*. That's because students' life prospects are interdependent. If we cared only about equalizing *academic* success, we might have to invest massively in the disadvantaged to the point of depriving the better off. But if we care about equalizing life prospects *generally*, then insofar as *everyone's* life prospects are enhanced by investing in the more advantaged, equal educational opportunity, even taken alone, approves that investment.

15.4. Equal Opportunity *Through* Education

We have narrowed in on a particular construal of a principle that, in slogan form, commands near universal appeal. I have tried to motivate a principle of equal educational opportunity that regulates opportunities for living good lives and that effectively entails equal *outcomes* along that dimension. In short, I've endorsed a principle of equal educational opportunity that directs us to equalize students' prospects for living good lives.

My arguments for this construal effectively urge a particular re-orientation toward thinking about the value in question. Rather than thinking about equal educational opportunity in terms of equal opportunity *for* education, I've been nudging us toward seeing equal educational opportunity as equal opportunity *through* education: toward thinking of educational justice as a requirement for fairness in children's life prospects *generally* (see also Lazenby 2016; Temkin 2016). I now want to motivate that re-orientation directly. Equal educational opportunity is a crucial ingredient for realizing social justice broadly, and it requires radical educational equality.

At its heart, I've suggested, the appeal of equal opportunity lies in the conviction that it's somehow unfair when some enjoy considerably less favorable life prospects than others through no fault of their own. In the context of education, *all* disadvantage should be regarded as arising through no fault of the one suffering it: Even if children should be held responsible for *some* purposes, they should not be held responsible in any way that justifies withholding educational benefit. So, were we simply to implant the ideal of equal opportunity into education, we'd arrive at a construal of equal educational opportunity that demands equal academic outcomes.

But the appeal of equal educational opportunity is not redeemed simply by implanting that broad ideal into schools; rather, the appeal comes from appreciating the importance of education *for securing*

the broad ideal. This distinction may seem to split hairs. But it suggests that, even independently of the arguments so far developed in this chapter, construing equal educational opportunity as equal opportunity *through* education is congruent with our reasons for caring about equal educational opportunity in the first place. Education equips students with the skills and dispositions to build valuable lives for themselves. Because the broad ideal of equal opportunity favors each of us enjoying equal opportunities to build valuable lives for ourselves, and because education is the common vehicle by way of which we're prepared to live valuable lives, equality of opportunity favors education equally preparing all students to live valuable lives. In this way, the broad ideal has radically egalitarian implications for education, but those implications do not amount to importing the value wholesale *into* education: They don't amount to requiring that schools preserve fair competitions *for academic outcomes*. Rather, equal educational opportunity – equal opportunity *through* education – means securing the educational prerequisites for equal opportunity to obtain broadly. That means pursuing radical educational equality *and* it means measuring educational equality in terms of prospects for living good lives.

Now, in urging us to consider equal educational opportunity as equal opportunity *through* education, I effectively introduce a new bit of work for us to do: Theorizing equal educational opportunity now requires a conception of *general* equal opportunity. We can find one such conception in John Rawls seminal theory of justice. In developing his account of equal opportunity, Rawls first considers a principle that he ultimately – and illuminatingly – rejects as too weak: a principle that he calls "careers open to talents." Careers open to talents is a minimal, legalistic construal of equal opportunity. It requires that all of us have "the same legal rights of access to all advantaged social positions" (Rawls 1999: 62) – that favorable positions are allocated even-handedly *given the existing distribution of qualification*. But careers open to talents imposes no requirements of fairness in opportunities to *become qualified* – it requires "no effort to preserve an equality, or similarity, of social conditions" (Rawls 1999: 62; see also Schaar 1967; Young 1994). If we award positions by merit but tolerate social obstacles to some people *acquiring* the kind of merit in question, then we won't have achieved genuine equal opportunity on the dimension we have reason to value. To put it more colloquially, if what we care about is neutralizing the effects of our undeserved "starting points" – "levelling the playing field" so that our prospects aren't so affected by the lot we're born into – then we have to care not only about opportunities *for positions* but also about *developmental* opportunities: opportunities to acquire the skills and dispositions that make us qualified for positions. *That* is why education is so crucially important for equal opportunity on the *right* construal.

Rawls rejects careers open to talents in favor of a more demanding construal of equal opportunity. On this construal, equal opportunity requires that "positions are to be not only open in a formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them" such that "those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances" (Rawls 1999: 63). Among other things, this requires "maintaining equal opportunities of education for all" (Rawls 1999: 63). To this end, Rawls goes on to say, "the school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barriers (Rawls 1999: 63).

Rawls's principle of equal opportunity, which he calls "*fair* equality of opportunity," envisions mobility across social divisions. Importantly, achieving this vision requires contributions from different social sectors. Education plays a pivotal role in securing fair equality of opportunity. But, for Rawls, it can do that work *only if* inheritance and bequests are regulated to prevent large accumulations of wealth across generations. That's because of the role that intergenerational transfers of privilege play in sustaining educational advantage and disadvantage. As Rawls puts it, "the internal life and culture of the family influence, perhaps as much as anything else, a child's motivation and his capacity to gain from education" (Rawls 1999: 265). Only if wealth is broadly dispersed can educational institutions have any hope of educating students to enjoy fair equality of opportunity

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(see also Curren 2017). To recall, this is one reason we should not reject radical educational equality on grounds of its being impossible to realize: We can secure the educational prerequisites for equal opportunity *only if* other institutions are doing their share – share only if our inheritance and bequest law is broadly dispersing material and thus human capital. In capitalist societies wherein wealth and opportunities concentrate in the hands of a few, we should *expect* a principle of justice in education to be unrealizable. By contrast, in the institutional structure Rawls favors, "The emphasis [of institutional cooperation] falls on the steady dispersal over time of the ownership of capital and resources by the laws of inheritance and bequest, on fair equality of opportunity secured by provisions for education and training, and the like, as well as on institutions that support the fair value of the political liberties" (Rawls 1999: xv).

15.5. The Ideal to Realize and The Way to Realize It

For Rawls, it seems, a just society is one wherein early developmental inequalities are kept in check by various institutional mechanisms for distributive justice, and wherein egalitarian educational institutions render inert the developmental inequalities that remain. But plausibly, when other institutions fail, educational justice has yet more evening out to do. This means that, when we turn to the question of *what equal educational opportunity tells us to do*, we should expect the answer to depend strongly on facts on the ground: on what inequalities exist and what other institutions are doing about them. Equal opportunity *through* education means equalizing the educational prerequisites for leading good lives. So long as other institutions are unjust, that can't fully be accomplished, certainly not without running afoul of other values.

I think equal opportunity is the right ideal by which to measure educational injustice. But I think that when it comes to questions about *what we should do*, we'd be better guided – including guided in ways that help us come closer to realizing equal opportunity – by Rawls's *other* principle of distributive justice. The difference principle favors the social arrangement with the highest floor: the arrangement wherein the worst off are better off than they could be under any other arrangement. Practically speaking, and applied to schools, "the difference principle would allocate resources in education … so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored" (Rawls 1999: 86–87; see also Parfit 1997). Rawls goes on:

> If this end is attained by giving more attention to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not. And in making this decision, the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth.
>
> *(Rawls 1999: 87)*

I don't endorse the difference principle on Rawls's terms exactly. In particular, I don't endorse the *absolute* priority of the *very* worst off relative to others who are nearly as badly off. But I think that any social sector that wants to promote egalitarian justice – and that must work against failures in other institutions, and that faces dire tradeoffs between egalitarian justice and other values – has good reason to adopt a prioritarian approach. Education is a social sector that *must* promote egalitarian justice broadly; educational justice is indispensable for social justice. Here, in sum, is how I think we should understand its role: Education *is just* when it equalizes students' prospects for leading good lives. This ideal is unattainable, at least for now. But we can pursue it – and we can pursue it in a way that is robust across changes in the (in)justice of other institutions – by working through education to improve the prospects of the least favored. In crafting and evaluating education policy, we should

attach moral weight to students' interests in proportion to how badly off those students are, measured by their prospects for living good lives.

(Related Chapters: 3, 6, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 33, 34.)

Note

1 The principle I endorse here treats social class background and natural endowments as analytically distinct but morally equivalent, and thus as calling for the same response when it comes to educational justice. That means my principle avoids the problem of needing to distinguish among sources of educational disadvantage in practice. This is a welcome feature of the principle, because we lack broadly applicable measures for discriminating between acquired and innate aspects of intelligence. IQ scores do not reliably track differences in natural ability but are largely a product of cognitive exercise. See Flynn 1987; Neisser 1998.

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