

The Equality of Opportunity Trap

The first step toward equity in education is to recognize that students do *not* have equal opportunity.

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Equality of opportunity is an ideal whose time is past. It may have served a progressive social purpose when first articulated by Thomas Jefferson in the late 18th century; however, accepting equality of opportunity as a desirable social goal in 1985 helps confound attempts to formulate coherent social and educational policies and programs that promote equity.

Although legal equality (one person, one vote; equal justice under the law) seems to be broadly accepted in the United States as the best means of promoting and preserving political equity, the ideal of social and economic equality has yet to be clearly agreed upon. In industrial and commercial institutions, equality of opportunity

reigns supreme as an ideal to be strived for. Society, so it is argued, is best served when each person has the right to compete on equal footing for its benefits: prestige, wealth, celebrity, and so forth. It is further argued that because of equality of opportunity the United States is a meritocracy, a land where children, no matter how humble their origins, can as the result of their own talent and diligence grow up to be anything they want to be. In this argument, a meritocratic society is held to be an equitable one because people earn their "just desserts" through their own efforts. Many people believe the meritocratic process begins with a person's achievements in school.

Help for Poor Geniuses

Taking the ideal of equality of opportunity at face value, one straightforward way of attempting to ensure social equity would be simply to confiscate, after their death, all the wealth people had amassed during their lifetimes and distribute it equally among the surviving members of society. Thus, it would be in everyone's interest to encourage those in each generation who find fulfillment in amassing wealth to do so. At the same time, this would help prevent the children of these wealthy individuals from having opportunities that are denied to the children of janitors, teachers, and others of humbler means. This scheme acknowledges that the actual

existence of equality of opportunity in society is of central importance if the contention that equality of opportunity best ensures social and economic equity is to have any validity at all. After all, idiots have been born into wealthy families and geniuses into poverty. In a democratic society that aspires to social equity via equality of opportunity, it is not only unseemly but dangerous to allow wealthy morons to have limitless economic advantage and social opportunity while poor geniuses may never realize their potential for want of opportunities. Such a state of affairs would clearly make a mockery of merit as a basis for success and would be patently inequitable. My plan would militate against such distortions in the meritocratic order because it would help to ensure that all citizens could compete with each other for economic and social rewards on an equal footing without something as irrelevant as parental wealth getting in the way.

I suspect that my modest proposal is not likely to be adopted in the foreseeable future. Skeptical readers will no doubt correctly identify numerous practical and philosophical problems. Many of these criticisms I would probably share. However, the principal virtue of my scheme is not its conceptual purity nor its practical possibilities but its outlandishness. I have taken the ideal of equality of opportunity about as far as I can go within the framework of U.S. society as it now exists in order to raise a question: if the radical confiscatory inheritance taxes envisioned by my proposal cannot reasonably be expected to produce equality of opportunity in U.S. society, then is it reasonable to expect that schools can produce it?

Professional Self-Delusion

Surely, it is absurd on the face of it to argue that the opportunities available to students (even good students) graduating from the vast majority of U.S. high schools or colleges and universities are equal to the opportunities that were open to William F. Buckley, Jr., Nelson Rockefeller, Henry Ford, or Ted Kennedy, for example, as they began their adult lives. To pretend

additionally that a public education system, in which the amount of money available to educate each student can vary by thousands of dollars among school districts, is capable of producing such equality of opportunity is an exercise in professional self-delusion. Sadly, however, this is precisely the delusion that the education profession has, over the years, tacitly if not explicitly supported. I contend that the education profession is implicated in the perpetuation of social inequity if it continues to present itself as the social institution through which equality of opportunity is to be realized, and to accept the mantle of guardian of the so-called American meritocracy.

None of this is to argue that educators should despair or that there is nothing we can do. An important and positive task would be to analyze school practices in terms of equity to further clarify the nature of equity in an educational context. Such analysis can also extend our understanding of how social and educational inequities are related one to another.¹

The sort of professional self-study I propose is neither abstract nor impractical. I believe it is, however, essential if the education profession is to stop implicitly perpetuating inequities it could never explicitly support. To return to the concept of equality of

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opportunity, try to imagine a school program based *explicitly* on the principle of equality of opportunity *as it functions* in our society. Imagine a school where:

- No extra time could be spent with students with learning difficulties.
- Successful students could get more nutritious lunches and more comfortable seats in the classroom.
- Students who did well got extra attention and could bequeath this extra attention to their younger brothers and sisters.
- Only students in P.E. classes who achieved a certain level of performance could use the locker room.
- No curriculum or instructional changes because of different learning styles were allowed.
- Successful homework assignments and test scores could be inherited.
- All instructional materials were purchased by the students, and any student who could not afford those materials had to do without them.
- Students could visit the school nurse only when they had purchased all their instructional materials.

Finally, imagine a school superintendent and board members who, when confronted with parents and children who pointed out the unfairness of these practices, responded to those parents and children that they were being envious of their betters and that since each child had an equal opportunity to compete for the benefits of the school program, the program was indeed fair.

Absurd, you say. There are things people should not have to compete for—even if they have an “equal opportunity” to do so.

Exactly. The choice facing educators is whether to work to reveal this absurdity or continue to obscure it. □

¹For an excellent example of the kind of analysis I am proposing, see Jeanne Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

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