

Dialogue When We Have No Reason to Listen: School Choice and Equal Educational Opportunity

Sigal Ben-Porath

University of Pennsylvania

School choice is viewed by many — including egalitarians, libertarians and a host of others — as a productive policy for pursuing a host of valuable goals. Kristen Davidson suggests that equal educational opportunity (EEO) is among them, and prefaces her essay with the important question, what is a worthy goal of schooling? I focus my response on considering whether school choice is designed to accommodate diverse answers to this question, and suggesting that it may be less accommodating — by design — to some of the views that Davidson finds among her research subjects. As a result of this structurally constricted view that school choice policies impose on families, they have little incentive to listen to others as they choose a school.

By questioning the unified notion of “quality schooling” and showing that it reasonably means different things to different parents, Davidson joins studies that investigate the reality of school choice and its normative consequences. She describes the considerations parents make during the actual process of choosing as data that should inform its theoretical framing. In a methodological move that should be integral to philosophical investigations, she offers a (small) dataset in support of what I understand to be a call for expanding the common theoretical framework on choice.

Let us consider her key findings: parents have different goals, or priorities, for their children’s schooling. Parents are “seeking the best,” “defending diverse schools,” and “preserving the neighborhood.” Parents can understand what they seek in multiple ways. For the “diverse schools” group, for instance, diversity is seen as a benefit that can outweigh school performance. It is notable though that what is seen as school diversity is perceived differently by different racial and ethnic groups. While white families express a preference for about 15 percent minority students in their children’s school, African-American parents tend to prefer that around 50 percent of their children’s peers would be children of color.¹ For parents “seeking the best,” diversity is a low priority and achievement trumps it. It is assumed that “the best” means the best learning outcomes, such as the best results on standardized tests, the best acceptance rates to the best-rated colleges and the like. Parents who are seeking “the best schools” tend to escape local neighborhood schools as they assume that peer effects have a significant impact on school performance. They further assume that with more affluent children attending the same school of choice the school would have better resources, and therefore would be able to better position their children in the race to the top of the charts.

It is easy to criticize, and even to sneer, at the relentless drive and misplaced ambitions of these parents. Especially when we focus on EEO as a starting point, it is easy to claim that “seeking the best” parents are not publicly minded, that they

practice unjustified (or excessive) forms of parental partiality, that they are “opportunity hoarders,” reserving for their children many resources and future promises that could better have been distributed among more children in the neighborhood.

But this criticism ignores two issues. First, the anxieties that these parents express are quite reasonable. Young adults’ educational and financial outcomes today have flat-lined as compared to their parents. The aspiration for constant progress — unrealistic and possibly hubristic as it might be — remains unfulfilled for current youth, and it makes sense therefore for their parents to invest as they do a growing percentage of their income and time in advancing their children.

Second, the effort to secure “the best” for their children is encouraged and even expected by the very premise of school choice. School choice policies are meant to provide parents with the opportunity to seek what they think is the best learning environment for their children, the place where they can thrive. If a family values a certain form of schooling, one that is in line with the official view of schooling as expressed in institutional design and countless official statements, if they aspire for their children to be “career and college ready” — who could blame them? They are buying into the system (if not in fact participating in generating its tenets), and the fact that they do it very well because of their prior education, social networks or additional resources is hardly shameful.

Moreover, the notion of EEO itself serves to promote this type of focus by the “seeking the best” parents. Opportunity, as a concept, means that there is a road, an open door. It does not mean that you are required to take this path, or that others who can share it must take it at the same time or in the same pace as you do. Hence the very notion of “opportunity” circumvents the demand for equality, and even more so it minimizes the demand for individuals to consider the effects of their choices on others in their community. If school choice is structurally organized to provide EEO for all, then individuals are encouraged to use the freedom given to them to promote their personal preferences. Even increased access to information, which seems like a solid way to improve the EEO outcomes of choice, only provides access to a narrow set of measures that is deemed relevant for the school choice process. The information presented about school standing encourages parents to consider first and foremost the school’s level of achievement. Those who are considering diversity, as well as those aiming to promote public goals, are thus (sadly) out of line with the policy’s design.

Davidson assumes that the increased de facto segregation that school policies engender impedes the EEO goals of school choice. While integrated schools (and neighborhoods) are material to the democratic functioning of society and to the preservation of civic equality, it is less clear that school choice policies are designed with any interest in the kind of equality for which integration aims. In seeking EEO they effectively neglect, and even negate, the search for public civic equality, and prefer over it the promotion of equality in the pursuit of predetermined personal aims. Davidson suggests that, “the most promising way to address those concerns is to ensure equal participation in articulating pathways to desired educational outcomes.”

But “dialogue across perspectives” is only going to work if the framing of the policy is amended to include other visions about what is worthwhile in education, and if the policy is able to accommodate a multiplicity of visions about educational aims, including not only private but also civic and social aims. Inasmuch as all it is meant to do is maintain the monochromatic vision of success as measured by standardized tests and postsecondary admission, and inasmuch as the most radical change that it aims for is allowing marginalized groups to participate in the same race, the dialogue is likely to defeat its own aims. While “deep listening” and cross cultural dialogue, as well as opportunities to express the unique views across and within different groups in the community, are valuable for achieving a more civically equal society, it is unclear how these dialogues would bridge the differing views on diversity in a way that can productively inform school policies. As the process functions now, one of the views — “seeking the best” — trumps the others, either through accepting the aggregate choices of individual families or through policies that prioritize certain families over others. Since the dialogue is designed to end with each parent pursuing his or her preferences without any structural relations among the decisions other than their aggregate outcomes, the incentives to listen to each other is minimized.

School choice is thus a policy framework that effectively rejects equality as a social aim altogether in favor of the aggregation of personal preferences. The equality that school choice policies seek to promote is the equality to participate in the pursuit of preset personal aims — preference-maximizing or “seeking the best” ones — that are inherently in conflict with those of the other groups of parents in this study. That is because the main opportunity that the policy allows is the opportunity to position oneself and one’s children in comparison to others on a spectrum (or ladder) of one-dimensional success. There is little room for parents to strive for alternative goals such as “Preserving the neighborhood” and “Defending diverse schools.” Those who pursue these aims are largely seen through the lens of school choice policy as misguided. The most generous interpretation of school choice in this regard sees it as a policy that aims to open the race (or the opportunity to climb the ladder) to those who previously were not able to participate. From an equality, or a democratic justice, perspective it is indeed more equitable to invite families who cannot pay private school tuition or move to a more affluent neighborhood to try and place their children in more successful schools. But the policy’s goal is not, and never has been, to include their perspective on what a good school might look like.

1. Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd, “School Choice, Racial Segregation, and Test-Score Gaps: Evidence from North Carolina’s Charter School Program,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 26, no. 1 (2007): 31–56.