

On Equality versus Adequacy: Principles and Normative Frameworks

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The *adequacy principle* as the criterion of a just distribution of educational resources came on to the scene in litigation in the late 1980s.¹ At about the same time, Amy Gutmann incorporated another kind of adequacy principle, as a criterion of political equality, into her more expansive normative theory of democratic education.² This distinction between a principle of distribution and the normative theory in which it is embedded should be kept in view. Thus, I will refer to Gutmann's normative theory as the *adequacy framework*. I will also apply this label to similar normative frameworks held by thinkers such as Elizabeth Anderson³ and Debra Satz.⁴

The adequacy framework places much greater emphasis on fostering political equality through education than on the equal distribution of material goods that flow from education. This difference applies both to the question of what is to be equalized and the level of equality that is required. The adequacy framework permits differences among the value placed on education by different parents to play out in democratic decision-making so as to result in certain educational inequalities, so long as a threshold level of political equality is attained for all sufficiently capable children.

The adequacy framework has met with considerable criticism from thinkers such as Harry Brighouse, Adam Swift, Robert Reich, and William Koski, whose views will serve as my foils as I fend off several challenges to the adequacy framework. I will also suggest that the alternative *equality framework* has serious problems of its own.

CHALLENGES TO THE ADEQUACY FRAMEWORK

Brighouse and Swift⁵ embrace a principle of educational adequacy but contend that it must sometimes be augmented and sometimes overridden by a principle of equality. In particular, they articulate a “meritocratic principle of equality of educational opportunity,” such that, beyond adequacy, educational inequality is permissible only if it results from talent and effort, not from sources such as race and socio-economic class. They are clear that educational equality will be in competition with other principles, against which it may need to be traded off, including a *prioritarian* principle that requires “improving the prospects for enjoying a flourishing life of those whose prospects are least.”⁶

Brighouse and Swift conceive the adequacy framework to be indifferent to inequality above the threshold level. Tracing out the consequences, they ask us to imagine a situation in which all of the children in a given school district have attained the threshold level but there remain additional educational resources to allocate. The adequacy framework, according to them, would permit allocating these resources to

those students most above the threshold, further increasing their educational advantage and producing injustice.

The adequacy framework does permit educational inequality to exist above the threshold, but Brighthouse and Swift neglect important details. In particular, the adequacy framework has built-in checks on the kinds and level of educational inequality permitted. Political inequality is limited to the level at which any increase would give those with the best education an advantage in democratic deliberation. Gutmann names this the “democratic threshold,”⁷ which is composed of “democratic character” — consisting of moral character and reasoning⁸ — plus mastery of other school subjects needed to effectively deliberate. Things like music and art do not go into the threshold: there is no requirement to devote extra effort and resources to ensuring children are raised to a threshold level who lack ability or motivation compared to higher performing children in these areas.

Because a level of inequality that would enable individuals to gain an advantage in democratic deliberation is prohibited, the basis for the objection to inequality short of producing such advantages is not obvious. If in Brighthouse and Swift’s example, the distribution of the additional resources resulted in violating the kind a degree of inequality permitted by the threshold, the threshold would have to be adjusted upward.⁹ The threshold is an exacting standard of adequacy that would require huge strides toward educational equality relative to where we are now.

This does not satisfy proponents of the equality framework. For, in addition to being a democratic good, education is also a *positional* good,¹⁰ importantly affecting access to other goods in the overall system of distribution, such as further education, employment, housing, income, and health. And the way a better education provides access to goods like further education and employment is a zero-sum game. For example, if A is in the running for a job and better educated B then enters the pool of applicants, A’s chance of landing the job is diminished. And this is unjust if B has come by her better education unfairly. The same thing is true of admission to competitive graduate and professional schools.

The charge against the adequacy framework vis-à-vis education’s status as a positional good is thus that its indifference to inequality above the threshold permits morally arbitrary factors, such as who children’s parents happen to be, how much their local community values education, and so on, to play a significant role in determining their shares of society’s goods.

THE ADEQUACY FRAMEWORK RESPONSE

The adequacy framework is not indifferent to material inequality, for equal citizenship cannot be realized if material inequality is not contained within certain limits. Foregoing the details, the adequacy framework might adopt parallel thresholds in employment, housing, income, and health care. Though this would not completely eliminate the problem of educational inequality, it would certainly render it less urgent.

However tentative and inchoate this suggestion might be, it should remind us of something important about education’s role as a positional good: that education

as a positional good is not a neutral sociological fact; it is a normative feature of the larger distributional scheme. As such, its role as a positional good must be examined and evaluated in developing a normative conception of educational equality in relation to the broader question of justice.

Now, consider Koski and Reich's¹¹ caution that the adequacy framework could prompt well-off parents to start an "educational arms race" aimed to raise their children's education further and further above the threshold of adequacy. Clearly, the adequacy framework I have described would not permit this. As indicated previously, the threshold is, contrary to Koski and Reich, not "absolute," but relative and subject to adjustment. Equal citizenship, the ability to effectively participate in democratic deliberation, what it takes to be able to complete a serious four-year college degree,¹² and similar ideas associated with the adequacy framework are all relative to the knowledge and capabilities of others.

In the real world arena of school funding policy, no doubt, an educational arms race could be the result of employing an *adequacy principle*, as distinguished from the *adequacy framework*. However, a parallel *equality principle* faces no less serious problems in preventing so inclined well-off parents from acting in ways that exacerbate educational inequality. In this vein, the equality framework is frequently criticized for sanctioning "leveling down" to an equally inadequate level of education for all, something the adequacy framework does not do. The leveling down charge does not stick at the level of the *equality framework* because of its adoption of adequacy as one constraint. But it does apply to the *equality principle* in the real world arena of school funding policy. Indeed, it is a particular threat in the current education policy environment in which well-off parents can choose public schools that provide an equal, leveled down baseline of public funding and then top up this amount through fundraising activities and direct donations. In a similar vein, well-off parents, whether intentionally or not, display the propensity to support the maintenance of educational inequality through the manipulation of the criteria of distribution. Sociologists have named this phenomenon "maximally maintained inequality" (MMI). By way of illustration, a recent study¹³ found that increased mathematics course taking prompted by the standards movement that followed in the wake of *A Nation at Risk*¹⁴ closed the gap between lower- and higher-SES students in the number of mathematics courses taken. However, higher-SES students maintained their edge in calculus courses as enrollment in calculus remained exclusionary. Calculus took on additional weight in college admission, permitting the advantaged to maintain their position.

As the two previous paragraphs suggest, an objection to how a principle might be interpreted and applied in the educational policy-making arena is not necessarily an objection to how it should be interpreted and applied per the normative framework in which is embedded. This observation is germane to several additional challenges to the adequacy framework advanced by Brighouse and Swift.¹⁵

Brighouse and Swift¹⁶ preface their critique of the adequacy framework by suggesting that, because of Anderson's¹⁷ and Satz's¹⁸ open embrace of non-ideal theory (and presumably Gutmann¹⁹ would qualify too) they should be particularly

sensitive to the real world context of policy-making. Brighthouse and Swift then present two test cases.

In the first, we are asked to imagine two reforms, both of which have a good chance of success if implemented. Reform A will improve the democratic character of the children destined to become the elite so that they are more responsive to the interests of those over whom they will have power. Reform A will also contribute somewhat to the upper mobility of the disadvantaged. Reform B will do nothing to improve adequacy as defined in terms of democratic character but will improve the prospects of the lowest 10% of achievers to obtain low-wage but secure jobs by improving their “soft skills.” Brighthouse and Swift’s intuition is that Reform B should be chosen over A. They contend, more generally, that other considerations, presumably the prioritarian principle in this case, provide a reason for choosing B over A.

Two responses. First, it seems clear that a threshold principle of job security can also provide a reason for preferring Reform B over A. Again, it is not possible to achieve the aims of the adequacy framework under conditions of marked material inequality. Second, the example presents us with a false dilemma. Why should we assume that just two reforms are possible with just these two kinds of results? It seems altogether possible that some version of Reform A, faithful to the adequacy framework, could integrate students as well as impart soft skills, and thus achieve both sets of results.

In their second example, for which they find some basis in the real world education policy arena, Brighthouse and Swift ask us to imagine a situation in which schools in a district are *de facto* segregated, and we are faced with a choice between two proposed policies. The first policy, integration, is required by the adequacy framework but will result in a substantial number of advantaged parents removing their children from district schools. The second policy foregoes integration but will not result in advantaged parents removing their children and will have a number of positive effects for less advantaged students, including reducing the achievement gap. Not surprisingly, Brighthouse and Swift opt for the policy that foregoes integration.

Again, there is no obvious reason why we could not reach the same conclusion based on threshold reasoning. But more to the particulars of this example, whereas the first example presents us with a false dilemma, this one is an Aunt Sally. We are presented with a case in which achieving one of the central aims of the adequacy framework is futile. Elizabeth Anderson, who has the most to say about integration among adequacy framework proponents, is very clear that integration must be implemented in the right way and under the right conditions to achieve the goals she sets for it.²⁰ And there is little prospect of that in the example provided here. Indeed, the very democratic incompetents that Anderson seeks to educate would be exiting the schools where this education would be supposed to occur.

The adequacy framework exemplifies a very ambitious form of non-ideal theory, to be sure. But unless its aspirations associated with integration are uniformly

out of the reach of human action, Brighthouse and Swift's example provides no test of it *qua* normative framework. Consider a parallel illustration. That implementing or preserving affirmative action in higher education admissions is now approaching futility in the United States does not settle the normative question in favor of the color-blind principle adopted by the Supreme Court. As an instance of non-ideal theory, the adequacy framework is grounded in and responsive to actual human circumstances rather than idealized circumstances. It does not thereby collapse into a kind of *realpolitik*, bereft of any independent normative perspective from which to criticize unjust practices. It is humanly possible to achieve integration and its goals per the adequacy framework,²¹ even if it is unworkable in Brighthouse and Swift's example.

Educational inequality is not unjust *per se*. We can hardly require everyone to study exactly the same things to exactly the same levels of performance. Setting such radical egalitarianism aside, educational inequality can be unjust in two ways: first, when it is undemocratic, as when schools fail to prepare children to effectively participate in democratic politics, and second, when it results in unfair distributions, as when it fosters illegitimate access to other goods, educational and otherwise. This second form of injustice is a consequence of how education functions as a positional good, above or alongside the threshold of adequacy.

It is not immediately clear how the equality framework, starting with the meritocratic principle of equal educational opportunity, can deal with either of these. But I will limit myself to the second. Consider what should go into college admissions decisions. The meritocratic principle requires that applicants be ranked based on demonstrated talent and effort, for example, as measured by the SAT, courses taken, and grades. Then applicants would be chosen from top-down until the available slots were filled. Although the ranking from which the selections are made should not be the result of race or socio-economic class, it is difficult to see how to determine what role they play and to thus eliminate them from admissions decisions per the meritocratic principle (a point I expand later).

Of course, the meritocratic principle is defeasible. We saw earlier that giving priority to improving the prospects of the disadvantaged may override the meritocratic principle. Moreover, in addition to being defeasible, the meritocratic principle is also limited in scope. As Brighthouse and Swift remark, "lots of ... educational inequalities are unfair in ways that meritocratic equality of opportunity does not make comment on."²² So, presumably the kind of injustice described above that is a consequence of education functioning illegitimately as a positional good could be ruled out on grounds other than failing to satisfy the meritocratic principle. And affirmative action could be defended on still different grounds, perhaps, improving the prospects of the disadvantaged. And so on for the "lots of other educational inequalities." One is left wondering just what value the meritocratic principle can have in the fair distribution of education.

Consider the meritocratic principle as applied to children.²³ Educational opportunities are things that can be passed up, as in "Ana had the opportunity to attend

Harvard but declined it, preferring to attend college closer to home.” But children’s educational opportunities cannot be approached in the same way, as in “Six-year-old Susan had the opportunity to learn to read but declined it, preferring to play hopscotch.” Susan would not be afforded such a choice, would not be capable of responsibly exercising it, or both. As Debra Satz observes, “The reading teacher aims to teach all the children in his class to read, even the lazy child. Moreover, society has an interest in securing certain achievements in all children who are capable of attaining these levels of achievement.”²⁴ The concept of equal educational opportunity must be viewed in terms of educational careers that include the achievement of numerous educational results, many, or most, of which are not chosen, and where the concept of merit has little place.²⁵ We would not be treating six-year-old Susan fairly if we deferred to her preference for hopscotch over reading or determined she had insufficient merit to be taught to read.

Scrutinizing the concepts of talent and effort leads to a related but deeper problem. The meritocratic principle is grounded in the belief that talent and effort are relevant qualifications for given opportunities. Given this premise, we should award opportunities based on identified talent and effort, not things such as race or socio-economic class. But the assumption that we can cull *natural talent* from the race- and class-based witches’ brew of previous opportunities, experiences, and family legacy that go into *developed talent* is exceedingly dubious.²⁶ And if we cannot distinguish natural from developed talent in practice, we cannot isolate it from the effects of race and socio-economic class, which we need to be able to do in order to award opportunities and positions per the meritocratic principle. The problem is no less pronounced in the case of effort. Indeed, we have a weaker attachment to the idea of a *natural* basis of effort, probably because more precise mechanisms to explain its development are known, such as *habitus*, social and culture capital, adaptive preferences, and the like.

To be sure, we can add the assumption that talent and effort are distributed equally across race and social class. And then we can go on to argue that because the observed unequal distributions of educational attainment across race and social class provide good evidence of inequality of educational opportunity to develop talents, we are obligated to take special measures to mitigate this inequality independent of, in addition to, or in conflict with the meritocratic principle. But this really does not help rescue the meritocratic principle from the challenge I am making to its usefulness. It remains disengaged from our judgments regarding the fair distribution of education because we are unable to identify natural talent as such.²⁷

One way to avoid (not solve) this problem is to move to a “radical conception” of educational equality that eliminates natural talent as a criterion and relies only on effort, on the grounds that individuals’ levels of talent are just as undeserving of reward as their race or socio-economic class.²⁸ Brighthouse resists this move and retains the meritocratic principle because of several problematic distributional principles he thinks the radical conception would sanction: leveling down and huge expenditures on children with cognitive disabilities. So, Brighthouse retains the meritocratic principle.

But I want to go further along this road that Brighthouse started down, past where he turned back. Rather than being too radical, the radical principle of educational equality may not be radical enough. As indicated above, in practice, if not also in theory, it is impossible to distinguish a level of effort from how it is produced by the myriad dimensions of the social and cultural environment. Thus, effort is no less undeserving of reward than talent. We are left, then, with abandoning talent and effort as criteria for the distribution of education except as they are entangled in the world of moral luck.

Following Anderson, the starting point for working out just arrangements in the non-ideal, unjust world that we inhabit is “the epistemological consequences of social inequality and segregation,” not “nature and genetics.”²⁹ This starting point supports a principle for distributing education that does not depend on meeting the impossible to meet requirement of culling out the natural sources of educational performance. Though it retains a general conception of merit grounded in relevant qualifications, it expands what counts as qualifications beyond the narrow limits of the meritocratic principle. I call this the “democratic conception of fair educational opportunity.”³⁰

Consider affirmative action in college admissions. Affirmative action is *prima facie* inconsistent with the meritocratic principle in cases in which the beneficiary of affirmative action is less qualified in terms of narrow criteria of talent associated with the meritocratic principle. Other grounds must be sought for affirmative action to justify overriding the meritocratic principle. The democratic conception of fair educational opportunity encounters no such inconsistency. The qualifications for positions are not confined to narrow meritocratic criteria but are tied to the position in question as defined by broader institutional aims, including the promotion of social justice. So, preferring a woman to an *otherwise equally or more qualified man* is justified if, for example, the woman can bring a perspective and provide a role model that could help dismantle patriarchy. How her capacities — her *durable developed talents* — might be related to some morally arbitrary antecedent causes is largely irrelevant in this case. And it would not necessarily change things if the woman in question came from privilege and the man in question from disadvantage.³¹ But it could, for example, if a *critical mass* had been reached for women in the student body but not for disadvantaged men.

Although decoupled from ideal theory and the associated concept of natural talents, the democratic conception of fair educational opportunity may be given a fundamentally Rawlsian justification.³² Differences in human capacities are not things that individuals can claim to have created for themselves and thus should not be put at their disposal to pursue advantages without regard for others. As products of human arrangements, under human control, education policies and institutions should be designed so as to recognize differences in human capacities that are brought to, and produced by, education and employ these differences for the benefit of all.

In this vein, the adequacy framework rejects the equality framework’s preoccupation with education as a zero-sum positional good, such that B having more and

better education than A guarantees that as B's access to other goods goes up A's goes down. Instead, education as a good grounded in equal citizenship requires that certain relationships exist among citizens that enable them all to effectively participate in social and political life. Creating and maintaining these relationships requires fostering tolerance, mutual respect, cooperation, and other skills that can only be acquired and honed collectively. Educating future citizens to be tolerant, respectful, and cooperative will not come at the expense of making others less well off. On the contrary, citizens who possess these democratic characteristics will not be disposed to use educational inequalities to unfairly gain other benefits. This still leaves plenty of room for, indeed requires, differences in educational performance — and, yes, merit, properly conceived — to serve as the basis for awarding positions and attaching differential rewards to them.

CONCLUSION

Proponents of the equality framework reject “equality monism,”³³ which is to say they do not embrace equality as the only value to be promoted in education policy. In this vein, the equality framework incorporates an adequacy *principle*. It rejects the adequacy *framework* because of its alleged indifference to important inequalities above or along side the threshold. Near the heart of the equality framework is the aim of rendering fair a zero-sum competition in which education, a positional good, provides access to other important goods, such as further education, employment, income, and health. And the meritocratic principle of equal educational opportunity is a central principle in the framework.

As promised, I have suggested that the characterizations of the adequacy framework provided by proponents of the equality framework are not always on the mark. The adequacy framework is committed to exacting standards of equality. Though it permits citizens who place a high value on education to devote more resources to it, creating certain education inequalities, it places strict limits on the degree to which these inequalities can lead to political advantage and, indirectly, to positional advantage in obtaining other goods.

Also as promised, I have suggested how the meritocratic conception of equal educational opportunity has serious problems of its own. It depends on the very dubious ability to isolate natural talent and the disposition to exert effort from the effects of the race- and class-related mix of previous opportunities, experiences, and family legacy. Because the meritocratic principle must be so frequently overridden or set aside, it has little usefulness in formulating or evaluating educational policies per the requirements of justice.

1. William S. Koski and Rob Reich, “When ‘Adequate’ Isn’t: The Retreat from Equity in Education Law and Policy and Why it Matters,” *Emory Law Journal* 56, no. 3 (2006): 545–615.

2. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

3. Elizabeth Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Approach,” *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 595–622.

4. Debra Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623–648.

5. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2009): 117–128.
6. *Ibid.*, 120.
7. Paralleling Gutmann's view, Debra Satz adopts political equality among citizens as the basis of educational adequacy. See Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship."
8. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.
9. Both Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, and Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education," explicitly make this claim.
10. Koski and Reich, "When 'Adequate' Isn't," also call it a "private" good.
11. Koski and Reich, "When 'Adequate' Isn't."
12. Among adequacy framework proponents, Anderson sets down a concrete educational threshold as the "minimum required to enable [students] to successfully complete a serious four-year college degree." See "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Approach," 615.
13. Thurston Domina and Joshua Saldana, "Does Raising the Bar Level the Playing Field? Mathematics Curricular Intensification and Inequality in American Schools, 1982–2004," *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 4 (2012): 685–708.
14. United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Printing Office, 1983).
15. Brighouse and Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy."
16. *Ibid.*
17. Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education."
18. Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship."
19. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.
20. See Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education," and written after Brighouse and Swift's critique in "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz"; and Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
21. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*.
22. Brighouse and Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy," 119.
23. Kenneth Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice Democracy and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); and Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship."
24. Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," 631.
25. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*.
26. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008).
27. Upon investigation, environment and practice (the "10,000 hour rule") explain outliers at the highly talented end of the spectrum, such as Mozart. See Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*. At the other end of the spectrum, we typically have a physical explanation, as in Down's syndrome.
28. Harry Brighouse, "Moral and Political Aspects of Education," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
29. Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education," 621.
30. I take "fair educational opportunity" from Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education."
31. In this vein, Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, refers to the talented and otherwise advantaged who also benefit from affirmative action and can serve as "agents of justice" to help overcome racial injustice.
32. Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education."
33. Koski and Reich, "When 'Adequate' Isn't."