

Deschooling Adults

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Let us accept the set of premises and conclusions Francis Schrag proposes, along with his assertion that some kind of a voucher system is the means to achieve the ends he identifies. For this system to be fair, the state must regulate the distribution of educational opportunity in ways that differ from — and for factors unrelated to — those Schrag considers.

If the concern of the state is to allocate resources for opportunities to learn *in order that* citizens achieve their visions of flourishing, there should be grounds to believe that these opportunities will be accessed and distributed such that they will, in fact, lead to flourishing. If such grounds do not exist, there is simply no reason for the state to allocate the resources under the premises of Schrag's argument. Put simply, distribution of opportunities to learn must be based on an individual's ability to benefit from the opportunity offered.

Note, though, that the argument is not that some learners merit more or less resources than other learners based on their relative abilities to learn. The argument here is not about the fairness of the relative distribution of resources for learning; it is about whether or not there is a reason to distribute the resources in the first place.

While the capacity of an individual to use educational opportunities to achieve his or her vision of flourishing depends on many factors, some are relevant to the liberal state's interests and others not. First, if the individual is to use learning to move toward his or her vision, he or she needs to understand and be able to make an argument that there is a plausible connection between a given opportunity to learn and his or her vision of flourishing. If the vision does not include anything relevant to the knowledge conveyed in, say, a graduate program in economics, the state ought to be able to deny resources to support this endeavor.

Second, in some cases, because it is necessary in some situations to possess certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes to learn from particular types of opportunities, participants should be required to demonstrate that they have acquired them; neither successful and meaningful participation nor learning that would actualize participants' visions of flourishing is likely without these prerequisites. To use an example from Schrag's paper, since Robin Bhalla has not demonstrated that he has the habits of mind to benefit from a liberal arts education, he should not be able to use his voucher to pay for one. To access resources for learning from the state, one should be ready to make effective use of the opportunity in question.

On the other hand, certain factors are not relevant to a person's ability to make meaningful use of an educational opportunity, and the state (and those offering educational opportunities to learners) ought not limit a person's access to opportunities on the basis of these factors. Here, think of the usual factors banned from consideration: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. However, there are factors beyond these that are irrelevant but which are commonly used today to limit

educational opportunities; under Schrag's argument, to deny a citizen resources or the access needed to learn on the basis of these factors would violate the standard of equal regard.

As Schrag observes, there is no reason to believe that a mediocre secondary school student would carry this performance into a different type of learning environment. Here, I take environment to mean (and I think Schrag does, as well) both the context and the content of learning. A student who performed poorly in the context of a traditional American high school classroom may do well in a pottery studio. And there is no reason to believe that a person who performs poorly at one skill or in one discipline may perform poorly with respect to a different type of skill or in a different discipline. If Johnny cannot do long division, the state should not deny him the opportunity to learn to play the flute or study southern gothic literature.

Other factors — all related to Schrag's observation that schooling and education are often viewed mistakenly as one and the same — are not legitimate bases to limit access or distribution. For example, Schrag himself limits access to resources to those who are over eighteen years old and who have completed compulsory schooling. These are illegitimate grounds for denial. A twelve year old may be ready to benefit from post-secondary educational opportunities and may not be making progress toward his or her vision of flourishing due to lack of access to appropriate educational opportunities; if he or she possesses the relevant skills, knowledge, and prior experience to take advantage of postsecondary learning opportunities, the length of time he or she has spent in school or learning is irrelevant, as is age. The state should not deny appropriate educational resources.

Also, in keeping with the spirit of Ivan Illich and John Holt, we can argue that grades received, tests taken, achievement of a particular number of course credits in a certain number of subject areas, and receipt of a diploma all occur under conditions of compulsion, in contexts and within relationships that a young person is forced to enter into (in other words, in schools before the child reaches a certain age) and hence are not necessarily accurate representations of a student's abilities to benefit from postsecondary educational opportunities.¹ If a person can demonstrate possession of the skills, knowledge, and experiences needed to benefit from a postsecondary educational opportunity and that this opportunity is necessary to help them enact their vision of the good, to deny them access to relevant educational resources is to violate the standard of equal regard. Decisions about access to postsecondary educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of how well a person has learned to play the school game or their willingness to play it, unless the game in question is more schooling of the same kind. Schrag mentions in his paper individuals who have flourished in intellectual endeavors despite never having completed or even entered college. To take this one step further, high school dropouts may prove to be excellent scholars.² Schools have no monopoly on the production of learning, and for many young people the environments they offer rule out rather than support educational progress.³

Some additional modifications must be made to Schrag's arguments so that resources for learning may be distributed fairly; these modifications focus on

providers of learning opportunities such as institutions of higher education. Providers must be able to demonstrate that the programs they offer are designed such that if a student exerts reasonable effort, he or she can expect to acquire the knowledge and skills that led him or her to the program in the first place. Otherwise, the state has no reason to believe that the resources it expends on the student's behalf will be used to help the student move toward his vision of flourishing.

Now recall Bhalla and his peers, and imagine the university has accepted vouchers from the state for their education. If it is routinely the case that students are *able* to behave as Bhalla and his peers reportedly do, at the same time that the university avows to the public that learning is taking place (remember, Bhalla made the dean's list), then the university has in effect claimed that these students have acquired a liberal arts education and the ability it grants to achieve certain visions of the good — something clearly not true. As Bhalla and many of his peers recognize, it is often the case that the effective function of the university is not to provide an education — it is to certify that individuals have the right to compete for certain occupations and professions and consequently to access particular visions of the good life that the earnings from those positions carry. Credential inflation — which requires that students accumulate more and more years of schooling to compete with one another in the job market even though their schooling is largely irrelevant to job performance — requires the state to expend more and more of its resources over time to assist citizens in achieving their visions of flourishing.⁴

When universities and students are complicit in this process, the state has a legitimate right to refuse to distribute vouchers to them. Yet this creates problems: if employers continue to hire based on the credentials distributed in these and other institutions of higher education, the wealthy would have access to certain jobs (and visions of flourishing) unavailable to the less well-to-do, which is problematic given Schrag's argument.

The solution is not to eliminate universities altogether; some individuals do need them to acquire the education they can provide. Instead, as Schrag suggests, we must sever schools from credentialing altogether. Yet the only way for this to happen, according to Illich, is for the state to legalize hiring on the basis of credentials. Hiring must be made on the basis of the actual knowledge and skills possessed. While Schrag does not come to this same conclusion, I think his arguments nevertheless lead us to the same point.

1. John Holt, *Instead of Education* (Boulder: Sentient Publishing, 2004); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

2. In the case of someone under eighteen years old, we might put in place additional requirements, such as demonstration of the capacity to make informed and reasoned decisions about what one's vision of the good consists of.

3. See for instance, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), and John Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).

4. Illich, *Deschooling Society*; Randall Collins, "The Dirty Little Secret of Credential Inflation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2002), <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v49/i05/05b02001.htm>20.