



Equality of Educational Opportunity

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Abstract : It is widely accepted that educational opportunities for children ought to be equal. This thesis follows from two observations about education and children: first, that education significantly influences a person's life chances in terms of labor market success, preparation for democratic citizenship, and general human flourishing; and second, that children's life chances should not be fixed by certain morally arbitrary circumstances of their birth such as their social class, race, and gender. But the precise meaning of, and implications for, the ideal of equality of educational opportunity is the subject of substantial disagreement (see Jencks 1988). This entry provides a critical review of the nature and basis of those disagreements.

Key Words : Education, equality

To frame the discussion we introduce three key factors that underscore the importance of treating equality of educational opportunity as an independent concern, apart from theories of equality of opportunity more generally. These factors are: the central place of education in modern societies and the myriad opportunities it affords; the scarcity of high-quality educational opportunities for many children; and the critical role of the state in providing educational opportunities. These factors differentiate education from many other social goods. We follow this with a brief history of how equality of educational opportunity has been interpreted in the United States since the 1950s and the evolving legal understandings of equality of opportunity. Our subsequent analysis has implications for issues that are at the center of current litigation in the United States. But our philosophical discussion is intended to have wider reach, attempting to clarify the most attractive competing conceptions of the concept.

1. Equality of Educational Opportunity as an Independent Concern

Education has both instrumental and intrinsic value for individuals and for societies as a whole. As the US Supreme Court stated in its unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), "In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education". The instrumental goals of K-12 education for individuals include access to higher education and a constellation of private benefits that follow college education such as access to interesting jobs with more vacation time and better health care; greater personal and professional mobility, better decision-making skills (Institute for Higher Education Policy 1998) and more autonomy at work. Research further shows that

ISSN : 2348-5612 © URR





education levels are correlated with health and wealth: the more education a person has, the healthier and wealthier she is likely to be. At the same time, education is also considered intrinsically valuable. Developing one's skills and talents can be enjoyable or good in itself and a central component of a flourishing life, regardless of the consequences this has for wealth or health.

In addition to the instrumental and intrinsic value of education to an individual, education is also valuable for society. All societies benefit from productive and knowledgeable workers who can generate social surplus and respond to preferences. Furthermore, democratic societies need to create citizens who are capable of participating in the project of shared governance. The correlation between educational attainment and civic participation is strong and well-documented: educated citizens have more opportunities to obtain and exercise civic skills, are more interested in and informed about politics, and in turn, are more likely to vote.

It is therefore relatively uncontroversial to say that education is a highly valuable good to both individuals and to society, especially to democratic societies. This makes questions about who has access to high-quality educational opportunities, and how educational opportunities should be distributed, particularly important.

However one interprets equality of educational opportunity, a number of important challenges face anyone who believes that the ideal is a crucial component of a fair and just society. Several of these challenges are philosophical in nature. For instance, one can ask whether certain values (e.g., respecting family autonomy) compete with the demands of equality of opportunity in education in ways that trump or are trumped by concerns about educational equality. One can also ask whether equal educational opportunity requires affirmative action, and what it may require for students with disabilities and special educational needs. One can accept equality of educational opportunity with respect to some goods and adequacy of educational opportunity with respect to others (Callan 2016). There are other challenges that are not philosophical but practical, such as how we can convince policymakers to allocate sufficient funds to meet students' educational needs, and how we might increase public support for the ideal of equality of educational opportunity more generally.

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