

Give and Take: Parental Donations, Schools and Community

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In her examination of issues linked to community boundary disagreements and donations to public schools, Ranjana Reddy raises questions demanding a clear use of complex and contested philosophical concepts. In this response, I request clarification of community and equality which could usefully be explored in a little more depth. It seems that all countries struggle with the tension in education that results from the dual aims of excellence and equity. In wrestling with the requirements of gifted and talented children, I have explored what it is fair to provide for this group and how such provision impacts on everyone else invested in the education system. In the United Kingdom, administrative education boundaries affect provision, presenting us with the dilemmas described by Reddy concerning the extent to which parents should contribute extra funding in order to benefit their particular community. While the similarities are striking, the differences are perhaps more illuminating. I should outline some of these in order to situate my response.

In the United Kingdom, there is a long history of education based on social class with some of our most prestigious schools boasting a 700-year history. These exclusive (ironically named “public”) schools charge considerable amounts for their services. Less exclusive fee-paying schools exist, often with charitable status and dominated by the middle class. Most children however, attend comprehensive schools with a mixed demographic, variable in size, resources, quality and results. These are open access and state funded, some with extra money to compensate for local economic disadvantage.

A smaller but significant group of schools constitute the state funded selective system and are again characterised by the middle class. Parents are often strongly recommended to make voluntary contributions to help such schools. Parents are prepared to uproot their family and make sacrifices such as giving up a second car or vacation to ensure entry into these “good schools.” Once the child’s place is secured, parents are only too happy to make their annual minimal covenant contribution. We have the extra dimension of faith-based schools too, attended by children who may not practice the official religion of the school, but whose parents want them to have the benefit of, for example the superior library facilities, and scholarships provided by philanthropists. We have a system characterized by variable funding and restricted access to quality education. This is perpetuated by unfair selection criteria based on outdated laws and anachronistic physical boundaries. So we have related but different systems, with related but different concerns.

In terms of community, a clear definition is required as it may have policy implications. In Reddy’s paper, a moral community is referred to but it is not clear that this differs from other communities. Groups could come together for the pursuit of leisure activities, such as a community of scouts, a choir or dance troupe. There could be religious communities with shared values, or looser communities based purely on geographical location. Whether people’s geographical similarities are

based on deliberate choice or casual accident also affects the nature of the community their proximity has created.

Without being absolutely definite about the nature of community it could still be useful to describe the level of commitment felt by its members. Where would the communities Reddy describes lie on the spectrum of community? Would they be defined as thin or thick conceptions of community?¹ Making a statement about this may help to explain and define the nature and extent of the community's responsibilities. In terms of education, this could help in deciding the nature of provision. One distinction could be between basic and additional provision. To be acceptable to most people, education must at least make a serious attempt at ensuring basic literacy and numeracy. Even though this is an impoverished notion of education, beyond these basics, entitlement and responsibilities are more complex and controversial.

Equality is another difficult concept, immediately invoking the question "Equality of what?" In education, it is often assumed people are referring to equality of opportunity, but they could mean equality of resources or of outcome. In order to decide whether parental contributions to education offend against equality, we need to ask what type of equality we have in mind.

In the United Kingdom and the United States it is unusual to refer to equality of outcome as an educational ideal, yet in Northern European (the Nordic model) and in some parts of the Antipodes, equality is indeed characterized by outcome. Positively conceived, this results in the compensation of disadvantage, but what happens when the scheme is "too successful?" To provide equality of outcome, if the able disadvantaged outstrip their advantaged less able peers there is some logic in restricting their achievements. Equality of outcome can imply leveling down and whilst it seems counter-intuitive to hold children back, some schemes would advocate cutting down the tall poppy, in order to assure equality. Let us take the example of a child provided with extra classes to make up for a reading deficit whose origin stems from a disadvantaged background with a lack of books and parents with a low level of education. If the child takes to reading with ease and races ahead of her peers, she may be eligible to be entered for statutory tests earlier than the rest of her class. She passes the tests and is ready to be accelerated into the next year of schooling. This is disallowed as the district requires equality of outcome and does not permit students to be taught out of their chronological age group. She is a victim of her own success.

Perhaps it would be more useful to consider equality of resources. Providing everyone with the same amount of money for education seems an attractive ideal until we realize that people have different requirements. Some aspects of education are simply more costly than others. Training medics and engineers is more expensive than educating philosophers and mathematicians. Providing resources for the disabled is more expensive than for the able bodied because of the equipment needed for independence, mobility and access to further resources. These arguments are discussed in a series of exchanges in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, with Harry Brighouse questioning Wilson's notion that education resources should be

awarded to those who can “profit from them most,” but without a clear definition of the criteria for judging who these people would be.²

Most discussion about equality seems to focus, however, on equality of opportunity; also a woolly issue.³ Adam Swift identifies three understandings of equality of opportunity — “minimal,” “conventional” and “radical.” The “minimal” view holds that people’s gender, religion or race must not prevent them from opportunities in areas such as education and employment. The “conventional” view goes further, suggesting that not only should people’s competences be considered above their race, etc, but that they should have had an equal chance to acquire the competences in the first place. This echoes the meritocratic principle of reward for talent times effort, with the added dimension of aiming to assure a level playing field as a backdrop. Many people like this idea but balk at some of the measures that would have to be taken to ensure its realization, for instance restricting or demanding certain practices in the home, such as supporting children with homework. Without equalizing parental support, “conventional” equality of opportunity cannot be assured. The third conception of equality of opportunity is labeled “radical” and “requires that untalented children — whether rich or poor — should have the same opportunities as talented children,” which again would oblige the state to revise some deep-seated structures and values, such as the meritocratic aims it seems to hold.⁴

It is difficult to say exactly what is meant by equality of opportunity, as it is not even clear what opportunities are in question. By lowering the bar, we could be sure that all pupils have the opportunity to achieve the basic minimum. This implies that where possibilities exist for only some pupils to train for national level sports, or learn the piano, it would be better for all to be denied the chance in the name of equality. This seems counter-intuitive and ultimately unfair and I agree with Brighouse when he suggests that equality of opportunity is only a desirable ideal if qualified by other principles to keep it from undermining more important values. Ultimately, it may be necessary to embrace an inegalitarian approach to education, with the acceptance that decisions about funding carry with them more complexities than are at first apparent.⁵ Swift echoes this,

It is perfectly coherent to reject equality at the philosophical level, as a fundamental idea, while arguing that, for other reasons, resources should be more equally distributed — perhaps much more equally distributed than they are at present.⁶

Linking conceptions of both community and equality is the notion of fairness. This does not necessarily equate with an equal distribution of resources or automatic access to being part of a community, but both community and equality must avoid the negative concept of elitism in order to ensure fairness. (Perhaps there is a reasonable understanding of elitism as the best of something, such as an elite military force or an orchestra, but this is not the aspect under consideration.) What schools and communities must avoid is unfairness through unreasonable exclusion based on irrelevant criteria that could damage autonomy or well-being.

One disagreement I have with Reddy’s paper is her notion that public education should be evenly distributed, as it is a public good. Public goods should, where

possible, be distributed according to need and this may be uneven. Endorsing egalitarian provision could for example, result in no subsidy for Higher Education, unless a 100 percent take up could be guaranteed. What of tax breaks for parents, funding for the arts or public broadcasting? There are also further implications of limiting parents' contribution to their children's education. Other advantages that are a privilege of special family relationships could be affected, for instance music lessons and bedtime stories.

Thanks to Reddy for a paper that stimulated lively debate and raised some important and complex issues.

1. Terence McLaughlin, "Citizenship, Diversity and Education: A Philosophical Perspective," *Journal of Moral Education* 21, no. 3 (1992): 235-50.

2. Harry Brighouse, "In Defence of Educational Equality," in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 3 (1995): 416-20.

3. Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 91, 102.

4. *Ibid.*, 102.

5. John P. White "The Dishwasher's Child: Education and the End of Egalitarianism," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 28, no. 2 (1994): 180-92.

6. Swift, *Political Philosophy*, 92.