

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM ON EQUALITY AND ADEQUACY

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In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Brown v. Board of Education* that when a state provides children with an education, the opportunity to be educated “is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” For roughly two decades following the *Brown* decision, educational law and policy took as its lodestar the orienting ideal of *equality*, and violations of equality—unequal funding, unequal access, unequal protection, unequal treatment—provided grounds for litigation and legislation.

During the past two decades, however, the rhetoric and policy of equal educational opportunity has given way to the rhetoric and policy of providing an “adequate” education for all children. The concept of educational *adequacy*, rather than educational equality, now frames contemporary discussions about school reform among scholars, courts, and policy makers. The contested arena of school finance—the hobgoblin of virtually every state in the union, in which during the past thirty years no fewer than forty-five states have seen their school funding schemes challenged in state courts—provides the clearest evidence of this evolution in thinking. In school finance litigation, advocates and courts have frequently abandoned equality and adopted the language of adequacy. Educational finance policy, as Peter Enrich (1995) observed in an influential article, was “leaving equality behind.” Indeed, a common description of the current school finance scene is that we are in the midst of an “adequacy movement.”

The purpose of this special issue of *Education Finance and Policy* is to examine the twin ideals of equality and adequacy that have animated school reform in general and school finance in particular since *Brown v. Board of Education*. Much ink has already been spilled in analyzing the shift from equality to adequacy. So why a special issue on the topic?

Unlike the existing literature on equality and adequacy, the articles here are straightforwardly philosophical in orientation, and the contributors assess the shift from equality to adequacy in normative terms. A normative analysis matters a great deal, for equality and adequacy appear to be fundamentally different norms with very different consequences for school finance schemes.

The basic contrast between equality and adequacy is as follows: Equality is necessarily comparative or relational, while adequacy is not. To ask if somebody or something is equal, we must engage in a comparative evaluation. Does X have as much as Y? Is the outcome in situation A equal to the outcome in situation B? To ask if somebody or something is adequately well off, however, we need not make any such comparison; we simply identify what constitutes the level of adequacy and then make the appropriate allocation or redistribution of resources.

Gaining an understanding of the differences between equality and adequacy provides leverage, therefore, on answering some crucial questions of education policy: Are inequalities in input or output above a threshold level of adequacy permissible? When is unequal funding of students tolerable? Or perhaps unequal funding is required, allocating greater resources to the socially disadvantaged. But more generally, the articles here show that whether a state is required to provide and fund an *equal* education for all students or an *adequate* education for all students is a question not merely of constitutional interpretation but of social justice.

Each of the contributors to this special issue is a distinguished scholar, bringing philosophical expertise to bear on a topic normally seen as the domain of social scientists. The first three articles originated as conference presentations, where the charge was to provide a philosophical analysis of equality and adequacy and to illustrate the implications of the difference by considering a recent proposal called weighted student funding (WSF), which is gaining some policy traction in various districts and states.

Helen Ladd's article, "Reflections on Equity, Adequacy, and Weighted Student Funding," maps out the conceptual landscape of equality and adequacy and considers the complex definitional and pragmatic relationship of each to school inputs and outputs. While sympathetic to WSF and its equality orientation, Ladd thinks WSF ultimately is unrealizable. Debra Satz's article, "Equality, Adequacy, and Educational Policy," argues that the sharp contrast often drawn between equality and adequacy is overstated, and she defends a

version of educational adequacy that is rooted in civic equality. Standing in relation to each other as civic equals, Satz claims, yields an adequacy principle of educational distribution. The article by Harry Brighthouse and Adam Swift, "Putting Educational Equality in Its Place," defends equality over adequacy but notes that equality is not the only aspiration of social justice and that other values, such as parental liberty, place constraints on the state's pursuit of equality.

After receiving these articles, the editors asked Kenneth Strike to contribute a commentary. Strike's commentary, while including reflections on the Ladd, Satz, and Brighthouse and Swift articles, evolved into something greater and is included here as a stand-alone contribution. Like Satz, Strike is dubious about the contrast between equality and adequacy, and he argues that while adequacy sets a floor of educational distribution, the state may nevertheless be obliged to provide education equally above that floor.

There is spirited disagreement in the symposium articles. Despite this, readers will nevertheless find that the explicit normative frameworks brought to bear on questions that have typically been the province of positive social science will yield new insights and stimulate new questions. No one doubts that the topic of equality and adequacy in school finance is important. But how to think about equality and adequacy is much disputed. If not resulting in agreement or consensus, this symposium provides clarity in appreciating the complexity of the ideals of equality and adequacy and in understanding more precisely what is at stake at the level of policy in adopting one ideal rather than the other.

REFERENCE

Enrich, Peter. 1995. Leaving equality behind: New directions in school finance reform. *Vanderbilt Law Review* 48: 101.