

EQUALITY, ADEQUACY, AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Debra Satz

Philosophy Department
Stanford University
Building 90
Stanford, CA 94305-2155
dsatz@stanford.edu

Abstract

In this article I argue that the distinction between an adequate education and an equal education has been overdrawn. In my view, a certain type of equality—civic equality—is internal to the idea of educational adequacy. An education system that completely separates the children of the poor and minorities from those of the wealthy and middle class cannot be adequate for a democratic society. Educational adequacy should be tied to the requirements of equal citizenship. I also argue that my conception of adequacy in education has advantages over competing frameworks. I contrast its implications for a recent policy proposal that argues for weighted student funding (WSF) with the assessment of this proposal from an equality framework. While weighting in favor of the least advantaged students is important, the critical issue is whether or not such weighting is sufficient for bringing all students up to adequacy's high bar. This means that to be adequate, WSF must be placed in a larger policy context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent work on the justice of the distribution of primary and secondary schooling in the United States has focused on the shift from an “equality” standard to an “adequacy” standard. Yet, although there is a large literature on the legal and practical implications of the shift, far less has been written on the normative implications of this altered framework. Moreover, throughout the discussion, adequacy has been understood by both its proponents and detractors to be defined in terms of a noncomparative threshold that each student must attain. Indeed, adequacy is often identified with a low threshold of achievement that is insufficiently generous to the least advantaged students.

The difference between the adequacy and equity approaches is usually drawn in terms of a logical distinction: whereas the idea of equality is essentially comparative (it matters how much a given person has with respect to others), adequacy is seen as essentially noncomparative (it matters only that a given person has enough of some good).¹

My main aim in this essay is to undermine the sharp contrast usually drawn between adequacy and equality as goals of educational reform and to defend an egalitarian conception of adequacy. In my view, a certain type of equality—civic equality—is actually internal to the idea of educational adequacy. (See also Gutmann 1987, especially chapter 5; Anderson 2004, 2007; Liu 2006.)² An education system that completely separates the children of the poor and minorities from those of the wealthy and middle class cannot be adequate for a democratic society. Educational adequacy is tied to the requirements of equal citizenship, in ways that I will spell out below. As will be seen, in my interpretation, educational adequacy has comparative, egalitarian, and relational elements. Further, I defend a generous notion of educational adequacy in which many additional resources must flow to the least advantaged students. This entails that those who endorse adequacy views because they are complacent about inequality or because they are unwilling to devote resources to improving the education of poor children are simply mistaken.

I also argue that my conception of adequacy in education has advantages over competing frameworks. To demonstrate my conception’s advantages, I contrast its implications for a recent policy proposal that argues for weighted student funding (WSF) with the assessment of this proposal from an equality framework. If our K–12 educational goals are, at least in large part, based on the requirements of equal citizenship, then schools have an important role to play in breaking down stereotypes and animosity between groups and encouraging intergroup knowledge and understanding. These goals cannot

1. See Koski and Reich 2006.

2. I am especially indebted to Anderson’s discussion of these issues.

be accomplished simply by focusing on equalizing individual opportunities or individual outcomes—we have to also address outcomes and opportunities that can be achieved only at a group level. In my view, proposals like WSF, while well motivated, fail to address the civic aspects of education by focusing too narrowly on individual-level factors concerning students. Furthermore, while weighting in favor of the least advantaged students is important, the critical issue is whether or not such weighting is sufficient for bringing all students up to adequacy's high bar. WSF is compatible with insufficient levels of funding for disadvantaged students as well as with the continued "hyper-segregation" of blacks in schools and neighborhoods. This means that to be adequate, WSF must be placed in a larger policy context.

2. EQUALITY PARADIGMS

Equality theories tend to be framed in terms of equalizing either inputs or outputs; the most typical input metric is money per individual student and the most typical output metric is individual opportunities. Below I survey some of the possible meanings for educational equity.³

Equal Resources

If educational equality is understood in terms of equalizing financial resources, then in its most straightforward interpretation, it requires equal funding for all students. Under this interpretation, all students are entitled to the same amount of money from the government for any government-provided resource. Plaintiffs advocating greater equity in terms of this framework will be successful when, for example, they succeed in establishing a system of school financing that generates the same amount for any pupil in the state.

This interpretation of educational equality in terms of equal financial resources has had some limited legal and legislative successes, but it is subject to some obvious objections that have rendered it difficult for courts and legislatures to implement, as well as being conceptually unattractive. Although it has garnered no serious support from educational reformers, it is worth taking a moment to lay out its problems, some of which apply to other, more plausible interpretations of educational equity.

First, because it does not specify a threshold of funding, this conception is compatible with leveling educational resources downward for all. For example, in California, a successful school finance equity case has been coupled with a lower proportion of state revenue spent overall on education than before.⁴

3. This section draws closely from Satz 2007.

4. *Serrano v. Priest* 5 Cal. 3d 584 (1971).

Second, equal financial inputs do not yield equal resources; for example, attracting good teachers to poorer schools usually requires paying those teachers higher salaries than they would need elsewhere. But even if resources are interpreted more broadly than simply as cash, an equal resources perspective ignores the fact that students have different needs. Poor students in particular carry a higher “load”—poor health, developmental disabilities, hunger, family disruption, and violence—which makes them more costly to educate. Equal resources will not address the special needs of many disadvantaged students and may not yield an adequate, let alone an equal, education. (This is indeed a key advantage of WSF over an equal resource perspective.)

Third, equal funding may not translate into equal education, insofar as the school’s organization and infrastructure ensure that the money is badly spent, with poor teachers and incompetent or corrupt leadership locked into place in the school.

Because of these problems, other understandings of educational equity have been used in educational finance litigation. Few people support the idea that educational *outcomes* for all children should be equal: not only is such an ideal unrealistic, but it is also evident that not all children will be equally capable or equally motivated to learn. Instead, the idea of equality of educational opportunity has been the dominant thread in public discourse about education and in legal cases. However, equal educational opportunity is itself subject to very different understandings. There is a good deal of disagreement about what it means for children (or adults) to have equality of opportunities for education with proposals ranging from securing the absence of overt discrimination based on race and gender in schools to the far more ambitious goals of eliminating all race, gender, and class differences in educational achievements.⁵

Equality of Opportunity and Vertical Equity

An especially attractive conception of equality of opportunity ties it to vertical equity. Something like this idea is behind policy proposals such as WSF. According to this idea, rich and poor students should have the same opportunities to compete for educational and employment positions. No child should be disadvantaged in the competition because of factors that are outside her own control.

Though appealing in theory, there is a difficult issue here: For which attributes should a child be held responsible and which should be seen as

5. Indeed, there are so many different interpretations of equality of opportunity that at least one educational theorist has suggested that it might not mean anything at all. See Jencks 1988, p. 533.

outside her control? Should we hold children responsible for their genetic endowments?⁶

Some people interpret this version of equality of opportunity in meritocratic terms. Unequal educational outcomes are acceptable only to the extent that they derive from differences in what children deserve based on their level of effort and talent, and not from their family wealth or favorable social circumstances.

In his recent book on schooling, Adam Swift (2003, p. 24) defends a version of the meritocratic view:

Someone's chances of getting into a good university, or getting into a university at all, shouldn't depend on whether her parents are able and willing to send her to private school. It should depend on how intelligent she is, and how much effort she's prepared to make when applying her intelligence. The kind of equality of opportunity we're talking about is meritocratic: people with the same level of merit—IQ plus effort—should have the same chance of success. Their social background shouldn't make any difference. If the lucky ones are jumping the queue, the unlucky ones are necessarily losing out.

I do not believe that we should endorse the meritocratic interpretation of equality of opportunity. It cannot guide us in allocating resources for K–12 education where “merit” is highly endogenous to schooling; it would not offer a sufficient education with respect to either children with little inborn talent or those children who early on make poor choices; and it has no substantial applicability to the lives of young children.⁷

First, consider that the creation of merit—of talent and ability, of effort and incentive to work hard—is itself highly endogenous to the distribution of educational resources that we choose. If we choose to devote fewer resources to courses in advanced mathematics, for example, we will thereby affect the level of math ability in our society and change the talents that will “merit” selection for jobs in university math departments. If a teacher devotes more time to her less able students and less time to her more able students, then she too can affect the meritorious abilities of her students and thus change the order of the queue. “Merit” cannot tell us what the structure of educational opportunities should be, since that structure will itself help determine who comes to have merit.

6. There are probably intractable questions about what actions are inside and outside a child's control. Rawls (1971) points out that our talents, our genes, and even our levels of effort are, in an important sense, dependent on chance.

7. See Satz 2007 for further elaboration of this point.

Second, the principle of merit as a basis of rewarding students with educational opportunities would offer very little in the way of resources to those children who have fewer inborn capacities or little educational potential. Consider the example of a child who cannot learn without the presence of an aide. It is compatible with the merit-based view that the gap between these children's abilities and those of other children will substantially increase and that these children would not even attain an adequate threshold of education.

A final problem with meritocratic equality of opportunity is that the language of merit and, indeed, of "opportunity" seems misplaced in primary and secondary school education. We expect children to go to school and master certain capabilities; it is not enough that they have the opportunities to do so. As Michael Walzer (1983, p. 203) notes, "The goal of the reading teacher is not to produce equal chances, but to achieve equal results." The reading teacher aims to teach all the children in his class to read, even the lazy child who cannot concentrate and sometimes disrupts the class. It seems overly moralistic to withhold educational opportunities from a young child who fails to work hard or is less talented than his peers.

Defenders of vertical equality of opportunity need not underwrite this idea by appealing to ideas of desert. Rather than attempting to closely track pre-existing individual levels of merit in young children, John Roemer (2000) has argued that we should work to ensure equal opportunities for higher education and employment across a range of social types. To implement equality of opportunity in education, he proposes that each society make a list of the factors that are viewed (by a majority?) as clearly beyond a child's control and that are also believed to substantially influence the amount of education the child receives. After doing this, each society should divide individuals into groups or types whose factors all have approximately equal value. Suppose, for example, that the list of circumstantial factors a society decides influence a child's educational attainment is family income, race and ethnicity, and gender. One social type might consist of all white male children born into the highest income decile and another type all female black children born into the lowest income decile. Roemer argues that educational equality of opportunity is achieved when there is no difference in the average educational outcomes of these different types. When there is no such difference, where children wind up at age eighteen now reflects only the differences in their underlying potentials and their effort—not factors associated with their being members of the different types.⁸

8. Rawls (1971, p. 275) defended a related principle of fair equality of opportunity: "equal chances of education and culture for persons similarly endowed and motivated."

Roemer's interpretation of educational equality of opportunity resonates with the democratic idea that all individuals are entitled to the same rights regardless of their social background and the related idea that, in a democratic society, differences in social background should be irrelevant to opportunities. I note two potential problems with the model. The first concerns the need to identify the factors that are outside an individual's control. This task raises thorny metaphysical issues—issues that are simply not settled by appealing to the views of society's majority. The second problem concerns the sorting of individuals into types. This proposed division runs the risk of stigmatizing individuals by marking members of some groups as less responsible for their lower social achievement than others. I think we should be especially wary of publicly identifying some students as belonging to an "inferior" type that requires extra compensation for achievement.

I want, however, to set aside these worries here and ask whether Roemer's model articulates an appealing ideal for educational reform even if these two concerns are addressed. Is the equalization of children's potentials (on average) across social types even plausible as a guiding principle for educational policy, particularly in a society marked by inequalities outside education? Consider the following objections.

The Educational Arms Race, or Leveling Down

This standard is hostage to the best opportunity (see Satz 2007). It is certainly true that if educational resources were improved for poor children they could compete for higher education and jobs on fairer terms. But even so, no society has the resources to supply the same opportunities to poor families as are possible for those with more wealth who value the continued development of their children's talents. If some parents invest more resources in their children's education than other parents wish to or are able to, this principle will continually justify devoting more resources to bring the now disadvantaged child up to the levels of her wealthier peers. No society can devote all its resources to education, so at some point a line must be drawn as to how much the state is willing to spend.

Can leveling down be justified? That depends on the consequences of allowing the inequality in educational resources. Suppose all children are provided with a decent public education, however this is defined. If the additional development of one child's talents through extra resources enhances overall productivity, then this should, given appropriate social institutions, redound to everyone's absolute advantage. Suppose you and I are equal in underlying potential but your family pushes you harder or invests in special lessons, and that leads your potential to surpass mine. Although it may now be true that

my relative position with respect to a given employment opportunity is worse, my absolute position may be better because your additional talent potentially increases the size of the social surplus. It makes no sense for me to object to all such improvements simply because my own relative position is worsened. Why think that ensuring equality of opportunity for competitive goods has absolute priority over other concerns, such as giving priority to the least advantaged members of society?

Parental Freedoms

There are many factors involved in the fostering or stunting of a child's opportunities. These factors include parents' educational levels, parental income and wealth, transmission of personality traits, geographical location, parenting styles, attractiveness, and health status. Data continue to show that unequal educational outcomes are more strongly influenced by exogenous factors than by school funding or schools themselves. The advantage of being raised in a middle-class home is estimated at one-half a year's achievement for every year of a mother's educational achievement (Berlin and Sum 1988). Even with respect to differences in parents' financial resources on educational attainments, recent scholarship suggests that the direct effect is probably smaller than has been previously thought, to the extent that parents are not in extreme poverty and children's basic material needs are met (Mayer 1997). In short, many factors outside schools affect children's development.

Consider parents who adopt religious conceptions that differentially stress hard work, otherworldly pursuits, or materialistic consumerism. These different conceptions might line up with social types generated on other grounds. Yet these different conceptions will tend to have different effects on children's talents and development independent of the parent's social type. Moreover, a parent pursuing her conception of the good in ways that shape her children's potential seems a completely different matter from those effects on her children's potential that stem from poverty and malnutrition, even if both factors undermine equality of opportunity across different social types.

In fact, there is a deep tension within the ideal of equality of opportunity. Allowing equality of opportunity for parents is just allowing inequality of opportunity for children. Each of the choices that adults make in their lives has some effect on the choices that will be open to their children. What a parent values, even where a parent lives, will inevitably have some effect on the development of his child's potential. We probably cannot secure the equal development of children's potential across all social types given the diversity of families, parents, parenting styles, geographical locations, and values without sharply cutting into parental freedom.

3. ADEQUACY

The alternative to an equal opportunity view is an adequacy view. Adequacy approaches typically focus on ensuring some threshold level of education that must be achieved for all children. Many proponents and some opponents of adequacy endorse the idea that educational adequacy requires only a fixed and minimal threshold of achievement; adequacy is widely viewed as compatible with significant inequalities above this specified threshold of opportunity and proficiency. Critics charge that adequacy simply ignores inequalities among students. As two critics of adequacy in education put it, adequacy involves only “a specific quantitative level of educational resources . . . to achieve certain educational outcomes based on external and fixed standards. It is a measure that does not compare the educational resources or outcomes of students with each other, but rather, looks only to some minimally required level of resources for all students” (Koski and Reich 2006, p. 550).

But why should we define adequacy in this way? The educational outcomes appealed to by courts and legislatures attempting to determine adequacy vary widely. Some stress civic capacities such as the ability to vote and to serve on a jury, others the capacity to compete in the labor market, and others the ability to succeed in higher education.⁹ I believe that when we reflect on the civic purposes of education, we will be led to adopt a conception of educational adequacy that has comparative, relational, and egalitarian elements.

In my view, educational adequacy should be understood with reference to the idea of citizenship. Education has long been recognized as a “foundation of good citizenship,” a necessary condition for full membership in the political community. As the Supreme Court wrote in the *Brown* decision, education is required for the “performance of our basic public responsibilities,” and its absence effectively shuts out individuals from participation in society.¹⁰

9. Note that the benchmarks articulated in some of the key adequacy cases are comparative. For example, in *Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. New York* 719 N.Y.S. 2d 475 (2001), Justice Leland DeGrasse struck down the entire New York State school financing system, arguing that the idea of education for citizenship invoked by the New York constitution involves “more than just being qualified to vote or serve as a juror, but to do so capably and knowledgeably.” He also argued that minimal competency for any employment was not enough; it must include skills for “sustained productive employment.” DeGrasse’s criteria for jury selection and employment were essentially comparative, since the ability to serve as a capable juror depends in part on the levels of skill that others on the jury have as well as on each juror having access to a wide berth of experience and knowledge; so does the ability to have access to sustained employment in a quickly changing job market. The Ohio Supreme Court declared in broad terms that children must be educated adequately so that they are able to participate fully in society, and it directed the legislature to create an entirely new school financing system with a significant infusion of resources to failing schools. Other adequacy decisions have followed in this path, defining adequacy in terms of a high level of skills, preparation for students to be citizens and economic participants in a democratic society, standards that relate to contemporary needs in society, and standards that themselves depend in part on what skills others in the society have. My proposal tries to articulate the ethical values behind these court decisions.

10. *Brown v. Board of Education* 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954).

I follow Marshall (1977) in defining citizenship in terms of the political, civic, and economic conditions that are needed to make one a full member of one's society. Citizens are equals in terms of their status as full members, although they may be unequal along other dimensions such as income and wealth. As full members of society, citizens (1) have equal basic political rights and freedoms, including rights to speech and participation in the political process; (2) have equal rights and freedoms within civil society, including rights to own property and to justice; and (3) have equal rights to a threshold of economic welfare and to "live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall 1977, p. 11). Citizenship is associated not only with political and civil rights, such as freedom of speech and political participation, but also with social and economic rights, such as access to employment and a level of income essential to being, and being regarded as a full member of one's society. Since citizens are to be equals with respect to these basic political, civic, and economic rights, no citizen should suffer a disadvantage in having access to these basic rights as a result of her social background.

We can derive, in general terms, the nature and content of educational adequacy from citizenship's various components.¹¹ First, citizenship requires a threshold of knowledge and competence for exercising its associated rights and freedoms—liberty of speech and expression, liberty of conscience, and the right to serve on a jury, vote, and participate in politics and in the economy.

Second, the empirical content of this threshold itself depends on the distribution of skills and knowledge in the population as a whole. For example, what it takes to serve competently on a jury depends in part on what other jury members know. Jurors need not only to comprehend and apply concepts like "preponderance of evidence" and to be able to analyze statistical tables and graphs, but also to be capable of responding to the arguments of other jurors during their deliberations. Similarly, if students applying to college are now expected to have knowledge of algebra, then those students who are not taught algebra are effectively cut off from college and the educational and employment opportunities that depend on a college degree.¹²

Third, an education adequate for equal citizenship includes but goes beyond the achievement of a narrow list of individual skills. A democratic society is more than a collection of independent individuals; it includes the ways that people cooperate and relate to one another in employment, in politics, and

11. Here I follow Satz 2007.

12. Moses (1994) argues that all students need a floor—an acceptable amount of math education in middle school that readies them for the college preparatory sequence in high school. But Moses also emphasizes the "moving target" nature of this floor: the college preparatory math curriculum differs from place to place and it is changing.

in making social decisions in their neighborhoods and within public spaces. While some aspects of civic competence (e.g., numeracy, literacy, knowledge of history) can be achieved by individuals alone or in varying contexts, other competencies (e.g., mutual understanding, mutual respect and tolerance) are group achievements, best accomplished through the presence of diverse individuals. Individuals who are effectively cut off from one another, in class- and race-segregated schools and neighborhoods, will also lack the knowledge and perspectives needed in both politics and the economy. A society whose leaders come narrowly from one social group will do a poor job in representing the interests of the diverse members of that society, interests about which they may have no real information.

Fourth, although an adequacy standard does not insist on equal opportunities, large inequalities regarding who has a real opportunity for important goods above citizenship's threshold relegate some members of society to second-class citizenship, where they are denied effective access to positions of power and privilege in the society. Care must be taken to ensure that those with fewer opportunities are not at such a relative disadvantage as to offend their dignity or self-respect, cut them off from any realistic prospect of upward social mobility, or deprive them of the ability to form social relationships with others on a footing of equality. Thus an education system that precludes the children of poorer families from competing in the same market and society as their wealthier peers cannot be adequate.

This ideal of equal citizenship does not require equalizing the average development of children's potential across social types. Nevertheless, it has egalitarian distributive implications. While some spending inequalities across districts and schools can theoretically be justified, large differences in educational resources may cut off the bottom segments of society from effective access to society's best opportunities and leading positions. In my view, then, adequacy is not only a function of the bottom of the distribution but also of the top of the distribution. Citizens are not equals when there is a closed intergenerational social elite with disproportionate access to society's positions of political and economic power.

My conception of adequacy undercuts the sharp divide political philosophers often draw between sufficiency and equality. What is "enough" to be a member of one's society in good standing inevitably involves relational elements: to use an example from Adam Smith, what it takes to "appear in public without shame" is dependent on what others have. What is sufficient to serve as a social minimum is conditioned by the resources that others have and by what they can do with those resources. When some people have a lot more than others, this may affect what others need to take part in community life.

This entails that a standard of educational adequacy shaped by the value of citizens' equality will be sensitive to the surrounding social fabric. In a society with a robust set of welfare rights for all citizens regardless of their level of educational achievement, the importance of education to social inclusion is considerably less than in a society in which access to health care and secure neighborhoods is contingent on comparative educational credentials. I will return to this point below when I discuss the objections to adequacy based on the claim that education is a positional good.

4. BENEFITS OF ADEQUACY FOR CITIZENSHIP OVER EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY APPROACHES

Adequacy for citizenship has egalitarian dimensions. It requires that education be distributed in ways that are consistent with equal civic status, including fair (but not equal) access to opportunities above citizenship's threshold. Many of its practical implications are likely to be similar to those endorsed by vertical equality of opportunity theorists. Nevertheless, I believe that a focus on educational adequacy for citizenship has some theoretical and policy advantages over the traditional focus on educational equality of opportunity.

First, because adequacy for citizenship sets a minimum threshold of attainment, it theoretically prevents states from spending down to an equality of resources that leaves all schools without resources for meeting adequacy's educational standards.¹³ Although courts, legislatures, and educators will inevitably disagree about the content of an adequate education, adequacy in principle gives us standards and instruments by which to hold public schools and state policy makers accountable for delivering a level of education to all.

Second, because adequacy looks at the democratic purposes of education, as opposed to focusing only on providing equal opportunities, integration by class and race is necessarily central to adequacy. The prevalence of separate schools for rich and poor undercuts the primary lesson of democracy—that we are all social equals. Indeed, as the Supreme Court noted in its sweeping conclusion in the 2003 University of Michigan case, there is compelling

13. While many states have reasonable education systems pocketed with some high-poverty, low-achieving schools, some rural and poorer states have global problems in educating their state's children. In these states the problem is not so much funding inequality between districts, but the low levels of funding for all schools. The 1989 Kentucky finance litigation case, *Rose v. Council for Better Education, Inc.* (79 OS.W. 2d 180, 60 Ed.LawRep. 1289), provides an example. The problem in Kentucky was not so much unequal educational resources but lack of resources overall. Neither an equity perspective nor a weighted student funding proposal is likely on its own to address this problem. Instead, we need an adequacy perspective to show that the state is failing to deliver an adequate education to its children given existing levels of resources and so must increase school funding, usually by raising taxes.

evidence that integration is centrally important to preparing students to function in a diverse society.¹⁴

From the vantage point of the conception of educational adequacy for equal citizenship, the neglect of the civic purposes of education is a key weakness of equality of opportunity approaches. If our K–12 educational goals are, at least in large part, based on the requirements of equal citizenship, then schools have an important role to play in encouraging intergroup knowledge, respect, and understanding. To be sure, equal opportunity theorists can endorse race and class integration as *instrumental* to achieving more equal opportunities for poor children; on the view that I am defending here, by contrast, such integration is a *constitutive* part of education for citizenship.

Third, adequacy for citizenship can explain why some inequalities require greater remedial attention than others—namely, those inequalities that affect the prospects of the least well off. My approach argues that inequalities that involve some people falling below the requirements of full social membership are always of concern. By contrast, the equality of opportunity principle tends to view all inequalities as on par: the inequalities that place some people below a threshold of inclusion are treated the same as the inequalities between the rich and the superrich in education.

Fourth, on a practical level, adequacy for citizenship is a more realistic standard for a diverse society. This principle recognizes that individuals will disagree about the relative priority of education over other social goods. As long as nonfederal decision-making bodies are vested with the authority to finance education, there will be different decisions about the levels of school funding. At the same time, because this principle directs our attention to the education of the least advantaged and its relationship to the education needed for full inclusion in society, it places bounds on the amount of acceptable inequality in educational outcomes between rich and poor. All children must have effective access to an education qualifying them for college. In practice, this means that every child with the underlying potential and motivation should be prepared by their primary and middle schools to successfully complete a college preparatory curriculum and have such a curriculum available to them in high school. This is a high standard, but it is not unattainable.

5. RESIDUAL CONCERNS

Education Is a Positional Good

Some supporters of equality of opportunity argue that by allowing inequalities in educational opportunities to remain, adequacy actually harms the worst-off

14. *Grutter v. Bollinger* 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

members of society because education is a positional good (see Koski and Reich 2007). Positional goods are goods whose value depends on relative advantage.¹⁵ If everyone drove a Porsche, then the positional aspect of having one would be erased (although the absolute quality standard of everyone's car might be improved).

Critics of adequacy might argue that when rich parents can send their children to private schools or better-endowed public schools or can supplement their children's education with additional resources, this actually disadvantages other children whose parents can afford less. Access to labor market and university positions is essentially competitive, so the greater worth of some parties' opportunities has a direct negative effect on the worth of the opportunity for others. Moreover, in our society, as I alluded above, education is not only a means to high-paying employment, but it also translates into health insurance, leisure time, home ownership, and increased mobility. If we allow some parents to spend more on their children than the society collectively undertakes to provide, then those parents unfairly decrease the worth of the opportunities of the others.

How compelling is this objection? The extent to which education is positional is contested. For example, although access to the higher education that translates into high-paying jobs is in some respects competitive, in others it is not. In fact, admission to most colleges in the United States is not competitive: almost any high school graduate who applies will be admitted. Only a small percentage of colleges and universities have competitive admissions: according to *U.S. News and World Report's* college issue (2007), no more than one hundred colleges in the United States accept fewer than half their applicants. The main issue with respect to the majority of colleges is not competitiveness but preparation for college, which adequacy addresses. Of course, even if greater numbers of students from poor families were prepared for college, there is a serious matter of the decreasing affordability of college for the poor. The maximum federal aid for poor university students in 1996 had only 43 percent of the buying power that the aid had in 1980 (Orfield 2002). Making college more affordable is a necessary condition for making it more accessible to poor children.

Education is probably positional at its upper ends, and it is important to see how my conception of adequacy places limits on the ability of elites to capture education's positional advantages for themselves. Adequacy, as I understand it, must be concerned with ensuring that children from all walks of life are represented in society's leading institutions, including elite postsecondary universities, and in attractive careers. A democratic society requires leadership

15. The term comes from Hirsch 1976.

positions to be filled by people from all parts of society, not only the most privileged. In a democratic society, there are no fixed and frozen ranks, where “each person is believed to have his allotted station in the natural order of things” (Rawls 1971, p. 479). If the inequalities that adequacy permits fail to integrate such privileged positions in universities and employment across class and racial lines, then adequacy is not adequate to its purpose. This is why adequacy views must look not only to the bottom of the distribution but also to the top of the distribution. Children of all walks of life must have a fair chance of obtaining the most privileged social positions. The more sharply educational advantages are positional and the more they depend on excluding others, the more an adequacy view will converge with an equality of opportunity view.

The positional nature of education can also be countered by social design. It is worth stressing that elite higher education need not have the gatekeeping role that it currently serves for access to social entitlements. There can be diverse routes to success in life. In Sweden, for example, being a college graduate is not a prerequisite for a political career; it is possible to rise to high political positions because of one’s experiences in the labor movement. And, according to the citizenship tradition represented by Marshall (1977) that I am endorsing, full membership in society requires that individuals have access to certain goods as a right and not as a reward for placing in the competition for elite education. From the perspective of equal citizenship, Marshall argued that there are strong reasons to provide a level of health care, income, security, and education to all as a right: these goods are the entrance ticket for full inclusion in society as an equal member. To the extent that in providing such rights we thereby decrease the steepness of the social hierarchy, we also lower the private returns to education.

State Complicity

Some critics might argue that my conception of adequacy makes the state complicit in the perpetuation of unequal educational advantages.¹⁶ By allowing richer districts to supplement their finances through local parcel taxes or to unequally fund schools in the first place, the state is now setting its stamp of approval on inequality. It is bad enough for private individual factors to influence children’s life prospects, but it is a far worse injustice if the state is a party to the unfairness.

I agree that unequal outcomes that might be acceptable when they are the result of private decisions can become morally objectionable when sanctioned, enabled, or promoted by the state. There is a strong *prima facie* case for the

16. Thanks to Rob Reich for pressing this point in discussion.

equal public provision of education; as *Brown v. Board of Education* put it, education must be provided by the state “on equal terms.” But on equal terms does not mean with equal resources. In the first place, as I have argued, equal resources will be insufficient to adequately educate the disabled and socially disadvantaged students who will require substantially more resources than their peers.

In the second place, once the positional objection is met, unequal funding of education need not be objectionable. If allowing rich parents to invest in their children’s social capital generates benefits for all, the state may be justified in facilitating such unequal development of talent through distributing public funds unequally.

It is worth underscoring that an equality of opportunity framework tends to have the effect of tying funding to the preferences of the median voter. Rather than force many voters away from their preferred spending levels, adequacy allows local communities to make taxation decisions about how much they want to devote to education. Of course, it does not follow from this that voters should be permitted to draw on vastly unequal local tax bases to pursue their funding preferences. Such a disparity is unlikely to meet the demands of adequacy for citizenship. Instead, following on the 1970 proposal of Coons, Clune, and Sugarman, there may be good reason to adopt a policy of “equal tax rates, equal expendable dollars,” according to which communities can draw funds from a common tax base in proportion to how much they are willing to tax themselves.

6. ADEQUACY AND WSF

The proponents of a recent report produced by the Fordham Institute (2006) endorse a scheme of WSF in U.S. public schools. The aim of the proposal is to promote greater equity in education by (1) giving to each individual student an amount of funding that will vary with the student’s level of need and circumstances; (2) allowing each individual student to use that funding in any school that admits her; and (3) allowing each school the freedom to use the funds in any educational way that they wish.

The basic reform behind this proposal is to substitute state funding of school districts and the school districts’ funding of schools with a formula that assigns funds directly to each child, weighted more heavily for students who are poor, have special needs, or have limited proficiency in English. Each child would have a “backpack” of funding, and schools would have incentives to recruit harder to educate children to secure additional resources. Schools would be free to determine how to use these additional resources—whether to attract more qualified teachers, spend more on books, or update facilities.

While the goals behind this proposal are perhaps worthy, I believe that it raises some serious concerns from an adequacy perspective. There may be other concerns about such proposals, but I want to focus here on how WSF looks through the lens of ensuring educational adequacy for citizenship.

First, while it makes sense to use WSF to address different student needs, what is needed in many school districts is more funding overall coming in, not a funding scheme that simply reshuffles what may be an inadequate level of funding. While many states have reasonable education systems pocketed with high-poverty, low-achieving schools, some rural and poorer states have global problems in educating their state's children. In these states the problem is not so much funding inequality between school districts but the low levels of funding for all schools. Simply reshuffling the resources does not guarantee that the resources as redistributed will be adequate to produce desired results.¹⁷ It is therefore deeply troubling that WSF does not make any reference to an adequacy standard.

Second, the consequences of WSF will depend in large part on how the weights are calculated. There are serious problems with determining the weights in a purely individualistic manner: how costly it is to educate a student is dependent on many nonindividual-level factors, including the characteristics of the student's peers. But these cannot be known, on this model, in advance of the school's selection of its incoming class as a whole.

Third, while some degree of decentralized decision making may be a good thing for schools, there is a critical issue as to whether or not the funds will actually be spent in ways that address the needs of the least advantaged students or whether relying on decentralization will actually produce worse results. For example, from the perspective I have endorsed, it will be very worrying if this method of sorting students actually leads to an even greater racial and social stratification than we have today.

Finally, while WSF makes sense as one element in a complex toolbox to address educational disadvantage, it cannot stand by itself. From the perspective of adequacy outlined in this article, institutional changes are required, including greater integration of housing and schools, and a commitment to give all students an adequate education—including raising taxes to supply funds for schools. Where a decentralized program such as WSF may not be sufficient to eliminate high-poverty schools, other measures need to be

17. The Kentucky Educational Reform Act of 1990 not only raised school funding and changed the financing of schools, but it reshaped both the curriculum and the governance of schools. It also put into place performance-related policies that enabled schools to remove poor leaders, receive entitlements to expert help, and receive funds to develop family- and community-related resources for poor youth.

considered. For example, we might want to challenge zoning laws that have the effect of excluding the poor from middle-class communities.¹⁸

My conception of educational adequacy for citizenship directs us to distribute primary and secondary schooling in terms of five criteria (Satz 2007). This is not a ranked list, although I believe that the first two criteria are probably the most urgent. However, as I have emphasized, the first four criteria are central to my conception of citizenship.

1. Secure an educational minimum whose empirical content is defined dynamically by the changing requirements for full membership in society. These requirements must not be understood narrowly as political capabilities but must also include capabilities for sustained productive employment.¹⁹
2. Secure fair opportunities for educational and employment positions above the minimum. No social group should be relegated to a second-class position, with access only to inferior and unrewarding schools and jobs. While fair opportunities need not be equal, for the reasons I have given above, the extent of acceptable inequality of opportunity has bounds.
3. Secure the equitable distribution of leadership skills among diverse individuals and groups.
4. Develop the capabilities needed for cooperative interactions between diverse individuals and groups in society. These include trust, tolerance, and mutual understanding and respect. To achieve these capabilities, we need to move beyond an exclusive focus on resources and focus on integrating schools and neighborhoods across race and class divisions.²⁰
5. Avoid leveling down the development of talent and ability, except insofar as this is necessary to get all children with the potential above citizenship's high threshold.

Some version of WSF is likely to be one tool for realizing these objectives. But it is unlikely that any of these objectives can be secured without accountable output standards on a national level, increased funding in many school districts, and substantial integration across class and racial lines.

18. *Southern Burlington County NAACP v. Township of Mount Laurel* 67 N.J. 151, 335 A.2d 713 (1975).

19. Given that what is needed to function as a citizen is changing, how can we judge what is required of today's children to become adults tomorrow? I think this is a serious issue, although it is partially addressed by pointing out that, on my conception of adequacy, the continuing education of adults is also a concern. Adult education programs and worker retraining programs are clearly important from the perspective of ensuring equal citizenship. Thanks to the editors for pressing this point.

20. This is easier said than done, of course.

An earlier version of this article was published in *Ethics* (see Satz 2007). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer and to the coeditors of this journal, David Figlio and David Monk, for comments.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2004. Rethinking equality of opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift's "How Not to Be a Hypocrite." *Theory and Research in Education* 2(2): 99–110.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2007. Fair opportunity in education: A democratic equality perspective. *Ethics* 117: 595–622.
- Berlin, Gordon, and Andrew Sum. 1988. *Toward a more perfect union: Basic skills, poor families, and our economic future*. New York: Ford Foundation.
- Coons, John E., William H. Clune, and Stephen D. Sugarman. 1970. *Private wealth and public education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fordham Institute. 2006. *Fund the child: Tackling inequity and antiquity in school finance*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
- Gutmann, Amy. 1987. *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hirsch, Fred. 1976. *Social limits to growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jencks, Christopher. 1988. Whom must we treat equally for educational opportunity to be equal? *Ethics* 98: 518–33.
- Koski, William S., and Rob Reich. 2007. When "adequate" isn't: The retreat from equity in educational law and policy and why it matters. *Emory Law Journal* 56: 545–615.
- Liu, Goodwin. 2006. Education, equality, and national citizenship. *Yale Law Journal* 116(2): 330–412.
- Marshall, T. H. 1977. *Class, citizenship, and social development*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mayer, Susan. 1997. *What money can't buy: Family income and children's life chances*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moses, Robert. 1994. Remarks on the struggle for citizenship and math/science literacy. *Journal of Mathematical Behavior* 13: 107–11.
- Orfield, Gary. 2002. Policy and equity: Lessons of a third century of educational reforms in the United States. In *Unequal schools, unequal chances: The challenges of equal opportunity in the Americas*, edited by Fernando Reimers, pp. 400–22. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Roemer, John. 2000. Equality of opportunity. In *Meritocracy and economic inequality*, edited by Ken Arrow, Samuel Bowles, and Steven Durlauf, pp. 17–32. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Satz, Debra. 2007. Equality, adequacy, and education for citizenship. *Ethics* 117: 623–48.

Swift, Adam. 2003. *How not to be a hypocrite: School choice for the morally perplexed parent*. London: Routledge.

U.S. News and World Report. 2007. America's best colleges. Washington, DC: *U.S. News and World Report*.

Walzer, Michael. 1983. *Spheres of justice*. New York: Basic Books.