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EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND COMPLEX EQUALITY: THE SPECIAL PLACE OF SCHOOLING

ABSTRACT. This paper is an engagement with *Equality* by John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Judy Walsh and Sara Cantillon. It identifies a dilemma for educational egalitarians, which arises within their theory of equality, arguing that sometimes there may be a conflict between advancing equality of opportunity and providing equality of respect and recognition, and equality of love care and solidarity. It argues that the latter values may have more weight in deciding what to do than traditional educational egalitarians have usually thought.

KEY WORDS: educational equality, meritocracy, equality of opportunity, Black–White test score gap

John Baker et al.'s new book *Equality* is a tremendous achievement. The authors have elaborated and defended a carefully thought out, mildly perfectionist, account of egalitarian justice, and looked at its implications both for the design of particular social institutions and for political practice. Scholars of the left have a great deal to learn from it, but less self-consciously political scholars, too, will find it extremely valuable.

I am going to focus on the implications of their theory for schooling. First I want to explore one of the principles concerning schooling that they implicitly adopt, showing that it has slightly different practical consequences than many readers will, I think, take it to have. Then I want to look at a serious dilemma that egalitarians face when thinking about their goals for education—specifically the dilemma between equality of opportunity as it is usually understood in education and equality of prospects for having an all-things-considered flourishing life. I spend some time elaborating this dilemma in the context of their discussion. I am not certain whether the dilemma I consider is one that raises trade offs among their preferred principles, or whether it raises trade offs between those principles and another. If the former, then it is

something they should address; if the latter, it shows a stark way in which their theoretical approach departs from the mainstream of left political rhetoric about education.

Baker et al. identify four major equality problems in education. They are:

- Equality in educational and related resources
- Equality of respect and recognition
- Equality of power and
- Equality of love, care, and solidarity[1]

The first problem has two dimensions. First, various mechanisms within the school system such as selection, tracking unequal funding etc. ensure that some students get more effective educational resources devoted to them than others, and those who have more resources devoted to them are the already-more-advantaged students. Second, some students, again those who are already more advantaged, come to the school better equipped to take advantage of the resources devoted to them in the school. Even the methods of evaluation, which systematically value linguistic and the more traditionally 'academic' intelligences, favor those who are already more advantaged.[2]

The second problem is that the design of the academic curriculum, the staffing of the school, and perhaps most tellingly the ethos of the school, systematically values one (or a few) cultural backgrounds over others. Working class children come to an institution which embodies cultural values which are not theirs; the feminine, too, is disvalued, so that girls experience schooling as more of a trial than do boys.[3] Typical white middle class children (especially boys) encounter a home from home; a place where they can feel settled and enjoy the resources devoted to them. Schools need to be more inclusive, in the sense that they need to be places where all

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[1] John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Palgrave, 2004), pp. 143–144.

[2] See *Ibid*, pp. 144–54.

[3] It is worth noting that recently some academics and journalists in the US have disputed this characterization, arguing that recent changes in schooling in the US have made it more girl than boy friendly. If they are right, then the inequality is just as bad, from Baker et al.'s point of view. See Dan Kinlon and Michael Thompson, *Raising Cain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000) for a well-known example of this claim.

cultures are welcomed, and no student endures disadvantage be-
cause of her cultural background.[4]

The third problem is that teachers have unequal power over the
lives of students, and that, even among the adults within the
school, there are unacceptable power hierarchies. Baker et al. call
for a radical democratization of schooling, both internally and
externally—adults and children who spend their lives within schools
should confront each other more nearly as equals than they do,
and the institutions that direct education policy at higher levels
should be more subject to democratic control.[5]

The final problem is that education

'has to take seriously the need to provide students and teachers with prospects for
relations of love, care and solidarity. The biggest obstacle to this challenge is the
way that education has neglected not just the emotions involved in love, care, and
solidarity, but the emotions generally' (164).

Schooling in Britain and Ireland has divided children up into the
academically and the vocationally oriented, and focused on the aca-
demic and vocational curriculums respectively, but has neglected the
task of facilitating children's becoming well-integrated and emotion-
ally healthy persons. More recently British schools have introduced
a new subject, Personal Health and Social Education, which does,
indeed, focus a bit more on 'life skills' than was traditional, but it is
still an unusual administrator who infuses the life of her school with
the imperative to improve children's emotional intelligence.[6]

I find a great deal of what Baker et al. say compelling, both in
their diagnoses of the problems, and in their elaboration of the
principles that should guide our thinking about schooling. In my
comment I want to do two things. First I want to focus on the
second problem and principle, which I think is the most problem-
atic, and explore more precisely what it might involve. Second, I
want to elaborate a potential conflict either among the principles
or between them and another principle which commands wide
assent on the left, and which points in a less radical, and more
conservative direction than Baker et al.'s principles.

It must be the case that schools are more welcoming to some
students than to others, and that this inequality influences both

[4] See *Ibid*, pp. 146–61.
[5] See *Ibid*, pp. 161–63.
[6] See *Ibid*, pp. 164–66.

inequalities of welfare and inequalities of learning within the school. The usual response from the left to this problem is to argue that schools should adapt their ethi and organization to be more welcoming to children from working class backgrounds or ethnic minorities; and this response is, indeed, the response suggested by Baker et al.'s comments.

I'm not so sure that it is the right response, at least in all circumstances. Schools are obliged to do a number of things for their students. They need to equip students with the skills and knowledge that enable them to make their own judgments about how to live their lives, and the strength of character to act on those judgments; to equip them with the knowledge and understanding of worldly matters that will enable them to flourish in a complex world; to prepare them to be self-reliant in the economy they will enter; and to prepare them to be effective and responsible democratic citizens. This requires an ethos which is, in fact, somewhat discontinuous both from that of the public culture of the society in which they live; or at least, from the public cultures of the capitalist societies on which Baker et al. are focused. It also requires an ethos somewhat discontinuous from that of the home culture.[7]

Both discontinuities are required because not every child is raised within a home or a culture which provides them directly with the resources that will enable them to live well. The home culture is, by its nature, limited; it provides the child with a window onto a certain fairly restricted range of ways to live her life. For some children the mores, habits, and cultural resources provided by their families will be exactly what they need. But for many more access to other models of living are necessary. The mainstream culture will provide supplemental opportunities for some children. But others, either because their home culture is steeped in the influence of the mainstream culture, or because the narrowly materialistic focus of late capitalist cultures provides them with little help in learning how to live, will need other resources still.

If children spend a large part of their social life in school, that is the arena in which to supplement it with alternative role models. Extra-curricular activities present opportunities to encounter,

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[7] See Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Harry Brighouse, 'Channel One, the Anti-Commercial Principle, and the Discontinuous Ethos', *Educational Policy* 19/3 (2005) 528–549, for elaborations and defenses of the idea of a discontinuous ethos.

sample, and make judgments about activities that they otherwise would never know much about. Most of the children in the Latin club probably participate in it because they enjoy Latin. But many of the children who act or sing in the school play or choir, or who participate in the sixteenth Century Music group, or the Oxfam society probably participate initially out of curiosity, or infected by the enthusiasm of a teacher or a friend. Similarly, having ethnic and cultural diversity, and even a diversity of personalities, among the employees of a school is valuable because it provides children with alternative models of living. Knowing that an admired teacher is a devout Christian unlike one's own adult acquaintances, or (alternatively) that a despised teacher has the same political views that one has received from one's own family provides children de facto with a different perspective on the world. For some children it might be valuable to observe a teacher's love of Shakespeare; for others it might be valuable to observe a teacher who is both a serious intellectual and an expert on contemporary popular music.

In the examples I've given giving diversity is not valuable because it mirrors the experiences and composition of the students, but because whatever a student's background she will find contrasts in the school. In other words, although the school should be welcoming to all children, it should also challenge them all, not only academically, but personally. The working class child who attends a school which express contempt for her culture and values is wronged in one way; the middle class child who attends a schools which celebrates and never challenges his culture and values is wronged in another way.

So, although I agree with Baker et al. that no child should attend a school which expresses contempt for her culture, I think it is worth emphasizing that this does not mean that schools should be imbued with the culture that the child brings from outside. Its ethos should be sufficiently connected to the influences the child brings in from the outside that the child can make sense of and feel somewhat at ease there, but should be sufficiently discontinuous that the child is provided with genuinely different opportunities and is challenged to reflect on them.

Now I want to make a slightly different comment about the possibility of trade offs among the values that Baker et al. implicitly adopt.

Imagine a society, if you can, which has broadly and sincerely adopted the egalitarian principles Baker et al. have argued for, and has implemented numerous reforms to realize those principles. In such a society we would not notice trade offs between the different educational requirements Baker et al. propose. In particular, because wage differentials would be relatively small, no-one's lifetime expected income and wealth would be much diminished by a policy of pursuing their emotional integration, or by schooling them in a atmosphere that affirmed the cultural values they brought to the school.

But in our world, there is a serious dilemma. Labor markets reward particular skills and habits, and the adoption of particular cultural values. Here are some examples. Employers prefer obedient to disobedient workers. They prefer workers who will 'fit in' with the rest of their workforce, and whose cultural traits it will be easy to accommodate. They seek people who will work hard, and who will be willing to subordinate their family and personal lives to the pressures and demands of paid work. Employment law, and tax-transfer policies, can do a great deal to change this; but education policy cannot. Schools can behave differently, but their different behavior will not fundamentally restructure the reward profile offered by labor markets.

This might be a very serious problem in practice, for simultaneously implementing Baker et al.'s four principles in unreformed capitalist economies. The trade off is between their first principle and the other three—in particular the principles promoting cultural congruence and emotional learning. Consider the public debate in the United States about the so-called Black–White test score gap. Researchers observe a significant gap in test scores between white and African-American children. It is initially tempting to attribute that gap to the fact that white children are, as a whole, from wealthier homes and attend better-resourced schools, than African American children, but it turns out that a substantial gap remains even after we control for household income and wealth, and what we know about the effects of school resourcing; it remains, too, within school districts (so is not attributable, for example, to racism specific to the South, or some other region). When we control for *grand*parental income and wealth the gap becomes much smaller (something that many

administrators seem not yet to have noticed), but a non-trivial gap remains.[8]

Researchers agree on this much. They differ on what best to attribute the gap to, though most serious researchers do not think it is attributable to genetic differences in IQ, and I shall rule that explanation out here. Other than those researchers who do attribute the gap to IQ, most are careful to be tentative in proferring their preferred explanation, but here are some contenders:

1. Social Factors:

a) Features of the society: for example the continuing and extreme discrimination against African American males in the criminal justice system, and the manifest continuing (but less extreme) discrimination against African-Americans in the housing, labor, and credit markets.
b) Features of the ethos of the school and behavior of administrators and teachers (racism by the schools, the tendency to hold African American students to lower standards etc).

2. Factors within the African-American community:

a) Features of the different family structure of African-American and white children: for example, the very high rates of children raised by single mothers, and the tendency of African American families to have more children.
b) Features of the broader African American culture, including the peer reward structure (e.g. the fact that African-American children are more likely than white children to reward their peers for anti-authoritarian and anti-learning behaviors).

We simply do not have the evidence to know for sure what the causes are, or what the balance of the causes is. The above possibilities would probably interact; so, for example, because of discrimination (1a)) African Americans can expect a lower return on schooling than Whites, and this may lead to a more negative attitude toward the personal costs involved in learning, which is reinforced by the fact that one's peers have a similar negative

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[8] See Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, *The Black–White Test Score Gap* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998) and Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute 2004) for comprehensive summaries of the state of research on the black–white test score gaps up to the point of publication.

attitude (2b)). Discrimination by the justice system and in labor markets (1a)) almost certainly has an affect on the family structure (2a)) by removing a large part of the pool of potential partners for single mothers. If schools were simply racist, in a straightforwardly discriminatory way, then the cultural values of the African-American children might be irrelevant. But most scholars and policymakers who attribute the gap to school behaviors do not believe that schools are directly racist. Rather they assume that the schools are set up in a way that rewards the cultural values of white children, and penalizes those of African-American parents and children. As Claude Steele accuses:

One factor is the basic assimilationist offer that schools make to Blacks: You can be valued and rewarded in school (and society), the schools say to these students, but you must first master the culture and ways of the American mainstream, and since that mainstream (as it is represented) is essentially White, this means you must give up many particulars of being Black styles of speech and appearance, value priorities, preferences–at least in mainstream setting. This is asking a lot.[9]

In order to get as much of what school offers as white children, African-American children have to go an extra mile; if Steele is right they have to renege on their cultural heritage, at least if heritage is understood as the encumbrances they already bear. Whites are not called upon to do the same thing.

The problem is that what is true of schooling is also true of the labor market. Success in the labor market requires the same kinds of cultural assimilation that schools demand. In refraining from making such demands on African-American children, as Baker et al.'s *second* principle recommends, the school jeopardizes their preparedness for the labor market. The corollary is that schools which devote resources to preparing these students well for participation in the labor market jeopardize the relationships that ground these children's lives. Similarly, schools which divert resources from that task to educating them appropriately in the emotions and in how to have a flourishing personal life worsen their material prospects; they make it less, rather than more, likely that these children who emanate from an already disadvantaged social group will succeed in the competition for income, wealth, and interesting employment.

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[9] Claude M. Steele, 'Race and the Schooling of Black Americans', *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1992) 68–75.

How serious this problem is, or might be, is an empirical and contingent matter. My experience is that many educators simply refuse to countenance the possibility that there is a real trade-off here; others are very sharply aware of it, and experience it as a imposing on them a major dilemma. It is very difficult to know how to adjust the culture, curriculum and structure of a school to the culture that African-American children bring into the school while simultaneously fulfilling the mission of preparing them well for success in labor markets; but it might not be costly to do it once we have found out how. If so, then the dilemma is less pressing than it might otherwise appear. Similarly, it might be inexpensive to adapt a school's culture to fit well with the culture of the white working class of the 'outer rings' of Britain's cities, without compromising the academic mission, once we have figured out how to do it. 'Difficult' need not mean 'expensive'. But at present the dilemma appears serious because nobody has figured out how to adapt schools to such pupils.

Once we acknowledge there is a trade off here (of unknown magnitude) one obvious response is to decide it in favor of equality of prospects for income and wealth and interesting employment. This, I think, is the line of thought suggested by Rawls's adoption of lexical priority for the fair equality of opportunity proviso in the second principle of justice, and it is the line that I take in my own slightly foggy discussion of this issue in my book *School Choice and Social Justice*.[10] But it is the wrong line of thought; or, at least, it stands in need of a great deal of justification.

The reason is this. Children enter school as persons who are still in formation. They deserve the chance to become autonomous, and to be able to develop the skills and resources with which they can engage the adult world with some semblance of self-reliance. But, ultimately, when dealing with a child, one's concern must be with their prospects for living a flourishing life. Labor-market opportunities provide opportunities for flourishing. Other things being equal people with higher incomes (up to some threshold of income) have better health and longevity, they are able to buy more consumer goods, and they are more able to be socially involved. People with better jobs have more interesting working

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[10] Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

lives, and, often, more power over their immediate circumstances. But continuity between the cultural values of one's childhood and those of one's adulthood also makes for a better life at least for many of us. For some children, the (flourishing) costs of disconnection may well outweigh the benefits of upward mobility. Especially for those children for whom upward mobility does not mean getting out of poverty, but instead moving away from their cultures in a way that breaches the relationship with their family of origin, this may be a serious consideration.

What makes the educator's job so difficult here, is that she is making decisions for the child, and these decisions have a serious impact on the character of the bundle of opportunities the child will have. By teaching the child the manners, habits, knowledge, and skills that are valued (however wrongly) in the professional labor market the school may be pushing her away from her cultural roots. But by not doing the same the school may be foreclosing on her behalf opportunities for higher education, interesting work, and enhanced income expectations.

I believe, along with Baker et al., that the institutions of our economy mis-value many human traits and activities, and I believe that its bias toward certain manifestations of cultural 'normalness' constitutes an injustice. But this is an injustice which is very hard to imagine being influenced through schooling. We can change our schools, but doing so will not change our economy, and even if it did it would not do so within the time-frame that would benefit the children we are currently educating.

The best strategy for Baker et al. is to say that I have not identified a need to trade off among their equalities. They might say that the sense of resources invoked in their principle of equality of educational resources is tagged to a notion of prospects for flourishing all-things-considered. So a working class child who has worse prospects for flourishing because she has been educated to participate in the rat-race has not, in fact, had the first inequality problem solved; the solution to the first problem is the solution to the second problem. Then there is no problem for them in principle with their view; it is just epistemically very difficult to know what strategies to use to ensure that those children for whom entering the rat-race will be better get the appropriate educational opportunities without diverting those children for whom entering the rat-race would be bad into it.

But if this is right they have abandoned a value which the left in general, and the educational left in particular, has given considerable weight to: the principle of equality of opportunity for prospects in the economy. The left has long demanded of education that it enhance the opportunities for children from working class backgrounds for advancement within capitalist economies. This idea is embodied in Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity; that people with similar levels of talent and willingness to exert effort should face similar prospects for culture and material goods. It is also evidenced in the much repeated ambition of Britain's New Labour government to use education policy and family policy to reduce the influence of social origins on children's prospects in the labor market. Equality of opportunity, presented as such, is insensitive to the quality or distribution of the outcomes a society has to offer; it simply demands that, whatever the quality and distribution of the opportunities, the competition for them should be fair in a quite stringent sense of fairness.

In my own work on educational equality I have endorsed and given great weight to the value of equality of opportunity. I think, now, that I have been wrong to do so, and that the value is not fundamentally important.[11] It is this value that conflicts, or might conflict, so much with Baker et al.'s second concern in practice; if we abandon it, the conflict dissolves, as I said, into a pragmatic problem. But, as a final comment, I want to emphasize that there are political costs to abandoning the equality of opportunity.

Some time ago Samuel Scheffler pointed out that liberal egalitarianism of the form that has grown out of Rawls's work is deeply at odds with the public political culture we inhabit, because it abandons the idea that there is some sort of pre-institutional notion of desert on the basis of which we should allocate rewards in social institutions.[12] This makes it extremely difficult for those of us who work within a post-Rawlsian framework to develop a political morality well-suited for the public politics of the societies of which we inhabit the political fringes. I think that thoroughgoing abandonment of equality of opportunity is similarly problematic for left wing theorists in education. We need to find points of

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[11] See Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, 'Equality, Priority and Positional Goods', *Ethics* 116 (2006) 471–497 for a pretty clear retraction.

[12] Samuel Scheffler, 'Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21/4 (1992) 299–323.

contact between our theorizing about the appropriate content of education and the practical policy demands of parents, teachers and policymakers. Abandoning equality of opportunity understood as equality of opportunity for labor market prospects makes this more difficult than we might like to think.

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