Journal of Philosophy of Education

Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2012

Fair Educational Opportunity and the Distribution of Natural Ability: Toward a Prioritarian Principle of Educational Justice

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In this article, I develop and defend a prioritarian principle of justice for the distribution of educational resources. I argue that this principle should be conceptualized as directing educators to confer a general benefit, where that benefit need not be mediated by improved academic outcomes. I go on to argue that it should employ a metric of all-things-considered flourishing over the course of the student's lifetime. Finally, I discuss the relationship between my proposed prioritarian principle and the meritocratic principle that it is presumed to supplement.

I INTRODUCTION

The value of an education is constituted in large part by the future benefits for which education serves as a gateway. In a highly stratified society like ours, these benefits are substantial, and account for vast disparities in the quality of life that differently situated children can expect to enjoy. A question of justice arises with considerable urgency: Given that the external rewards associated with being educated are highly unequally distributed in our society, how can teachers, administrators, and policy-makers perform their jobs in a way that is fairly responsive to the interest that each child has in being educated?

Though the term 'meritocracy' was coined by a sociologist who intended it as a dystopian ideal, subsequent theorists and political figures have co-opted the term and endorsed meritocratic principles of justice.[1] And indeed, it is easy to recognize the appeal of a society in which people succeed in proportion to their abilities, irrespective of their social class. Meritocratic principles of *educational* justice require that educational resources be deployed to break the correlation between academic achievement and social class. Because it is purportedly unfair for students to be worse off simply because they were born into a disadvantaged social class, defenders of meritocratic principles argue that we should

raise the achievement of those disadvantaged students by allocating resources disproportionately to their benefit, up to the point of equalizing achievement across social groups. As put by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift in their defence of a meritocratic principle, 'an individual's prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual's talent and effort, but they should not be influenced by his or her social class background' (2008, p. 447).

Though meritocratic principles have been articulated in various ways, the formulation Christopher Jencks develops in his 1988 paper 'Whom Must We Treat Equally for Educational Opportunity to be Equal?' is perhaps the most straightforward in de-legitimizing *only* educational disadvantage caused by *social* contingencies. That principle—which Jencks refers to as weak humane justice (hereafter WHJ)—understands fairness in education as 'equal opportunity for the genetically equal and unequal opportunity for the genetically unequal' (p. 522).

But as Jencks and Brighouse and Swift recognize, WHJ on its own will not lead to a just educational system. While it directs us to eliminate disadvantages due to *social* contingencies, it *approves* disadvantages due to *natural* contingencies. Thus, if it were the only principle of justice in education, it would follow that we have no duties of justice to students who struggle academically because of naturally-caused differences and therefore enjoy relatively dim prospects for leading a good life.[2] My project here is to develop a companion principle for WHJ which explicates the duties educators have to students disadvantaged by natural contingencies.

Rawls famously advocated two principles of justice: one to regulate disadvantage caused by social contingencies; the other to regulate disadvantage caused by natural contingencies. Accordingly, we can think of WHJ as an education-specific analogue to John Rawls's fair equality of opportunity principle (hereafter FEO).[3] Recall that, just as WHJ cannot unilaterally direct educators on how to fairly distribute their resources, FEO does not independently determine what a just social structure looks like within Rawls's theory. Accordingly, I propose that we consider a prioritarian principle of justice in education inspired by FEO's companion principle—the difference principle.[4] In this article, I will develop a prioritarian principle of educational justice and lay a conceptual foundation for further inquiry into what it demands on behalf of students who are disadvantaged due to natural contingencies.[5]

Though the prioritarian principle I explicate is *inspired by* the difference principle, I do not claim that it is the result of applying Rawls's theory of justice specifically to the educational realm. Rawls's principles are explicitly meant to apply to the overall structure of society, and not to the internal workings of any particular institution *within* society.[6] Moreover, Rawls's principles are offered as an *ideal* theory of justice, in which '[e]veryone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions' (1971/1999, p. 8). In contrast, my project here is decisively located within *non*ideal theory, as I am endeavouring to uncover principles of educational justice for a society which fails to comply with broader principles of justice. Notwithstanding these differences between Rawls's project and my

own, I think that there are *independent* reasons for regulating educational disadvantage due to natural contingencies using a prioritarian principle of justice. These reasons will become clear in due course, as will the many important conceptual differences between Rawls's difference principle and the prioritarian principle I endorse. For now, I invoke Rawls's principles of justice simply because his difference principle offers a useful starting point for conceptualizing prioritarian principles generally.

The article unfolds as follows: In Section II, I argue that WHJ cannot independently determine educators' obligations of justice to students, and propose a prioritarian principle of educational justice (hereafter PPEJ) to regulate inequalities due to differences in natural abilities. Such a principle will direct educators to benefit those students whose naturally-caused academic underachievement renders their future prospects dim. In Section III, I argue that we should conceptualize PPEJ as directing educators to confer a *general* benefit, where that benefit need not be mediated by improved academic outcomes. In Section IV, I argue that PPEJ must measure disadvantage in terms of prospects for flourishing. In Section V, I discuss several implications of recognizing PPEJ as a principle of justice belonging to non-ideal theory—that is, a principle that applies to actually-existing individuals living in our currently unjust world. In the Section VI, I discuss the division of labour between WHJ and PPEJ, concluding tentatively that PPEJ might not only *supplement* WHJ, but *replace* it. If I am right, then PPEJ will independently guide educators with respect to their duties to disadvantaged students, be those students disadvantaged by social *or* natural contingencies. In the intervening sections, I focus on PPEJ in its more modest role: as a principle of justice for the education of naturally-disadvantaged students.

II THE NEED TO SUPPLEMENT WEAK HUMANE JUSTICE

Imagine a world in which WHJ is perfectly realized. Now, apart from compensating for the disadvantage of social class background, imagine that resources are distributed equally so that students arrange themselves, by virtue of their natural abilities and inclination to exert effort, into a hierarchal system with the least talented students at the bottom, the most talented at the top, and the rest falling between these two extremes in order of increasing natural ability and effort.[7] Speaking roughly in terms of tiers within this hierarchy, we can say that members of all social class backgrounds are proportionally represented on each tier, such that students' achievement is perfectly correlated with talent and effort, and—conditional on talent and effort—*un*correlated with social class background.

Why might this distribution seem unfair, in spite of its perfect realization of WHJ? First, an appeal to intuition: In our society, academic achievement plays a huge role in determining the size of our share of the external rewards that enable us to live good lives—things like income, power, meaningful employment, and leisure. Moreover, these external rewards are *themselves* very unequally distributed, and *unjustly* distributed, since the

distribution is marked by extreme inequalities not themselves justified by any principles of justice.[8] The perfect realization of WHJ is consistent with a scenario in which the most talented attain a huge share of external rewards, while the least talented attain a share that is tiny by comparison. We deem it unfair for the less academically successful to end up so much worse off than others, even if they are *not* disproportionately from poor or minority social class backgrounds. Intuitively, then, WHJ fails to exhaust the demands of justice in education, because it does not fully satisfy the fairness considerations that justify it.

One might conclude from this appeal to intuition that the *real* injustice is located in the external reward structure itself: that the real problem is the inequality in social and economic rewards in society at large, rather than the inequality in educational outcomes which largely determine what any particular student's share of those rewards will be. In a society informed by an egalitarian ethos and regulated by progressive redistribution policies, the human capital developed through education would likely be directed to the benefit of the entire society, and in particular to those who are least well off. In such a society, with its egalitarian reward schedule, educators may well be freed of some of their obligations to those whose *educational* prospects are low. They may similarly be freed of those obligations in a society with an *in*egalitarian reward structure, but with little correlation between educational outcomes and prospects for external rewards. They might be freed of those obligations in such societies because those students with poor *educational* prospects may nonetheless have very favourable *life* prospects—and ultimately, it is students' *life* prospects that are the true object of concern.

Why, then, not work to establish the egalitarian ethos and progressive redistribution policies of the egalitarian society? Or, why not work to break the correlation between educational success and the external rewards for which education currently serves as a gateway? The simplest answer is that we need not pursue educational justice *to the exclusion* of pursuing justice in the external reward structure. Of course, the extent to which justice prevails in the external reward structure impacts heavily on the obligations of educators in the educational domain. That is precisely the point of investigating those obligations while holding fixed the external reward structure we presently face. If there were good reasons to be optimistic that reform of the broader reward structure were forthcoming in our society, we may well have grounds to treat the practical import of my project with scepticism. But I am not optimistic that the broader social changes which would undermine the practical import of my project will occur anytime soon. There is little political will for progressively redistributive taxation schemes, and—relatedly—no move toward a more egalitarian ethos among our citizenry. Nor is there will to break the correlation between academic success and external rewards; indeed, it is difficult to see how such a change would occur absent movement toward greater egalitarianism.

On the other hand, there is considerable political will for educating students more justly. Racial and social class achievement gaps have received overwhelming attention recently among academics, politicians, and the media. The basic fairness argument for closing these gaps and

raising the achievement of struggling students seems to resonate, even among a citizenry which more broadly resists egalitarian and prioritarian policies. Thus, I take the project of investigating the principles of justice for educators in our non-ideal circumstances to be of immense practical importance. It is likely that students will, for the foreseeable future, matriculate into a highly unequal and unjust society. Thus, we must ask, 'What principles ought to guide educators in deploying the resources available to them, *taking the external reward structure as fixed?*'. I have argued that it is intuitively implausible that WHJ exhausts the principles of justice which determine what educators should do under these circumstances.

We can make this intuitive case more concrete by invoking the kind of argument that Rawls gives for the necessity of supplementing FEO with a further principle. Equal opportunity is a broadly appealing normative ideal precisely because it de-legitimizes something that is nearly universally recognized as unfair: people's fates being determined by circumstances beyond their control, or disadvantage caused by factors over which the disadvantaged party has no control.[9] It is this undeserved social disadvantage that FEO and its educational analogue, WHJ, attempt to eliminate. But what Rawls and others have pointed out is that eliminating social disadvantage only goes part of the way toward remedying unearned disadvantage, since our natural abilities are also beyond our control.[10] As Rawls puts it, '[t]here is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune' (1971/1999, p. 64), since social contingencies and natural abilities are 'equally arbitrary' from a moral point of view (p. 65). Thus, if there is a good case to be made for mitigating unearned disadvantage, then we should not be content to eliminate unearned *social* disadvantage. FEO must be supplemented by a principle dealing with disadvantage resulting from people's unequal *natural* abilities. Enter the difference principle.

Similarly, WHJ must be supplemented. It very plausibly maintains that a student should not be disadvantaged relative to her peers in virtue social circumstances, since those circumstances are beyond either of their control. But once again, social circumstances are not the only source of disadvantage that operates independently of individuals' control. Since poor academic achievement resulting from *natural* causes can impair a student's life prospects just as much as poor academic achievement resulting from *social* causes, and since the external reward schedule is not itself designed to the benefit of those who are on the low end of it, we must look beyond WHJ if we are committed to the broadly appealing egalitarian sentiment that our life prospects should not be determined by circumstances beyond our control.

In particular, we must look to some principle that captures the obligation we have to benefit those students who lack the natural academic aptitude of their peers, and who thereby suffer from diminished life prospects. We might think that we should adopt a principle that directs us to *eliminate* disadvantage caused by poor academic performance due to natural causes, just as WHJ directs us to eliminate disadvantage caused by poor academic

performance due to social causes. Rawls rejects the analogous move in developing his principles of justice for the basic structure of society. Rather than attempting to eliminate disadvantage resulting from natural endowments, Rawls argues as follows:

> [T]he basic structure can be arranged so that these [natural] contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate. Thus we are lead to the difference principle if we wish to set up the social system so that no one gains or loses from his arbitrary place in the distribution of natural assets . . . without giving or receiving compensating advantages in return (p. 87).

So Rawls opts for an egalitarian principle to regulate social contingencies and a prioritarian principle to regulate natural contingencies. In due course, I will give an education-specific argument for regulating natural contingencies with a prioritarian—rather than an egalitarian—principle of justice. But this task must await further explication of the principle I have in mind.[11] The tentative proposal is for the following division of labour within the realm of educational justice: The egalitarian WHJ insists that prospects for academic achievement be equalized across social class backgrounds; the prioritarian PPEJ insists that educators work to improve the life prospects of those students whose natural differences interact with the external social environment so as to render them disadvantaged relative to their peers. PPEJ directs teachers to distribute their resources so as to benefit students disadvantaged on account of these natural differences, where the benefit owed is proportional to the extent of disadvantage. Over the course of the next several sections, I will attempt to put some flesh on the skeleton of PPEJ.[12]

III THE EDUCATIONAL AND THE ACADEMIC: TEACHING AS A PREPARATION FOR LIFE

How are we to understand this benefit that PPEJ directs educators to confer on disadvantaged students? The argument for the instability of WHJ sets the stage for an innovative understanding of how PPEJ should be conceptualized. The crucial premise in that argument is *not* that it is intrinsically unfair for naturally gifted students to do better in school than their peers. Rather, the crucial premise is that unequal academic achievement begets unequal life prospects generally in a highly stratified society like ours. If we lived in a society with an egalitarian external reward schedule, we would be untroubled—or at least much *less* troubled—by unequal academic performance due to natural differences. Such inequalities may not doom struggling students to experiencing less fulfilling lives than their peers.[13] What is unjust is that our social structure transmits unearned academic aptitude into external rewards, and unearned inaptitude into external disadvantage. As a general rule, naturally gifted students end up on top—and naturally inapt students on bottom—of our stratified social structure.

A tempting response is to dichotomize the possible recourses for discharging PPEJ in these circumstances: Either we modify the external reward structure to interrupt the transmission of poor academic performance into disadvantage, or we raise the academic performance of students who struggle due to natural causes. Since we are looking for a principle to guide educators in the non-ideal circumstances they actually face, we must accept the external reward structure as given. Thus, all proposals to reform the broader social structure—by making rewards more equally distributed, for example—are off the table. We are left, apparently, with a single option: If we want to discharge our duty to naturally disadvantaged students, we must improve their academic performance. But there are a couple of problems with this option. First, narrowly defined academic outcomes may be unattainable for many students, or may simply not be the most effective investment in their future prospects. Consider Linda, a fourth grader with moderate cognitive impairment due to Down's syndrome. Linda will never achieve enough academically to attain security and fulfilment as an adult through the conventional channels. But that doesn't mean that educators can do nothing for her. Not all that is educational is academic. Teachers may impart certain life skills that will enable Linda to attain a higher degree of independence than she would otherwise enjoy, or impart skills for navigating personal relationships; this is an appropriate *educational* use of Linda's and her teacher's time, even if that time might otherwise have been spent marginally improving Linda's test scores.[14]

A second problem is that a commitment to raising the specifically academic outcomes of naturally disadvantaged students will almost certainly require resources to be diverted from talented students, even to the detriment of the very students it was intended to help. It might, for example, cause the skills of Linda's academically gifted classmate Steve to remain undeveloped, where those skills might otherwise have prepared an adult Steve to engineer pedagogical techniques for educating cognitively impaired students. This possibility is especially troublesome in light of the fact that our concern for the academic performance of naturally disadvantaged students is driven by a concern for their life prospects generally. Sacrificing life prospects to improve academic performance cannot be what PPEJ demands.

A better move is to notice that the alleged dichotomy is a false one. We can see this by considering the various points which distributive principles of justice in education might take to be salient. Equal resource advocates take the salient point to be on the input side: They argue that equal *resources* should be put into each child's education. Equal opportunity advocates and adequacy theorists reject the assumption that the input side is uniquely salient. Because equal inputs can result in vastly *un*equal outcomes depending on the various social and natural circumstances faced by the child, these theorists argue that we should focus instead on the *outcomes* of education.[15] Typically, these outcomes have been understood in terms of academic performance.[16] But by focusing narrowly on academic outcomes, we ignore the fact that what is salient on the outcome side is not

a point but a *span* consisting of immediate positive academic outcomes *as well as* the more distal positive life outcomes that are correlated with education.

Thus, the dichotomy entertained in this section ignores a third strategy which educators have at their disposal: We can understand our prioritarian obligation to naturally disadvantaged students as an obligation to benefit them *generally*, where that benefit *may* take the form of a direct investment in their future prospects that bypasses the mechanism of improved academic outcomes. By broadening our focus from specifically academic outcomes to all-things-considered valuable outcomes, we can relate the conversation more coherently to the reasons for which we care that education be distributed fairly in the first place, and we may be cognizant of a broader range of possibilities for improving the prospects of naturally disadvantaged students. Conceptualizing PPEJ as an obligation to benefit students generally allows us to take seriously the possibility that we educate Linda better if we teach her skills to enjoy listening to stories or articulating her feelings than we do if we work tirelessly to get her to understand subtraction; likewise if we provide opportunities for Steve to get to know and befriend her, and for him to develop aspirations to further his education in ways that will ultimately benefit them both.[17]

IV MEASURING THE BENEFIT: A FLOURISHING METRIC OF JUSTICE

So for the purposes of PPEJ, we will understand both disadvantage and the benefits owed to the disadvantaged in terms of students' *general* life prospects. In the perfect meritocracy we envisioned earlier, those whose academic achievement is poorest will correspond perfectly to those with the poorest prospects. But in our society, the correlation will be imperfect. How, then, are educators to measure the positions of students in order to determine who is disadvantaged relative to whom?

For two reasons, we should measure advantage and conceptualize benefits for PPEJ using a metric of all-things-considered flourishing. First, a flourishing metric will measure relative levels of well being based on students' attainment of *actually valuable outcomes*, rather than mere *opportunities* for them. While opportunity metrics are appealing when we're measuring advantage among adults whom it is appropriate to hold responsible for converting opportunities into valuable outcomes, the metric we deploy for the purposes of PPEJ must be appropriate for measuring *childhood* advantage, and children should *not* be held responsible for converting educational opportunities into actual advantage. To see why, consider the fact that education is mandatory in our society until age sixteen. We do not allow children to choose to forego the life outcomes which education enables them to attain, because we deem the outcomes too important, and we judge that children under the age of sixteen lack the necessary degree of agency to be held responsible for converting—or failing to convert—educational opportunities into positive outcomes.

Similarly, PPEJ must understand advantage in terms of actually valuable outcomes, rather than opportunities for attaining them, at least until the developmental point at which we are comfortable holding students fully responsible for their choices.

Second, a flourishing metric is appropriate for the purposes of PPEJ because it will be sensitive to *intrinsically* valuable components of students' lives. We should not take childhood advantage to consist just in those outcomes that are necessary for the development of mature agency. Such things as enjoyable aesthetic or athletic experiences are relevant to assessments of relative advantage among children, even if children could develop agency without them.

Of course, we will want to know more about how flourishing is to be understood. Colin Macleod and Samantha Brennan (n.d.) have both endorsed flourishing metrics of childhood advantage, in that both metrics include actually valuable life outcomes which need not be developmentally crucial. According to Macleod, childhood goods can be thought of as 'emerging from various forms of creative stimulation of distinctive faculties' including physical, emotional, aesthetic, cognitive, and moral faculties (Macleod, 2010, p. 21). For Brennan, childhood advantage consists in experiences of unstructured, imaginative play; relationships with other children and with adults; opportunities to meaningfully contribute to household and community; time spent outdoors in the natural world; physical affection; physical activity and sport; bodily pleasure; music and art; emotional wellbeing; and physical wellbeing and health (p. 20).

Because education is future-oriented, we should measure advantage for the purposes of PPEJ as prospects for flourishing *over the course of a lifetime*. Thus, PPEJ must recognize benefits conferred on two fronts: increases in children's attainment of *actually valuable outcomes*, and increases in their prospects for flourishing as adults. As such, we will have to expand these accounts of childhood flourishing to include those elements that only constitute flourishing when experienced by adults. For example, a teacher might benefit a disadvantaged student by facilitating her development of the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that will enable her to enjoy healthy adult relationships.[18]

We can see from the preceding discussion why PPEJ must part ways with the difference principle when it comes to the metric the two principles deploy. Rawls's metric of social primary goods (hereafter SPG's) includes powers, positions of authority, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect (1971/1999, p. 79). The SPG's metric is unsatisfactory as a measure of childhood advantage—and is therefore unacceptable for the purposes of PPEJ—because it assumes that we are distributing goods among agents who can be held responsible for setting their own ends, and for converting the goods distributed to them into actual advantage. This 'agency assumption' is implicit in the metric of SPG's because the goods are not themselves constitutive of advantage, but rather are raw materials with which individuals can pursue their own advantage, whatever they take that to be. Because students cannot be held fully responsible in this sense, the metric of SPG's will not do for our purposes.[19]

One important implication of the fact that children cannot be held fully responsible for converting educational opportunities into valuable outcomes is that educators need not attempt to disambiguate students' effort as an independent source of disadvantage. We should not withhold a benefit from a student on the grounds that her disadvantage is caused by a lack of effort, since she should not be presumed to have the sort of agency over her exertion of effort that would justify withholding such an important benefit otherwise owed. Thus, disinclination to exert effort is among the causes of disadvantage that should be problematized by the principles of justice in education.[20]

V PPEJ AS A PRINCIPLE OF NON-IDEAL THEORY

Another difference between the difference principle and PPEJ is that the difference principle is not intended to restrict inequalities based on the positions of particular individuals, but rather to restrict inequalities based on the position of the worst off *representative* individual, as defined by social position.[21] Rawls applies the difference principle only to assess the position of representative individuals because he takes the basic structure of society as the primary subject of justice; the positions of individuals are just so long as the basic structure conforms to the principles of justice.[22] PPEJ, on the other hand, is a principle for determining the obligations of *actual* teachers in distributing educational resources among *actual* children. Whereas the difference principle specifies the ideally just structure of society, PPEJ is intended to guide action in the non-ideal circumstances in which we find ourselves.

This difference has several implications for PPEJ. First, PPEJ may need to utilize a less stringent prioritization of the worst off than does the difference principle. The difference principle's maximize-the-minimum, or 'maximin' requirement constitutes a very stringent version of the general mandate to benefit the worse off: In designing the basic structure, we are prohibited from foregoing any possible benefit to the very least advantaged even if we could, by foregoing that benefit, provide a much greater benefit to the almost as badly off (1971/1999, p. 72). But perhaps it is unrealistic to expect actual individuals to regulate their conduct toward one another in such a way as to maximize the position of the least well off. It might, for example, be extremely difficult or inefficient for educators to accumulate the information necessary to discern students' relative degree of disadvantage. Their efforts might much more fruitfully be harnessed to improve the prospects of disadvantaged students generally.[23] PPEJ is prioritarian, then, in that it requires individuals to benefit those who are less advantaged in proportion to their disadvantage. But because of its status as a principle of justice among actual individuals, it might be a mistake to saddle it with a stringent lexical priority rule.

Moreover, PPEJ must be prioritarian in a different way than the difference principle. While the difference principle approves a single arrangement of the basic institutions of society—that which optimizes the

prospects for the least advantaged representative individual—PPEJ mandates a course of action. It calls for particular behaviours in the here and now. In order for PPEJ to be action-guiding for actual individuals, it must be cashed out not in terms of the distribution of valuable outcomes that we want, but rather in terms of the equalizing process by which we deem it appropriate to move toward it.

Of course, we have to know something about the correct distribution in order to say anything substantive about PPEJ. This is where our ideal theory principles of justice come in. If Rawls is right that the ideally just social structure is one in which the position of the worst off is optimized relative to other feasible structures, then educators in our society can go to great lengths in deploying their resources to benefit disadvantaged students before exhausting the principled obligation they incur by virtue of their role as educators in an unjust society. This suggests that we should be more concerned not with the point at which the obligation is *fully met*, but rather the point at which it becomes *constrained* by competing values and feasibility concerns. I will not attempt to say anything very decisive about the position of PPEJ with respect to feasibility and competing values, but I think it will be helpful to ask what the constraints are, and to set forth some considerations that might be relevant in weighing them against PPEJ.

First consider the feasibility considerations of cost and know-how: With regard to cost, educators can start by redirecting some of the educational resources currently available within the system. For example, schools might choose to fund art appreciation classes for struggling students, even at the cost of cutting funds for pull-out enrichment programs for high achievers. Or they might design enrichment programs for high achievers with the sincere goal of developing in talented students a disposition to exercise abilities in service to others.[24]

With regard to know-how, there are some fairly straightforward ways to benefit less advantaged students that do not require expertise beyond what we should expect from educators already. These might include administrators allotting more funds for enrichment programs for the cognitively disabled, guidance counsellors offering career advice with an eye toward developing students' natural abilities into community resources, teachers teaching social ethics alongside reading and arithmetic, and *all* educators spending more of their time with struggling students and less with high-achievers. Admittedly, some interventions *will* require the development of new competences, but plenty of work that can be undertaken immediately.

Apart from feasibility concerns, other values may be in tension with PPEJ. Likely candidates include the value of respecting parental interests, the value of childhood wellbeing, the value of perfectionist development of excellence, and the value of economic growth.[25] An examination of these values will help provide a framework for determining the space in which educators should work to further PPEJ. There are at least four considerations that should guide us in weighing competing values. First, we should ask how important the values are relative to one another. Second, we should ask how well realized the values are relative to one another within the current social arrangements. Third, we should ask how well-positioned we

are to further each value relative to the others, on the grounds that we have some reason to act where our efforts can do most good. Finally, we should ask to what extent each value is inimical to the others, because one value may weigh favourably in virtue of requiring fewer trade-offs.

PPEJ can be pursued to some considerable extent within the constraints set by other values, on any plausible construal of how those values should be weighed. For this reason and because I am not sure how the considerations will play out, I will say little about how PPEJ fares in a comparative assessment. But a few points are worth noting. First, research suggests that after societies cross a certain threshold of material affluence, further economic growth does not make their members better off. Richard Layard amasses evidence from the social sciences and biology to argue that higher average income has little effect on happiness above $20,000 per person (2005, p. 34). Robert Frank reaches a similar conclusion using evidence concerning the correlation between GDP and subjective reports of wellbeing (Frank, 1999). This research suggests that in a society like ours, further economic growth is unlikely to result in individuals living better lives. Accordingly, in our relatively affluent society, we should be cautious about giving the value of economic growth a great deal of weight relative to other values that *do* make people's lives better.

Second, insofar as we are concerned with parental interests, we should consider whether PPEJ may actually allow more families to enjoy the goods of an intimate familial relationship. One can imagine that severe flourishing deficits on the part of parents or children can impose a serious strain on family relationships, detracting from the value of those relationships.[26]

Finally, it is worth noting that PPEJ seems largely compatible with the value of childhood wellbeing. Of course, questions will arise about how we trade off current flourishing against future flourishing. But PPEJ takes flourishing seriously at all stages of life, and will register a child as disadvantaged to the extent that future flourishing must be purchased at the cost of childhood flourishing. Thus, while there are certainly constraints that set limits on how far we should go in pursuing PPEJ, I do not think that they should discourage us from getting started. There is good reason to think that we can improve life quite a bit for disadvantaged children before running afoul of constraints.

VI THE DIVISION OF LABOUR BETWEEN WHJ AND PPEJ

Why do we need an egalitarian principle to regulate social disadvantage and a prioritarian principle to regulate natural disadvantage? Why not instead develop a single principle that can direct educators with regard to unearned disadvantage generally? While I alleged PPEJ to be inspired by the difference principle, I've taken sweeping departures from the Rawlsian paradigm to meet the requirements of an educational principle of justice in non-ideal theory. Why then, should we accept Rawls's division of labour as an appropriate model for the educational domain?

Now that we have fleshed out PPEJ somewhat, we are well-positioned to answer the most relevant part of this question for our purposes: Why not formulate a single *egalitarian* principle of educational justice to regulate disadvantage resulting from *either* socially *or* naturally caused academic underachievement? The answer: A prioritarian principle is preferable for our purposes, *at least* for regulating natural disadvantage. Imagine directing a teacher (administrator, policymaker) to equalize life prospects among all her students. Chances are she would have no idea how to start, and even less optimism that the task could ever be completed. She will be unable, of course, to equalize academic achievement among all her students. And she will be unable to modify the external reward structure so as to de-link academic achievement and prospects for flourishing. Given the scope of her role as an educator, and her limited control over the fates of her students, equalizing prospects for flourishing is simply out of the question.

Now imagine instead that we ask her to identify the children whose prospects for flourishing are bleak, and to do what she can in her capacity as an educator to improve those prospects. She will likely start by spending more time with those children—subject to whatever constraints competing values impose—and by prioritizing the needs of students in proportion to their disadvantage. She will find this prioritarian project much more manageable, and much more straightforwardly action-guiding. In short, the prioritarian principle is preferable because it directs individuals to follow a *process* to discharge their duties of justice to students, rather than mandating a certain *distribution* that individual educators are nearly powerless to effect.

Perhaps PPEJ will not expire while students still enjoy unequal prospects for flourishing. In other words, it may be that teachers should continue to disproportionally favour disadvantaged students until some utopian point at which all students enjoy equal life prospects, regardless of natural ability. Or it may be that the utopian distribution of flourishing is that which maximizes the flourishing of those who enjoy least. Either way, conceptualizing our obligation as prioritarian enables educators to focus on identifying the possible courses of action whereby we might make disadvantaged students better off.

Admittedly, an educator directed to *equalize* prospects among all her students may well embark on an identical course of action. Given what she knows and the limitations she faces, a policy of prioritizing the worst off students is likely to be the best tactic for promoting equality among her students in the long run. I maintain that the prioritarian principle is more *straightforwardly* action-guiding, particularly given the currency of all-things-considered prospects for flourishing which educational justice must employ. But there is an even stronger reason for preferring the prioritarian principle: An egalitarian principle of justice will sometimes under-specify the just course of action for agents in non-ideal circumstances.

Imagine a highly idealized case in which a teacher can deploy the resources at her disposal to educate her students in one of two ways: The first option will result in a classroom distribution in which half of her students enjoy five units of prospects for flourishing, and the other half

enjoy three units. The second option will result in three-quarters of her students enjoying 4.5 units of prospects for flourishing, and one-quarter enjoying 2.5 units. An egalitarian principle will offer this teacher no guidance under these circumstances, because there is no obvious sense in which one distribution is more equal than the other. The distance between the two groups of students is the same (two units) in each of the distributions. Even if we assume that our egalitarian principle calls for the *highest feasible* egalitarian distribution, we have no guidance regarding which distribution to choose, as each option results in a mean achievement of four units. With more complicated classroom (school, district, etc.) configurations, the problem of egalitarian principles under-specifying the just distribution is likely to become even more acute. Moreover, we will often have to purchase equality understood in terms of number of students achieving equally at the cost of a different intuitive understanding of equality: equality as minimizing the total range of achievement. In order to bring more students up to the higher level of outcome-attainment, we will often have to further diminish the prospects of those left behind on the lower tiers.

PPEJ, in contrast, provides clear guidance, and it provides the *right* guidance: The teacher should deploy her resources to bring about the first distribution, because that is the distribution which optimizes the prospects of the least advantaged. That this option is the intuitively correct one can be seen when we recall that we are measuring outcomes using a metric of all-things-considered flourishing. We need not worry that lowering the outcomes which the most advantaged enjoy will ultimately harm the least advantaged; that consideration is already built into the metric, so to speak. And the relative urgency of improvements to the prospects of the least advantaged can be seen when we recall that their disadvantage is not understood narrowly in terms of their academic achievement, but *holistically,* in terms of their all-things-considered flourishing over the course of a lifetime. Even remaining neutral regarding the stringency of the priority of the worst off, we can agree that ensuring that the very worst off enjoy an adequately good life is more morally important than ensuring that some subset of them enjoy an even better life. Thus, we should prefer the option which raises the bottom rung of the distribution, even if that option means that more students will occupy that bottom rung. Not only is PPEJ more straightforwardly action-guiding for actual educators; it also provides guidance in all cases, whereas egalitarian principles will, in some cases, under-specify the just course of action.

Notice, now, that the under-specification problem does not apply uniquely to inequality caused by natural contingencies. Egalitarian principles will sometimes under-specify the just course of action whether the inequalities in question are due to natural causes *or* social causes. Why, then, should we not formulate a single *prioritarian* principle of educational justice to regulate disadvantage resulting from *either* socially *or* naturally caused academic underachievement? If the prioritarian principle is preferable for regulating inequality due to natural contingencies, and if the reasons for which it is preferable do not distinguish between natural and

social contingencies, then that principle would seem also to be preferable for regulating social contingencies as well. Why not apply PPEJ to both sources of disadvantage?

We might worry that there is some morally important feature of social inequalities that renders them *all* unjust, even if they *could* be directed to the benefit of the least advantaged. But recall that Rawls's reason for introducing two distinct principles was pragmatic: Both sources of inequality are irrelevant from a moral point of view; nonetheless, some inequalities due to *social* contingencies are permitted, because those inequalities can benefit the least advantaged.

But does the possibility of directing inequality to the benefit of the least advantaged distinguish social from natural contingencies *in principle*? Richard Arneson and Matthew Clayton raise the analogous question regarding FEO and the difference principle. They conclude that there is no principled distinction, and argue that we should use the difference principle to regulate both sources of inequality, leaving advantage intact only when doing so is to the maximal benefit of the least advantaged. After all, allowing some *social* differences to affect advantage might rebound to the benefit of the least advantaged as well (Arneson, p. 94). The mere fact that natural difference can *more readily* be directed to the benefit of the least advantaged does not ground a principled difference in the way in which social institutions ought to treat the two sources of disadvantage (Arneson, 1999, p. 95; Clayton, 2001, p. 249).[27]

Just as Clayton and Arneson see no principled reason to insist that social contingencies generally be regulated using an egalitarian principle, I see no principled reason for insisting that social contingencies in the educational domain be regulated by an egalitarian principle, rather than PPEJ. Meanwhile, features of the educational domain, and the non-ideal nature of the project I am engaged in provide some positive reason for embracing PPEJ as a single principle of justice in education. First, we have already seen that egalitarian principles of justice can under-specify the just distribution between two non-ideal alternatives; thus, they can fail to provide educators with guidance regarding how to deploy their resources in the actual circumstances they face. Second, PPEJ is more straightforwardly action-guiding than egalitarian principles, because it directly mandates a course of action, whereas egalitarian principles do so only derivatively.

Finally, given that we have reason to prefer PPEJ, at least to regulate disadvantage due to natural contingencies, we have an additional pragmatic reason to prefer PPEJ to regulate social disadvantage as well. The reason for this is that educators are not epistemically well situated to discern the causes of students' disadvantage. Assume for a minute that there is some fact of the matter regarding the extent to which any particular student's achievement is determined by natural causes and the extent to which it is determined by social causes. Educators may have no way to reliably discern that fact. Even if they *could*, doing so would likely require an investment of resources. We may be justified in foregoing the enlightenment those resources could buy, using them instead to benefit a disadvantaged student. Thus, epistemic limitations generate a pragmatic reason in

favour of conceptualizing all educational obligations of justice using a single principle. Insofar as we have independent reason to prefer a prioritarian principle in the case of naturally-caused disadvantage, we have a pragmatic reason to opt for that principle generally.

If we embrace a single prioritarian principle, that principle will direct educators to benefit underachieving students whatever the cause of their underachievement. In most cases, that benefit will be conferred by working to improve students' academic performance. In a small range of cases, however, it will take some other form. The possibility of improving some students' lives directly is no more appropriate for the naturally disadvantaged than for the socially disadvantaged. The fact that I have argued specifically for this possibility in my explication of PPEJ does not diminish the appeal of regulating both social and natural disadvantage by a single prioritarian principle. There may yet be some overriding reason to prefer the egalitarian WHJ to regulate educational inequalities due to social contingencies. But I conclude, tentatively, that a good case exists for embracing PPEJ as a principle of justice in education to guide educators with respect to both socially- and naturally-caused disadvantage.[28]

VII CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of education is not to impart some narrowly defined academic skills or knowledge; rather, it is to enable students to lead good lives. Academic skills and knowledge are merely vehicles by which the ultimate goal is conventionally attained. But for many students—and in particular for those challenged by severe natural disadvantages—narrowly-defined academic outcomes may be unattainable, or may simply not be the most effective means of living a good life. I have argued that PPEJ must take seriously the insight that academic achievement need not be the sole vehicle by which education enables students to lead good lives, while acknowledging that it is likely to remain the *predominate* vehicle for this purpose.

I have argued that PPEJ must measure good lives in terms of flourishing, and I have explored the implications of PPEJ as a principle of justice capturing obligations among actual individuals in the here-and-now. Finally, I have explored the division of labour between PPEJ and its presumed companion principle, WHJ. There is a case to be made, I think, for abandoning WHJ and embracing PPEJ as an independent principle that captures obligations of educators to disadvantaged students whose poor prospects are due to *either* natural *or* social contingencies. But even if some principled case can be given for retaining WHJ as an independent principle of justice in education, it should, like PPEJ, measure disadvantage in terms of students' prospects for flourishing over the course of a lifetime. And whether educators' duties to students are prioritarian or egalitarian, those educators should remain cognizant of the possibility of benefiting students in ways unmediated by narrow academic outcomes.

In explicating PPEJ, I have used Rawls's difference principle as a starting point. But we can see that the apple has fallen a good distance from the

tree. In every case, the departures we took from the difference principle were called for by the fact that we sought a principle of justice to guide teachers, administrators, and policymakers constrained by the actual circumstances of our society. There is, I grant, much work left to do in explicating PPEJ. But I hope to have presented a sufficiently attractive sketch to justify further consideration and development.

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NOTES

1. For example, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared, soon after taking office, that '[t]he Britain of the elite is over. The new Britain is a meritocracy' (1997; see www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2001/feb/14/features11.g21). For the first use of the term 'meritocracy,' see Young, 1958.
2. To be sure, some impairments that may seem to be natural are in fact socially caused, such as impairments caused by growing up near hazardous waste sites.
3. Rawls's second principle of justice requires that inequalities be arranged so that they maximally benefit the least advantaged representative individual, and are attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (1971/1999, p. 53). In Rawls's theory of justice, fair equality of opportunity performs the dual roles of correcting for social disadvantage and preventing discrimination in hiring by enforcing open positions. In Rawls's own words: '[T]hose with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system' (1971/1999, p. 63).
4. The difference principle maintains that the most just arrangement for the basic structure of society is the one in which the least well-off representative individual is better off than under any feasible alternative arrangement (1971/1999, p. 65).
5. I do not mean to suggest that the causes of low achievement are easily identifiable. Because of the reciprocal effects of talent and social class background, it may not be possible even in principle to discern the roles of social and natural disadvantage in determining how well a child does in school. This difficulty will be taken up later in the article; for now, I just assume that there is some discernable fact about the extent to which a child's achievement is affected by social class, and the extent to which it is affected by natural ability.
6. More specifically, Rawls says that his principles apply to the 'basic structure' of society, by which he means 'the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation' (1971/1999, p. 6).
7. Of course, what counts as 'talented' and 'untalented' is to some considerable extent socially constructed. For the purposes of this article, I will take assessments of talent to be suitably relativized to a particular society.
8. For an elaboration on this fairness-based case for educational equality, see Brighouse and Swift, 2008, p. 446. The instability of meritocratic principles has also been pointed out in Brighouse, 2009 and Jencks, 1988.
9. For examples of egalitarian arguments that invoke this crucial premise, see Cohen, 1993 and 1995; Arneson, 1990; Temkin, 1998, pp. 130; and Temkin, 2003, pp. 767, 775. See also Parfit's discussion of telic egalitarianism in Parfit, 1995.
10. See, for examples, Rawls, 1971/1999, pp. 64, 87, and 89; Cohen, 1995; Arneson, 1990; Parfit, 1995, pp. 91–92; Temkin, 1998, p. 155; and Temkin, 2003.

11. As will become clear in due course, the import of the intervening discussion will not be diminished if it turns out that *all* disadvantage should be regulated by an egalitarian principle, or that all should be regulated by a prioritarian principle. I will ultimately suggest that we have some reason to believe the latter.
12. To be sure, educators are likely to have obligations to students beyond those set forth by considerations of distributive justice. They have a duty to respect the physical integrity of their students, for example, even if by violating that duty they might bring about a more just distribution of educational outcomes. For the purposes of this article, I set aside the complicated issue of how educators are to balance competing duties to students, in order to focus on explicating the duties which arise in virtue of principles of distributive justice.
13. Of course, we would want all children to have reasonably pleasant childhoods, and to be made to feel worthy and capable in their endeavours. But these are consistent with some children being less academically talented than others, even if the skill difference is large.
14. It might be all-things-considered better for Linda to be integrated as far as possible into a standard classroom for her age group, even if that means some of her time will be spent on academic skills that will not optimally serve her. The point is that PPEJ should leave room for these nuanced context- and child-dependent considerations, rather than understanding benefits in narrow academic terms.
15. For examples of adequacy theories of educational justice, see Anderson, 2007 and Satz, 2007. See also Anderson, 1999. For a compelling argument *against* adequacy theories, see Brighouse and Swift, 2009a.
16. This tendency is exemplified most strongly in the black/white achievement gap literature. See, for examples, the selections in Jencks and Phillips, 1998 and Magnuson and Waldfogel, 2011. See also Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) whose reform agenda predicated on the achievement gap understood in terms of narrow academic outcomes has influenced organizations funding educational research (The Herritage Foundation, The Education Trust), as well as the Bush and Obama presidential administrations. Of course, the theorists who focus on narrow academic outcomes need not be committed to the view that those are the only outcomes that matter; those working on the empirical side of the issue most likely focus on narrow academic outcomes because those outcomes are the most readily measurable. But until we reject this narrow focus in our theorizing, we are unlikely to develop ways to operationalize and measure the life course outcomes correlated with education that we really care about.
17. Of course, it may be preferable in the majority of cases to benefit students by investing in their academic achievement, and educators should certainly be risk averse about wrongly judging students incapable of achieving academically at a high level. But by understanding PPEJ as mandating a *general* benefit to those disadvantaged by natural academic difficulties, we enable educators to make nuanced judgments about how they can maximally prepare students to live good lives.
18. This metric of flourishing raises several questions about weighting which merit serious consideration, but which I will not take up here. For example, a full defence of this metric of advantage would require some explanation of how present flourishing is to be weighed against future flourishing. In spite of the seriousness and interestingness of the need to manage trade-offs, I will set aside this issue for the purposes of this article.
19. One may wonder whether this constitutes a general rejection of the SPG's metric. Certainly it does if what we want is a universal metric appropriate for measuring advantage among all types of people. The point that matters for my article is that SPG's is inadequate for measuring advantage among children. I want to leave open the possibility that it is an acceptable metric for measuring advantage among adults. Other metrics have been proposed in the literature, including opportunity for welfare (Arneson, 1989 and 1990), access to advantage (Cohen, 1989 and 1993), and (non-Rawlsian) resources (Dworkin, 1981a and b). Though I do not discuss these alternatives here, they all join the metric of SPG's in making the agency assumption, and are therefore ill suited to assessing childhood advantage. The capabilities metric developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum might be adapted so as to constitute a flourishing metric of childhood advantage (Sen, 1979, pp. 217–220; Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000). Such a modified version would understand advantage among children in terms of functioning, rather than capabilities, and it would include intrinsically valuable life outcomes on the list of capabilities, even when those outcomes make no contribution to the development of agency.

20. It is a further question whether lack of effort is better classified as a natural or a social cause of disadvantage. Depending on the appropriate division of labour between PPEJ and WHJ (to be addressed in Section VI), we may be spared the need to make classifications.
21. For further explanation of the difference principle as applying to representative individuals, see Rawls, 1971/1999, p. 56.
22. The basic structure of society is 'the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation' (1971/1999, p. 6). See also the basic structure and pure procedural justice, pp. 76–77.
23. For a general philosophical discussion of the appropriate weighting of benefits to those who are progressively more disadvantaged, see Nagel, 1977 and Parfit, 1995.
24. Furthermore, there may be a good case for diverting considerably more resources into the education system, if (plausibly) primary and secondary schooling are particularly effective entry points for mitigating unearned disadvantage, or if there is greater political will to benefit disadvantaged children than to benefit disadvantaged adults.
25. On parental rights, see Brighouse and Swift, 2008 and 2009b, and Brighouse, 2009. On the value of childhood wellbeing, see Brighouse, 2009. On the perfectionist development of excellence, see Kupperman, 1987. I will discuss the balance between WHJ and PPEJ in the next section.
26. For more on the goods of familial relationships and the fair distribution thereof, see Brighouse and Swift, 2009b, 'Legitimate Parental Partiality'.
27. Clayton and Arneson grant that some social disadvantage—that caused by harmful racial discrimination, for example—should be eliminated on independent grounds. But these objectionable cases can be ruled out by a principle of antidiscrimination; they do not constitute a reason to categorically eliminate socially-caused inequality.
28. If we do retain WHJ as a companion principle to PPEJ, we will of course have to investigate the priority relationship between them. The analogous investigation for FEO and the difference principle has been thoroughly executed by Clayton and Arneson, who conclude that, even if the egalitarian principle is to be retained, it is not lexically secondary to the prioritarian principle, as Rawls claims (Rawls, 2001, p. 43; see also 1971/1999, p. 38). I think their arguments against the lexical priority relationship extend to PPEJ and WHJ, but I will not take up the issue of weighting the two principles here. It will only be relevant if I am wrong that PPEJ alone should do the work of regulating disadvantage generally within the educational domain.

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