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Conceptions of Educational Equity

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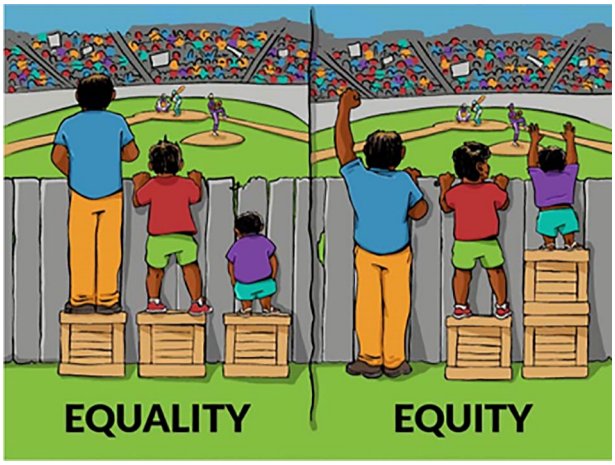
"Educational equity" is universally lauded but equally ill-defined. At least five contrasting meanings of equity are in current use: equal distributions of outcomes across populations; equal outcomes for every child; equal resource allocations across students, schools, districts, states, or nations; equal experiences for each child; and equal levels of growth by each child. Furthermore, these conceptions are themselves often subsumed to concerns for benefiting the less advantaged, ensuring educational adequacy, or prioritizing short-term benefits versus long-term structural change. Researchers, educators, and policy makers alike will benefit from understanding these distinctions and trade-offs, not least in order to reimagine and restructure the unjust conditions that make some of those trade-offs unavoidable in the first place.

Keywords: *equity, aims of education, education philosophy, education policy*

Most people working in education agree that "educational equity" is an important aim of schooling.[1] However, the almost universal acknowledgment that equity is a valuable goal can obscure very real differences in what various people and organizations mean by "equity" and how they operationalize it. The lack of a clear definition of equity in the education field means that individuals and groups can all claim to be "working for equity" when they actually have very different and even opposing aims and values concerning schools, children, learning, and structures of advantage and disadvantage.

Many educators became familiar with the concept of equity through the following cartoon, drawn by Angus Maguire (Maguire, 2016) and based on an original image by Craig Froehle:[2]



This image is often used as a way of firmly explaining that equity is not equality, because equality means treating everyone the same, whereas equity requires giving everyone what they need. It shows that giving people equal resources (the same number of milk crates) does not guarantee that they will all reach equal outcomes (being able to watch the

baseball game); in this way, it argues that equity means everyone reaching equal outcomes. But as others have pointed out, even this may not capture what people "really" mean by educational equity: Why be satisfied that some children are forced to watch over a fence rather than from the stands? Why assume that everybody wants to (or should) be watching a baseball game at all? Should we be preparing kids to *watch* or instead to *play* and to *innovate*?

As these questions suggest, this depiction shows only a sliver of the possibilities that people might mean when they say they value educational equity. In addition to different conceptions of *equality* such as resources or outcomes, these possibilities include different conceptions of the *aims of education*, goals of *benefiting the less advantaged*, and perhaps even a rejection of equality in favor of *adequacy, merit, democracy*, or *liberation*. Over the course of this article, we will explore these varied understandings of equity and how they reveal different aims, values, and trade-offs in the education field.[3] We will also return to this image and its transformations as a touchstone—particularly its expansion from the equality-equity binary to three or even four boxes designed to spur more radical political and educational imagination. By combining conceptual analysis of the use of "equity" in educational policy documents, curricula, and instructional practices with visual analysis of Maguire's cartoon and its various transformations, we aim to help educators understand the various and often competing ways in which educational equity may be conceptualized, instrumentalized, or even set aside depending on one's time horizon and scope of action.

Because this is a philosophical article, we do not claim to offer a comprehensive empirical analysis of all ways in which equity has been conceptualized; nor do we follow the familiar structure— literature review, research question, methods, findings, discussion—used by empirical researchers. Rather, we provide a *conceptual* analysis of some important ways in which educators and policy makers attach value both to equity and to education more broadly, with the aim of highlighting the variety of (sometimes competing) goals that are often hidden under generic "equity" terminology. Furthermore, because our goal is to provide analysis that is useful to people in the education field broadly, rather than primarily to philosophers, we have confined technical discussions of the vast philosophical literature about equality to the endnotes.

We begin in section 1 by discussing how equity in education can be interpreted as different versions of *equality*. Although philosophers have long recognized that "equality" (and as we argue by extension, equity) can be interpreted in a number of different ways depending on *what* one is trying to equalize, with the exception of Jencks (1988) these philosophical distinctions have had limited impact in education and have also often been unresponsive to educational policy or practice.[4] By diving into the particulars of equity-oriented educational initiatives, we show that depending on the context and aims, educational equity can reasonably be interpreted as equality of educational *resources* across comparison sets, equal *distribution* of educational outcomes across populations, equal *outcomes* for every learner, equal educational *experiences* for each child, or equal levels of *growth* or *development* for each learner.

As we show in section 2, however, equity is often also used to stand in for values that are not necessarily tied to equality at all. Two of these are the principle of *benefiting the less advantaged*, where disadvantage is understood in terms of poverty, racism, ableism, and sexism in schooling, and the legal principle of educational *adequacy*.[5] Furthermore, whereas equity is often talked about as if it should be the overriding value in education policymaking and practice, we show at the end of section 2 that no matter how "equity" is conceived, it sometimes requires trade-offs with other values we have reason to care about. This opens us up in section 3 to considering the relationship between ideals of equity and structural change and how questions of context and time horizon should be central to discussions of educational equity. We examine the expanded version of Maguire's cartoon and discuss ways in which it positions equity as, at best, merely instrumental for—and possibly even a harmful distraction from—achieving more radical goods such as "liberation." Finally, section 4 closes with questions for educators and educational policymakers to use in conversation with colleagues and other stakeholders to determine where their conceptions of equity converge and diverge. When "equity" is used as a buzzword and placeholder for competing values and theories of change, education workers can talk past each other and limit opportunities for true transformation in the field. Our goal is to provide distinctions and frameworks that can help clear the muddied waters of equity conversation in education, allowing the field to better understand the trade-offs and decisions we make in the name of "equity."

Defining Equity: Equality of What?

To explain why and how equity is such a useful concept, but also such a capacious (and often self-contradictory) one, we start with a 2018 report on *Equity in Education* from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international coalition of 36 countries around the world. The OECD opens its report as follows:

> Equity in education means that all schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students. As a result, students of different socio-economic status, gender or immigrant and family background achieve similar levels of academic performance in key cognitive domains, such as reading, mathematics and science, and similar levels of social and emotional well-being in areas such as life satisfaction, self-confidence and social integration, during their education. Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students'

> outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which the students have no control. Equity in education also demands that students from different backgrounds are equally likely to earn desirable post-secondary education credentials, such as university degrees, that will make it easier for them to succeed in the labour market and to realise their goals as adult members of society. (OECD, 2018)

The OECD clearly believes it is giving a clear and coherent account of what educational equity means. But even a cursory examination of this four-sentence paragraph reveals some confusion, internal tensions, and perhaps even outright contradictions. The first and third sentences state clearly that educational equity is about "*equal learning opportunities . . . not . . . equal education outcomes."* The implication here is that it would be foolish to expect *every* child to master discrete mathematics, say, or to graduate from university. Rather, the authors argue, the *distribution* of math whizzes, university graduates, and so forth should be approximately equal across all classes of children, whether grouped by socioeconomic status (SES), gender, family background, etc.

But is this really what the OECD means? Would the member states be satisfied if only 15% of students learned to read, say, or achieved emotional well-being by feeling socially integrated, so long as the 15% was evenly distributed across all social classes? Clearly not. And in fact, the second sentence seems to suggest a different conception of educational equity: one focused on *outcomes* rather than solely opportunities. All students are expected to "achieve similar levels of performance in key cognitive domains . . . and similar levels of social and emotional well-being." These are goods that the OECD (and presumably all of us) want for *all* children, not just for an equal distribution of children across groups. As with the likelihood of "earn[ing] desirable post-secondary education credentials," therefore, these are *outcome* measures of equity, not just "opportunity" measures.

Before we switch entirely to outcomes, though, it is worth spending a bit more time on the ideal of equalizing opportunity. What would it mean, in fact, to distribute *learning opportunities* equally?

One possibility is to look at inputs, or *resources*. Equity evaluators taking a resource-focused approach might ask whether girls attend as many days of school each year as boys; if low-income children have the same student-teacher ratios and curricular offerings as high-income children in the region; or whether textbooks, computers, or school nurses are available to refugee children at the same rate as they are available to children of citizens. One of the enduring and shameful features of schooling in the United States, for instance, is that schools and districts that disproportionately serve children who are low-income, non-White, noncitizen, and/or English language learners consistently have fewer resources and offer more limited curricular opportunities than do schools and districts that serve White, native-English-speaking children with US citizenship from middle- and upper-income families (Mathewson, 2020). In other words, the United States provides less to those who have less. We see similar patterns of difference if we compare spending across countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). Highly industrialized nations (that not coincidentally were often colonial or settler colonial powers in the past) have levels of wealth that are disproportionately high in comparison to their global population. They also spend disproportionately more money on educating their children than poorer nations are able to do, and (unsurprisingly) their citizens achieve higher average levels of educational attainment than do citizens of low-income countries in the Global South. Given all this, there is good reason to think that equalizing resource distribution across districts, states, and nations is an important step toward distributing learning opportunities equally.

But it is immediately clear that *resource equality* is not the same as, and would not suffice to ensure, *equality of opportunity*, since children from different backgrounds may have different types and levels of need and hence are able to convert resources to achievement at different rates. Perhaps refugee children will need *more* nursing care or lower student-teacher ratios in order to learn as much as native-born citizen children. Students who have received sub-par education in primary school may struggle to achieve in secondary school programs such as International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement, even if such opportunities are on their face equally available and open to all. Schools serving children from low-income families may need to provide food and dental care so their students can enjoy healthy development and concentrate on learning rather than on hunger pangs or tooth aches; wealthier children may not need schools to provide these resources. Students on the autism spectrum may need a one-on-one aide or a smaller classroom in which sensory inputs can be limited in order to be successful. On the flip side, some school systems may look as if they successfully provide learning opportunities to students only because parents with disposable income or knowledge of "how the system works" pay for cram schools, private tutoring, or other supplemental educational services. In the absence of such expenditures, students may "fail" to learn because the schools systematically fail to provide them everything they need to be successful. Each of these examples demonstrates that even if schools receive equal per-pupil funding—and even if schools provide "equal opportunity" in the form of equal curricula, student-teacher ratios, classroom structures, and other resources—children with diverse needs and living in diverse contexts will be unable to access those learning opportunities in equitable ways.

Furthermore, the resources provided by a school or district to each student often constitute only a fraction of the expenditures that wealthy families spend on expanding their own children's learning opportunities. A study of family expenditures in the United States, for instance, found that in 2006

affluent families spent on average *six times* as much as low-income families spent on their children's "enrichment activities" such as music lessons, sports team fees, or summer camps. This level of expenditure is higher even than the overall per-pupil spending in schools (Kaushal et al., 2011)! Even if (counterfactually) every child was able to convert resources to opportunities at identical rates, equalizing school-based resources is not the same as equalizing educational opportunities given the massive disparities in families' out-of-school educational investments. Equal school-based expenditures under this counterfactual might satisfy the OECD's claim that "Equity in education means that all schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students," but not the OECD's demand that "differences in students' outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which the students have no control" (OECD, 2018). If affluent families more than double the average per-pupil spending in public schools and spend six times more than low-income families on enrichment activities, then children from affluent families will on average have very different outcomes from children from middle- and low-income families. And again, this does not even take into account differences in resource conversion rates by children from different backgrounds, or by schools serving students with different needs.

Another articulation of educational equity, this time from the California State Department of Education, helps further illustrate this idea. The California Department of Education (n.d.) writes: "students come to school with diverse backgrounds, abilities, talents, and challenges. *Schools ensure equity by recognizing, respecting, and acting on this diversity*. . . . [H]igh quality schools have the capacity to differentiate instruction, services, and resource distribution, to respond effectively to the diverse needs of their students, *with the aim of ensuring that all students benefit equally*" (emphasis added).[6] This way of thinking about equity could suggest that what should be equal is the amount of *growth* that students experience through schooling—that each student should experience equal amounts of development and enrichment as they move through the California school system. In one respect, this conception of equity as equal growth is fairly radical, as many studies have found that educational disparities among groups of children widen during the school years; even keeping them static would thus be an achievement, particularly because that would mean that schools were succeeding in combating systemic inequalities at least during the school day (Dumont & Ready, 2020). On the other hand, insofar as children enter schools with disparate levels of academic preparation and school readiness (as all the evidence suggests that they do), then enabling each student to grow an equal amount during the year merely maintains extant inequalities. Consider three students who enter first grade together: Anjelique, who reads at a second-grade level; Bradon, whose reading skills are on grade level; and Christopher, who is still struggling to link letters with sounds. If each child achieves nine months' worth of growth in reading during first grade, then Anjelique will enter second grade reading at a third-grade level; Bradon will be reading on grade level; and Christopher will be reading a year below grade level. It is hard to see how this realizes ideals of educational equity. In fact, given the many ways in which historical and structural injustices shape children's experiences outside of and preparation for school, an equal growth model of educational equity would seem paradoxically to entrench systemic inequality rather than overcome it—even if it would also be far superior to inequitable growth patterns that further exacerbate such inequality.

This problem with equating equal growth to educational equity might be why, later in the same document, California's Department of Education claims that equity demands that "quality schools will produce *comparably high academic achievement and other positive outcomes for all students* on all achievement indicators." This brings us back to outcome measures: California seems to insist on equal outcomes for every student, not just equal distributions of outcomes among groups of students. In many ways, this is an inspiring vision of equity. But it also raises questions of its own. Should all students be expected to master calculus, for example, or to write college-level history papers? These skills certainly are not necessary for most people to live productive and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, they represent only a narrow conception of what is valuable to learn and achieve. If we nonetheless insist that educational equity requires that all students achieve such outcomes, then millions of children (and their teachers) may be subject to a fairly miserable slog that serves neither their own nor society's goals. They may also be forced to postpone or miss out altogether on other classes that excite them more—in film writing, say, or coding, plumbing, or veterinary care. Many students (and schools) may also end up being labeled as "failures" if they *do not* master calculus or historical writing—an outcome that may be even more deleterious from the perspective of equity than unequal academic achievement would be.

Outcomes do not need to be solely in the realm of academic achievement, of course; this is presumably why California refers to "other positive outcomes" in its definition of equity. Consider how *Courageous Conversations about Race*, a program and framework for educators to discuss race with the goal of developing antiracist classrooms, schools, and societies, characterizes equity. "[I]f your school is truly equitable . . . [students] are treated with respect and dignity. Above all else, they are expected to reach high and succeed often. When students graduate, they exit secure in their knowledge and their abilities. . . . Education has fulfilled its mandate with these students, and they are *prepared to attain all their hearts desire*" (Singleton, 2014). Here, it seems as if educational equity is measured both by equal resources—not monetary but experiential, such as the

provision of respect and dignity, social inclusion, and a sense of accomplishment—and by outcomes, although the outcomes here are very different from the outcomes specified by the state of California.[7]

In this respect, it might be useful to think about educational outcomes as what Brighouse et al. call "educational goods": the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that are embodied in people because of their education, and the flourishing that they enjoy in adulthood as a result (Brighouse et al., 2018). Educational goods, by their account, are diverse, encompassing at least six important capacities that schools should aim to develop in students: the capacities for economic productivity, personal autonomy, democratic competence, healthy personal relationships, treating others as equals, and personal fulfillment. Under this conception of outcome-oriented equity, all students would not be expected to achieve identical academic or even social-emotional outcomes and would not be labeled as "failures" if they developed economically productive talents in some areas, for instance, while eschewing study of others. A school district committed to this model of educational equity might enable some students to develop their talents as performing artists, others to pursue public service, and other students to enter the building trades, while also teaching a common foundational curriculum including health and healthy sexuality, civic rights and responsibilities, and personal finance. Such diversity of pathways might raise its own set of red flags, however, particularly as one scrutinizes who enters (and exits from) each pathway. Furthermore, each of these capacities is itself complex, and what it actually takes to have them can vary by context; the capacity for democratic competence, for example, requires different knowledge, skills, and even dispositions in different political systems with different histories. So even if we agreed that this list captures the right set of outcomes that an equitable school system would enable all children to achieve, we still face lots of questions about what that looks like, and how we would know when a system was achieving equity by these measures.

To review, we have thus far seen that equity could be understood as:

- Equal distribution of outcomes across populations (e.g., equal percentage of college graduates or of people living fulfilled lives across racial groups, genders, SES, neuroatypical and neurotypical populations, nations, etc.)
- Equal resources allocated toward education across students, schools, districts, states, or nations (whether measured by money or by criteria such as student-teacher ratio, nurses or libraries per school, technology availability, number of advanced courses, etc.)
- Equal experiences for each child (e.g., experience of being respected or challenged, opportunities for play, social inclusion)
- Equal levels of growth or development by each learner
- Equal outcomes for every learner (academic, social-emotional, or other)

We have seen how each of these may be an important aim and desirable standard for equity under various circumstances, and also how each may be incomplete or even misleading as a stand-alone approach to equity. We have also seen that they cannot all be achieved simultaneously: equal growth from unequal starting places will result in unequal outcomes; equal outcomes will demand highly unequal resource allocation; and even equal experiences such as inclusion or opportunities for play may result in inequalities of some outcomes or opportunities.

Challenging Equity

Thus far, we have focused on the ways in which conceptualizing educational equity is complicated because of the range of, and incompatibility among, different aims one might try to equalize. In this respect, *equality* has been central to our analysis of educational equity; the challenge has been to determine equality of what, why, and for whom. But in at least some contexts and circumstances, equality may be the wrong frame altogether. Rather, concerns about educational equity may sometimes be better framed in terms of either *disadvantage* or *adequacy.* This is because we often (rightly) do not care much about differences among children or communities that are all doing really well. If all students are reading above grade level, we normally are not urgently concerned about remediating differences between the students reading one year versus three years above grade level—even when those differences may be traceable to systems of power and oppression such as class differences or to cycles of socialization such as gendered expectations about reading. Similarly, if every child reports that they feel a sense of belonging and are recognized positively for who they are at school, we worry less about variation in students' responses among the already-high scores. So long as all children are truly thriving, we tend not to be concerned about comparative levels of goodness. Rather, educational equity is often used to emphasize concerns about badness: about children who are not thriving, whose learning is inadequate, or who are significantly disadvantaged in absolute, not just relative, terms.

The Less Advantaged

Let us start with concerns for the less advantaged.[8] Poverty is bad primarily because of its effects on poor people: it creates barriers to their flourishing, and, not coincidentally, to their educational prospects. Similarly, racism, ableism, and sexism are bad in large part because of the way

they disadvantage those who are subject to them, denying them equal respect, equal opportunities, and even equal status as human beings, and impeding their ability to flourish and to contribute to society. When people claim that we should attend to educational equity, what they often mean is that we should prioritize the interests of children and families who are disadvantaged in one or more of these ways—particularly when resources or political will to address all inequalities are limited. In a society characterized by poverty, racism, ableism, sexism, and other injustices, the needs and interests of the less advantaged are more urgent than those of others (Rawls, 1999).

This conceptualization of educational equity as *prioritizing the less advantaged* can be seen in a variety of educational policies. For example, numerous US school districts and states use "weighted student funding" to allocate additional funds to schools or districts that serve students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; California adds further weight for high concentrations of such students in particular districts. England, similarly, has a "pupil premium": schools receive an additional sum of about $1500 per year for every student who has claimed free meals in the previous six-year period, and about $2500 per year for every student who is living in a foster or residential care setting. A number of school choice mechanisms also give priority to those perceived as less advantaged. India's Right to Education Act requires all private schools to set aside 25% of their seats for children from low-income or low-caste backgrounds, with the tuition paid by the government. San Francisco's public school choice program gives priority to families from neighborhoods with historically low achievement on state standardized tests.

Although these are apparently inspiring applications of ethical principles in the real world, the policies do not always achieve their intended effect of improving educational prospects for the less advantaged. In San Francisco, schools have ended up more segregated by race, class, and achievement than they were before the implementation of the weighted school choice program (Goldstein, 2019). In India, private schools have devised numerous mechanisms to skirt the 25% set aside—and some historically disadvantaged children who have been admitted under these provisions have experienced significant harms such as bullying and exclusion once in the school.

It can also be challenging to figure out *how* to prioritize the less advantaged at the level of school or classroom practice. This is partly because schools and teachers do not know everything about their students that is relevant to assessing how advantaged they are. From physical and mental health, a parent's recent job loss, and housing instability to fear of deportation, divorce, and social isolation, many factors feed into students' comparative advantage or disadvantage that may be invisible even to caring teachers. Prioritizing the less advantaged is also challenging because students are developing and learning, so who is more advantaged changes sometimes in fits and starts. For instance, a student might lag far behind her peers at one time due to an unidentified learning-related disability, but then leap ahead once it has been diagnosed and treated; or a student with limited English proficiency might seem very disadvantaged when she first arrives at school but then be one of the higher achievers once her mastery of the language passes some threshold. Who is "less advantaged" thus changes over time, so it is hard to develop policies that can be clear, predictable, and equitable. Moreover, the piecemeal development and implementation of such policies may merely paper over structural injustices in the short term rather than systematically addressing and changing the practices and structures that lead to those inequalities in the first place; we discuss this trade-off further in section 3.

Educational Adequacy

Another problem with focusing on the "less advantaged" is that it maintains a comparative stance—who has less than others?—whereas, as we discussed above, many people who talk about equity are really calling out absolute rather than comparative harms. This suggests that they care about neither equality nor comparative advantage, but *adequacy.* Naming the problem as one of (in)adequacy rather than equality also acknowledges the lack of urgency about inequalities at the upper end. If children are all achieving and thriving at an appropriately high level—in other words, above the threshold for adequacy—then differences among them are often not described as "inequitable" precisely because they do not generate much moral concern. Focusing on adequacy also captures the anger many people may feel about comparing children's levels of disadvantage to determine who most deserves some scarce resource or intervention; *all* children who are receiving an inadequate education deserve better, regardless of who among the group is less advantaged than the rest. Educational adequacy has also been a powerful legal concept in the United States to force states to redistribute or even increase overall education expenditures statewide. The US Constitution says nothing about education, and state constitutions rarely frame education in terms of equality. But state constitutions can plausibly be interpreted as requiring that everyone receives an adequate education, so legal scholars have used various theories of what constitutes an adequate education to litigate cases in states around the country. The *Campaign for Fiscal Equity* lawsuit, for instance, famously forced New York State to redirect more than $2 billion to New York City public schools on adequacy grounds.

At the same time, it can be hard to determine both what an adequate education would have to be adequate *for* and what criteria to use to determine whether standards of adequacy have been met. On the weaker end, some theorists understand adequacy in terms of employability: the state

owes its citizens the kind of education that will enable them to earn a living wage and have secure employment. On the stronger end, others think we should aim to ensure that "everyone [is] educated *well enough* so that they [can] meet all others as equals, or peers, in the public domain" (Brighouse & Swift, 2014). Even on its weaker interpretation, adequacy obviously matters. In any capitalist society, in which nearly everyone is dependent on employment for income, and in which an income is a prerequisite of being able to have control over one's life, having the skills needed for stable and well-paid employment is a matter of great urgency.

Nonetheless, how we measure those skills—and their adequate provision to all students—is subject to contention and confusion. Should the metric be standardized test scores? Graduation rates? Literacy levels? Some index of all of those? In *Gary B* v *Snyder*, a federal appeals court panel ruled in April 2020 that Detroit's underfunded schools violate students' "right to a basic minimum education," defined as the opportunity to learn to read (Peak & Hanford, 2020). By contrast, in October 2020, a federal district judge dismissed *Cook* v. *Raimondo*, which charged Rhode Island with failing to provide students a constitutionally mandated adequate education by failing to prepare them for democracy.[9] Adequacy arguments are sometimes used to support policy reforms that are quite different from increasing or redistributing resources to historically marginalized schools and communities. In *Vergara* v. *California*, for instance, plaintiffs used adequacy arguments to challenge teacher tenure and other job protections in Los Angeles Unified School District; similar suits were filed in New York, Minnesota, and New Jersey to overturn teacher tenure and layoff provisions, and in Massachusetts to lift the cap on the number of charter schools permitted to open in the state "as violations of the state constitutional right to an adequate education" (Anon 2017). Many advocates for educational equity view these cases as violating principles of equity rather than upholding them; although others certainly disagree, these disputes help us see that educational adequacy and educational equity are not coextensive concepts.

Other Values

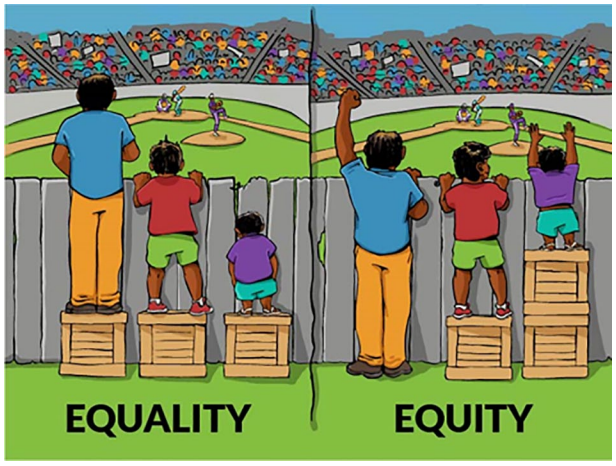
Depending on how they are described, values such as *prioritizing the less advantaged* and *ensuring educational adequacy* could be seen either as ways of conceptualizing and realizing educational equity, or as alternatives to the principle of equity itself. Regardless of which view one takes, however, both values are in some way treading on similar ground as equity: they are all concerned about ensuring that all children are enabled to thrive above some baseline in a way that demonstrates respect and regard for their equal humanity. This fact can make it appear that educational equity, however conceived, is always the most important value that we wish to achieve in education.

But there are times when other values that we also have reason to favor—for example, democracy, liberty, existential safety (say, in light of climate change or war), merit, care, even efficiency—may conflict with the demands of equity, so that we have to make a judgment about which values are more important, and/or about what trade-offs we are willing to make. We may value families' liberty to choose where to live or what schools to send their children to, for instance, even as their choices exacerbate inequity (see Brighouse et al., 2018, ch. 3). We may choose to embrace democratically elected school boards even as the boards make decisions that make children in their own district worse off compared to children in other districts. Schools may reasonably decide to spend scarce resources on school safety or climate change mitigation measures, even when the consequence is reduction in compensatory educational services for vulnerable student populations.

This is not to say that trade-offs are always inevitable, nor that all claims of conflict between equity and other values are compelling. Claims about the incompatibility of equity and merit, for instance, are often grounded in racist, sexist, ableist, classist, nationalist, or xenophobic beliefs that misinterpret divergences from majoritarian norms as demonstrations of inferiority. But at the same time, values clashes can be real and hard to resolve. Universities in Britain, for example, admit students to specific courses of study such as sociology or applied mathematics, and they determine whom to admit almost solely on the basis of their "A-level" grades: their performance on a comprehensive series of assessments in their chosen fields of study. Comparatively few low-income or working-class, Black, and other students who attend nonselective secondary schools earn A-level grades high enough even to be considered for admission at elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. As a result, these universities admit and educate a disproportionate number of middle- and upper-income, White British students from private schools. Such outcomes are clearly inequitable, and they are created by systemic injustices that shape children's lives long before they apply to university. At the same time, it seems reasonable for universities to value demonstrated academic excellence and to select students on that basis. In the absence of fundamental economic, political, and educational reforms at much earlier stages of children's lives, British universities for the time being thus face hard trade-offs between values of educational equity and educational merit.

Expanding Beyond Equity

Having run through a whirlwind of contesting conceptions of and even challenges to educational equity, let us now return to the iteration of Angus Maguire's cartoon with which we opened the paper. As we look more closely, we can begin to see what this image does and does not tell us:



As we mentioned at the opening of this essay, the picture distinguishes equality of resource distribution from equality of outcomes. On the "equity" side of the picture the milk crates have been distributed unequally in order to achieve equality of *outcomes*: the spectators' eyelines are now at equal height. The picture thus defines equity as equality of outcomes—or perhaps as we discussed in the last section, as *adequacy* of outcomes, with the measure of adequacy being that all children can now see over the fence. But we now know that neither equality of outcomes nor adequacy are the only plausible meanings of "equity," and that other goals may be more desirable than equity in certain cases. Furthermore, we can also now identify some additional problematic assumptions baked into this image of equity:

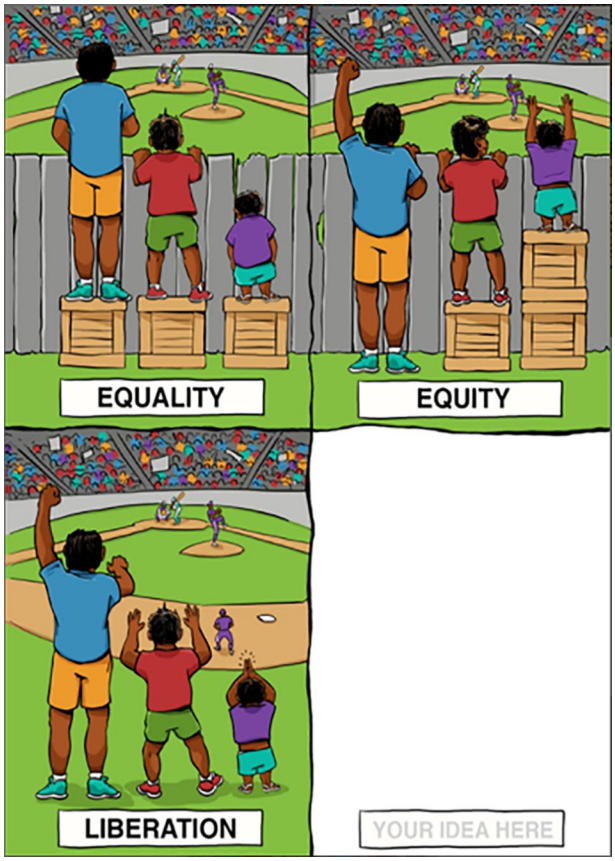
First, even accepting a definition of equity as equal outcomes, this image assumes that a single form of redistribution—namely, redistributing the milk crates among the spectators—will achieve the equal outcome of all spectators being able to see the game. But this approach rests on implausible and ableist assumptions about the limits of human diversity. Suppose, for example, that one of the spectators is shortsighted. Then the work of giving them what they need to achieve equal outcomes is incomplete; it would be hollow to say that everything is ok because they have been treated equitably if one of them still cannot actually see the game, *especially* if a simple remedy (eyeglasses) is available. Tackling inequity thus may require multidimensional reforms rather than a single metric for redistribution.

Second, we can see that this image represents a very simple situation in which there is *just one outcome for everyone*—seeing the baseball game—for us to consider. But now we know that when it comes to education, we may not care about everyone achieving exactly the same outcome—and in fact, it may be more desirable for learners to be able to pursue diverse goals. Young people—like people in general—have varied preferences and talents and will flourish in their lives and contribute to society in different ways. When it comes to baseball some will flourish and contribute as spectators, others as players, others as umpires, still others as managers. And the societies people inhabit are even more rich and varied than baseball: maybe one of these spectators does not care about watching the game at all and would prefer bowling, attending a concert, or creating social media content. So this suggests that insofar as the aims of education are themselves multidimensional, educational equity itself should also be assessed according to multiple and diverse metrics. Even if equality of outcomes does matter, it is not the *only* good that matters: we have reason to care that students flourish, and that they contribute to society, and that gives us reason to care about their *range of learning opportunities*, not just equal outcomes.

Third, this image assumes that the means for achieving equity as equal outcomes are *benign*. Standing on a milk crate is not much more unpleasant or dangerous for most people than standing on the ground. But not all means of achieving equity in all circumstances lead purely to positive outcomes without trade-offs for the people involved. Consider busing: it may, in some circumstances, be the best way for a school district to promote school integration, which may, in some circumstances, given political and resource constraints, be the best way of making outcomes more equal. But being bused for 90 minutes a day to and from a school in a distant neighborhood may be more unpleasant or more dangerous for students than walking 20-30 minutes a day to and from a school in one's own neighborhood. Consider another popular example: "drill-and-kill" style test preparation is used in many schools as a means for achieving more equal testing outcomes for students, but the style of teaching and learning may be demeaning or even degrading for students. The daily lived experience of a student matters, and it matters independently of the contribution it makes to her learning, or to equalizing outcomes. The means for ensuring certain aims in the name of equity can have costs, sometimes for those students who benefit.

Fourth, as other scholars have shown, this image assumes that the conditions inhibiting equity are *fixed*: in this case, that the fence is immovable (Leonard, David J., 2018). In some cases this might be true for the long term; in others it might be true only in the short term: for example, the fence may be immovable for *this* game, which the spectators *really* want to watch. But sometimes it might not be true at all, and the best solution would be to reimagine the whole environment by removing the fence altogether. A related assumption here is that the conditions making the spectators unequally able to watch the game are *inherent* and personal—the individual attribute of their height. But in some cases the problem may not be inherent to the spectators at all; it may be a function of their environment or the external structures imposed upon them. This line of thought is why an increasingly popular version of the graphic includes a third or even a fourth box:

This adapted graphic suggests that equity itself may simply be an instrumental waystation toward an even greater



good—namely, the dismantling and reimagining of the basic structures of society so as to achieve "liberation."[10] Or alternatively, maybe "equity" is now shown to be as misleading a goal as "equality": why spend energy on sourcing and redistributing milk crates if the true goal is to tear down the fence (at which point the milk crates will be useless anyway)? From this viewpoint, any "equity"-oriented effort put into achieving equal outcomes within the context of existing power structures is a harmful distraction from more "liberatory" ends.

Conclusion: Achieving Transparency and Acknowledging Trade-offs in Conversations About Equity

So where does this leave us? We have just seen four separate considerations that we have reason to care about: the *distribution* of educational outcomes, the *diversity* of educational outcomes, the daily lived *experience* of the student, and the fixed or changeable *context* and *time horizon* of the inequity. We have also seen multiple ways of conceptualizing equity—as equality of resources, equal distributions of outcomes across different populations, equal levels of growth, equal experiences, or equal individual outcomes—and we have seen why each conception of equity may be desirable under particular circumstances, even though collectively, they could never be simultaneously realized in practice. Furthermore, we have considered whether advocates of educational equity are better understood as expressing a commitment to privileging the less advantaged, to achieving educational adequacy, or to transforming basic structures to achieve "liberation" rather than to elevating any form of equality as such.

Does this vast variation in how to conceptualize, value, and apply "equity" mean that it is a meaningless concept? Not at all—if anything, it is all too replete with meaning! Educational equity is the vessel we fill up with our hopes and dreams for children, families, educators, schools, communities, and the future. But when we use the term "equity" without specifying more clearly what we mean by our use of the term in a particular context, at a particular time, for a particular purpose, we risk misleading ourselves and others about the values for which we stand. We may miss fundamental differences between how we are conceiving of educational equity and how our colleagues and communities are conceiving of it. We also risk sidestepping the hard judgments and potential trade-offs that come with educational decision-making.

In conversations about equity, then, it is rarely sufficient to claim, "Our district does X because we believe in equity" or "As an equity-oriented teacher, I am committed to doing Y." Rather, we encourage educators and policy makers to take a hard look at what is gained and lost given the particular conception of equity on which they are drawing. By being more transparent about their own interpretation of equity, educators and policy makers will also be empowered to take others' equity claims more seriously and to consider together the trade-offs among the various conceptions of equity at play. These may include:

1. Resources: Does this conception require resource trade-offs in situations where resources are scarce? Which resources, exactly, is it focused on—for example, money, time, curriculum, instructional expertise—and which does it ignore or treat as fixed?
2. Outcomes: Does this conception benefit some students more than others? Does it benefit other stakeholders more than it benefits students?
3. Values: Does this conception prioritize certain beliefs or goods over others? Does it contain an assumption that others share the same value judgments?
4. Radical versus practical solutions: Does this conception focus on short-term benefits over long-term structural change, or vice versa? What is gained or lost in this focus?

In sum, "What is educational equity?" does not have a simple answer. We have tried to show that numerous values and goals are at stake when decisions have to be made, some of which might reasonably be considered as "equity" related, and some of which might better be considered as independent of equity. The Angus Maguire cartoon alerts us to one

important distinction, but it turns out that many more distinctions matter in many situations. We cannot provide an algorithm for what values or aims to prioritize, nor for what distinctions will be most important when assessing educational equity in a particular context. But we hope that the ideas we have presented here can help readers understand the values that matter in their conception of equity, and also why striving for equity can be so challenging. Furthermore, we hope that the distinctions and language we have provided will help facilitate nuanced and thoughtful conversations and better deliberations about what trade-offs to make and how to make them.

Regardless of how one defines and measures educational equity in a particular context—as resources, growth, outcomes, distribution of opportunities, experiences, preference satisfaction, surpassing a threshold (adequacy), or otherwise—it will often be impossible to achieve full equity because of resource scarcity, contextual and structural injustices, or political or cultural barriers. Acknowledging trade-offs does not mean that equity only requires pragmatic solutions, or that we should be comfortable with those trade-offs or solutions. In fact, understanding trade-offs is crucial for critiquing the conditions that make realizing equity so difficult. Sometimes, figuring out why trade-offs exist leads to reimagining and restructuring the unjust conditions that make those trade-offs unavoidable in the first place. Understanding trade-offs may help us get closer to realizing an ideal vision of an equitable society—even if it also tempers our expectation that educational equity can be readily or simply achieved.

Notes

1. Equity was a nearly universally embraced aim (at least as a rhetorical matter) in educational policy and practice as recently as two years ago. When COVID hit and schools shut down in March 2020, for instance, an astonishing 49 out of 50 US states released COVID-response plans for schools that named "educational equity" as one of their core aims (Levinson, 2020; Reich 2020). In the past year, however, a number of right-wing activists have tied "equity" to "critical race theory" and other conservative bugbears, thus leading to a precipitous drop in support for "educational equity" among Republican governors and legislators, and among some school board members and parents as well. We set these new critiques—and, we would argue, often misrepresentations—of educational equity aside for the purposes of this paper.

2. For a fascinating history of the "meme-ification" of this graphic that raises many of the points and challenges that led us to write this article, see Craig Froehle's 2016 Medium post "The Evolution of an Accidental Meme" (Froehle, 2016).

3. Jencks (1988) observed "the enduring popularity of equal educational opportunity probably derives from the fact that we all define it in different ways without realizing how profound our differences really are" (Jencks, 1988, p. 518). We think the same is true of "equity."

4. See, e.g., Sen (1980); Dworkin (1981a, b); Rae (1983); Arneson (1989); Temkin (2003); Anderson (2007); Cohen (2008), Gosepath (2021). Two notable exceptions (in addition to Jencks) that have taken education seriously are Walker and Unterhalter (2007) and Fishkin (2014), although neither has had the impact on educational practice or policy discourse that we would hope for.

5. The principle of benefiting the least advantaged, known as *prioritarianism* in the philosophical literature, was introduced by Rawls (1999); see also Arneson (2000), and see Schouten (2012) for an education-specific prioritarian principle. Similarly, adequacy has a corollary in the more general literature about justice called *sufficientarianism*. See Frankfurt (1987); Shields (2012). For criticisms, see Casal (2007).

6. For an excellent compilation of the different ways that different states define equity, see Chu (2019).

7. This integration of distributive and relational concerns echoes arguments in Fraser and Honneth (2004); see also Anderson (1999; 2010) and Cohen (2008) on whether the distribution of the social product, or the equal standing of persons, is what justice should fundamentally be concerned with. For a deflationary take on this debate, arguing that the participants are at cross purposes, see Schouten (manuscript).

8. Rawls (1999) argues for what he calls the difference principle as one element of distributive justice: that social and economic inequalities are just only if they maximally benefit the least advantaged positions in society. Many theorists take Rawls's theory to give implausibly strong concern for the least advantaged, while agreeing that being less advantaged adds urgency to one's interests.

9. Although the judge ruled that the case could not move forward on legal grounds, he did celebrate the Providence, RI, high school plaintiffs' efforts to secure a democratically adequate education.

10. Angus Maguire created this graphic in partnership with racial justice organization The Interaction Institute for Social Change and The Center for Story Based Strategy. They use it in an interactive "4th box" learning activity that lets users create their own image using the visual elements of this one. Similar to our conversation in this paper, IISC found that the original two-box image "contains rather than unleashes important conversations" in their work for racial equity. The way they put it, the "either/or logic" of equity/equality as shown in the original two images foreclosed discussion about the history of structural racism, newly imagined futures, and participants' own fluid identities and privileges.

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