

Curriculum Redesign for Equity and Social Justice

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reviewed by the CCR

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Executive Summary

Equity and social justice are critically important issues in education. Equity and social justice got engrained in the very purpose of education. In almost all countries, the achievement gap between rich and poor continues to mobilize the political arena. Education is perceived to be the great equalizer, by providing opportunities to disadvantaged learners to educational achievement and success, leading to upward social mobility in a merit-based society. Yet, many education systems have not succeeded in improving equity in education and despite all good intentions many policies have failed to produce sustainable results. In redesigning the curriculum, with the aim of fostering equity and social justice, it is vitally important to have a solid conceptual foundation of what is meant with equity.

In recent years, the concept of equity has widened from socio-economic inequality and redistribution to many other forms of mechanisms through which social disadvantage, discrimination, marginalization or disempowerment are realized. The issue no longer is solely about inequality, but about many forms of exclusion, especially with the growing understanding of the relationship between diversity and equity. Moreover, in modern societies education also fulfills a selection function, which can come at odds with its equity ambition. Social mobility happens through selection, but from an equity perspective selection should happen on the basis of ability, merit and achievement, and not on the basis of family background, gender, race, religion or whatever other irrelevant factor.

The difficulty in understanding equity and social justice in education and in developing effective policies comes from conceptual confusion. A large range of concepts populate this space of research and policy, often with conflicting meanings and consequences. An attempt is made to distinguish and define the most common conceptualizations of equity:

- *Equality of outcomes*: regardless of their background and abilities, students achieve more or less similar educational outcomes (attainment, learning outcomes).
- *Equality of opportunity*: by removing barriers, minimizing the impact of social background and compensating for disadvantages in resources, all students are provided with equal opportunities to succeed. The outcomes however also depend on the efforts made by students.
- *Social mobility*: schools should remove barriers and provide incentives for talented students from disadvantaged background to climb the social ladder.
- *Meritocracy*: the best and the brightest, regardless of their social background, are brought to the highest social positions.
- *Social cohesion*: by instilling notions of shared ethical norms and citizenship, socio-cultural diversity in society is prevented to turn into social divides and fragmentation.
- *Social integration*: excluded and marginalized communities are integrated in the language, dominant culture and social norms of society.
- *Affirmative action*: discrimination is prevented ex ante by awarding certain rights to underserved and excluded categories in order to create a level playing field, by providing multiple perspectives and giving voice to the excluded.
- *Segregation*: specific groups and individuals, who risk to be victim of exclusion and oppression, are taken apart and educated in a 'safe space', free of discrimination.
- *Personalization*: different learners, each with their specific background and abilities, are not subjected to a 'one size fits all' standardized approach, and are treated

- *Social inclusion*: diverse and different learners are recognized in their specific needs, positive qualities and their dignity.
- *Fairness*: learners from diverse and unequal backgrounds are treated in a 'fair' way throughout the entire educational process.

For each conceptualization, the opportunities and the risks are discussed. The concepts are mapped in a two-dimensional space with equality vs. inequality and diversity vs. homogeneity as the two axes, based on the idea that a modern notion of equity and social justice should count as much towards equality as to a positive idea of diversity.

Based on an assessment of the opportunities and risks of each concept, a choice is made for the concepts of social inclusion and fairness as the most promising approaches to equity and social justice. At the end of the paper, the implementation of this perspective in curriculum redesign is demonstrated.

Rationale

In education, fostering equitable opportunities for all is an imperative of paramount importance. No educational policy or intervention is possible without an explicit or implicit view on equity. Every system, structure or action in education has differential consequences for different social groups in society. This implies that one cannot hold a neutral view on equity in education. In most cases, educational interventions are not sufficiently explicit on their short- or long-term consequences for equitable opportunities of various social groups. However, it is much better to be clear and to take an explicit stance to equity issues. It is therefore fortunate that policy makers now increasingly deal in an explicit way with equity in designing and implementing policies and interventions in education.

However, things are not that simple. It is not sufficient to be for or against equity in education. In fact, most people will agree that fostering equitable opportunities in education is an important objective. Such an ethical or political stance is, of course, positive, but is not enough and in some cases even misleading. Outcomes of educational interventions may be very different from the intended outcomes. Because education is a complex system and located in a highly diversified society, the real consequences of educational policies and interventions are seldom straightforward. Different dimensions of the equity issue, such as gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, etc., might easily show different and sometimes even opposing outcomes. As we will see in the paper, the growing importance of diversity has fundamentally complicated the discussion on equity in education. So, carefully designing and implementing equity policies and interventions has become increasingly important.

This is exactly what this paper tries to do for CCR's action in education. It provides the conceptual groundwork for a sustainable view of the Center on equity. It tries to achieve this by exploring various concepts of equity and social justice in education, in order to define a coherent basis for its vision on equity. The conclusion of this exercise will be that fairness and inclusion should provide the basis for CCR's vision of equity and social justice in education.

Equity in education

Two decades into the 21st century, many education systems continue to struggle with huge social disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. This is a quite tragic verdict, especially since many governments and leaders have made strong commitments to improve equity and social justice in education. And because of the fact that educational outcomes increasingly impact on many other opportunities in life, from health over employment to social and political participation, educational inequities have ever more problematic consequences. Opportunities for a fulfilling life are distributed through education, so every opportunity to an excellent education missed, signifies a reduction in opportunities in life later on.¹ And educational

¹ See chapter 2 in: OECD (2017), *Educational Opportunity for All: Overcoming Inequality throughout the Life Course*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264287457-en>; Piacentini, M. and B. Pacileo (2019), "How are PISA results related to adult life outcomes?", *PISA in Focus*, No. 102, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7b60595e-en>; Esping-Andersen, G. (2008). Childhood investments and skill formation. *International Tax and Public Finance*, 15(1), 19–44. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10797-007-9033-0>

achievement in turn impacts on future socio-economic status (SES), thereby influencing educational opportunities of the next generation.²

Equity in education is not a new issue. For several decades, most education systems and jurisdictions all over the world have recognized the importance of equity in education. Most of them have also implemented various policies to reduce the equity gaps in educational opportunities, access and outcomes. As PISA data have shown,³ jurisdictions differ significantly in the equitable distribution of learning outcomes. These differences can be explained by a wide variety of factors, of which policy interventions are one category. However, after several decades of implementing pro-equity policies in education, the overall results do not look very impressive. Comparing the 2009 and 2018 PISA cycles for reading, only in 6 countries (none of them OECD member countries) did the performance gap between the most disadvantaged and the most advantaged students decrease, while in another 6 (of which 2 are OECD member countries) it increased.⁴ Equity and social justice remain very significant challenges in education.

In a longer time perspective, the picture is even more depressing. A recent study in the UK concluded that over a time span of 95 years, the association between family socioeconomic background (SES) and children's primary school performance remained constant.⁵ Across 16 British population cohorts, the association between SES and performance, after correcting for cohort-specific confounders, remained constant at 0.28. The persistence of the socioeconomic equity gap over such a long time period is surprising and, indeed, somehow depressing, because it suggests that pro-equity policies, which became more pronounced especially in the post-war period in the UK, did not really impact the association between socioeconomic background and school performance.

Of course, equity in education cannot be isolated from more general economic and social factors affecting education and students' learning. Basil Bernstein, the seminal sociolinguist, once noted the phrase which since then has become iconic: "Education cannot compensate for society".⁶ Social inequality, poverty, racism and other forms of social injustice severely impact the educational opportunities of children. Whether education in itself strengthens social inequities which children bring to school, reproduces them, or lessens them, is a judgment difficult to make. The intent is, of course, lessening, but the data above shows it is not often the case.

In a peculiar way, education has produced its defeat against inequality itself. In an age when education was about the acquisition of basic literacy, the claim of being the great equalizer was justified. Now, when the forms of education that really pay off are sequestered for access mainly

² Ritchie, S. J., & Bates, T. C. (2013). Enduring Links From Childhood Mathematics and Reading Achievement to Adult Socioeconomic Status. *Psychological Science*, 24(7), 1301–1308.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612466268>

³ OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>. OECD (2018), *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>

⁴ OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris,

<https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>, p. 56.

⁵ von Stumm, S., Cave, S. N., & Wakeling, P. (2022). Persistent association between family socioeconomic status and primary school performance in Britain over 95 years. *Npj Science of Learning*, 7(1), 4.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-022-00120-3>

⁶ Bernstein, B. (1970), 'Education cannot compensate for society', *New Society*, 15(387): 344–347.

by a privileged few, education could just as easily be thought of as the great un-equalizer. The relationship between education and opportunity has been transformed over the last fifty years in the most advanced industrial nations. When educational attainment rises, the differences – and hence the inequalities – that are produced, become more powerful.

Although between-country inequalities are lessening on a global scale, within-country inequalities are increasing in most OECD countries and emerging economies indeed.⁷ Since the 1980s, aggressive pro-market policies have had an adverse impact on income inequality, poverty and social segregation in many countries. Redistribution mechanisms through social security and social welfare policies have generally weakened.⁸ The transformation of economies caused by technological change, globalization and digitalization has strengthened polarization of labor markets, income distribution and the emergence of new categories of low-paid and precarious jobs. Even in developed nations, a significant share of the population lives on or under the poverty line, and especially child poverty has become an endemic phenomenon. The financial and economic crisis of 2008 and the following years and, again, the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated economic reallocation to the detriment of already disadvantaged people and have exacerbated social inequalities.

Social inequity has also become a more multidimensional issue. Income inequality or poverty no longer suffice as sole indicators for social injustice. Unequal opportunities, segregation and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, migration status, geography, religion, age, disability, or other dimensions of a person's identity are now rightly seen as part of a multidimensional understanding of inequity. The term 'intersectionality' is increasingly used to denominate the linkages between these different dimensions. Various inequities and discriminations tend to interact and accumulate, resulting in intensified forms of social violence. This also implies that *the perspective of equity has widened from economic redistribution to many other forms of mechanisms through which social disadvantage, discrimination, marginalization, or disempowerment are realized*. This has profound consequences on the definition of pro-equity policies, also in the field of education. From a dominant perspective on equitable, mainly financial access to education several decades ago, the policy focus is now rightly shifting to examining all components and dimensions of the educational structures and practices on how they eventually contribute to or compensate for various dimensions of inequity.

In some countries like the USA, it is financial fairness in the funding of education, not access anymore, that is still an issue, as school districts get funded by local taxes; so the wealthier towns progress while the poor ones languish.⁹ We will state upfront that, from an effect-size

⁷ Milanovic, B. (2016), *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.

⁸ Atkinson, A.B. (2015), *Inequality. What Can Be Done?* Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; Esping-Andersen, G., Gallie, D., Hemerijck, A. and Myles J. (2002). *Why We Need a New Welfare State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Baker, B. D., Farrie, D., & Sciarra, D. G. (2016). Mind the Gap: 20 Years of Progress and Retrenchment in School Funding and Achievement Gaps. *ETS Research Report Series*, 2016(1), 1–37.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ETS2.12098>; Bruce, M.D., Ermasova, N. & Mattox, L. (2019). The Fiscal Disparity and Achievement Gap between Extremely Wealthy and Poor School Districts in Illinois. *Public Organization Review* 19, 541–565. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-018-0417-7>; Knight, D. S. (2017). Are High-Poverty School Districts Disproportionately Impacted by State Funding Cuts? *School Finance Equity Following the Great Recession*. In: *Journal of Education Finance*. 43/2.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45093658>; OECD (2013), *Lessons from PISA 2012 for the United States*,

perspective, *the largest positive outcome in the US would come from better financial fairness in educational funding*, which would allow to provide:

- ample additional training to teachers (*PD, lesson plans, etc.*)
- ample remediation, enrichment and support to disadvantaged students (*via daily tutoring*)
- accelerated language learning to catch up non-native speakers.

It is against this background that also the relation between curriculum and social justice is turning into an important and interesting question. Compared to various input and output elements which long have been seen as relevant issues in an equity perspective, the internal components of the educational system, including the curriculum, have been neglected for too long. Only recently, the curriculum has been identified as a major issue in educational equity.¹⁰ A major effort to redesign the curriculum thus needs to develop its own vision on how its ambitions relate to equity and social justice. To start this reflection, is the major purpose of this paper.

This reflection comes at a point in time where equity and social justice find themselves in the center of heated political debate in the United States and elsewhere. The polarized nature of the political and ideological debate might negatively impact on the reception and usage of this paper, no matter how balanced, evidence-based and logical it attempts to be. Readers with a fixed political view on equity might be tempted to reduce its messages to predetermined positions on the political continuum and either welcome or condemn the views. Still, this paper is conceived as an invitation to reflect on very complex and even ‘wicked’ issues with an open mind.

Evaluating equity in education

More than in any other field of social life and public policy, equity and social justice are incredibly important in education. This is because of the intrinsic purpose of education to uplift and emancipate individuals, social groups and entire nations from ignorance and submission to wisdom and autonomy, not autocracy. No other social institution has that purpose. In old times, this mission was reserved for just a very thin layer of the social fabric, such as clerics in Medieval Europe or imperial bureaucrats in ancient China. But all modern societies have embraced – sooner or later – the ambition to expand the benefits of education to societies as a whole. Thus, education became the main modernizer and the main equalizer in human history. And equity and social justice got engrained in the very purpose of education. This explains why education is so sensitive to equity and social justice.

However, no matter how well-intentioned,¹¹ education can never achieve full equality. This is due to the other function of education, next to the equalizing function, which is selection. Selection concerns the filling of positions within economic, political and social elites and

Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264207585-en>.

¹⁰ OECD (2021), *Adapting Curriculum to Bridge Equity Gaps: Towards an Inclusive Curriculum*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6b49e118-en>

¹¹ See the defense of equality of outcomes by Phillips, A. (2004). Defending equality of outcome, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 12/1, 2004, pp. 1–19. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/533/1/equality_of_outcome.pdf

equipping the selected with the necessary attributes to occupy these positions. Contrary to what the beliefs of many educators that education is about the development of the individual to realize his or her full potential, not all kids can reach the top of the social ladder. The function of selecting the most talented one is controversial in the education space, but from a societal point of view completely legitimate. Moreover, educators themselves do contribute to selection, by differentiating expectations and in doing so limiting the opportunities of many. The equity issue with regard to selection is that it often is implemented in an biased manner, by prioritizing prejudice and partial opinion over rigorous assessment of talent. Despite the impossibility of complete equality, education has to ensure that the selection function is implemented in an equitable and fair manner.¹² *This means that selection, and the resulting social mobility, happens on the basis of ability, merit and achievement, and not on the basis of family background, gender, race, religion or whatever other irrelevant factor.*

Not a single education system is perfectly delivering on the equity and social justice promise. But some do better than others, such as the Nordic countries with their social-democratic tradition, and several systems dramatically fail, such as the United States or France.¹³ Evaluating education systems on how well they do with regard to equity and social justice depends on the definitions, criteria, and measurement tools used. As we shall see in the next section, there are many different definitions of equity in education, each with its own implications for policy and practice.

With regard to measurement, a lot depends on the specific measures used. Input measures, such as access to education, financial resources invested in schooling or the availability of cultural resources at home, will lead to different results than outcome measures. And within outcome measures, looking at learning outcomes and skills acquisition will lead to different results than one looks at educational attainment. One can look at the overall variation in the distribution, but such measure also shows differences in human potential and talent, genetically determined or not. A better measure is to look at the degree to which the distribution is influenced by social background, such as family income, parental educational attainment, or cultural capital at home. This is what PISA is reporting on: the percentage of variance explained by parental economic, social and cultural status (ESCS).¹⁴ Equity is achieved when the percentage of explained variance in performance is close to zero, meaning that each student has the same probability to reach a certain level of educational attainment or acquire a certain level of learning outcomes, regardless of its family background. Equity means that whatever inequality exists between students in a school system, it is not related to students' socioeconomic status, but is merely the expression of innate differences in ability and talent.

¹² Brennan, J., & Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 287–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9127-3>

¹³ Gorard, S., & Smith, E. (2004). An international comparison of equity in education systems. *Comparative Education*, 40(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006042000184863>

¹⁴ See chapter 1 in OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>. Avvisati, F. (2020). The measure of socioeconomic status in PISA: a review and some suggested improvements. *Large-scale Assessments in Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40536-020-00086-x>. Some of PISA's ESCS measures are also criticized for their endogeneity, for example the number of books at home, see: Engzell, P. (2019). What Do Books in the Home Proxy For? A Cautionary Tale. *Sociological Methods and Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119826143>.

The answer, of course, lies in the pervasive role of poverty, deprivation, discrimination and exclusion on the educational opportunities and performance of children. Research has amply demonstrated the corrosive effects of unequal family resources, disadvantaged neighborhoods, insecure labor markets, and worsening school conditions on children's opportunities.¹⁵ In the US, growing income inequality, the widening gap in parents' educational attainment, residential segregation, various forms of discrimination and exclusion, and many more factors are responsible for a widening gap in educational opportunities and outcomes.

In this regard, the social and cultural context matters as well. Inequality also works in indirect ways. The SES measure doesn't value social and cultural differences in educational aspirations and preferences. The meritocratic ideal of modern education systems is much more prevalent in and supported by the urban middle class than it is by the working class or in rural communities. Paul Willis' seminal ethnographic account of how working class 'lads' in an English industrial town actively resisted and rejected schooling, thereby actively contributing to their perpetuating working-class futures and social deprivation, is a classical account of the social variation of attitudes and preferences towards schooling.¹⁶ Recent research has pointed to the fact the educational inequity is also the result of 'opportunity hoarding' by the middle class, which in turn can lead to discrimination and social segregation.¹⁷

In comparatively equitable education systems – Canada is a good example with much higher levels of educational equity as measured in PISA than most other nations including the United States – specific forms of social injustice can still be very important. Exclusion and discrimination of indigenous populations for example can still be very real issues in such statistically equitable systems.¹⁸ Individuals or groups with specific learning needs often do not get the adaptations in schools they need and deserve and thus are discriminated. Minority language groups often do not get the opportunity to be educated in their native languages and are subjected to schooling in the hegemonic language.

Concepts of equity and social justice in education

It is useful to distinguish and define some major concepts in equity and social justice in education. Too often, these concepts are used indifferently or even synonymously, contributing to major confusion in the discussion. In this section, we will discuss the most common conceptual approaches to equity in education.

Equality of outcomes

Let's start with one of the clearest but also most radical expressions of equity in education: equality of outcomes. In this view, education systems are equitable if there is only a narrow

¹⁵ See for example: Duncan, G.J. & Murnane, R.J. eds. (2011). *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. Russel Sage & Spencer Foundation.

¹⁶ Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Reeves, R. (2017). *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do about It*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁸ OECD (2017), *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279421-en>

variation in the distribution of outcomes, such as attainment rates, learning outcomes, skills acquired or whatever. Given the natural variation in talents and abilities, and the significant variation in social backgrounds, material and immaterial resources invested in education by parents and families, education can only achieve equality of outcomes by remediating and compensating for inequalities at the start of an educational trajectory. Education systems which realize a high degree of equality of outcomes thus try to minimize the impact of family background on learning and maximize the uniformity and cohesion of educational pathways by avoiding selection, opposing testing and postponing educational tracking and streaming. With regard to curriculum, those systems adhere to a largely common one, with similar learning objectives and content for all students.

This very egalitarian definition of social justice and equity in education, very popular in the second half of the 20th century in, for example, the comprehensive school movement in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and today in for example critical race theory in the United States, has a very ambitious equity agenda. It views the school as an instrument to correct and compensate for social inequalities in family background, access to financial and non-material resources, cultural background and preferences, etc. The school is defined by its social mission to equip all students with the necessary knowledge, skills, character, and meta-learning to start successfully in life.

More recently, this view on equity has been criticized on a number of points:

- The neglect of diverse abilities and talents among students, especially of gifted students.
- The lack of incentive for effort, personal responsibility and innovation.
- The over-emphasis on the role of education in compensating for society, and the disregard for (even genetic) differences or the role of personal effort.
- Exaggerated homogenization with a risk of a reduction of learning outcomes to the mean. Equality risks being seen as synonymous to close to the average.

More specifically with regard to the curriculum, the notion of equality of outcomes risks being satisfied with below-excellence levels of standards, in order to allow most if not all students to reach them. PISA-results has shown that some countries, especially, Eastern Asian ones, are successful in combining high levels of learning outcomes with high degrees of equality of outcomes, but for many Western countries the trade-off between excellence in standards and equality of outcomes is very real. For the sake of equity, standards and definitions of achievement have been compromised and expectations have been put at a lower level. Equality of opportunity policies have sometimes tried to narrow the achievement distribution, not only by raising the achievement of low performers, but also by consciously or unconsciously constraining the performance at the top of the distribution. A radical interpretation of equality is tempted to see high expectations, rigorous testing and demanding teaching as discriminatory. For the illusionary sake of social justice, teachers and schools are then incentivized to portray students as achieving when they are not.

Equality of opportunity

As a correction to the problems facing the concept of equality of outcomes, a number of social philosophers and scientists (mainly John Rawls, John Roemer, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum) have advanced the concept of ‘equality of opportunity’.¹⁹ In this concept, the variety

¹⁹ Ferreira, F. & Peragine, V. (2016). “Individual Responsibility and Equality of Opportunity.” in *The Oxford Handbook of Well-Being and Public Policy*, edited by M. D. Adler and M. Fleurbaey. Oxford:

of abilities and talents is recognized, as well as the role of personal effort and social preferences of families and social groups. Equality of opportunity means that performance should not depend on personal circumstances that stem from the randomness of birth, but to individual effort.²⁰

The role of educational policy thus mainly consists of offering all students, regardless their abilities and social background, equal opportunities to embark on the process of learning. This can be done not only by removing all possible barriers to successful learning trajectories, but also by introducing compensatory measures for those students who face disadvantage and discrimination. An equality of opportunity approach tries to create a level playing field for all students, by severely reducing the impact of social background and removing all possible forms of discrimination, while recognizing the importance of individual and cultural preferences and personal effort in the final outcomes.

In this concept, the end result is not necessarily a narrow distribution of learning outcomes, as they depend on the given distribution of abilities and talents, the successful trajectory of individual students and their personal effort towards achievement. Students who do not succeed in education because they choose not to invest as much personal effort in this, should not blame society if they have received first- and even second-chance opportunities.

The concept of equality of opportunity is a rather vague concept, with many possible meanings and policy implications.²¹ It has been criticized for pointing education policies to a narrow focus on access and financial barriers to education, thereby taking an agnostic view on what happens within the educational process. It considers the curriculum and the teaching and learning process as neutral, assuming that there is an objective positive purpose to education which is beneficial for all students.

A more fundamental criticism of the ‘equality of opportunity’ concept is that it makes a vague and rather difficult to operationalize distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable sources of inequality. The question then is whether there is sufficient ground and enough social consensus to make decisions on whether sources of inequality are ethically acceptable or not.²² Appreciating the ‘effort’ of an individual, for example, is a good case. In theory, the amount of personal effort in turning opportunities to positive outcomes is an important ingredient of the equality of opportunity argument. But effort is not only determined by personal responsibility, but is also influenced by social context, learned behaviors and cultural norms. Many structural aspects, which have an impact on an individual’s success, remain out of reach of an individual’s effort.

Oxford University Press, pp. 747–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199325818.013.24>. See also: Mason, A. (2001). Equality of opportunity, old and new. *Ethics*, 111(4), pp. 760–781. <https://doi.org/10.1086/233572>

²⁰ Roemer, J. E., & Trannoy, A. (2016). Equality of Opportunity: Theory and Measurement. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 54(4). <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20151206>

²¹ Lazenby, H. (2016). What is equality of opportunity in education? *Theory and Research in Education*, 14(1), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878515619788>

²² Kanbur R., Wagstaff A. (2016). How Useful Is Inequality of Opportunity as a Policy Construct?. In: Basu K., Stiglitz J.E. (eds) *Inequality and Growth: Patterns and Policy*. International Economic Association Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137554543_4

Social mobility

A concept linked to equality of opportunity is social mobility. For many years, education provided the most important route to improving one's life and those of one's children through upward social mobility. By removing all possible barriers to successful education, talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to climb the social ladder by achieving a successful education. For many decades, education has been seen as the main vehicle for social mobility and many students, who previously were excluded from an elitist education, were able to benefit from the educational opportunities. The ambition that through education, talent and effort, one can secure a better life than that of their parents was crucial to the expansion of education systems in the second half of the 20th century.

However, the degree to which education offers opportunities for upward social mobility differs widely across countries.²³ And even among regions within countries, the variation in educational mobility is quite important.²⁴ Institutional factors, educational policies, the general economic and social environment, they offer part of the answer to why social and educational mobility differ so much. Hence, social mobility may not be a perfect expression of the equity and social justice in a given system. This is because social mobility is the product of both seemingly contradictory functions of education, equalizing opportunities and selection on the basis of ability, talent and achievement. The actual amount and the fairness of social mobility depends on the balance between both functions of education.

Over time, in several OECD countries, upward social mobility has become more difficult to achieve, and the fear of downward social mobility is becoming more widespread in the middle classes.²⁵ *Large parts of the population seem to believe that the social contract of the 20th century welfare state, of which public education is an important component, has either ended or no longer serves their interests.*²⁶ When the engine of social mobility starts to sputter, trust in school systems falters and young people from vulnerable backgrounds may no longer invest their time and energy in schooling. ***The consequences might be felt beyond the education systems, when people lose trust in the 'social contract', become defiant towards the 'system', embrace populism and turn away from democracy.***

²³ Pfeffer, F. T. (2008). Persistent inequality in educational attainment and its institutional context. *European Sociological Review*, 24(5), 543–565. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcn026>; Narayan, A. et al. (2018). *Fair Progress? : Economic Mobility Across Generations Around the World. Equity and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28428>; Schütz, G., Ursprung, H.W. Wößmann, L. (2008), Education Policy and Equality of Opportunity. *Kyklos*, 61: 279-308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6435.2008.00402.x>

²⁴ Betthäuser, B. A., Kaiser, C., & Trinh, N. A. (2021). Regional Variation in Inequality of Educational Opportunity across Europe. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211019890>

²⁵ See for example: World Economic Forum (2020), *Is the American Dream Over? Here's What de Data Say*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/social-mobility-upwards-decline-usa-us-america-economics>; OECD (2018), *A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264301085-en>.

²⁶ See for example: Social Mobility Commission (2020), *Social Mobility Barometer. Public Attitudes to Social Mobility, 2019-20*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/858908/Social_Mobility_Barometer_2019-2020.pdf

While education has been the most powerful vehicle for social groups and entire nations to progress and escape from poverty and social exclusion, it can also foster inequality itself. Despite all possible efforts from policy makers and school leaders, educational opportunities are not fairly distributed within societies and education itself continues to pass advantages and privileges from one generation to the next. The selection function of modern education systems often confounds talent with social background.

Meritocracy

The concept of meritocracy is a further expansion of the idea of social mobility. It logically (and chronologically) follows from an equity approach aiming for equality of opportunity and social mobility. Meritocracy denotes a society where in principle status, prestige and power are awarded to those, whatever their background and social origin, who succeed in developing their talents into assets or ‘merits’ such as skills or credentials, in most cases through successful educational careers. Equality of opportunity then refers to the starting situation, social mobility to the process and meritocracy to the result at the moment of competition for status and power.

In his brilliant account of the idea of meritocracy, Adrian Woolbridge defines meritocracy as follows: “A meritocratic society combines four qualities which are each in themselves admirable. First, it prides itself on the extent to which people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents. Second, it tries to secure equality of opportunity by providing education for all. Third, it forbids discrimination on the basis of race and sex and other irrelevant characteristics. Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage and nepotism”.²⁷

Meritocracy has a very powerful role in defining what counts in the opportunity-mobility process. The question thus is what exactly counts as ‘merit’? Traditionally, meritocracy values educational outcomes such as credentials and test scores, which are largely cognitive outcomes. The definition of merit in itself can severely limit opportunities of people who do not meet the traditional standards of merit. Feedback loops into the educational process, such as to what matters in high school success or to the selection to post-secondary institutions, reinforce the traditional notions of merit. Other valuable attributes of people than test scores and credentials, such as character qualities, are seldom taken into consideration in the meritocratic process. This might be changing slowly, as employers are starting to recognize the value of character competencies.²⁸

Recently, experts have started to doubt whether modern societies still provide opportunities for meritocracy to function well. As noted by Tharman Shanmugaratnam, “we can no longer be confident that *meritocratic systems* will blunt the advantages and disadvantages that children bring with them from their homes and social backgrounds, at least not in the way that they did in a past era”.²⁹ Widening inequalities, but also ceiling effects through increased participation to higher education limit the possibilities for disadvantaged youth to climb the social ladder. Even more radical is the critique that the concept of meritocracy has been legitimizing social inequalities and even fostering further increases of social gaps in wealth and power between the

²⁷ Woolbridge, A. (2021), *The Aristocracy of Talent. How Meritocracy Made the Modern World*. New York, Skyhorse, p. 1.

²⁸ See for example: McKinsey (2021), *Defining the Skills Citizen Will Need in the future World of Work*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/defining-the-skills-citizens-will-need-in-the-future-world-of-work?cid=eml-web>

²⁹ Shanmugaratnam, T. (2021), “Education’s untapped potential”, in: O. Blanchard & D. Rodrik (2021), *Combatting Inequality: Rethinking Government’s Role*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, pp. 99-105.

elites and disadvantaged and disempowered layers of society.³⁰ The expansion of higher education in OECD countries and the growth in well-paid high-skilled jobs have indeed contributed to widening social disparities.³¹

Social cohesion

All four concepts discussed so far have in common that they do not conceptualize the increasing diversity of populations. A growing understanding of the multidimensional nature of inequality has led to concerns that equity in education is about much more than gender, family background, economic or social disadvantage, but also about race, indigenous populations, sexual identity and much more. The notion of diversity thus has entered the debate on social justice and has fundamentally reshaped the questions about equity and social justice.

The main reaction to the recognition that our societies are highly diverse was a social-political fear for fragmentation and social disruption.³² It is in this context that the concept of social cohesion saw the light of day. The concept mainly serves to protect societies against the risks of fragmentation and polarization between various social groups, divided by economic circumstances, poverty versus wealth, ethnicity and race, geography, etc. The role of education thus is seen to foster social cohesion through instilling shared notions of citizenship, interdependence and mutual interest. With regard to the curriculum, this approach aims to foster a common core curriculum with shared ethics, behavioral norms and mutual respect. In curriculum theory, E.D. Hirsch has been an influential proponent of this need for shared knowledge for social integration and citizenship.³³

While still being a powerful political concept, the notion of social cohesion has failed to gain much traction as an approach to social justice, mainly because it aims to overcome divisions in society by problematizing them, rather than recognizing and confronting them in a more positive way. It defines social justice as the shared interest of society as a whole, while denying the legitimate demands of specific social and ethnic groups for social justice. It is aimed more at restoring or preserving social homogeneity than positively appreciating diversity. The recognition of diversity in education deserves much more thorough and ambitious approaches.³⁴

Social integration

Along similar lines, the concept of social integration aims to provide opportunities to disadvantaged and disempowered social groups by providing them avenues to participate successfully in education, the job market, democratic institutions and social life more generally, on the condition of sharing the dominant values of the society in which they integrate. The concept, mainly used with reference to migrants and refugees,³⁵ suffers from significant

³⁰ See for example: Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The tyranny of merit*. Allen Lane.

³¹ Carnoy, M. (2011). As Higher Education Expands, Is It Contributing To Greater Inequality? *National Institute Economic Review*. 215(1): 34-47. doi:[10.1177/0027950111401142](https://doi.org/10.1177/0027950111401142).

³² See for example: World Economic Forum (2021), *The Global Risks Report 2021*. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-risks-report-2021>

³³ Hirsch, E.D. (2020). *How to Educate a Citizen: The Power of Shared Knowledge to Unify a Nation*. Harper Collins.

³⁴ Burns, T. & Van Damme, D. (2018). Education and Diversity: Challenges and Opportunities. In: INSEAD. *The Global Talent Competitiveness Index 2018*, Fontainebleau, France, pp. 53-59.

³⁵ See for example: Lundberg, O. (2020). Defining and implementing social integration: a case study of school leaders' and practitioners' work with newly arrived im/migrant and refugee students.

ambivalence in its implementation, ranging from assimilationist to more adaptive approaches.³⁶ Yet, it differs from social cohesion in its more positive appreciation of diversity. If implemented well, integrationist education policies can give significant opportunities and rights to disadvantaged and disempowered social groups, while at the same time aiming for social peace. In terms of the curriculum, the concept can lead to the integration of non-traditional and minority views in the core curriculum and aims to empower disenfranchised social groups.

However, the concept of social integration does not have strong egalitarian ambitions. It mainly addresses the adverse consequences of social inequalities and social injustice, such as marginalization and exclusion. The burden is largely placed upon those on the outside of the social consensus to find a way, instead of those on the inside creating space and/or changing their space to welcome others. The concept also assumes that marginalized or diversity groups should have to assimilate or adapt into the dominant culture, instead of finding a shared space or carving out their own space.

Affirmative action

More radical approaches to social justice in education consider all of the above mentioned concepts as inadequate and insufficient. They only lead, in the views of radicals, to incremental, piecemeal change, while leaving the mechanisms of discrimination and injustice intact. There is a need, in their eyes, for faster and more radical interventions to turn the tide. One of these approaches is affirmative action or positive discrimination, which consists of correcting inequities by awarding certain rights and privileges to underserved groups. The concept is mainly used with regard to personnel policies in public institutions or access to post-secondary education,³⁷ but it is increasingly relevant to understand various approaches in education, including curriculum reform. Affirmative action differs from equality of opportunity by its proactive nature; instead of ensuring that discrimination will not be tolerated once it is detected, affirmative action aims to avert and prevent discrimination *ex ante*.³⁸

Explicitly including views of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in educational content and correcting the one-sided approaches of the dominant groups in society has become a legitimate approach in many jurisdictions. Of course, it is the case that knowledge, transmitted from science to educational curricula and textbooks, often is adjusted through the lens of dominant groups and hegemonic cultures. Correcting this by adding multiple perspectives, giving voice to the disempowered, is a legitimate way of achieving social justice in educational

International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being, 15(sup2).

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2020.1783859>

³⁶ Assimilation requires someone, for example a migrant person, to adjust to the prevailing dominant norms and codes of behavior, whereas in adaptation society itself changes in order to positively incorporate other people's norms. The distinction goes back to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and is then transferred to sociology and cultural anthropology.

³⁷ Arcidiacono, P., Lovenheim, M., & Zhu, M. (2015). Affirmative Action in Undergraduate Education. *Annual Review of Economics*, 7(1), 487–518. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080614-115445>

³⁸ Crosby, F. J., Iyer, A., & Sincharoen, S. (2006). Understanding affirmative action. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 57, 585–611. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.57.102904.190029>. For a very informative account of the legal and constitutional aspects of affirmative action, see: Lemann, N. (2021). Can affirmative Action Survive? *The New Yorker*. August 2 issue.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/02/can-affirmative-action-survive?s=09>

curricula. Openness and multi-perspectivism are necessary ingredients of social justice in education.

However, the risk of this approach is its intrinsic tendency of turning into radical hyperbole by falling into the trap of epistemological relativism. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, the philosopher Alan Bloom already lamented: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”³⁹ The idea that truth is relative to one’s position in the social order, that there is no absolute truth, and that many truths are equally valid, has entered the social sciences with the advent of philosophical post-modernism and has become especially popular in the educational domain. In this view, anything goes as long as it is recognized by one social group as legitimate representation of truth. Each social group considers that it has inalienable right to its own truth. ***Clearly, this is an unacceptable and dangerous proposition, which denies the nature of scientific inquiry and the very concept of truth.***⁴⁰

Perfectly legitimate anti-racist calls for ‘decolonizing the curriculum’ by eliminating manifest residues of colonizers’ views of the world sometimes turn into relativist opinions that there are no objective truths, but only ‘black’ and ‘white’ views of reality. Sometimes, respect for someone else’s opinions prevails over the search for truth, when criticizing someone can feel as if you’re imposing your beliefs on others, thus infringing on their freedom.⁴¹ Truth will always be contested and is often nuanced and full of contradictions, so education has to foster communication, dialogue and cooperation. Or as Harvard’s Howard Gardner noted in his *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed*: “It’s important for us to salvage, indeed to valorize, the core idea of truth. I believe that human being, working carefully and reflectively and cooperatively over time, can converge more and more closely to a determination of the actual state of affairs – to the way that things actually are”.⁴²

Some disciplines lend themselves better to restorative affirmative action, such as social sciences, history or language, while others such as mathematics and natural sciences do much less. The degree of rigor in the scientific method, as well as the mere object of scientific inquiry – the natural world –, make the natural sciences less vulnerable for socially desirable views. Newtonian mechanics are valid, regardless of the social or cultural context. The laws of nature don’t know any gender, race or religion.

But that doesn’t mean that there are no valuable cultural differences in the way for example mathematics are understood and taught. Native American nations – the case of the Navajo is well documented⁴³ – had their own ways of understanding and transmitting basic concepts of the natural world such as time, space and geometry. From this cultural tradition of the Navajo nation, a particular way of teaching mathematics has been developed, which has become well-

³⁹ Bloom, A. (1987). *The Closing of the American Mind. How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 25.

⁴⁰ See also: Rauch, J. (2021), *The Constitution of Knowledge. A Defense of Truth*. Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press.

⁴¹ Boudry, M. (2021). *Why Relativism is the Worst Idea Ever*. Blog of the American Philosophical Association. <https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/07/29/why-relativism-is-the-worst-idea-ever/>

⁴² Gardner, H. (2011). *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Basic Books.

⁴³ Pinxten, R. (2016). *Multimathemacy: Anthropology and mathematics education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26255-0>.

known as a the ‘Navajo math circles’.⁴⁴ This example demonstrates that in a perspective of equity and social justice, it might be appropriate to respect and value specific cultural representations, even within mathematics, and to guarantee them their own space through affirmative action.

Another influential criticism of affirmative action is that its implementation inevitably leads to tensions with the principle of merit. In a recent remarkable letter, three mathematics professors at renowned US universities have voiced a virulent attack on affirmative action: “The nationwide effort to reduce racial disparities, however well-intentioned, has had the unfortunate effect of weakening the connection between merit and scholastic admission”.⁴⁵ Their criticism is all the more credible since “The concept of fighting “white supremacy,” in particular, doesn’t apply to the math field, since American-born scholars of all races now collectively represent a small (and diminishing) minority of the country’s academic STEM specialists”. This criticism makes clear that respect for different cultural representations in education and the sciences and guaranteeing them their own space will only be sustainable to the extent it preserves not only the concept of scientific truth but also that of merit in performance, achievement and selection.

Still, there is a lot of room for improvement in curriculum design. A recent research paper reports on an experimental project in which science and math classes of first year undergraduate students were manipulated by alternative embedded diversity philosophies.⁴⁶ The comprehension of the math and science classes by students of color improved in the multicultural condition compared to the colorblind condition. The embedded diversity philosophy sent a message of inclusion to students of color, positively impacting on their learning.

The conclusion is that affirmative action in education, including correcting the curriculum to give proper credit to views from disadvantaged groups in society, is perfectly legitimate and helpful to foster equity and social justice on the condition it avoids or contains the risk of epistemological relativism in the search of truth and does not annihilate the principle of merit. But affirmative action needs to be grounded on robust standards of achievement in order to guarantee the credibility of credentials of disadvantaged learners. Affirmative action is realized by offering disadvantaged learners the highest quality educational experience, not by offering them sub-standard assessments in order to artificially award success.

Segregation

An even more radical view on social justice consists of isolating the perceived victims of injustice and provide them with educational environments where they feel safe, no longer threatened by the visible and less-visible forms of discrimination. In some countries, this concept has become popular among radical feminists defending the rights of women to ‘safe spaces’ free from

⁴⁴ Brodsky, J. (2020). How The Navajo Nation Is Transforming Math Education. *Forbes*. Dec 19. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliabrodsky/2020/12/19/how-the-navajo-nation-is-transforming--math-education/?sh=5c1e12894c96>

⁴⁵ Deift, P., Jitomirskaya, S., Klainerman, S. (2021). As US Schools Prioritize Diversity Over Merit, China Is Becoming the World’s STEM Leader. *Quillette*. 19 August 2021. <https://quillette.com/2021/08/19/as-us-schools-prioritize-diversity-over-merit-china-is-becoming-the-worlds-stem-leader/>

⁴⁶ Good, J. J., Bourne, K. A., & Drake, R. G. (2020). The impact of classroom diversity philosophies on the STEM performance of undergraduate students of color. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104026>.

perceived threat and violence, and promoters of civil rights of disadvantaged ethnic groups.⁴⁷ Segregated schools for girls only for example have been established in some countries as part of a radical strategy for gender justice and equal rights. These schools offer a gendered, feminist curriculum that aims to foster a gender identity among girls, unchallenged by masculine power. Similar ideas seem to be prominent among radical approaches of social justice for black and ethnic minority students in the US and indigenous students in other countries.

In many jurisdictions, education systems offer opportunities for free school choice and radical experiments, also with regard to curricula and content. In this sense, segregation as a strategy of social justice has some legitimacy, especially if seen as a temporary strategy to foster vulnerable students' security and absence of threat. But the effects are mostly very moderate and do not seem to last long. Some studies show that girls in same-sex schools may perform slightly better in mathematics, but the effect size was small and did not extend to other subjects.⁴⁸

However, more fundamentally, an educational approach based on fragmentation of identities has no future in a 21st century characterized by connectedness and interdependence. It is difficult to see how a strategy of segregation can foster the knowledge and competencies needed for peaceful coexistence on this planet. Humanity is forced to live together and to foster a better world based on mutual understanding, not segregation. Moreover, radical segregation for the sake of diversity leads to persistent inequality.

Personalization

Another approach to do 'justice' to equity as well as to diversity, is to provide better opportunities to different abilities and talents by focusing on the individual student. The strategy of 'personalization', very popular nowadays in education, aims to radically differentiate educational delivery and even educational content at the individual level.⁴⁹ This approach, increasingly facilitated by educational technology and learning analytics, assumes that individual students are too different from each other to be treated in a standardized way, as happens in most classrooms. Standardization – treating very different individual learners in a 'one size fits all' approach – might create learning environments where prejudices and stereotypes flourish. By tailoring education to the needs of the individual student, it is believed that inequities and discrimination have less chance to impact on learning and educational achievement. Thus, personalization is not only an educational and technological development, but also increasingly a strategy to foster social justice in education. Especially for groups who are clearly discriminated against in traditional ways to organize schooling, such as students with disabilities, personalized and adaptive learning environments are seen as an approach to foster equity. Advocates of personalization in education believe that "Schools and classrooms should be developed as physically and psychologically safe, personalized learning communities where students feel they belong and teachers engage in practices that help them know their students

⁴⁷ Williams, J. (2016). *The Separation Solution?: Single-Sex Education and the New Politics of Gender Equality*. Oakland: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520963788>.

⁴⁸ OECD (2015). *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*, PISA, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264229945-en>; Pahlke, E., J.S. Hyde and C.M. Allison (2014). The effects of single-sex compared with coeducational schooling on students' performance and attitudes: A meta-analysis, *Psychological Bulletin*, 140/4, pp. 1042-1072. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035740>

⁴⁹ Bernacki, M. L., Greene, M. J., & Lobczowski, N. G. (2021). A Systematic Review of Research on Personalized Learning: Personalized by Whom, to What, How, and for What Purpose(s)? *Educational Psychology Review*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09615-8>

well so that they can respond to children’s specific needs, interests, readiness for learning, and opportunities for growth”.⁵⁰

Yet, personalization seems to predominantly be a buzz-word without much impact on education practice. The realities of class size and limited competencies of teachers to differentiate teaching and learning preclude massive adoption of personalization in today’s public school systems. Things might become different in tech-heavy learning environments.⁵¹ Adaptive technologies and intelligent tutoring systems, differentiating learning to the needs of the individual learner, can help to reduce achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged learners.⁵² Opportunities for tech-driven personalization extend to education in low- and mid-income countries.⁵³

The downside of personalization is that it confirms the uniqueness of each individual students with his or her challenges and identity, *at the expense of a concept of common good in education*. Extreme personalization can lead to the neglect of social interaction and the development of social skills. The absence of a human instructor and peer support possibly negatively affects the learning motivation of disadvantaged learners. Exaggerated curriculum flexibility, while possibly being beneficial to individual learners, risks to deepen divides in learning. As promoted in concepts such as social cohesion, social integration or social inclusion, a shared curriculum and a shared view on knowledge is important to avoid extreme individualization and social fragmentation.

Social inclusion

Social inequality can lead to social exclusion of disadvantaged people and marginalized social groups. Poverty is not only the lack of sufficient financial resources, but also the impossibility to fully participate in social life, the impoverishment of social connections and the loss of dignity. In contemporary societies, people suffer from social exclusion on the basis of economic status, color of their skin, sexual identity, religion or other factors.

The concept of social inclusion aims to counter social exclusion by explicitly focusing social justice on the basic human need of all individuals to be positively recognized in their human dignity, to be connected and to be able to fully participate in social life. Originally developed with reference to learners with disabilities and special needs, the concept of social inclusion has been widened to various dimensions of education in diverse environments.⁵⁴ An inclusive approach in education positively values diversity, but aims not to develop diverse talents and abilities by special treatment (affirmative action), excessive personalization, or segregation, but

⁵⁰ Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>

⁵¹ OECD (2021), *OECD Digital Education Outlook 2021: Pushing the Frontiers with Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain and Robots*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/589b283f-en>

⁵² Murphy, R. et al. (2020). Investigating Efficacy, Moderators and Mediators for an Online Mathematics Homework Intervention, *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 13/2, pp. 235-270, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2019.1710885>.

⁵³ Major, L., Francis, G. A., & Tsapali, M. (2021). The effectiveness of technology-supported personalised learning in low- and middle-income countries: A meta-analysis. *British Journal of Educational Technology*. 52/5, pp. 1935-1964. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13116>

⁵⁴ Koutsouris, G., Anglin-Jaffe, H., & Stentiford, L. (2020). How well do we understand social inclusion in education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(2), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2019.1658861>

by bringing students together and connecting them to the collective good. The concept of social inclusion differs from the previous conceptualizations of equity and social justice by its emphasis on social connectedness including integration in peer groups and cross-group friendships.⁵⁵

One of the benefits of social inclusion over concepts such as equality of outcomes or equality of opportunity is that it does not aim to achieve equality by reducing the impact of differences among individuals. A social inclusion agenda in education minimizes the risk of flattening the distribution by leveling out differences. Thus, social inclusion is perfectly compatible with an excellence agenda in education, even if not all learners will achieve excellent levels of achievement. In contrast to equality of opportunity, a socially inclusive approach does not merely provide opportunities to embark on education but tries to ensure that students from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds are supported and empowered throughout the educational trajectory.

By focusing on social connectedness and by positioning itself against the risks of social fragmentation, the concept of social inclusion, while also positively valuing diversity, radically differs from the segregationist approaches to equity. Especially in the context of the debate about multiculturalism, this is important. In his famous 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, Robert D. Putnam identified the risks of highly diverse societies in reducing social solidarity and social capital.⁵⁶ In his view, there is a real danger that multicultural policies and approaches in highly diverse societies promote social fragmentation and isolation disguised as equity. Successful immigrant societies have overcome such fragmentation by creating new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities.

Social inclusion is a very useful concept for addressing the specific educational needs of specific groups of disadvantaged or vulnerable learners, such as students with disabilities, indigenous students or students from minorities. In an equality of opportunity approach, these students are often assumed to benefit from generic compensatory or remedial measures, neglecting their often very specific concerns and interests. In contrast, the concept of social inclusion allows for specific, targeted measures that are beneficial to excluded individuals or social groups.

Fairness

Whereas social inclusion is an approach to equity and social justice targeted at specific disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, fairness is a more general and more ambitious interpretation of social justice. The concept of fairness certainly is more ambitious than the concept of equality of opportunity, which limits social justice to securing opportunities. The distinction in political philosophy between ‘minimal’ or ‘formal’ equality of opportunity and ‘fair’ equality of opportunity is useful here.⁵⁷ Fair equality of opportunity goes beyond the elimination of discrimination and prejudice, does not contend itself with providing the same educational chances to a child from a poor family compared to a similarly competent child from a wealthy

⁵⁵ Juvonen, J., Lessard, L.M., Rastogi, R., Schacter, H.L. & Sayre Smith, D. (2019). Promoting Social Inclusion in Educational Settings: Challenges and Opportunities, *Educational Psychologist*, 54/4, pp. 250-270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1655645>

⁵⁶ Putnam, R.D. (2007). E Pluribus Unum : Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30/2, pp. 137-174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x>

⁵⁷ Swift, A. (2006). *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians*. Cambridge: Polity. Bøyum, S. (2014). Fairness in education - a normative analysis of OECD policy documents. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(6), pp. 856–870. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.899396>

family, but requires the educational system to create a level playing field by compensating disadvantaged children. Fairness introduces social justice into every aspect of the educational experience. It is not just about the absence of barriers, but about ensuring that all learners in the end have a 'fair' chance to succeed. The concept of fairness is at the same time general and very specific, because what is fair for one individual or social group might not be for another.

There is evidence that young children have an inborn sense of fairness and have already developed the ability to make fairness judgments by the age of twelve months and possess a well-developed sense of fairness by the time they start pre-school, when they're three or four years old.⁵⁸ Most people have a good sense of basic fairness and make moral judgments accordingly, but progressively include contextual information in these judgments.⁵⁹ And in our multicultural world, people in many different cultures share some basic '*ordinary virtues*', to use Michael Ignatieff's expression, such as tolerance, forgiveness, trust and fairness.⁶⁰ Thus, fairness is a very basic and powerful ethical imperative.

The problem with the concept of fairness is that it easily can mean very different things. For some, it is synonymous with radical equality of outcomes. There is only fairness when everyone is equal. Educational opportunities should be a function of choice and effort alone, since it is fair that differences in talent and ability are compensated for by society. Another confusing reading of the concept of fairness is deservedness.⁶¹ In this view, it is only fair that the more talented or harder working students are getting higher grades and better jobs. This is of course an individualistic interpretation which is contradictory to social justice. In the definition of fairness in this paper, the concept of fairness is seen in a perspective of the common good. In this perspective, fairness is connected to need. People have connections to each other and are interdependent. To achieve the common good, people should be treated differently, based on the different needs they have. So, a social justice interpretation of fairness differs both from a radical egalitarian and a radical individualistic notion of fairness.

Another possible problem with the concept of fairness is that it goes beyond objective interpretations of equity and introduces a subjective element in the conceptual definition. To some extent, fairness is in the eye of the beholder. What is seen as 'fair' by one individual might be different from the perception and interpretation by others. Some people think it is fair to provide special remedial educational interventions to some disadvantaged groups, while others might think they are unfair to the extent they are disproportionate or do lead to disadvantaging others. These subjective aspects are not necessarily problematic, as there are no absolute measures of social justice. In democratic societies, social justice is always negotiated and people rightly have different views and sensitivities.

A possible source of disagreement on fairness is that the concept tries to combine elements in the environment and personal effort. Most people will consider it unfair to provide extensive

⁵⁸ McAuliffe, K., Blake, P.R., Warneken, F. (2017). Do Kids Have a Fundamental Sense of Fairness? *Scientific American*. August 23 Issue. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/do-kids-have-a-fundamental-sense-of-fairness/>

⁵⁹ Andrejević, M., Feuerriegel, D., Turner, W., Laham, S., & Bode, S. (2020). Moral judgements of fairness-related actions are flexibly updated to account for contextual information. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-74975-0>

⁶⁰ Ignatieff, M. (2017). *The ordinary virtues. Moral order in a divided world*. Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press.

⁶¹ Dobrin, A. (2012). It's Not Fair! But What Is Fairness?. *Psychology Today*. Blog post 11 May 2012. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/am-i-right/201205/its-not-fair-what-is-fairness>.

support mechanisms to disadvantaged groups or individuals if they themselves do not exercise the necessary effort to take benefit from those measures. However, the optimal balance between structural measures and personal effort is open to subjective judgment. This includes the risk that prejudice and very partial views start to influence judgment of what is considered to be 'fair'. Also, it neglects decades if not centuries of community destruction, which has rendered some groups unable to "pull themselves".

With regard to the curriculum, the concept of fairness mainly suggests giving due respect to views, knowledge, and experience from all possible social and cultural groups, without exaggeration so that the common good still is preserved.

Synthesis

Table 1 and Figure 1 provide a summary graphical representation of the various concepts of equity and social justice in education. Table 1 summarizes the advantages and risks of various concepts, while Figure 1 maps those concepts in a two-dimensional field with equality-inequality and diversity-homogeneity as axes.

Table 1. Characteristics of different concepts of equity and social justice in education

Concept	Description	Opportunities	Risks
Equality of outcomes	Equity in education means that... ...regardless of their background and abilities, students achieve more or less similar educational outcomes (attainment, learning outcomes).	The school has an ambitious agenda of correcting and compensating for the inequalities which children bring with them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic ambitions. • Compressing the achievement distribution leads to an approach of the 'least common denominator', mainly at the expense of high performers.
Equality of opportunity	...by removing barriers, minimizing the impact of social background and compensating for disadvantages in resources, all students are provided with equal opportunities to succeed. The outcomes however also depend on the efforts made by students.	The opportunity approach leads to a more realistic agenda for schools, while recognizing the importance of cultural preferences and individual effort of students in educational success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies and practices are often narrowly focusing on access and (financial) barriers, neglecting the educational process itself. • Personal effort is in itself function of social background and vulnerable to inequality.
Social mobility	...schools should remove barriers and provide incentives for talented students from disadvantaged background to climb the social ladder.	The talent reserve among disadvantaged social groups is tapped to enable individuals to flourish and societies to benefit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outcome depends more on the quality of the selection function of education than the effort of schools and students. • Relative social mobility also implies the risk of downward mobility for others. • Overall level of inequality is not affected.
Meritocracy	...the best and the brightest, regardless of their social background, are brought to the highest social positions.	Education confronts discrimination based on all possible irrelevant individual characteristics, provides pathways for all talented students and defines the currency of success (credentials, skills) in society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is not always clear what 'merit' exactly means and whether this is not influenced by social background. • Highly individualistic, at the expense of social progress of the social group or the community. • In itself, legitimizes and even increases social inequality.
Social cohesion	...by instilling notions of shared ethical norms and citizenship, socio-cultural diversity in society is prevented to	Education promotes a 'common core' of knowledge, skills and social norms, shared by diverse parts of the population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is more concerned with social stability than with inequality. • Attempts to protect the social order rather than provide social justice.

Concept	Description	Opportunities	Risks
	Equity in education means that... turn into social divides and fragmentation.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regards diversity as a threat and not as a positive force.
Social integration	...excluded and marginalized communities are integrated in the language, dominant culture and social norms of society.	Schools actively confront exclusion, discrimination and marginalization of social groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Departs from the dominant culture instead of engaging in cultural interaction. • Preserves the unequal balance of power between diverse social groups and cultures
Affirmative action	...discrimination is prevented <i>ex ante</i> by awarding certain rights to underserved and excluded categories in order to create a level playing field, by providing multiple perspectives and giving voice to the excluded.	Education proactively tackles inequalities by deliberately introducing certain forms of corrective unequal treatment, also with regard to knowledge and ways of looking at the world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal treatment in favor of some creates inequality for others. • The risk of relativism in content. • Weakening the concept of achievement by legitimizing substandard assessment
Segregation	...specific groups and individuals, who risk to be victim of exclusion and oppression, are taken apart and educated in a 'safe space', free of discrimination.	Providing 'safe spaces' can be a temporary solution to manifest forms of discrimination and threat, allowing the development of identity in a protective environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevents the development of identities in a context of the encounter, mutual understanding, connectedness and interdependence.
Personalization	...different learners, each with their specific background and abilities, are not subjected to a 'one size fits all' standardized approach, and are treated	With the help of adaptive educational technologies, specific needs of learners, who risk to be disadvantaged in standardized approaches to education, benefit from flexible and highly differentiated learning environments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessively individualistic approach to learning, at the expense of social interaction. • Risk of fragmentation at the expense of the common good.
Social inclusion	...diverse and different learners are recognized in their specific needs, positive qualities and their dignity.	By positively recognizing diversity and difference, learners from diverse backgrounds can engage in an adaptive, but socially interactive environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The appreciation of diversity can take priority over the concern with inequality. • Inclusion does not question the imbalances of power in society.
Fairness	...learners from diverse and unequal backgrounds are treated in a 'fair' way throughout the entire educational process.	While fully recognizing the need for the common good, the best possible solutions are sought for the needs and interest of every learner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can mean different things. • Views of fairness can easily be influenced by social or cultural inequality.

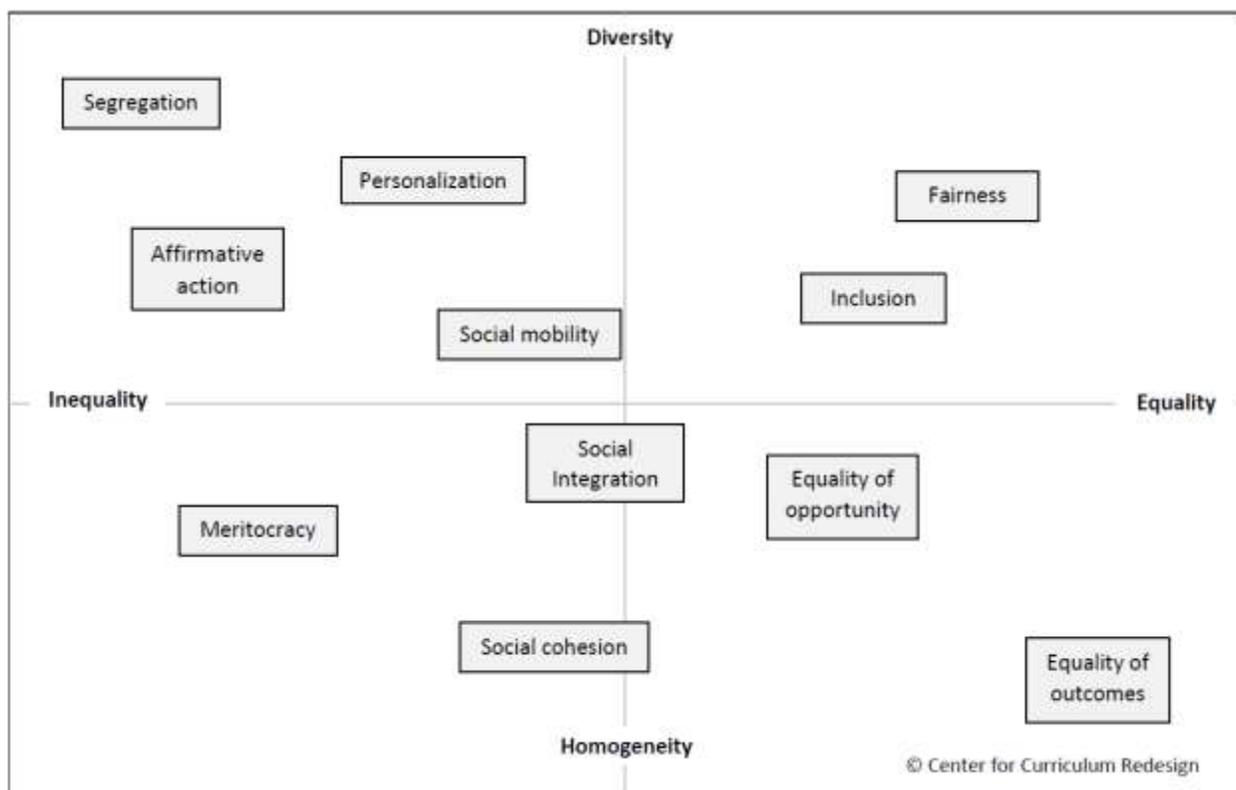


Figure 1. Two-dimensional mapping of different concepts of social justice in education⁶²

A choice for inclusion and fairness as guiding principles

In order to come to a vision on equity and social justice in education, one has to take position with regard to the various concepts. It is clear that the upper right quadrant represents the most ambitious sector of the field, with inclusion and fairness as the concepts which aim to reconcile equality and diversity. The two are equally important. Focusing on equality alone leads to fruitless egalitarian approaches, which have not been successful in the past and which might disrespect the legitimate views of minorities and specific social groups. Focusing on diversity alone risks to lead us to fragmentation and the loss of the common good. A perspective on social justice in education needs to integrate both concepts.

In Figure 2 the mapping of Figure 1 is adapted by indicating the preferred sector of the field and the preferred concepts of social inclusion and fairness as guiding principles. The figure also shows that four neighboring concepts – equality of opportunity, social integration, social mobility and personalization – can offer additional insights and added value, if integrated in a perspective of inclusion and fairness.

⁶² This figure is based on the author's conceptual work.

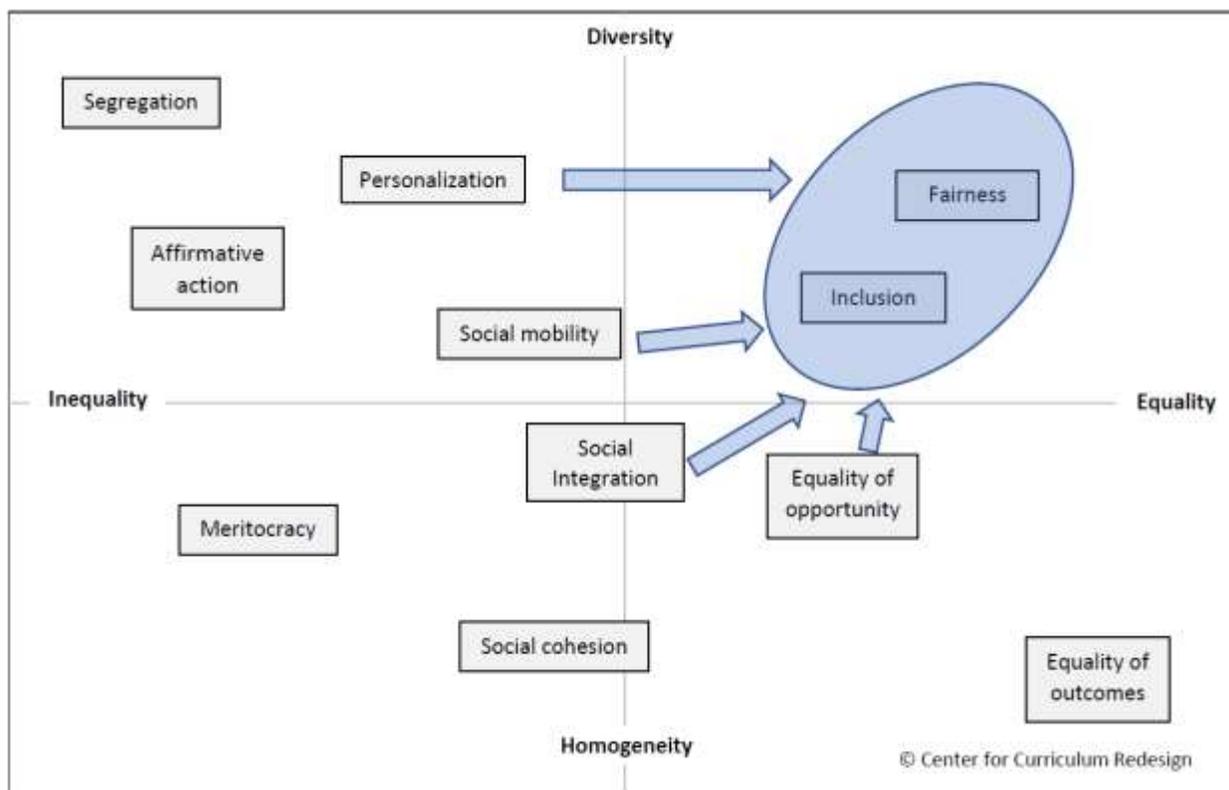


Figure 2. CCR view on equity and social justice in education centered around inclusion and fairness⁶³

The 4D framework as a framework for inclusion and fairness

After defining what equity and social justice means in the context of CCR’s curriculum work, this section aims to identify more specifically how CCR’s 4D curriculum framework works to foster social inclusion and fairness in education.

A holistic framework

A first relevant characteristic of the 4D framework is its holistic and balanced nature. Many current curriculum frameworks suffer from a partial and one-sided approach, frequently by relying almost exclusively on academic proficiency in disciplinary knowledge or in incomplete identification of “21st Century Skills/Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)”. From a perspective of inclusion and fairness this has been criticized as a curriculum approach biased towards the interests and the culture of white middle-class men. In reaction, recent curriculum developments inspired by concerns of social justice are focusing predominantly on social-emotional learning (SEL), even up to the risk of neglecting academic learning. Social-emotional learning is often seen as an approach correcting the academic advantages of the middle class, by promoting competencies which have the potential to be more beneficial to disadvantaged learners coming from less dominant class, ethnicity of gender backgrounds.

⁶³ This figure is based on the author’s conceptual work.

To some degree, there is some truth in this approach. Study tracks more frequently chosen by students from disadvantaged backgrounds might lead to lower academic knowledge proficiency, but can very well favor the development of social and emotional competencies. A purely academic, knowledge-oriented view on educational excellence therefore is contradictory to a social inclusive approach.

However, the view that emphasizing social-emotional learning might benefit the disadvantaged can easily become exaggerated. We still know very little about the social distribution of social-emotional competencies, but what we know does indicate that their distribution is also influenced by social background. A recent OECD survey of social and emotional skills in ten jurisdictions has indicated that in all of them socially advantaged learners scored higher on almost all competencies surveyed than disadvantaged learners.⁶⁴ Whether the achievement gap in SEL is equal, smaller or greater than in the case of knowledge proficiency or foundation skills as assessed by PISA, still is impossible to say.

From a fairness point of view, it would be wrong to favor one dimension of education over another, in order to strengthen the social interests of disadvantaged learners. It seems fairer to emphasize all dimensions as relevant and interesting for all learners, whatever their social, ethnic, gender or other backgrounds. The best guarantee for an inclusive and fair curriculum framework is to have a well-balanced approach in which all relevant dimensions of education are integrated. This is exactly the purpose of the 4D framework.

Avoiding social relativism

A serious risk in many approaches to social justice in the curriculum is that educational objectives and targets are intrinsically linked to social groups and their interests. We can call this ‘social relativism’. This approach is clearly prevalent in concepts of social justice such as affirmative action or segregation. In this perspective, the curriculum becomes a kind of zero-sum game: some components of the curriculum work to the advantage of some social categories and to the disadvantage of others. The current struggle for the ‘decolonization’ of the curriculum is based on the idea that there are specific elements of knowledge that are proprietary to some social groups and disadvantageous to others.

While it is of course true that components of the curriculum are socially constructed or heavily influenced by the social, economic and cultural context in which they emerged, a constructivist approach to curriculum can easily lead to social relativism. It is quite fundamental to understand that knowledge, skills, competencies and meta-learning can have their origins in specific contexts, but that they are capable of transcending these origins and achieve a more universal validity. Knowledge emerging from its social or cultural embeddedness can very well become part of the common good of all humanity. This is certainly true for disciplines with high levels of codification such as mathematics or the natural sciences, maybe to a lesser extent for disciplines which are more firmly rooted in language such as history, the humanities or the social sciences. But even in these disciplines, knowledge and skills if developed through rigorous scientific inquiry are perfectly capable of transcending their origins and acquire more general validity.

⁶⁴ OECD (2021), *Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92a11084-en>.

In a perspective of fairness for the common good, adhering to a social relativist view on the curriculum is a dead-end street. But exaggerated absolutism is equally problematic. Pretensions of universal truth are often disguised claims in the interest of the powerful. A balanced approach between social relativism and social absolutism in knowledge and skills is the best possible way forward towards fairness. It means recognizing that knowledge and skills can be partially valid to the extent they are socially constructed and that diversity of views needs to be guaranteed in a balanced and equitable manner. Learners need to be exposed to multiple viewpoints in order to learn to live and act in a diverse world.

In the same line of thinking, students also should be invited to think beyond perceived realities and learn to imagine alternative realities. It is in this sense that creativity as well as meta-learning are so important. Questioning the status-quo in knowledge and skills and developing the transformative capabilities to imagine and create better alternatives should be the aim of education. This also supposes to have acquired the ability to see one's own privileges and take initiative to help others to thrive.

Opportunities and agency

Inequality or any form of social injustice relate to individuals or social groups in two different ways. In one way, an individual or social group can be confronted with injustice and has to find appropriate and effective ways to react. This reactive mode can consist of many different behaviors, such as listening, trying to see alternative viewpoints, understanding, analyzing, etc. If done effectively, this creates opportunities for change. But the reactive mode has its limits. The other way is the more proactive way, which is characterized by critical reflection on one's own assumptions, open-mindedness, a deep understanding of the value of different views, and the development of a personal moral compass that takes into account the perspectives of others. The reactive mode is protective and oriented towards the preservation of one's own interest. The proactive mode is more oriented towards otherness. In both ways, the right knowledge, skills and competencies as well as meta-learning is critically important.

However, social justice is not something which is only done to oneself. Adequate and effective ways of addressing situations of inequity create opportunities for change. But change does not come automatically. It is here that the concept of agency becomes critically important. It requires agency to transform reality for the better. Opportunities must be seized. They often come with a small window, so adequate agency is required to benefit from them.

The concept of fairness embraces a strong notion of agency. Most people consider it to be unfair if someone is given many chances towards improvement, but does not take them. Learning to exercise agency therefore is important in a perspective of social justice as fairness. Especially the skills, competencies and subcompetencies in the 4D framework lend themselves very well to the development of agency.