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Liberal Democracy, Equal Educational Opportunity, and the Challenge of Multiculturalism

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Liberal political theory in general, as well as liberal educational theory in particular, has been largely silent on the challenge posed by multiculturalism. This lacuna results from the tendency to conflate "cultural" and "political" communities and to conceive of equality exclusively in terms of the latter. The result is that equality of educational opportunity is potentially rendered a sham for cultural minorities insofar as they are required to confront educational ideals and practices that are "culturally encumbered" in a way that reflects only the values and interests of the dominant social group. This article argues that "progressive" liberal educational theory can satisfactorily respond to the challenge posed by multicultural education when concepts such as "freedom" and "opportunity" are properly analyzed and when the demand to promote self-respect among citizens is taken seriously.

In 1954, the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision thrust the concept of equal educational opportunity center stage, and it has retained a central role in educational policy and research ever since. Despite its prominence, however—or because of it—the concept has become more and more elusive, more and more “a witches’ brew of equivocation and vagueness.”¹ Controversies have unfolded regarding both the general meaning of equal educational opportunity and its meaning in the context of specific policies.

Unfortunately, these two levels of analysis have rarely been joined. At the general level, the debate has been largely philosophical and has focused on issues such as how competing theories of justice entail competing conceptions of equal educational opportunity; whether the criterion of equality should be equality of access or equality of results; and whether the conflicts that putatively exist between the principle of equality and principles such as merit and family autonomy can be resolved.² Although these debates are useful for articulating and establishing general ideals, the guidance they can provide with respect to specific policies is quite limited.

At the specific level, the problem is just the reverse. Debates surrounding desegregation, tracking, bilingual education, education of the handicapped, and gender equity, for instance, typically fail to exhibit careful attention to the more fundamental political and philosophical assumptions and principles that implicitly underlie them. Instead, “equal educational opportunity” is employed as if its meaning were wholly transparent, and the debates proceed almost exclusively in terms of the legal reasoning of *Brown* and various applicable federal laws.³

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¹Paraphrase of J.R. Lucas, in Michael Levin, “Equality of Opportunity,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 31, no. 123 (1981): 110–125.

²Regarding conflicts among liberal principles, see especially James Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Regarding the controversy about access versus results as the criterion for equality of educational opportunity, see, for example, James Coleman, “The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity,” *Harvard Educational Review* 38, no. 1 (1968): 7–22; Nicholas Burbules and Ann Sherman, “Equal Educational Opportunity: Ideal or Ideology,” *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society* (1979): 105–114; Nicholas Burbules, Brian Lord, and Ann Sherman, “Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Education,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 4, no. 2 (1982): 169–187; Christopher Jencks, “Whom Must We Treat Equally for Educational Opportunity to Be Equal?” *Ethics* 98, no. 3 (1988): 518–533; and my “In Defense of Outcomes-Based Conceptions of Equal Educational Opportunity,” *Educational Theory* 39, no. 4 (1989): 317–336.

³These include Titles IV, VI, VII, and IX of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; the Bilingual Education Act of 1968; Sec. 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act; the 1974 Equal Educational Opportunities Act; and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

My primary task in this article will be to join these two levels of analysis with an eye toward providing a philosophically grounded examination of the concept of equal educational opportunity as it applies to multicultural education. In my view, because the concept of equal educational opportunity has “many faces,” its precise meaning and implications depend on the policy question at hand. Accordingly, various issues that raise questions regarding equality of educational opportunity are best examined one at a time by rendering a general philosophical framework sensitive to ethical principles and empirical considerations that are peculiar to such issues.⁴ Employing this method, I will proceed by first providing a general philosophical characterization of the concept of equal education opportunity and then sketching out the features of the particular “face” it assumes with respect to multicultural education.

A General Characterization of Equal Educational Opportunity

Questions about the aims of schooling and nature of the curriculum can only be answered from within a political theory that adumbrates the more general sociopolitical functions of public education. I will set aside broader questions of political theory and presuppose a liberal democratic theory⁵—the kind of political theory in which the principle of equal educational opportunity finds its home. My task in the remainder of this article will be to show how the liberal democratic tradition in general and the principle of equal educational opportunity in particular are robust enough to accommodate the peculiar challenge posed by multicultural education.

The principle of equal educational opportunity serves to justify demanding of public education something short of full equality: it demands only equality of opportunities, which it is then the responsibility of school children or their parents to act on. In this way, the concept of freedom is built into the concept of equal educational opportunity. As Onora O’Neil remarks, “The concept of equal educational opportunity cannot be rid of its libertarian birthmark, even after radical surgery.”⁶

At least since Coleman’s reflections,⁷ a controversy has existed regarding whether the criterion of equality of educational opportunity should be

⁴This method approximates “reflective equilibrium,” which draws on John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), and also Rawls’s “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 9 (1980): 515–572. Amy Gutmann acknowledges the influence of Rawls on the method of analysis she employs in *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁵In this context, by “liberal” I mean a general tradition in political theory. *Within* this tradition, there are liberals and conservatives in the more popular sense that would distinguish, for example, Ted Kennedy from William F. Buckley.

⁶Onora O’Neill, “Opportunities, Equalities, and Education,” *Theory and Decision* 7, no. 4 (1976): 275–295. I, for one, have attempted to perform such surgery. See my “In Defense of Outcomes-Based Conceptions of Equal Educational Opportunity.”

⁷Coleman, “The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity.”

equality of access or equality of results; and both criteria have proven problematic. Although guaranteeing equality of access is an advance over such practices as *de jure* segregation, it can be quite hollow if it merely amounts to removing formal barriers to the choices students and their parents might make, as *de facto* segregation aptly illustrates. On the other hand, guaranteeing equality of results seems to demand too much, both in terms of the capabilities of schools and in terms of how it threatens to block the freedom that students and their parents might otherwise wish to exercise.

This way of framing the problem seems to leave open two ways of responding: abandoning freedom and choice, on the grounds that they are ideological shams that merely serve to justify vast inequality, or abandoning equality of results, on the grounds that freedom is a cherished value that ought not to be sacrificed and that results cannot be equalized in any case. There is a third response, however, that merits careful examination: abandoning the quest for tidy solutions to clashes among fundamental principles, on the grounds that uncertainty, tentativeness, and tensions among political principles are permanent features of the project of democracy. I will briefly describe and defend this third approach, which, borrowing from Walzer, I shall call “interpretive.”⁸

The interpretive approach has two methodological features that exist in tension. First, social criticism is construed as immanent, which is to say it must gain a foothold in the vocabulary and accepted principles of a given political community if it is to have anything to say to the members of such a community and to have any chance of constructively influencing them. In this vein, Walzer encourages social critics “to interpret to one’s fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share” and warns against abstract philosophizing:

Justice and equality can conceivably be worked out as philosophical artifacts, but a just or an egalitarian society cannot be. If such a society isn’t already here—hidden, as it were, in our concepts and categories—we will never know it concretely or realize it in fact.⁹

Given the prominence of the principle of equal educational opportunity in the conversation about a just system of education, the immanent feature of the interpretive approach argues against abandoning it as mere ideological sham or as hopelessly muddled. Rather, the aim should be to devise philosophically defensible interpretations that have some chance of winning broad acceptance.

Working in the other direction, however, is the second feature of the interpretive approach: conceptual revisionism. This feature requires that

⁸Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), xiv.

political argument be progressive and dynamic, and not merely a lexicographical or historical account of what political principles mean or have meant. Instead, political argument must investigate shared principles and their implications, point to conflicts and inconsistencies, and respond to changing circumstances and knowledge. This feature of the interpretive approach argues in favor of revising the concept of equal educational opportunity as necessary so that it best accommodates competing principles and their implications—the principles of equality and freedom in particular—in light of current circumstances.

The approach just described has been adopted in one shape or another by various thinkers, most notably Gutmann.¹⁰ In particular, Gutmann begins with the assumption that equality of educational opportunity is a serviceable principle, then entertains and rejects several conceptions, and finally reaches the somewhat counterintuitive conclusion that equality of educational opportunity requires equalizing certain educational results (namely, those that go into the “democratic threshold”).¹¹ It will be sufficient for present purposes to set the intricacies of such arguments aside and to note three pivotal issues that any adequate interpretation of equality of educational opportunity must accommodate.

1. *Freedom and opportunities worth wanting.* The concept of freedom has different senses. The weakest sense requires only voluntariness and intent—a kind of freedom possessed even by young children. A stronger sense requires these features plus the ability to identify and weigh alternatives and their consequences and to choose the one judged best from among them—a kind of freedom attributed to normal adults.¹² It should require no argument to establish that these senses of freedom are not equally worth wanting. The first sense is simply too weak; in order to be free in even a minimal sense of being in control of one’s life, the second sense is required.

A necessary condition of freedom sufficiently worth wanting, then, is the ability to deliberate effectively, but this is clearly not a sufficient condition. For, to make use of the ability to deliberate effectively, an individual

¹⁰Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

¹¹Gutmann denies that she requires inputs or outcomes to be equalized. I think she is simply mistaken about this. For although she clearly denies that *all* educational outcomes must be equalized, in the end she nonetheless holds that *some* must be, namely, those that are required by the “democratic threshold.”

¹²A still stronger kind requires the features of the first two kinds plus the ability to reflect about one’s basic value commitments and way of life—a kind of freedom attributed to especially reflective adults. As it turns out, the second level is all that schools should be required (or permitted) to foster, because the third level entails having questioned one’s most fundamental commitments (e.g., one’s religious commitments) to qualify as free. Although this is what philosophical types strive for, it is inappropriate to demand this of the population in general. See, for example, Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

must also have the opportunity to exercise it. The opportunity to exercise it, in turn, requires (1) that information necessary for deliberation is available and (2) that social conditions do not impose a burden for acting on the results of deliberation that is disproportionate to the burden of other deliberators.

As an illustration of condition (1), consider Dennett's distinction between "bare" and "real" opportunities.¹⁵ He gives the example of a group of prisoners who have their prison doors unlocked by the prison guards while they are asleep and locked again before they awaken. According to Dennett, because the prisoners do not have the information they need to deliberate, they have only a "bare" opportunity to escape. As an illustration of condition (2), imagine a family that displays its disapproval of U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf and receives threats to its safety and property as a result. Here, although the requisite information for deliberation is available, acting on the results of deliberation entails a burden that is disproportionate to the burden of those who wish to express their support for military involvement. The principle of freedom of expression in this case is blunted, and therefore resembles only a "bare" opportunity.

The point is that neither the prisoners nor the dissenting family enjoy kinds of opportunities worth wanting, and similar examples are easy to find in education. For example, imagine a ninth-grade student who is being "counseled" into a vocational track and who, along with his or her parents, lacks knowledge about the consequences of such a decision. Also imagine that the family's cultural makeup leads it to be intimidated by and deferential to school authorities. First, the knowledge required for effective deliberation is missing. Second, the family is pressured by social conditions that are implicitly hostile to making a different decision. In general, something more is required in the name of equalizing educational opportunity than equalizing these kinds of "bare" opportunities.

2. *Equal educational opportunity as enabling.* Education is, no doubt, valuable in its own right, but it also is *enabling* in the sense that it serves (however imperfectly) as the gateway for obtaining other societal goods, such as desirable employment, adequate income, and political power. For this reason, equal *educational* opportunity is related to equal opportunity more generally because it serves as an important link in what might be termed an opportunity chain. Accordingly, the strength of the educational link determines the overall strength of the opportunity chain in the sense that the array of opportunities open to an individual is (again, imperfectly) determined by the quality of his or her education.

The opportunity chain is complicated by the fact that educational opportunity itself has this same chain-like character. That is, taking advantage

¹⁵Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1984).

of early educational opportunities is related to having later ones. For example, children who fail to learn to read early on have their curricular options progressively narrowed as they proceed through the K–12 curriculum, as compared to their counterparts who do learn to read. Consequently, their educational opportunities will be likewise narrowed such that they will be incapable of enjoying equality of educational opportunity and equality of opportunity more generally as they approach adulthood.

Several lessons may be drawn from this observation. First, what at one point in time serves as an educational end (like reading) later serves as a means to other ends (like reading textbooks for content). Thus, certain educational ends (or results) must be accomplished in order for certain other educational opportunities to exist. Second, and as a consequence of this, the concept of equal educational opportunity needs to be conceived in terms of *educational careers* rather than specific episodes within such careers, lest educational opportunities become merely “bare” and not worth wanting.

Working out the details of this claim outstrips the aims of this article.¹⁴ By way of a brief illustration, however, consider how far a free adult literacy program goes toward equalizing educational opportunity. The argument that such programs promote equality of educational opportunity gains its force by isolating particular choices from the broader social scheme that determines the scope and kinds of opportunities that individuals possess, and by glossing over the fact that adults who are free to undertake or pass up literacy programs suffer from a restricted range of opportunities. It seems quite reasonable to suggest that the need for adult literacy programs signals a failure of earlier education, a failure to produce earlier results required to expand the scope of adult opportunity—educational and otherwise. It also seems quite reasonable to suggest that to be put in the position of being an adult having the choice of whether to become literate hardly seems a choice worth wanting. (Compare a compensatory program like having the choice of whether to receive free medical treatment for work-related lung disease.)

3. *Equal educational opportunity and children.* Children raise a very special problem with respect to the concept of equal educational opportunity: Because children (especially young ones) lack the capacity for effective deliberation, this capacity must be instilled in them before questions regarding the other two requisites for freedom and opportunity worth wanting—adequate information and social support—even arise. Up to a certain age, then, children cannot possess freedom and opportunities genuinely worth wanting. Thus, it is up to someone else—schools, parents, or both—to act on children’s behalf to ensure that they one day are able to possess

¹⁴I am currently developing a more elaborate analysis and defense of this point in a paper tentatively entitled “Equal Educational Opportunity as Educational Opportunities Worth Wanting.”

these things. In other words, paternalistic interference in children's freedom (in the weak sense) is justified in the name of preparing them to enjoy freedom (in the strong sense) later on in life.

Invoking paternalistic interference in the name of children's best educational interests raises a number of potential (as well as real) conflicts—between schools and children, parents and children, parents and parents, schools and parents, and so forth—insofar as what educational opportunities are indeed worth wanting often can be (and is) in dispute. This is a large and complex issue, and much of it lies beyond the scope of this article. In my subsequent discussion, I will limit myself to the conflict between schools and culture, largely ignoring the other kinds of conflicts that can arise.

In summary, when applied to children,¹⁵ a defensible interpretation of the principle of equal educational opportunity is required to take into account the observations that (1) education should be enabling, (2) the concept of equal educational opportunity is best applied to educational careers rather than isolated incidents, and (3) children are not in a position to exercise freedom and opportunities (worth wanting) until they gain the capacity to deliberate effectively.

Equal Educational Opportunity and Multicultural Education

Will Kymlicka has observed that liberal democratic theory is surprisingly silent on issues of multiculturalism.¹⁶ He attributes this silence to a tendency among liberal theorists to ignore "cultural" communities in favor of the "political" community and to conceive of equality exclusively in terms of the latter. The upshot is that equality is potentially rendered a sham for cultural minorities. For, according to Kymlicka,

It only makes sense to invite people to participate in politics (or for people to accept that invitation) if they will be treated as equals. . . . And that is incompatible with defining people in terms of roles they did not shape or endorse.¹⁷

Kymlicka contends that although the failure to grapple with multiculturalism is a significant lacuna in liberal theory, it is not a fatal flaw. In his

¹⁵I include the conditional because some thinkers believe that children's lack of autonomy and the associated authority to represent their own interests requires a different moral perspective and vocabulary. Onora O'Neill, "Children's Rights and Children's Lives," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 445–463, for example, is willing to (proposes to) forgo rights language in the case of children. A similar move could be made with respect to equal educational opportunity, namely, it could be judged as having no defensible application to children. For a response, see my "In Defense of Outcomes-Based Conceptions of Equal Education Opportunity."

¹⁶Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 89.

view, respect for cultural identity is implicit in liberal theorists' (particularly John Rawls's¹⁸) commitment to self-respect as a "primary good" that must be protected by liberal democratic regimes. It is simply incumbent upon liberal democrats to work out this implicit commitment.

Liberal educational theory, like liberal political theory more generally, has also been largely silent on the problem of multiculturalism—and for a closely related reason. Liberal educational theorists have largely confined themselves to the question of what kind of individual is suitable to take his or her place as a citizen in a liberal democratic political community, and the answer has been what I shall refer to as the *liberal educational ideal*. This ideal may be identified with the goal of engendering in students a capacity for the kind of effective deliberation described earlier as well as a commitment to liberal principles such as nondiscrimination, nonrepression, and tolerance.¹⁹ Reaching this goal results in adult citizens who can evaluate and chose their own life plans and effectively participate in democratic politics.

The liberal educational ideal is intimately related to the principle of equal educational opportunity because it supplies the answer to the question of what educational opportunities are indeed worth wanting and thus what educational opportunities (or results²⁰) are to be equalized among school children. Consequently, the liberal ideal is *culturally encumbered*, which is to say that it rules certain goals for education *in*, such as effective deliberation, and certain others *out*, such as indoctrinating children with a particular religious faith. In the context of multicultural education, the liberal educational ideal thus faces measuring up to a challenge that may be characterized in terms of a slightly modified version of Kymlicka's earlier observation:

It only makes sense to invite people to participate in *schooling* (or for people to accept that invitation) if they will be treated as equals. And that is incompatible with defining people in terms of roles they did not shape or endorse.

This challenge to the liberal educational ideal has both political and empirical dimensions. The political dimension is that not all groups endorse this ideal as a central aim of education. The Amish, to take a well-worn example, reject the liberal educational ideal in favor of educating their children for work, piety, and a strong sense of community. Christian fundamentalists reject the liberal educational ideal as exemplifying "secular humanism." To take a less extreme example, political conservatives seek to place traditional

¹⁸Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

¹⁹Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.

²⁰See note 2.

values and associated political and economic practices beyond criticism in such a way as to circumscribe significantly the liberal educational ideal.

The empirical dimension of the challenge is that psychological and social barriers exist to educational opportunities even when explicitly articulated political ones do not. Minorities are often stigmatized in ways that can destroy self-respect and motivation or result in “disidentifying” with schooling.²¹ Related to the latter, so-called “caste-like” minorities exhibit “oppositional cultures” that render them ill-equipped to, indeed resistant to, take advantage of the present opportunity structure,²² even when they do not explicitly reject the liberal educational ideal.

Some no doubt think these kinds of problems are fatal for the liberal educational ideal, as well as for the allied principle of equal educational opportunity. Although the problems are indeed serious—and are problems that have received too little attention—the liberal educational ideal and the principle of equal educational opportunity are, if suitably interpreted, capable of accommodating these problems. Showing how will be my task in the remainder of this article. I will begin by, first, distinguishing conservative and progressive positions within the liberal tradition, next, refining the liberal educational ideal, and, finally, examining equality of educational opportunity with respect to three kinds of cultural minorities.

E.D. Hirsch²³ is a good representative of a conservative in the liberal democratic tradition vis-a-vis multicultural education. He makes free use of the principles and rhetoric of the liberal democratic tradition, contending that it is only by acquiring cultural literacy that the “disadvantaged (primarily African Americans and Hispanics) can participate in democracy and enjoy equality of opportunity. Hirsch’s solution to multiculturalism is thus to eliminate it by using public education to promote a uniform cultural literacy. According to Hirsch, this not only benefits the disadvantaged, but it is also required to preserve democracy.

Hirsch is wrong on both counts because his proposal is both naive and a betrayal of the liberal democratic tradition. It is naive to think that it would benefit people to strip them of their identities and that they would so easily abandon something so important to them; it is a betrayal of the liberal democratic tradition to think that something so important to people’s identities should be eliminated rather than accommodated.

Contra Hirsch, there is nothing in the liberal democratic tradition that compels it to strip individuals of their cultural heritage in service of the

²¹Claude M. Steele, “Race and the Schooling of Black Americans,” *Atlantic Monthly* 269, No. 4 (1992): 68–78.

²²John Ogbu and Maria Matute-Bianchi, “Understanding Sociocultural Factors: Knowledge, Identity, and School Adjustment,” in *Beyond Language: Social and Cultural Factors in Schooling Language Minority Students* (Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, 1986), 73–142.

²³E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

political-economic community. Thinkers in the tradition have long appreciated the sociostructural nature of liberal concepts such as freedom and opportunity. For instance, Dewey observes regarding freedom,

All conduct is *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social. . . freedom is found in the interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something. . . .²⁴

Regarding opportunities, Dewey observes,

The resistance and the cooperation of others is the central fact in the furtherance or failure of our schemes. Connections with our fellows furnish both the opportunities for action and the instrumentalities by which we take advantage of opportunity.²⁵

By incorporating sociocultural factors into the interpretation of freedom and opportunity, thinkers like Dewey, progressives in the liberal democratic tradition in general, hold a view that is potentially much more responsive to cultural differences than a conservative view such as Hirsch's. However, by endorsing the promotion of the culturally encumbered liberal educational ideal through public education in order to create citizens suited for a liberal democratic political-economic community, progressives in the liberal democratic tradition appear in the end to be subject to the same criticism that may be leveled against conservatives: they dismiss cultural communities in favor of the political-economic community and, in the process, promote a kind of public education in which cultural minorities are required to give up their cultural identities if they are to succeed.

There is no tidy, completely unproblematic response to this objection. However, it has more or less force depending on (1) how fully specified, how culturally encumbered, the liberal educational ideal is, and (2) what cultural minorities are at issue.

The liberal educational ideal should be *moderately* specified—specified just enough so that its realization enables peoples to control their own lives, and no more. When specified to this degree, it may, again, be identified with the capacity for effective deliberation in conjunction with a commitment to principles such as nondiscrimination, nonrepression, and tolerance. By contrast to this conception, Hirsch's conception is too specific in a conservative direction because it too heavily incorporates a particular cultural heritage.

Can this moderate conception of the liberal educational ideal—this conception of what educational opportunities are sufficiently worth wanting

²⁴John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Random House, 1930), 10.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 317.

to be equalized among school children—promote and be consistent with equality of educational opportunity vis-a-vis cultural minorities? To answer this question, I will consider, in turn, three kinds of cultural minorities²⁶ identified by Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi: autonomous, immigrant, and caste-like.²⁷

An example of an autonomous minority is the Amish. As noted before, the Amish reject the liberal educational ideal as a threat to their way of life. In response, the Amish are simply permitted to establish their own, largely unregulated system of formal education. As a practical matter, they are too small in number to pose a significant threat to a liberal democratic society. Furthermore, they are separatists who neither appeal to the state to protect community members' welfare nor attempt to influence public education. Regarding equality of educational opportunity, permitting the Amish to establish their own schools is tantamount to allowing them to determine their own view of educational opportunities worth wanting in deference to their cultural (particularly religious) sensibilities and to abandoning the quest for equality of opportunity.

Amish children are provided an equal educational opportunity only in the attenuated sense that they are provided with the opportunity to attend public schools, which their parents turn down on their behalf. On the other hand, the liberal educational ideal is not a threat insofar as the Amish do not have to give up their cultural community and identity to become a part of the political-economic community, for they simply do not participate significantly in the latter. Thus, as a result of observing the principle of equality at one level, namely, equal respect for cultural identity, Amish children forgo equality at another level, namely, equality of educational opportunity.

An example of an immigrant minority is the American Chinese. According to Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, groups like the American Chinese, who enter the U.S. voluntarily, exhibit an "alternation model of behavior," whereby they neither are assimilated into nor reject the mainstream U.S. culture reflected in the public schools.²⁸ Instead, they move back and forth between cultures as circumstances dictate. Given this response, groups such as the American Chinese also seem to have nothing to fear from the liberal educational ideal. Indeed, in one important situation in which they were excluded from enjoying the fruits of U.S. public education, they advanced

²⁶Throughout I will be speaking in terms of aggregate tendencies. I do not mean to suggest (nor do the authors I cite) that important differences do not exist within the categories of minorities I have chosen. Indeed, educators should in general avoid assuming that individuals can be described as thus and so simply because they fall into one or another general cultural category.

²⁷Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, "Understanding Sociocultural Factors."

²⁸*Ibid.*

their claims for equality of educational opportunity in the U.S. legal system in the celebrated *Lau v. Nichols*²⁹ case.

Caste-like minorities include groups like African Americans and Mexican Americans. Unlike autonomous minorities such as the Amish, they participate significantly in (and are subjugated by) the dominant political-economic community; unlike immigrant minorities such as the American Chinese, they became a part of the political-economic community involuntarily. Because of their peculiar circumstances, rather than adopting the separatist strategy of the Amish or the alternation strategy of the American Chinese, caste-like minorities have adopted an oppositional strategy to preserve their cultural identity.³⁰ Such a strategy typically entails poor school performance because what is involved in doing well in school requires accepting the values of the dominant culture to which caste-like minorities are in opposition.

Of the three kinds of minorities considered, caste-like minorities pose the greatest problems for the principle of equal educational opportunity. Unlike the Amish, they attend public schools and do not eschew the demand for equality of educational opportunity; unlike the American Chinese, they fare poorly there and are unwilling or unable to adopt the predominant norms. The crucial question for the present discussion is whether this state of affairs is the inevitable outcome of endorsing the liberal educational ideal as a central aim of education and endorsing the principle of equal educational opportunity as the sine qua non of a just educational system.

There are good reasons to believe that the answer to these questions should be "no." Caste-like minorities seem to be reacting more against false promises and having their identities defined for them than against the principle of equality of educational opportunity and the liberal educational ideal. Indeed, they have employed the concept of equality of educational opportunity as a basic principle in the course of pursuing their grievances within the U.S. legal system, *Brown* being the most celebrated example. Furthermore, oppositional behavior is most likely wrought by despair and frustration and is probably as much a reaction against being relegated to a lowly position in the class structure as to preserving cultural identity; it is not a deliberate strategy and is often self-defeating.³¹ It results from the perception (often accurate) that unless one is a member of the dominant culture, doing well in school will not result in the benefits that are promised, and from the perception (again, often accurate) that one must allow one's behavior and identity to be defined in terms of the dominant culture (e.g., by "acting white") in order to do well.

²⁹*Lau v. Nichols* 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

³⁰Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), argues for the same kind of oppositional culture with respect to working class boys in England.

³¹Consider Willis's "lads" in *Learning to Labor*.

Although we have a clear obligation to respect the cultural identities of autonomous and immigrant minorities—and could do much better in this regard—the obligation is especially demanding for caste-like minorities because of the peculiar way they became a part of and the peculiar roles they occupy within the political-economic community. Furthermore, because of their peculiar history and position within the political-economic community, caste-like minorities are the most often criticized by certain quarters for failing to take advantage of the *opportunities* that are offered to them.³² But requiring people to sacrifice their identities in order to succeed is not a kind of opportunity worth wanting; nor is working hard and doing well pursuing the false promise that education is enabling. The conclusion that I reach from the above observations is that the principle of equal educational opportunity is being betrayed vis-a-vis caste-like minorities, not that it is bankrupt.

Conclusion

I set out in this article to show that the liberal tradition with its central emphasis on equality is robust enough to accommodate the challenge posed by multicultural education. Given that the principle of equal educational opportunity is indeed not bankrupt, but is being betrayed, I will conclude by offering a few brief suggestions regarding how it might be better realized.

In general, institutional and classroom practices need to incorporate a much greater appreciation of the need for genuine participation and self-definition. At the institutional level, the participation of parents of cultural minority students should be enlisted and should be supported when it occurs. At the classroom level, teaching methods such as cooperative learning strategies should become commonplace, and teachers should develop a much greater sensitivity to cultural (including linguistic) differences and how to deal with them. These are quite familiar suggestions and I shall leave their further specification to empirical investigations.³³

What needs to be emphasized here is that, although the classroom and institutional practices I suggest are quite familiar, my underlying justification for advocating them probably is not (and would likely influence the way in which they are carried out). Specifically, I have in mind employing these practices so as to truly negotiate the curriculum. For example, I do not advocate cooperative learning as but another educational technology for achieving the same old educational objectives. Instead, cooperative learning should be practiced so as to exemplify and provide practice in democratic give-and-take. And I do not advocate parental participation so that schools may garner support at home for carrying out their own present

³²Patrick McQuillan, *Disney Land in the Jungle: The Myth of Educational Opportunity in an Urban American High School* (forthcoming doctoral dissertation, Brown University).

³³See, for example, *Beyond Language*.

agenda. Although the precise form such participation should take is an open question, two things are clear. First, students whose parents do not participate should not be penalized, for there are a variety of reasons that might account for parental non-participation, and children should not be held responsible for their parent's behavior in any case. Second, schools of choice based on market principles are a very bad idea. Again, children should not be held hostage by their parents' judgment and behavior. In addition, the market too heavily favors those who possess the capital—economic as well as cultural—and it dodges the democratic process of deliberation and negotiation about what kind of individuals and society public education should foster by supplanting it with “voting with one's feet” on the basis of unexamined and self-serving “preferences.”³⁴

I balk at choice and separatist schemes in general because I believe it would be vastly better to create a public school system in which such schemes were not necessary. However, I concede that certain non-market based schemes might be justified if warranted by circumstances. In particular, where groups are harmed by participation in culturally heterogenous schools that are dominated by mainstream culture, it might be acceptable for them to separate themselves voluntarily so as to protect their cultural identities and to preserve a sense of purpose, belonging, and self-respect. For example, schools exclusively for black males might be justified on these grounds. (Note that such schools are not simply the flip side of the practice of *de jure* segregation that was struck down in *Brown* insofar as the latter was judged harmful because it segregated blacks involuntarily and implied racial inferiority.)

The principle of equal educational opportunity can only be realized for cultural minorities by rendering educational opportunities worth wanting, and rendering educational opportunities worth wanting requires that minorities not be required to give up their identities in order to enjoy them. For minorities who can live with the liberal educational ideal—and I think most can—some “cultural elbow room”³⁵ must be provided within the area it circumscribes. To reiterate my earlier paraphrase of Kymlicka:

It only makes sense to invite people to participate in *schooling* (or for people to accept that invitation) if they will be treated as equals. And that is incompatible with defining people in terms of roles they did not shape or endorse.

Rendering educational opportunities worth wanting also requires ensuring that success in school is truly enabling. That the development of

³⁴I have in mind particularly the arguments by John Chubb and Terry Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990). The response is one of the several provided by Gutmann in *Democratic Education*.

³⁵The concept of “elbow room” is borrowed from Dennett's book by that name.

oppositional cultures and the failure of education to be enabling is determined by the political-economic order outside of schooling is cause for extreme pessimism, pessimism that is exacerbated by the frequent observation that schooling simply reflects and reproduces the political-economic order. Any proposals for educational reform that ignore these observations are doomed to either simply fail or further ensconce the status quo.

On the other hand, calling attention to the influence of broad political-economic influences is a two-edged sword. Too often, pointing to such influences serves to justify doing nothing, on the grounds that broad political-economic influences are beyond the power and purview of educators qua educators and that schools should stay out of politics. But, schools are inherently political, if only by default, and educators can and should take the political lead in reshaping public schooling so that it becomes an important locus for progressive social change that functions to prepare *all* children to participate in what Gutmann calls "conscious social reproduction."³⁶ Public schooling can be reshaped in this way, however, only if educators promote what the principle of equal educational opportunity requires by, first, construing it in a way that is consistent with philosophically defensible interpretations of the concepts of freedom and opportunity and, second, accommodating what twentieth-century social science has revealed regarding the influences that shape opportunity structures.

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³⁶Gutmann, *Democratic Education*.