Chapter 3

School Equity as a Matter of Justice*

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Educational systems present a considerable number of inequalities. Certain students receive better grades than others, or receive more attention from their teachers, or have more effective teachers, or have shorter school careers, or leave with or without a trade that enables them to find work, etc. Certain categories of students are more successful than others (for example, high-socioeconomic status (SES) children or girls in language tests).

It is evident from this list that certain inequalities may be acceptable, while others are not. Why do unacceptable inequalities exist? Perhaps the causes that produce them are very powerful: Sociologists have put a certain number in evidence (see Benadusi’s synthesis, Chapter 1). But if the causes are so powerful that these inequalities must be considered unavoidable, can one still speak of them as unacceptable?

We prefer to believe that, powerful as the forces that cause inequalities may be, they could be changed by collective action. But then a conclusion is imposed: The inequalities that we observe exist because most citizens tolerate them because they find them just, or rather—an important distinction—because they are not so sure that they are unjust enough to refuse to tolerate them.

One can imagine that it is difficult to determine the inequity of this or that educational inequality. If we find it unjust that working-class children are more likely to receive technical than general education, perhaps it is the effect of petit-bourgeois ethnocentrism that causes us to look down on the vocational world. If girls surpass boys in schools while teachers give them less attention, which ones are being treated unjustly? The idea that all should receive “equivalent schooling,” which was recently introduced in the Swedish education act (see Wildt-Persson and Rosengren, Chapter 13), holds that equality with respect to the learning process does not require that educations be “identical” but of “equal worth,” which means something like having “equal effects.” But which kind of effects are relevant?

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More systematically, one can justify—or condemn—an inequality between two groups or individuals according to:

- their initial endowments (a sampling of American adults found it fair that disadvantaged children receive more educational resources than others (Hochschild, cited by Kellerhals et al., 1988);
- the fairness of the process that produces the inequality (no one contests that some can pass and others fail a fair exam);
- the effects of the inequality (one accepts that high achievers stay longer in school and therefore receive more public money for their education because of the expected benefit to society; e.g., no one has an interest in producing bad doctors); and
- the side effects of strategies meant to reduce this inequality (they can consume resources that could have been used to address other priorities; they could have negative effects on other things that are valued by society, such as liberty (Gutman, 1999).

The goal of the “theories of justice” is to help us decide which equalities are required by fairness. Indeed, all modern theories of justice rest on the idea that all individuals are equal. But from this assertion of equality, the problem becomes, according to a formula put forward by economist Amartya Sen (1992), “equality of what?” Between libertarians, for whom relevant equality is one of “property rights” and Marx’s “each according to his needs,” there are degrees of difference.

According to Fleurbaey (1996), a theory of justice is necessarily composed of:

- an ideal; that is to say, the description of a just state, resting on the application of one or several principles of justice;
- a system of arguments explaining why this state is just; and
- a field of application.

These theories evidently do not bear directly on education. They bear on more fundamental goods. Sometimes, the author himself indicates the consequences of his theory for education; sometimes, this must be inferred from what he says about the distribution of the fundamental good that he has chosen as a goal. This inference can take two forms:

On the one hand, the education system is not an end in itself; its function is to introduce young people into the contemporary world. One can thus define educational equity as the quality of an educational system that favors as much as possible what this underlying theory describes as a just society (the “ideal”).

But the child or adolescent is not just “a future adult;” he/she is not just a means to an end, which would be his or her state as an adult. The child is also a person, to whom education has to be distributed with equity. Educational equity thus requires also that some rules that hold for adults hold also for young people.