Educational Equity: A Democratic Principle at a Crossroads

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This is an examination of the criteria for determining if equitable education occurs through desegregation and the effects of other educational programs on these criteria—access, participation, and outcomes. Equity in access may not provide equity in either participation or outcome. Other federal educational policies may interfere with the achievement of equitable education by all three criteria.

A substantial part of the history of federal involvement in education is represented by a series of policies designed to advance the principle of educational equity. These policies reflect a governmental response to the belief that all citizens regardless of sex, race, creed, or economic circumstance should be guaranteed equality of education. While few would deny the societal goal of educational equity, there is considerable disagreement as to the appropriate ways and means of advancing this principle.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to consider the alternative standards that have been or are now used to judge whether the equity principle is being advanced, and (2) to apply the various standards to a select group of federal programs to determine whether each is advancing the equity principle.

Although the concept of equality in education has long been a widely held value in American society, it was not specifically expressed in federal policy until the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision. The basis for that decision was the constitutional phrase guaranteeing equal protection of the laws. The Court held that segregated schools are unequal and that such schools could not provide equal protection of the laws. The equal protection clause must be translated into the principle of equity in education. The Court in 1954 did not specify the criteria by which equitable education could be determined. Subsequent court decisions have added somewhat to the definition, but some examination is appropriate of the various standards that have been and are being applied.

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY STANDARDS

An examination of past and current federal policies and programs suggests that three standards have been or are now being used to judge whether educational programs at the local level are in fact advancing the principle of educational equity. The three standards are access, participation, and outcomes.
One purpose for discussion of these standards is to consider whether the three standards are compatible with one another and whether each is implicitly or explicitly promoting a common definition of educational equality.

Access Standard

Any consideration of federal efforts to advance the principle of equal education must consider school desegregation as a major policy. Desegregation legislation and desegregation court cases clearly rest on the standard of equal access to educational facilities and services. This body of law and programs clearly states that segregated schools deny equal protection of the laws to minority students. Few advocates of the principle of educational equity would deny that equal access to facilities and services is a necessary condition for advancing the principle. However, for many, equal access is both the necessary and sufficient condition. Those who hold to this standard are satisfied that the principle is fully operational when barriers to access have been removed. Such individuals are reluctant to look inside institutions and question whether the students, especially minority students, are receiving equal treatment as they matriculate through the educational system.

The complexity of desegregating large school systems and the tremendous resistance to such desegregation efforts make it reasonable for many to feel that the equity principle is operational when equal access is achieved. For some, however, the access standard is not adequate, and they believe we need to move to a second standard—equal participation—to ensure that the principle is being fully implemented.

Participation Standard

The equity principle when viewed through the standard of participation calls for local programs that promote and even guarantee equal participation to all. Such practices as grouping and tracking, school suspensions, and involvement in curricular and extracurricular activities become important evidence for the participation standard.

The sources of resistance associated with the access standard tend to be external to the schools (e.g., community opposition to busing). The sources of resistance associated with the participation standard tend to be located within the schools and among the professional educators. For example, many professional educators advocate ability grouping (even though it produces unequal minority/nonminority participation) because they believe that it allows teachers to better meet the needs of individual students and presumably fit them for different stations in life. When confronted with the discriminatory nature and effect of such practices, educators cling to them because they believe that it is inappropriate to provide the same education to persons who differ in “abilities,” interests, and future status in society.

Educators advocating the equal participation standard may find themselves on the “horns of a dilemma.” On the one hand, they believe in equality