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Against Selection Revisited

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The main idea

The issue of talent-based selection concerns me personally, because I work – as a Swiss Gymnasium teacher – in a selective school system, and I am even part of the group in my canton that prepares the entrance exams for the Gymnasium. Also, I participate in the meetings where ultimate decisions are taken as to who is admitted to our school and who is not.

So, I take part in selective practices, although I am – as the title of my paper says – *against selection*. From the inside of these practices, it does not feel like we’re committing an injustice (in fact I often feel that we are quite generous in our decision-making), however, it is a fact that students from socially well-off families are overrepresented in our school.

In my paper, I start by outlining two different ways of connecting the issues of talent and distributive justice. First, talent can have a *justificatory* function in theories of educational justice, second, practices of talent ascription can have a *causal* role in the distribution of educational prospects.

The justificatory function of talent: Reference to individuals’ talent (or differences of talent among individuals) might be used to justify educational or social inequalities. It might be argued that those who are more talented should receive a better education or more educational resources. It might also be claimed that social status or income should be distributed on the basis of talent. This view is traditionally tied to the notion of a ‘meritocratic’ system. Here, then, talent has a normative role in the context on a theory of (educational) justice. It should also be noted that ascribing a justificatory role to talents presupposes some understanding of what talent ‘is’ and how it comes about.

The causal role of practices of talent ascription: Here, we do not address the issue of normative justification, but the question of what effects these practices have. Instead of discussing what talent is, we ask how talent is ascribed to individuals. We refer, then, to wide-spread social practices where a) an individual’s talent in a particular sphere is assessed, and/or b) individuals are characterized as more or less talented compared to others.

Against this background, the paper proceeds with the *empirical claim* that practices of talent ascription – especially when combined with selective settings – work out to the disadvantage of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the literature on educational sociology (going back to Boudon), primary and secondary effects of social background are distinguished. For one, students from different backgrounds in fact differ in their ability, at certain points of their educational biography. In the case of my own school, then, where most students join after 8th grade, it can be expected that those who come from well-off families are more likely to pass the exam – because they are in fact more competent. In addition, however, it has been observed, that equally competent (or ‘talented’) students from different backgrounds fare differently in selective settings: So, even if a socially disadvantaged student has the same level of achievement as a privileged student, he is less likely to be selected for an attractive school type (such as the Gymnasium). These are the secondary effects of social background.

A further question is how these effects might be *explained*: The explanation for the primary effects will lie – among other things – in differences of family upbringing. For instance, well-educated parents tend to read a lot to their children. The secondary effects might be explained in multiple ways – in one way or another, these explanations might involve biases or stereotypes on the side of teachers, parents, or the students themselves. These biases can refer to a) actual performance, to b) competence (or ability), or c) to the talents and potentials. It might be assumed that stereotypical views are especially powerful when talent is ascribed: Talent is not directly accessible, in identifying talent, we must rely on actual performances. This leaves room for epistemic errors, and also invites stereotypical assumptions.

These biases also come into play in non-selective settings, as soon as talent or competence is ascribed, but they are especially consequential in selective systems, where educational prospects are distributed on the basis of practices of talent ascription: These practices, then, can be said to exacerbate educational inequalities due to social background.

The further question is, then, whether this is unjust. Here, normative considerations must come into play: As I outline in my paper, liberal accounts of educational justice overlap in the view that *social inequalities in education should not be exacerbated*. My main argument proceeds from this minimal consensus: Selective settings should be avoided because they tend to lead to distributive injustice in education in that they play out to the disadvantage of those who are already socially disadvantaged.

The normative issue – the justificatory function of talent

As I see it, my main argument is on the one hand not normatively neutral – as it relies on a minimal view of educational justice. On the other hand,

it is independent of many of the controversies in the theory of (educational) justice.

It might be asked whether the talented should be *educationally privileged* (compared to other groups), that is, whether they should have a better education, more resources or attention provided to them, or whether it is just that they reach a higher level of achievement than others. (The term ‘educationally privileged’ can have different meanings, depending on whether we speak of resources or outcomes.)

The further question is whether (possible) educational privileges are grounded in a direct moral claim that arises from being talented.

In the Rawlsian tradition – which dominates the current debates in the field – being talented does not go along with a direct claim for educational or social advantages. Consider Brighouse and Swift’s meritocratic conception (which resonates Rawls’s principle of fair equality of opportunity): According to this conception, persons’ educational prospects should only be dependent on their talent and effort, not their social background. This means that persons with equal talent – who show the same kind of effort – should be treated equally. It does *not* mean that the more talented should have better prospects.

The reasons for this – within the Rawlsian framework – is that we are neither responsible for our family background nor for our natural endowment (or talent). Therefore, neither of these factors can (directly) be used to justify educational or social inequalities. Rawls complements the principle of fair equality of opportunity with the difference principle which states that social and economic inequalities should be arranged in a way that benefits those worst off. According to this principle, too, talent is not tied to a direct moral claim. However, the difference principle leaves some room for privileging the talented – this seems justified if it ultimately works out to the advantage of the worst-off (or the least talented). In this picture, then, talents are not seen as private property, but as a ‘common asset’ that should be used for the good of the disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, the Rawlsian approach is focused on reducing (or even neutralizing) social disadvantage in education. At a minimum, these disadvantages should not be *exacerbated*. As I said, my own argument relies on this minimal idea.

At the same time, it is neutral with regard to the question of whether the talented should be privileged, or whether being talented raises a direct claim for educational privileges. Even if talent brings with it a moral claim, the argument still stands: Selective arrangements are morally problematic because they are permeated with biases.

What talent is – static and dynamic conceptions

My main idea is also – as I see it – independent of the question of what talent ‘is’, or how it comes about. Talent is usually seen as a property inherent to individuals – a property that determines how fast or easily someone can learn, or what level she can achieve. Talent is traditionally

considered as a biological property, but there is also a long tradition according to which talent is (at least in part) socially brought about. According to this latter view, talents are developed in (advantageous) environments of upbringing. To the extent that social factors play a role in the development of talent, being talented cannot be considered as a stable or fixed property of individuals, but must be seen as evolving in time.

In the German tradition, a specifically pedagogical notion of talent was developed: Heinrich Roth has contrasted the traditional ‘static’ conception of talent or giftedness (in German: *Begabung*) with his own ‘dynamic’ conception. This distinction is taken up by Kirsten Meyer (2023, p. 35 in this volume). Roth goes on to say that instead of identifying those who ‘are gifted’, educators should aim at ‘gifting them’ (*begaben* is not a common verb in German, I am not completely sure how ‘to gift’ works as a verb in English). Roth’s account is still very popular in German educational thought, and it is typically used to criticize the selective school system: Instead of selecting students on the basis of some notion of static *Begabung*, we should promote the development of *Begabung* in all students, in a comprehensive school setting (traditionally called *Gesamtschule*).

Here, then, the argument against selection is based on a controversial conception of talent. It also relies on the (empirical) assumption that in selective settings, students cannot be appropriately ‘gifted’. My main point is, then, that my own argument against selection is much less demanding than this line of thought.

Apart from that, I would like to bring up two points that tend to be overlooked by the defenders of dynamic or social conceptions of talent: My first point is that the notion of biological, innate talent might have a critical function, in educational thought – and might itself have a role in the critique of selective systems. The idea is, here, that these systems primarily select on the basis of social factors (not ‘talent’). In other words: The selective mechanisms are such that the ‘wrong’ students are chosen for the Gymnasium. The static conception of talent allows us to say to high-achieving students from privileged backgrounds: You might perform well – but are you talented?

This does not seem possible (or not in the same way), if talents are seen as dynamic: Then, we might have to assume that the socially privileged are indeed ‘more talented’ – e.g., when they enter primary school. The defender of the dynamic view might respond that this does not matter – as it is still possible to try to gift everyone. However, the attempt to gift students must take their individual learning conditions into account, among them their talents. Assuming that talent is predominantly social might hinder teachers from taking a closer look at students’ ‘real’ talents that might not be easily visible.

The second point is that the idea of dynamic talents might lead to an overly demanding conception of *pedagogical obligation* – both with regard

to the family and the school. If everybody can be gifted in the same way, it is unclear where the limits of pedagogical obligation are.

There is a related psychological point: The dynamic view puts pressure on parents and teachers to 'do more'. For instance, parents whose children do not perform well when they enter school must ask themselves whether they have gifted their children enough.

These two points indicate that we should not automatically assume that the dynamic or social conception of talent is preferable in the context of educational justice. The classical (German) case against selection might be more problematic than it might seem. There is reason, then, to make the point against selection independent of the question of what talent is and turn to practices of talent ascription instead.