# Equality of Opportunity and the Education of the Talented

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*Abstract: It is contested whether talented students should receive special educational attention. Opposition to programs of talented or gifted education is often motivated by the notion that these programs undermine equality of opportunity. This chapter addresses the issue of education for the talented from the perspective of (educational) justice. After discussing the notion of talent, different distributive principles are laid out, so as to examine whether, or to what extent, they legitimize the special promotion of talented students. The discussion proceeds from a meritocratic conception to luck-egalitarian principles, and ideas related to Rawls's difference principle. It then turns to the demand for strict equality of educational outcomes, and principles of adequacy.*

Keywords: Equality of Opportunity, Adequacy, Educational Justice, Education, Talent, Gifted Education

## 1 Introduction

Whether school systems should do more for those students who appear to be highly talented or gifted is a controversial matter. Some plead for programs that provide special learning opportunities for these students. It is assumed that 'ordinary' forms of schooling hinder them from developing their true potentials, and it is also argued that talented students often suffer in class because they are not adequately challenged (Merry 2008).

However, there is also strong opposition to programs of gifted education. Here, considerations of equality come into view. It is argued that gifted education runs contrary to educational justice, or equality of opportunity. The latter concept can have two different functions, in this theoretical context. *First*, it can refer to a specific problem that theories of social justice have to address: How should competition for social positions be organized in a fair way? It is obvious that some attractive social positions (e.g., leadership positions) cannot be made available to everyone in a society because there is a limited number of these positions: it is commonly thought, then, that every person should have equal opportunities in the competition for these positions. *Second*, the concept of equality of opportunity can also refer to educational opportunities, that is, opportunities *for education*. It is clear that *through* education,

persons acquire better opportunities in social competition. Opportunities for education are relevant for equality of opportunity in the first sense. But the question of how educational opportunities should be distributed among persons is not necessarily linked to the problem of fair competition. For one thing, inequalities of educational opportunity might be seen as unjust even if they have no significant effect on the competitive opportunities of persons. Moreover, providing educational opportunities might be considered as relevant with respect to purposes other than ensuring fair competition – for instance, preparing young persons for citizenship.

With regard to conceptions of educational justice, two more things should be noted: not all of them use the concept of educational *opportunity*, and not all of them are *egalitarian*. The first aspect refers to the question of *what* it is that is to be distributed: it might not be opportunities, but resources, educational quality, or outcomes. The second aspect addresses the issue of *how* the goods in question are to be distributed among individuals. As an alternative to egalitarian conceptions of educational justice (e.g., Brighouse and Swift 2008 and 2014), adequacy- or sufficiency-based views have been developed (e.g., Anderson 2007; Satz 2007).

This essay considers the problem of gifted education from the perspective of (educational) justice. One question is how the specially talented should be treated compared to 'average' students (Merry 2008): Should the talented have better educational opportunities? Should more resources be spent on them? The question might also be directed at educational outcomes: Is it justified to educate the talented in a way that exacerbates the inequalities of achievement between those with average talent and those with high talent?

These questions compare 'average' students to 'gifted' students. It is left open what is done for different groups of disadvantaged students – students with learning disabilities, or students from poor and immigrant backgrounds. Alternatively, the core question might also be put as follows: Should more resources be directed towards the talented than to any other group of students, including the disadvantaged? In other words, should the talented be privileged *overall*? An additional question is whether there should be special programs for the gifted, that is, classes or schools that separate the talented from the other students. This might be considered as problematic from the perspective of justice even if equal resources are spent on all students.

In section 2 of this essay, the notion of talent is considered. Then, five accounts of educational justice are discussed with regards to the education of the talented: the meritocratic principle (section 3), a principle of educational luck egalitarianism (section 4), a principle of strict ('all-the-way') equality (section 5), the demand to improve the situation of the least advantaged (section 6), and conceptions of educational adequacy (section 7).

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## 2 Talent

If we want to promote the talented, we have to know what talent is, and how we can identify those who possess it. The concept of talent, as it is commonly used, refers to preconditions for learning and achievement. To be highly talented or gifted means to have an especially good ability for learning. The talented learn faster and easier than others, and they are able to reach a higher level of achievement. It might be said that the highly talented have better *potentials* for achievement than average persons.

The debate on the education of the talented refers only to potentials that are seen as *valuable*. A given cultural context determines a particular normative perspective on the basis of which one can discuss which potentials or talents should be seen as valuable, and describe those things that are in fact so seen. In our society, many different sorts of potentials count as valuable – potentials in sports, music, art, or science. In addition, we might speak of emotional, social, or practical capacities or forms of 'intelligence'. In many debates on gifted education, however, the focus lies on cognitive potentials or general intelligence. It seems clear that schools cannot promote all sorts of valuable capacities, but must restrict their attention to certain kinds of potentials. For instance, the public school system cannot take on the task of promoting a highly talented chess player.

An important question is whether (or to what extent) talent is rooted in persons' natural endowment. It is highly contested whether there are fixed natural potentials. The classical conception of innate talents can be distinguished from views according to which persons' talents or potentials at a given point of their lives are partly due to social factors and individual effort. In the recent debate on the role of talent in theories of (educational) justice, it has become widely acknowledged that talent is not a natural property (Meyer 2014 and 2021; Ahlberg 2021; Sardoč & Deželan 2021; Vopat 2021).

In a book from 1985, Israel Scheffler critically examines what he calls the 'myth' of fixed natural potentials. He claims that new potentials can arise in the course of an individual life: 'A girl who is potentially good at mathematics becomes a different person with actual achievement of mathematical skill. New potentials arise with the realization of the old' (Scheffler 1985, p. 11). He also makes clear that existing potentials can vanish. His view is embedded in a wider conception of the human being as an agent within a symbolically structured context. Scheffler writes: 'Human lives [...] do not ride on fixed rails; they do not follow trajectories already laid down by physics supplemented with biology. Their courses are modified by belief and interpretation, fear and hope, recollection and anticipation, symbolism, and value' (ibid., p. 41). This view, then, does not restrict its attention to natural or environmental

(social) causes of talent, but considers persons as actively involved in the development of their capacities.

According to the conception of talent as innate, the talented are a fixed group – the group of those born with the right sort of biological endowment. With regards to gifted education, this means that it makes sense to pick out those who belong to this group and educate them in a special way. The alternative view, that talent is not a pregiven phenomenon, however, opens up new perspectives for education: if talent evolves in social and educational processes, and can actively be promoted by individuals themselves, educators can try to help students develop new talents, instead of concentrating on a small group of students with certain innate traits.

The assumption that talent in part has social origins goes hand in hand with the view that social privileges are likely to promote the development of talent. For instance, when a child possesses a certain talent at the age of seven, this might already be the consequence of advantageous conditions of upbringing in the family. It does not come as a surprise, then, when the children of wealthy and well-educated parents in fact show more talent than working-class children.

The question of what talent is and how it evolves must be distinguished from the epistemic question of how the talented can be identified. The problem is that talent is not empirically accessible in a direct way. Talent must be distinguished from actual achievement: a person might be said to be talented although she performs badly. Still, in identifying talented persons, we must rely on manifest traits and performances, and this makes the process of identification difficult and unreliable. Empirical research shows, for instance, that children from socially privileged families are more likely to be identified as talented. It might well be that they are more talented or perform better due to advantageous family circumstances; however, empirical data also suggest that children from different backgrounds who show similar performances are treated differently (Peters & Engerrand 2016; Grissom& Redding 2016; Card& Giuliano 2016). Teachers seem to be biased in a way that works out to the advantage of the socially privileged. It can also be supposed, in addition, that socially privileged parents are more likely to consider their own children as gifted. This puts pressure on schools to accept these children into programs of gifted education.

## 3 Meritocratic equality of opportunity

The most widely discussed conception of equality of opportunity, in current moral philosophy, is John Rawls's principle of *fair* equality of opportunity. Rawls (1971, p. 72) starts by outlining a principle of *formal* equality of opportunity, according to which 'all have at least the same legal rights of access to all advantaged positions' (ibid.). This

requires the absence of formal types of discrimination in the competition for social positions. Access to attractive jobs and offices should be open to those best qualified for them. In this context, Rawls also uses the slogan 'careers open to talents' (ibid., p. 65). However, it is clear to Rawls that those best qualified for a particular position are not necessarily those who are most talented. The conditions of upbringing, including educational opportunities, might have influenced the development of capacities or qualifications. This is why Rawls finds it necessary to introduce his principle of fair equality of opportunity, which not only provides for formal access to positions of advantage, but ensures that all have 'a fair chance to attain them' (ibid., p. 73). This means that persons must have the opportunity to develop the capacities relevant in social competition. Rawls claims that persons with similar talents should have similar life prospects:

> 'More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent or ability, and have the same willingness to use them should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system' (ibid.).

With regard to education, this means that the equally talented should be treated equally in the school system. This 'meritocratic' conception of educational justice is expressed by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift as follows:

> 'An individual's prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual's talent and effort, but it should not be influenced by her social class background' (Brighouse/Swift 2008, p. 447; see also 2014, p. 15).

Like Rawls's principle, this conception accepts inequalities due to effort, although persons' ambitions or motivations are likely to be dependent on family background. Moreover, both conceptions rely on a notion of natural talent – a notion that was questioned by Rawls himself, in his later work (Rawls 1993, p. 270). It is easy to understand why they refer to natural traits at this point: the meritocratic conception is driven by the idea that inequalities due to social background should be mitigated. It relies on the view that some inequalities are naturally pre-given – these are described as inequalities of talent. It is morally acceptable, according to this conception, to treat unequally talented persons unequally. But what if talents or potentials are not naturally fixed, but are brought about through social processes? In this case, mitigating the influence of social background means to mitigate inequalities of talent to the extent that they are due to social factors. Whether talent is innate or not, it is clear that the meritocratic idea requires providing special educational support to socially disadvantaged students, not to the talented. Children from poor backgrounds should have equal prospects as privileged children with equal natural preconditions. To

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ensure this, the education system must help them make good for their disadvantageous upbringing.

With regard to the education of the talented, reference is sometimes made to a 'weak' or 'formal' understanding of the meritocratic principle corresponding to Rawlsian formal equality of opportunity: this principle might be used to regulate access to existing programs of gifted education. The idea is, then, that the selection of students for these programs should not be influenced by social background, color, gender, or religion, but rely only on the capacities or talents of students as they manifest themselves in actual performances. Here, it is not relevant to what extent these capacities or talents are socially influenced. The crucial point is that existing achievements are appropriately acknowledged. As mentioned in the first section, this formal principle of educational opportunity is often violated in the identification and selection of the gifted. There seem to be stereotypes related to these groups attributing to them lower potentials than to other groups. The existence of these stereotypes does not speak against the weak meritocratic principle, of course; rather, this principle demands that selection practices be improved. The knowledge, however, that these practices are very often – if not always – unfair might lead us to a different conclusion: instead of modifying the practices of selection, we might avoid selection altogether, in order to avoid certain forms of injustice (Giesinger 2021).

Apart from that, the weak meritocratic principle can be criticized as not far-reaching enough, which leads us back to the stronger meritocratic principle already discussed. This principle, too, has come in for critique, however, and indeed it is already criticized in Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. From this critique, we might get to a principle of educational justice that demands the neutralization of all inequalities that are undeserved.

## 4 Luck-egalitarian equality of opportunity

In his argument for fair equality of opportunity, Rawls uses the idea that some inequalities are due to factors that are 'arbitrary from a moral point of view' (Rawls 1971, p. 72). It is clear that social factors are in this sense morally arbitrary. We can take no credit for our family background. Our initial social position is not our own doing. We are not responsible for it and do not deserve it. This is why inequalities rooted in social background are unjust. As Rawls observes, however, this line of thought extends to natural factors (ibid., p. 75). This insight results in the view that individual talents – even if they are innate – are arbitrary from a moral point of view. Rawls did not develop this idea into an independent principle of justice, but kept it as a normative background assumption (ibid., p. 101). Others – so-called *luck egalitarians*

– took it up and proposed to take it as the primary or sole principle of justice (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989): this amounts to the view that social or economic inequalities are just only to the extent that they are not the result of brute luck, but are due to responsible decisions or actions of the individual. In this way, a radical form of equality of opportunity can be put forward. Within the meritocratic framework, those persons with disadvantageous natural preconditions (the 'untalented') have no chance to win the social 'race'. Certain educational or occupational options are only formally open to them. Responsibility-sensitive equality opportunity, by contrast, is set up to ensure real equality of opportunity for all, regardless of talent or social background. The idea is to provide all persons with real opportunities, and to leave it up to them whether they want to grasp them or not. As a result, all social or economic inequalities shall be the consequence of personal choices. Persons are themselves to blame if they are worse off than others. This conception can also be used in the discussion on educational justice. For instance, Brighouse and Swift formulate what they call 'the radical conception', without explicitly defending it:

> 'An individual's prospects for educational achievement should be a function of that individual's effort, but it should not be influenced by her social class background or her level of talent' (Brighouse & Swift 2014, p. 17).

This means that inequalities of talent do not justify inequalities of educational achievement. The effects of talent (or natural endowment) are thus to be neutralized. This raises practical questions as to how this is to be done, and in particular whether the naturally advantaged should be held back from developing their potentials. It should be noted, however, that the luck-egalitarian framework can be used in ways that do not raise these kinds of questions. John Calvert (2014) starts from the basic idea that 'no child should be worse off, or better off, educationally solely because of good or bad luck' (ibid., p. 74). Calvert confirms that the education system should neutralize the effects of inequalities due to luck – that is, due to natural and social conditions. Only those educational inequalities are just for which children can be held responsible (ibid. p. 75). This amounts to a principle that seems very similar to Brighouse and Swift's formulation:

> '(A)n individual's education should not be a function of those aspects of their condition or circumstances that are for that individual a matter of luck, but only of the free choices they make about their education, for which they can properly be held responsible' (ibid.).

But how does Calvert address the practical problems just mentioned? He does so by giving a particular answer to the question of what it is that is to be distributed. According to his view, children with different natural and social preconditions should all receive the same *quality* of education (ibid., p. 76). Quality is not tantamount to

resources, because equality of resources does not directly translate into equality of quality. It might well be that ensuring an equal educational quality to disadvantaged students requires special resources. Moreover, quality differs from educational opportunity: those who are provided with opportunities, but reject them, do not receive a high quality of education. Finally, quality can also be distinguished from achievement or outcome. Providing equal quality to all students is unlikely to result in equal outcomes. It has to be admitted that the requirement to provide an *equally good* education for all seems a demanding but realistic perspective for the education system. In particular, this conception does not amount to the view that the impact of talent on achievement should be neutralized. The talented – whether their talents are innate or not – must not be hindered from going as far as they can. As Calvert notes: 'That the intelligent or industrious may achieve more academically, is not in dispute' (ibid.). Calvert's basic demand might even be used to justify special educational attention for the talented. Education, it seems, can only be of high quality if it fits with the specific preconditions of the learners. It is known that high-achieving (or talented) students are often not sufficiently challenged in school settings directed at the average student (Merry 2008). Providing high achievers with an education appropriate to their needs is one of the aims of programs of gifted education. Calvert's educational luck egalitarianism might permit spending more resources on the talented than on average students. It is not clear, however, whether this consequence is acceptable from a broader luck-egalitarian point of view: the principle of equal educational quality may provide significantly worse life-prospects to the naturally and socially disadvantaged than to privileged groups. This seems not only incompatible with the core ideas of luck egalitarianism, but also with a meritocratic notion of equality of opportunity: providing students with equal educational quality is likely to privilege the socially advantaged in the competition for social rewards.

## 5 Strict equality of educational outcome

In social competitions, education has 'positional value' (Brighouse/Swift 2006) in the sense that its value for one person depends on how well educated others are. In the competition for social positions and financial means, you have to be better qualified than others, and you benefit from others being worse qualified than you, regardless of how well qualified you are in absolute terms. This means that any (educational) inequality, whatever its source, might be relevant in the competition for rewards. A possible conclusion is, then, that only strict equality of educational outcomes provides fair conditions for the allocation of social positions and financial means.

This view could be challenged by the claim that some inequalities, namely those rooted in unequal talent or unequal effort, are just. It might be argued, however, that persons are responsible neither for their talent nor for their effort or motivations. As Tammy Harel Ben-Shahar (2016) notices, persons' efforts might be influenced by their natural endowments as well as the social conditions of their upbringings. To the extent that this is true, children cannot be held responsible for their motivations to learn (or the lack thereof). Anyway, Harel Ben-Shahar argues, it is inappropriate to ascribe full responsibility to children in their decision-making and acting (ibid., 91–92; see also Schouten 2012, p. 481). This line of thought leads us from the radical conception to what Brighouse and Swift (2014, p. 19) call the 'extreme conception', that is, strict equality of educational of outcome, or 'all-the-way-equality' (Harel Ben-Shahar 2016). Within this framework, the talented or specially motivated students cannot expect to receive special attention: on the contrary, their level of achievement will have to be lowered. Competitive fairness is to be reached by 'leveling down': 'Taking away educational advantage from children has a positive effect on the objective situation of worse-off children by enhancing their competitiveness', Harel Ben-Shahar writes (ibid., p. 94).

There are two main objections to this demand: First, it might be argued that hindering gifted students from realizing their potentials is a form of injustice towards them. Second, we might point to the positive collective effects of promoting the talented. Obviously, we can all benefit from others' being well educated. Our society needs artists and scientists, doctors and lawyers, and people with capacities for political and economic leadership. Harel Ben-Shahar addresses both these objections by acknowledging that there can be 'competing interests' (ibid., pp. 95–97) in the field of educational justice, in the sense that there are other things than equality that matter. As to the first objection, she is aware that there might be a conflict between the individual interests of the talented and the demand for strict equality of outcome. She thinks, however, that no serious moral problems arise in this regard, as the educational needs of talented children can be satisfied by promoting the development of capacities that are not positionally valuable. However, the promotion of non-positionally valuable aspects of education will most likely influence the development of traits that are positionally valuable. Also, it is not clear which capacities are positionally valuable, and which are not. Studying Latin, for instance, might be considered as useless with regards to social competitions, but might nevertheless turn out to have positional advantages, in specific circumstances, especially if it is well known that talented children typically engage in this kind of 'useless' activity. Finally, it is not clear, from a strictly egalitarian standpoint, why only positionally relevant inequalities are to be seen as unjust. After all, talented children are also advantaged if

they are enabled to reach high levels in non-positionally ('intrinsically') valuable practices.

As to the second objection, Harel Ben Shahar notes that it must be ensured 'that society won't lose the ability to nurture the next generation of professionals' (ibid., p. 95). She seems to consider it morally acceptable, then, to give special support for the education of persons who are fit to take over particular roles in society for the benefit of all. Here the question arises whether considerations of this kind do not lead to some version of the difference principle, as proposed by Rawls (1971).

## 6 Benefiting the least advantaged

The insight that both inequalities of natural endowment and social background are 'arbitrary from a moral point of view' did not lead Rawls (1971) to adopt a luck-egalitarian perspective. Rather, he tried to account for this perspective by complementing the principle of fair equality of opportunity with the difference principle. According to this principle, social and economic inequalities are just if they work out for the benefit of all, including the least advantaged. If the situation of those worst off in society can be improved by reducing existing inequalities, this should be done. However, if reducing these inequalities and thereby improving the relative position of the least advantaged worsens their absolute position, the existing inequalities are just. With regard to education, this means – according to Rawls (ibid., p. 101) – that more educational resources should be spent on the most talented if this is likely to work out for the benefit of the least advantaged. If, however, the situation of the members of this group can be improved by giving more educational attention to them, this is the right thing to do. So, promoting the talented can be legitimate or even morally required, under certain circumstances.

Here, it is important to note that the meritocratic principle – as outlined by Rawls as well as Brighouse and Swift (2014) – requires treating equally talented students equally, but does not determine how groups of equally talented persons should be treated relative to one another. In other words, the meritocratic conception does not require privileging the talented, and it does not justify gifted education. However, it might be *compatible* with giving more attention to the talented than to other groups of students, including those who are least talented. Rawls subordinates the difference principle to fair equality of opportunity, thereby ensuring that equally talented persons have equal social prospects regardless of the question of how the situation of those worst off could be improved. Surprisingly, Brighouse and Swift (2008) propose another ordering of principles by stating that benefitting the worst off is 'the most urgent consideration of justice' (p. 41). Gina Schouten (2012) considers taking some version of

the difference principle ('a prioritarian principle of educational justice') as the sole principle of justice in education. Her considerations focus on the situation of the disadvantaged: 'Such a principle will direct educators to benefit those students whose naturally-caused academic underachievement renders their future prospects dim.' She gives little attention to the concerns of those 'favored by nature' – to use Rawls's expression. At one point, however, she writes that schools 'might design enrichment programs for high achievers with the sincere goal of developing in talented students a disposition to exercise abilities in service to others' (ibid., p. 482).

But how does the difference principle – or a similar principle – account for the luck-egalitarian perspective? Fair equality of opportunity legitimizes inequalities due to natural traits ('talents'). It demands that the most talented should have a real chance of ending up at the top of the social order. The difference principle is designed to ensure that the talented do not use their talents exclusively for their own benefit, but for the benefit of all, especially the 'untalented'. Rawls explains:

> 'We see that the difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out' (Rawls 1971, p. 101).

In this way, then, those who are not 'favored by nature' have nothing to complain about because they can benefit from the talents of others. These talents are considered as some kind of common good. A problem arises, in this context, from the critique of the idea of fixed natural talents (Ahlberg 2021, p. 781; Vopat 2021, p. 822). The consideration just outlined seems to presuppose that 'the talented' are a group of persons with specific natural traits. It is assumed that the members of this group can be identified and specially promoted for the benefit of all. If, however, talent is a partly social phenomenon, it is not clear *who* should be promoted. The first possibility is to promote those who actually show a high level of achievement or 'talent', in specific contexts. In doing this, however, we tend to privilege the already socially privileged. It might well be, though, that this works out for the benefit of those least advantaged. The alternative is to focus on natural traits and to promote those with the best natural endowment. One difficulty is to identify these persons. Another problem is that promoting the members of this group – independently of their actual talents, capacities, or motivations, and their level of achievement – may not provide the best social benefit.

These problems aside, it can be asked whether we can really expect the talented to work for the benefit of all. Only if this is the case can the special promotion of talented or gifted students be justified under the difference principle. Here, we might turn to

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Elizabeth Anderson's ideal of democratic education. Anderson (2007) considers the issue of justice regarding the education of social elites, stating that the future elites should be sensitive to the situation of socially disadvantaged groups, and feel responsible for improving their conditions of living. If this is the case, Anderson says, we can expect elite education to have positive effects for those worst off in society. For Anderson, it is of utmost importance that the members of different social groups are educated together, in socially heterogeneous comprehensive schools. This ensures, according to her view, that persons from different walks of life will come to know and understand each other. Moreover, it provides students from disadvantaged backgrounds with a better chance to join the elite themselves.

Anderson thus integrates some version of the difference principle into her account of educational justice. She is best known, however, for her critique of the egalitarian view of educational justice, and her plea for 'sufficiency' (or 'adequacy') in education.

## 7 Adequacy

The idea that all students should have an *adequate* – instead of *equal* education – has come up in US legislation and public debate, and has been taken up by philosophers (Anderson 2007; Satz 2007). Anderson relates this issue to a broader discussion in the theory of (distributive) justice: Should relevant goods be equitably distributed, or should they be distributed in such a way that everyone has *enough*? In other words, should egalitarian principles be replaced by a principle of sufficiency (see also Frankfurt 1987)?

The claim that there should be adequate or sufficient education needs to be clarified in an important way. If there should be an adequate education, it must be determined *with respect to what* that education should be adequate. Anderson and Satz state that everyone should have an education adequate to the aim of democratic or civic equality. Anderson (1999) presents democratic equality as an alternative to distributive equality. In a democratic community, she explains, persons should be related to each other as equals. With regard to education, this means that everyone should have access to a kind and a level of education that allows him or her to live as an equal, within the democratic community. It can be noted that the adequacy view entails a conception of the *aims* of education: we must clarify which capacities (forms of knowledge, attitudes etc.) are needed for democratic equality. It seems clear that among these traits are specifically democratic attitudes, such as the attitude of respect or tolerance.

Adequacy accounts typically determine a *threshold level* in the development of relevant capacities that should be reached, if possible, by everyone (see also Gutmann 1987). This is usually thought of as a level of basic education that enables persons to

access the labor market, to participate in democratic processes, and to live an autonomous personal life. Anderson's conception of elite education goes beyond that: she outlines a 'sufficientarian' conception that is directed at the specific conditions in the American school system. She writes:

> "[E]very student with the underlying potential should be prepared by their primary and middle schools to be able to successfully complete a college preparatory high school curriculum and should have such a curriculum available to them in high school upon successfully completing the requisite prior course work. This yields a high but not unattainable sufficientarian standard for fair educational opportunity" (Anderson 2007, p. 615).

Anderson makes the empirical assumption that in the United States, joining the elite does not presuppose access to one of the top colleges and universities. In her view, it is sufficient to attend one of the good colleges. Obviously, Anderson's account cannot directly be applied to school systems in other countries. This makes clear that the adequacy view must be sensitive to varying conditions in the education system, and in society as a whole (Giesinger 2017). It is also a matter of empirical conditions in a given social environment whether reaching a certain level of education is enough to participate in society, or join the elite.

There is a natural objection to the view that setting a sufficientarian threshold level could ensure educational justice. The problem is this: once a threshold is set, persons can gain competitive advantage by striving for an education that is *more than adequate*. If the state ensures an adequate education, wealthy parents can use private financial means to provide a better education for their children, thereby ensuring positional advantages for them. The objection is, then, that the adequacy view does not ensure fair competition for social rewards.

What does the adequacy view say about the issue of the education of the talented? In the first place, it demands that all children be brought up to a certain threshold level, regardless of their natural or social preconditions. The adequacy view, then, demands that special attention be paid to disadvantaged groups. However, it also justifies inequalities above the threshold level. So, promoting high-achieving students – for instance in private schools – does not seem to be illegitimate. As Anderson (2007) adds, providing special attention to talented persons is in accordance with justice insofar as these persons can be expected to use their talent for the benefit of all (6).

## 8 Conclusions

How should the talented be treated in the school system, compared to other groups of students? On the one hand, we can say that common conceptions of (educational)

justice tend to demand that special educational attention should be given to disadvantaged students. On the other hand, however, some of these conceptions seem to be compatible with setting up special educational measures for the talented.

The (strong) meritocratic conception requires special concern for the educational needs of the socially disadvantaged. The radical conception demands, in addition, the neutralization of educational inequalities rooted in natural differences, whereas the extreme conception of all-the-way-equality goes even further, requiring the neutralization of the effects of effort on educational achievement. The difference principle seems to be less demanding than that, but also requires paying attention to the educational needs of (naturally) disadvantaged students. Finally, according to the adequacy view, both natural and social disadvantages have to be addressed, and all students have to be supported in reaching a certain threshold level of education.

At the same time, however, promoting high-achieving or talented students might still be acceptable within some of these conceptions. Within the radical and the extreme conception, however, gifted education can only be justified if additional normative considerations are brought into play, and are given more weight than the proposed principles of educational equality. The Rawlsian version of the meritocratic principle leaves open how groups of equally talented students should be treated relative to one another. Against this backdrop, providing more resources to the naturally talented than to any other group of students might be justified. It has been proposed, at this point, to introduce the difference principle. This principle might be used to justify talented education regardless of whether talent is a purely natural phenomenon. Giving special educational attention to high-achieving students might work out for the benefit of those worst off. Clearly, however, the difference principle does not justify neglecting disadvantaged students. It is hard to determine what this principle requires in practice, that is, how much should be done for disadvantaged students, and how much for the socially and naturally well off.

The adequacy view demands an improvement in the educational level of the disadvantaged up to a certain threshold level. If there is a limited amount of resources for the state to spend on education, it is most likely that these resources will have to be invested for the sake of the naturally and socially disadvantaged, according to the adequacy view. In fact, Anderson and Satz think that education above the threshold is to be funded from private sources, in particular by parents who aim to promote the development and social opportunities of their 'talented' children.

This, however, is likely to undermine the fairness of conditions in the competition for social positions. Here, a (weak or formal) meritocratic principle seems to be required – a principle that makes access to attractive educational programs (including programs of gifted education) independent of social and economic background. It seems unfair for

socially privileged children to have substantially better educational opportunities than all other groups of children with equal potentials. As has also been noted, selective programs of gifted education tend to work out to the disadvantage of those already socially disadvantaged, and are therefore problematic from the perspective of justice.

Non-selective ('inclusive') forms of talented education might be justified by the educational principle that children should have an education appropriate to their individual educational needs. Here, it does not even seem necessary to ensure *equal* educational quality for all – it suffices to provide a quality of education fitting the particular preconditions of children (their talents, capacities, motivations, or values). If this idea is adopted, however, the inequalities *of achievement* between different groups ('talented' and 'less talented' children) are likely to grow.

Further thought should be given, then, to the question of how satisfying the individual educational needs of all children can be reconciled with the broader aim of educational justice. In this context, the notion of talent should also be further discussed: Maybe, the most important question in this regard is not what talent 'is', but how talent is ascribed to children, and what role these ascriptions play within pedagogical practices. Generally speaking, considerations on the practice of education should be brought together with the philosophical debate on distributive justice.

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